

The Last Trip

Personal account by pilot Jim Pestrige (1997)
Crashed 9th August 1943 near Vollmersbach

Before the Flight

I had completed one tour of operations followed by a 'rest' as an Instructor at an Operational Training Unit. Then, in July 1943 I was posted to Marston Moor, on a training course, to fly the heavier four-engined aircraft and to pick up a new crew. At the end of July I had six crewmen and we were then sent to join 102 Squadron at Pocklington in Yorkshire.

We were new to each other, new to the Squadron, though we knew the aircraft - Halifax II - well. Almost immediately we were on operational duties and the usual routines of a Bomber Station were familiar to all of us.

It was summer, good weather and hot sunshine - excellent flying conditions. On the 9th. August 1943 we were called for the usual morning briefing, it was to be an attack on Mannheim, a straightforward route and a prediction of good weather. We checked and tested our aircraft, studied our maps and collected our flying gear. Just another Operation - my 32nd. mission.



The Flight

The day had been hot and sunny so nightfall and cooler air was very welcome. At the Flight Office we gathered our parachutes before piling into a truck for a bright young girl - one of the Womens Auxiliary Airforce drivers - took us to our aircraft.

P/O Burdon was the Flight Engineer and quite new to the job. P/O Arthur Hunter came from Canada and was a navigator I had known for some time. F/O Les Bays seemed a little older than most of us and was a very experienced Bomb-aimer. F/Sgt. Ken Walker also had a lot of experience and was a cool and confident Radio Operator. Sgt. Les Dunn came from Wolverhampton where he had worked for Goodyear Tyres, he was our mid-upper Gunner. F/Sgt. Sherrington was a solid and cheerful Londoner, a well practised Gunner in our rear Turret. And that leaves me as Pilot and Captain of Aircraft.

That evening, about 22.45 our engines were warmed-up and we were comfortably settled in as we joined the line of aircraft then took off carrying a full load of incendiary bombs. We turned southwards from our airfield at Pocklington heading for Le Touquet, 400kms. away on the French coast. We climbed steadily into the clear night sky, calm air and no clouds, so clear that we could see many other aircraft heading in the same direction - we were not alone. Some time later Arthur Hunter tells me we are over Le Touquet and we turn eastwards on to a new course, it will be about 500 kms to Mannheim. On such a smooth and tranquil night there is a temptation to switch on to the auto-pilot - but the risk of German night-fighters is in our minds so we keep watch. An hour or so later we are getting near to the target, there is darkness below us and ahead we look for the flash of A. A. guns and exploding bombs. Our height



Wreckage of Pestrige's Halifax near Vollersbach and onlookers..

is about 7,000 mtrs. and ye are over Trier, some 90 miles - 150kms. to Mannheim. Suddenly there is a thudding on the port side, I look left and up through the wing there is, what looks like, a short stream of electric lamps rising between the two engines. We have been hit by incendiary bullets coming from below. Neither of our upper or rear gunners can see the enemy. Was-this one of the new Me-410 Messerschmidts with upward firing guns?

I manoeuvre the aircraft to avoid another attack as a trail from the port wing. The engines are still running as I order the bombs' to be jettisoned. But before Les Bays, the Bomb-aimer can do anything the aircraft shudders as part of the wing breaks away in a mass of brilliant flames. I give the order to all the crew *"Abandon Aircraft"*. *"OK Skipper"*, comes from Len Dunn, Sherrington, Bays and Walker. The Flight Engineer passes my parachute pack to me and as I clip it on the port wing disintegrates in a firey ball and the aircraft lurches into a violent spin. Les Bays has opened the forward hatch and dived into darkness. John Burdon has gone down the fuselage to escape through the main hatch. The wreckage of the Halifax spins and dives as I head to the forward hatch and jump through into the cold rush of air. The aircraft seems to float away as I pull the rip-cord, I feel the sharp jerk as the parachute bursts open above me.

The burning wreckage is going down fast now and nearby I can hear -then glimpse - the German Fighter. It goes through my mind that I would be a sitting target for any air-gunner, the fighter circles then disappears. In the distance there is a crash and flash as the wrecked Halifax hits the ground. It is not possible to see where I shall land - or on what. I am swinging gently when suddenly I hit the earth, a bit of a bump on a grass covered slope. Fortunately with no wind the parachute collapses besides me, the white silk glistening in the darkness. It is too obvious to leave it in the field so I quickly gather it up and release the harness. Stumbling down the slope I come to a small stream, a clump of bushes hanging over the water makes a poor hiding place for the parachute, but it will have to do. In the distance I suddenly hear voices - and the bark of dogs - a signal to set off in the opposite direction rapidly. Soon I come to a path

which leads through trees, I pause and listen - silence, blessed silence, except for the distant hum of aircraft. Further on the path comes out of the wood and across fields then there is a large stream sparkling in the dim night light. I wade across, it is not very deep, and up the bank into another field, ahead I can just make out a railway line and alongside it a road beyond it the ground rises quite steeply and seems to be covered with trees. I cross the railway then the road and head for the hillside, walking carefully through the undergrowth as the trees get closer. This seems the place to seek cover and rest for the coming day.

Into Captivity

As the sun rose on another hot summer's day I could see the fields spread out below my hiding place. A farmer with horse and cart and two or three young women were soon gathering hay and loading the cart. Behind me there was a path through the trees, some old people came to collect wood, I kept my head down, glad they did not have an inquisitive dog. Looking beyond the fields there was a small village with a railway station [Nahbollenbach], a few trains and some trucks and lorries passed on the road and railway, all was peaceful.

The maps I had, printed on silk, could give me no details of where I had landed, my only help was a small compass and a vague memory of the maps of the route we had been flying. It was a long hot day with no water and only a little chocolate to eat. Darkness came slowly and sounds faded into silence. I made my way to the road and walked to the village, all was quiet until I reached a road to the left which led uphill to the railway station. Then I heard low voices, I could just see a man leaning on a bicycle talking to another man, they were across the other side of the road so I walked on quickly turning up the road towards the station. I thought they said something to me but I kept moving and did not answer.

Well beyond the station there was a farmhouse, all quiet and dark, another three hundred metres and I was in open country and there was a small clean stream - water at last. I took off my flying boots and filled my rubber water-bottle, now was the time to investigate the farm. I walked back in stockinged feet and quietly looked at some of the buildings, in an outbuilding I found an old bicycle, it seemed in fair order so I carefully got it onto the road and rode back to collect by boots. Now I could get moving, back down the road just as the air-raid sirens start to wail. I press on past the station and round the corner on to the main road as people start to come from their houses. I must remember to ride on the right - what about lights? The cycle had one, should it be on in an air-raid?. The road is clear as I pedal on, under a railway bridge then a loop of road and another bridge, soon there are houses and the start of a town. I stop at a bus terminus to read the timetable, at last I shall know where I am - I read "*Idar Oberstein*".

More air-raid sirens and aircraft overhead, I cycle on through the town, someone shouts at me so I pedal faster till the houses are few and I am tired, I need to find a place to hide and rest. A small road leads off to the left and out into the country. On a hillside there are several vegetable gardens, allotments with sheds and beyond them pine trees. I hide my bicycle in a hedge and find a place of shelter for the next day. Under the trees on a soft sweet-smelling bed of pine-needles sleep comes quickly.

I wake at the first light of dawn, wet and cold, the dew is still dripping through the pines. I begin a search for food in the gardens, in one of the garden-sheds I find an old peak cap which fits and, I hope, looks more like the locals. Outside there is a fair crop of ripe pears. The day drags on, nothing to do but watch and wait. At last it is dark enough to recover my bicycle and ride on, better I think to stick to the country lanes. Not a sight or sound of anyone until I reach some houses where a sign tells me it is "*Allenbach*". I pass the local tavern, there are cheerful voices and I envy the warmth and comfort. There is a little moonlight as I ride along a ridge, it

seems to be very beautiful country and lower down in the valley a new road is being built. But now I must start looking for somewhere to lie up for the day. At last there is some rough land and derelict buildings beside the road, I turn off and soon settle for a place to have a short sleep. Later in the morning I explore the buildings, it was once a slate works, the rusting machinery and broken windows have stood alone for years [near Ellenberg and Buhlenberg]. The long day passes, that night I move off feeling I am not progressing fast enough so when I reach Birkenfeld railway Station I throw away the bicycle into a ditch. All is quiet, the station is the end of the line and a goods-train in the marshalling yard seems to be ready to leave. I wait in hiding till the last moment then leap aboard a wagon which has a small brake hut at one end. As the train pulls out of Birkenfeld goods-yard daylight comes with cloudy skies and a burst of rain.

After travelling for miles it is still early morning as the train pulls into another goods-yard and stops [Türkismühle]. Some wagons are uncoupled - including mine and we are left standing as the rest of the train moves off again. There are houses by the goods yard and a few people moving around, I take a quick walk by the railway line looking for a daytime shelter. At last there is a workmen's disused hut and next to it a large tool storage chest. By now the rain is heavy and I feel my soaking clothes clinging and cold. In the distance some people are coming down the road beside the railway, the only real protection is in the tool-chest - it is rather like a large coffin - so I go and lie there as the rain drips through the cracks in the lid.

It must have been a school further up the road for about midday the children come down the road hurrying in the rain. It is a long uncomfortable wait for the rain to cease and darkness to cover my movements. I follow the same path back to the station and goods-yard, I am looking for a train going south to Saarbrücken. There is an engine with steam up and a long line of wagons, in the middle I find an empty guards-van, not being used, unlike one well-lit van further down the train. I am wet, tired and hungry, the temptation to get aboard is strong and I give way, I hang my water bottle on a lever on the end wall and climb onto the top bunk in the empty van. Half an hour passes then there are voices - two or three men are checking the couplings and brakes, at my wagon there is a loud hiss, then rough comments. The door opens and a man enters, foolishly I had hung my water-bottle on the lever of the brake valve, he cast it aside, as he closes the valve he thinks it odd so he shines his torch round the van - my feet on the top bunk catch the light then there is much shouting and excitement. The train gang are kind and cheerful, in their hut is a hot stove, I am too exhausted to try to escape.

Three of the men are amiable and friendly but there is one man a strict Party Member I guess, who would cheerfully have tied me up. He urges the others to treat me as a dangerous enemy, though they do not know who I am, thankfully they refuse and ignore his requests. Then one of the local Railway officials arrives, He looks efficient and professional in his uniform and navy coat. Having heard from the gangers how I was found he speaks first in German, then French and English. I try to look completely blank - until he suggests I may be a Russian escapee. I sense a dangerous situation so I admit I am an English Airman. There is relief all round except for the Party Member, who denounces me as a 'Terror Flieger'. I can now talk with the official who tells me, in good English, he was Passenger Manager in Luxemburg. We walk back in the rain to the Railway Station Offices, It is Hermeskeil Station in the Hochwald - part of the Siegfried Line.

A young woman, on duty in the office, offers a cup of ersatz coffee. Shortly the Station Master arrives, a very pleasant late middle-aged man, whose English is much better than my German. We go to his office and we talk - he was an engineer and knew Coventry well, he had worked on the Siegfried Line with the Todt Organisation. He tells me it is his duty to report me to the local Police who would come and collect me.

In the Bag

It was only a short wait before the door flew open and two men stamped in. One was very large with a coarse red face and a drawn pistol, he filled his grubby pale blue uniform. The second man was small and dark with a tiny peaked cap, he looked like a clerk or postman acting as part-time policeman. I was tempted to laugh with thoughts of comic opera. The big one started shouting orders and wanting to search my pockets, he asked questions of all present about what I had said and done. Then, still with drawn pistol, we marched out of the station offices and off up the hill to the local prison. The cell was dark, damp and cold, on a rough dirty mattress I managed an hour or so sleep before daylight, a brief cold wash then to the prison office to watch my two policemen have cold-meat sandwiches before they took me back to the railway station. As the sun came up the train arrived, little was said as 'red-face' ensured that we had a compartment to ourselves. After a time the train stopped, I believe it was Osburg, where 'red-face' got out briefly. I asked the small policeman for a drink but he said it was not possible and added that local police officer was a hard and bitter man, he thought he had been a prisoner in the First World War. At this point he returned and there was silence as the train moved off. Soon we were in Trier Station, it was a sunny summer's Sunday morning, such an ordinary civilised sight, quite a lot of people in their best clothes and church bells in the distance My police escort saluted as an officer in very smart uniform met us on the platform.

It was an odd feeling, walking through the streets between two policemen while the rest of the people seemed to be starting their Sunday break. We came to a large and impressive building, perhaps it had been the Town Council Offices, entry for us was through a small side door and up a dark flight of stairs caged in with wire netting. At the top was a passage with a solid door, after a chat at a window at the side the door swung open and I was pushed inside to be handed over to some rather unpleasant men - they looked what they were - The Gestapo. I was thoroughly searched and handcuffed - however I did manage to conceal a few things like a compass, penknife and watch. A bit later I was taken to an office and stood before a Gestapo officer in full uniform. A much younger policeman was present as interpreter, I learned they did not believe I was an English airman - I was a spy - where was my equipment and radio who was I going to meet and where? It seemed a long session of argument and shouted questions, the interpreter knew very little English and this added to the difficulties. There was the usual threat of 'being shot next morning' and the blank refusal to accept my 'rank name and number'. At last I was taken back to the reception area with the Gestapo watching closely, time passed, there was no conversation, no food and no drink.

Eventually there was a commotion and argument at the entrance door then two Luftwaffe sergeants appeared. They had come to collect me and demanded I was released from handcuffs into their charge. The Gestapo were reluctant and there were phone calls and strong words but after exchanging documents I was walked out of this Headquarters with the two Feldwebels. One spoke good English and told me his father had been a lecturer at Imperial College in London before being interned when War started. They told me I was lucky, the Gestapo wanted to keep me but the Station Master at Hermeskeil had told the Luftwaffe the circumstances and I was their 'Kriegsgefangener'. We made our way, slowly and easily, to an Army Prison. It had been a Convent, set on a hillside overlooking the river with gardens and green fields around.

The Army Sergeant in charge was cheerful and professional, he soon provided a plateful of food and coffee. I was led upstairs to my cell, it was a small room on the top floor - with much laughter he wrote on the name board outside 'Der englische Major'. I was allowed to have the window open for a time, it was a wonderful view across the Mosel as the sun was setting, such sweet fresh air, the cathedral bells and peace - war seemed a long way away from this convent. I slept well and next morning the Luftwaffe sergeants came to collect me. We talked as

we took a tram-ride to the Luftwaffe Aerodrome on the outskirts of Trier, they told me it was a training station for pilots. I was deposited quite formally at the Guardroom then later taken to the Commanding Officer's office. He was stern and efficient with no nonsense, his English was good and his questions brief, satisfied with my replies I was handed back to my two Feldwebels, who took me to their own quarters. At last, a good wash, shave and clean-up, time was pressing as we had a train to catch to Frankfurt. We mingled with the crowds at the station, some were refugees from bombed towns some, on this Monday returning to work. At last the train came in and we found a comfortable compartment, it was an uneventful journey which ended in sunshine at Frankfurt. My escorts soon found an Army office and managed to beg cups of coffee. Finally a short ride to the Dulag Luft at Oberursel, farewell to my two Luftwaffe Sergeants and I was taken in as another Kriegsgefangener.