

Memories of an Air Operation over wartime Holland

Brief van Mr. E.E. McCullough aan auteur d.d. 15 september 2000

I, Edward E. McCullough, was an aircraft pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War. I volunteered to join the RCAF in March 1941, trained as a pilot in Canada, and was posted to England in November 1941 with the rank of Pilot Officer.

Incidentally, the ship that carried me to England, in a convoy of twelve ships, was Dutch owned and crewed, the Christien Hygiens (I hope that my memory of the spelling of the ship name is accurate).

My first flying duties were, to my regret at the time, to be a staff pilot at an Observer training base. No chance for a keen young fellow to perform heroic acts of bravery and win medals there! But it was important duty, and I accumulated many flying hours in England's challenging weathers, to my benefit.

Also, of much greater importance, I met and married a wonderful young lady – a qualified nursing sister – who has been my “flying partner” for these past fifty-seven years.

In early 1943, by then having the rank of Flying Officer, I obtained permission to go to operational duties, and was posted to 2 Group of the Royal Air Force. After some weeks of training on Blenheim aircraft, during which I was joined by crew members Flg.Off. Donald Brown (Obs.) and Flt.Sgt. John Shaw (Wireless Air Gunner) my crew and I were posted to RAF 107 Squadron for operational flying on Boston 3A aircraft. 107 Squadron's operations were primarily daylight low or medium level strike missions against German military targets in Holland, Belgium and France.

Initially, our squadron base was at Great Massingham in Norfolk, but in the summer of 1943 were moved to Hartford Bridge, a short distance south of Reading, Berkshire.

From there, my crew and I participated in a number across-channel strikes at targets in France. Our only operation that involved flying over Holland was the one of present interest, a strike against a target in southern Belgium.

The target was an aircraft and engine repair depot at Courcelles, Belgium. Three squadrons, RAF 107, RAF 88 and Free French 342, with twelve aircraft each were programmed.

The planned route was base to Orfordness (north of London), wave-top flight to the Netherlands coast at **Colijnsplaat**, thence south to the target. In our pre-flight briefing, it was emphasized that we must avoid the known flak defence units north of the Scheldt on Walcheren.

I was assigned to fly in number two position in the three aircraft leading the formation, that is behind and just to the right of Wing Commander England, the leader.

As your information from the German records clearly shows, we made landfall on Walcheren – well off our planned course – and flew directly toward the flak units.

My memory of the events of the next few minutes remains vividly clear. Obviously , we did not catch the defence units unaware. As we approached them at very low altitude there was across our flight path a horizontal band of heavy machine gun fire, clearly visible due to its tracer content.

Its purpose was of course to force us to a higher altitude where the many heavy flak gunners could see us. There was no option and we went up. Almost immediately, within a few seconds, and a few yards ahead of us, the Wing Commander's aircraft was blown apart by what was obviously a hit in the bomb load.

Then it was our turn, along with Flt.Sgt. Hoeg's crew in the number three flight position.

Very quickly, in spite of my best evasive attempts, my aircraft had several heavy flak hits. The port side engine and wing fuel tanks burst into raging fire. The flak ceased thereafter as the gunners went for following aircraft, leaving me and crew alive and able to decide next action. Fearing that the port side wing would soon fail, I decided to land immediately on the marsh-like ground below. There was no time to open bomb doors and drop the bomb load; we had to land on it.

The wheels-up landing was a good one. I spoke via intercom with Flt.Lt. Brown and Flt.Sgt. Shaw to check that they were OK. They were. But then We slid into a deep dry watercourse and the nose compartment (Flt.Lt. Brown's station) was buried and destroyed.

Flt.Sgt. Shaw and I managed to get out of the aircraft, but there was nothing that we could do for Flt.Lt. Brown. The fire was intense. We had to leave and by the time we had gone, perhaps fifty yards, the fire reached our bomb load and exploded it.

Very quickly thereafter a few shots over our heads from German army men standing on a nearby rail line persuaded Shaw and me to surrender. "For you the war is over!" was the greeting.

Flt.Sgt. Shaw had been wounded in one leg, but a very large German easily picked him up and carried him to transport on a road beyond the rail line. I had facial cuts and bruising (later checked as fracture-free in an Amsterdam hospital). So, Shaw and I were very exceptionally fortunate all in all. We were the only survivors of the fifteen crew members of the five aircraft shot down in those few minutes.

As I learned after the war, our squadron padre visited my wife on the day following the operation to tell her that I had been shot down and that without doubt I had been killed.

However, a few days later, Germany's "Lord Haw Haw" reported via German radio that I was a prisoner of war and neighbours brought the news to my wife.

I was eventually sent, after interrogation at Dulag Luft, Frankfurt, to Stalag Luft I at Barth, Germany, not to Luft 3. Flt.Sgt. Shaw went to Stalag 357. I was joined at Luft I by Lt. Baralier and Lt. Sorel of 342 squadron, who had been shot down on the same raid.

This camp was over-run by the Sovjet army in the spring of 1945, and we prisoners had to await negotiated release. We were flown out to England by the U.S. Army Air Force on May 12 th. Flt.Sgt. Shaw also got back to England but in poor health and he died a few years later.

While in England I learned that no aircraft of the thirty-six on the Courcelles operation ever reached the target. I also learned that Wg.Cdr. England had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order medal posthumously.

So this is the story of my brief experience of wartime air operations over Holland. What remains prominent in my memories are the questions: Why did we fly into the known danger area just north of the Scheldt? Yes, perhaps there was compass error in the Wg.Cdr's aircraft, but when we approached the Holland coast I could see clearly that we were off course and that we were going in where we were warned never to go!

Why was there no change of course, for which there was time enough ? Yes, this would have given the enemy more time to react, but as it turned out, the enemy was all too ready for us in any event.

You will understand that I do not wish to comment any further on these sad events. They are in the long past and cannot now be altered. Perhaps they are one further illustration of the basic stupidity of war.

On a lighter note, I can tell you that I visited the Courcelles factory in the late 1970's, and some factory members there expressed (jokingly) their disappointment that we had not bombed that place in 1943.

Our failure to do so meant that they were still having to operate in those "old" buildings!

The Reich Intruders (extract from)

ingekorte weergave

verslag van Plt.Off. John Bateman (Wop/AG)

On the evening of 21 October we looked at the notice board after dinner and saw that we were on the Battle Order for ops the following day. At last the moment had arrived after months and months of training, and I suddenly found that I had acquired a colony of butterflies, which happily soon dispersed.

As briefing was scheduled for quite early the next morning, we decided to forgo our usual after-dinner drinking and go back to our quarters, which was a small Nissen hut shared with John Brice and Dougie George. Sleep at first was elusive and we chatted on quite late into the night with much speculation as to what the target was to be, but that would be revealed at the briefing.

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Then on to the briefing room in the abck of an uncomfortable Bedford truck. The briefing room was a large Nissen hut with a platform at the far end, behind which was a map board nearly the whole width of the platform. The furniture consisted of hard wooden folding chairs, which would seat 130 bods.

This morning it was full as the three squadrons were participating in a maximum effort – 38 aircraft.

As was usual the Station Commander opened the proceedings with a “Good Morning gentlemen” to the crews of 107, 342 (Lorraine) and 88, led by Wg.Cdr. I.J.Spencer. The destination was an aircraft and aero engine repair works at Courcelles in Belgium, a target of sufficient importance to warrant a maximum effort. The briefing was then handed over to Dicky England, who was to lead the op.

He described the target and surrounding pin-points in some detail; the route chosen would take us away from known flak positions and near **Colijnsplaat** on the island of Noord-Beveland, we would turn south for Courcelles. Our bomb load was 250 lb HE with 11-second delay fuses that would give us adequate time to clear the target. We would fly six abreast with approximately 20 seconds between flights, and on the approach to the target we would fly in as tight a formation as possible.

After bombing we would head for **Knokke** and en route would be met by a Typhoon fighter escort.

Under no conditions were bombs to be dropped other than on the target; if it was not located they were to be brought home or ditched in the sea if individual captains thought this action necessary for any reason.

Dickie England was a highly professional officer who carried out the briefing in a quiet and authoritative voice, all the while pointing to the map and occasionally indicating possible hazards.

After he had finished the Met Officer gave his forecast of the wind, cloud and weather conditions we were likely to encounter. Dickie then detailed off the pilotsto their individual briefing, the navigators to theirs and the gunners to theirs, then wished us all “Good Hunting”.

At the aircraft I climbed into the gunner’s cockpit. I closed the hatch that formed the centre part of the floor and stowed my chute in the rack on the starboard side together with a spare packet of Martins cigarettes; as a non-smoker Frank always carried a bar of chocolate and a can of orange juice. I then set the radio transmitter to the allocated frequency, and what a super little radio it was compared with the antediluvian 1083/1084 on the Blenheim. As I had synchronised my guns only the day before I knew that they were OK, as were the ammo belts to each gun.

Meanwhile Johnny was walking round the aircraft with the rigger, visually checking all the moving surfaces, and making sure that the pitot head cover had been removed. By this time Frank had settled himself at the little table with the maps, instruments and the rest of the paraphernalia that all navigators seemed to carry, which was a complete mystery to me.

Eventually Johnny climbed up on to the port wing on his way to the cockpit, just pausing for a few seconds to have a quick word with me, and we wished each other good luck. I put on my helmet with the mike hanging loose to one side and plugged into the intercom socket.

After a while, “Pilot to navigator – do you hear me?”

Frank’s reply: “Navigator to pilot, I hear you OK”.

Then, "Pilot to gunner. Do you hear me?"
"Gunner to pilot. Hear you OK".

Johnny then signalled to the fitter on the trolley-acc raising his left hand and started the port engine, similarly with the starboard engine, then ran them up gently. In a few minutes Dickie England moved away from his dispersal towards the perimeter track, followed by the rest of A-Flight, then B-Flight. Take-off time was scheduled at 13.45 and at the precise moment the first two Boston's took off in echelon. Dickie led the procession in A-Apple, which beneath the cockpit had the inscription "England Expects", followed by Flg.Off. John Brice, Flt.Sgt. Teddy Hoeg, Flt.Lt. R.C.McCullough, ourselves and Flt.Lt. H.G. Brittain. These six aircraft comprised A-Flight of 107, plus six more, who were to lead the operation. The remaining aircraft took off in pairs, the last two taking off at 13.49 hours. When all aircraft were airborne and at about 1.000 feet, they formed up into six flights of six aircraft abreast with about 150 yards separating each flight.

Having reached the runway the two leading aircraft formed up in echelon, then the next pair, then us. With the brakes full on the engines were run up, and at the "green" from Flying Control the first pair rolled down the runway followed by the rest of us, until all 36 aircraft were airborne. When we had gained sufficient height, we formed up in a line abreast and circled the airfield until all three squadrons were formed up at about 1.000 feet, then set course for **Orfordness** where we were to cross the coast. When we were somewhere near Stowmarket, "Gunner to pilot, Brit's broken off and heading for home – must have a problem". Brit had aborted with what we found later to be an engine malfunction (he was replaced by Wr.Off. T.V.Glynn).

After a while, "Pilot to navigator, coast coming up. Are we on course?"

As we passed over Orfordness,"Navigator to pilot – on course".

We were always formal in our communications with one another over the intercom, which was really a matter of discipline and eliminated idle nattering – very rarely did we use Christian names.

We had descended a bit and crossed the coast at something under 500 feet.

"Pilot to gunner. Test guns". "Gunner to pilot. Testing".

I swung the guns over the side and fired a short burst."Gunner to pilot – guns OK".

At this time we were flying at about 50 feet above the water on a beautiful, clear autumn day that made it so much easier to scan the skies for possible bandits – no cloud cover for them.

"This is a piece of cake," I thought. "Just like an exercise".

"Navigator to pilot – we appear to be about 5 degrees off course".

"Pilot to navigator. Check again".

Two minutes later, "Navigator to pilot – confirm, 5 degrees off planned course".

"Pilot to navigator, either Dickie has changed the plan or you have boomed. In any case, we follow the leader". As strict W/T silence was to be observed, as we had been told at briefing, it wasn't broken now, but if we had really been off course we felt that a more senior crew would have broken silence, so we assumed we were OK.

"Pilot to navigator. Enemy coast ahead".

"Navigator to pilot. OK, but I am convinced we are still off course, miles off course".

"Pilot to gunner. Keep your eyes skinned. It's possible we're making a duff landfall".

Within minutes we were over the Dutch coast flying over flat silt land when all hell was suddenly let loose. Without warning the whole flak battery must have opened and the sky around us was full of flak bursts. They had got our altitude absolutely spot in. It was just like going through a wall, and how we escaped must remain one of life's mysteries.

As Brit had gone home we were on the right of our flight, and as the Flak continued to come up I saw the four aircraft on our left take the full punishment. Dickie's plane took a direct hit in the starboard engine, which fell from the nacelle and rolled along the ground like a gigantic ball of fire.

His aircraft pitched sideways, cartwheeling into the ground at 280 mph. The other three must have been hit almost instantaneously, and all hit the ground in a complete shambles of fire, smoke and scattered pieces of metal. I couldn't see exactly where the Flak was coming from and just fired my guns in the general direction without taking any sort of aim. Johnny had his finger on the button and exhausted nearly all his ammo. What seemed like an eternity probably lasted only a couple of minutes or so, then we were out of range. I could see the following aircraft getting a fairish dose, but they were jinking all over the sky and not flying straight into the stuff as we had done and I saw only two of them go down. This was my first trip and it was the only time in all my operational experience that I had seen such a large formation broken up so completely.

Eventually," Pilot to navigator, any idea where we are?"

"Navigator to pilot, not a glue. Climb up a bit and I might be able to recognise something".

"Pilot to navigator. Climbing up to 1,500 feet".

But after a few moments Frank had to admit that he was unable to recognise anything and was quite lost.

"We could be anywhere," he said. Johnny throttled back a bit and rocked the aircraft to indicate to anyone following that they should take the lead. Another plane came up alongside and we formed on him, but it soon became evident that he was equally as lost as we were.

Eventually some sort of leadership evolved and we pressed on towards Courcelles.

Now that the excitement was over I had a moment to take stock, and to my astonishment found that I was almost ankle deep in empty cartridge cases, which I kicked away towards the tail of the aircraft, and although I was standing in an open cockpit I was quite amazed to find that I was overheating, so I took off my battledress top and peeled off two pullovers before putting the top back on again. I would like to have thought that I was sweating through exertion, but the awful feeling came to my mind that it must be fear, although throughout that short encounter I had been too busy to have had any thoughts about personal safety.

By this time we had got down on the deck again and I was keeping a sharp look-out for bandits as the Hun flak boys must have radioed our course to the Luftwaffe. However, we pressed on weaving this way and that and eventually settled a course that Frank told us was in the direction of Courcelles.

However, for one reason or another we failed to pin-point the target and turned for home, meeting some more or less accurate Flak.

Thirty miles off the coast, "Navigator to pilot – unidentified fighters ahead and above".

I craned my neck round as far as I could to see forward and about 1,000 feet above us was the welcome sight of our Typhoon escort. They turned and, still flying above and behind, escorted us out of the coast. We were going home!

Our chums kept a steady course with us and I then knew that there were no snappers about and could relax a little. As we crossed the water I could smell cigarette smoke, which could only have come from Johnny's cockpit, so I lit one, then another, and another.

When we landed 3 hours and 20 minutes later and taxied to our dispersal, there was our faithful ground crew waiting for us, and when we told them of our experiences their expressions had to be seen to be believed. But they just got on with their jobs in silence, which was unusual, and when Frank opened the bomb doors they pushed the empty bomb trolleys under the fuselage to unload the bombs that should have been left behind at Courcelles.

De-briefing was a solemn affair. Several of the crews confirmed that they were 5 degrees off our planned course as we crossed the Dutch coast, and we wondered why the more experienced crews had not broken W/T silence to query the change of course.

I don't remember Frank expressing any satisfaction at being proved correct. It was later concluded that this disastrous navigational error could only be attributed to the fact that Dickie's compass was showing an error, though it had been swung only a day or two before by his navigator, Flg.Off. Anderson

The crews of Flg.Off. Brice, Flg.Off. McCullough, and Flt.Sgt. Teddy Hoeg were the others lost (Hoeg's commission had been promulgated that day). Flg.Off. Stoloff and Flt.Sgt. Chappell and their crews in 342 and 88 Squadrons respectively were also lost.

Wg.Cdr. England's award of the DSO was announced on the day after his death in the London Gazette. AVM Basil Embry, a former commander of 107 squadron, wrote of England, 'He was a great leader who commanded universal respect and admiration', a sentiment echoed by everyone who was privileged to have served with him.

Thus ended our first operation.