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**BOMBER SQUADRON - 5 GROUP
ROYAL AIR FORCE - SCAMPTON**



1051928 SGT. W.E. CLARKE

Wireless Operator/Air Gunner

with 49 Squadron 20th September 1941 - 18 November 1942

Commissioned 7th July 1942

WALTER ERIC CLARKE

AC2. LAC. ACTING CPL. SGT. P/O. F/O. F/LT.
ROYAL AIR FORCE



WALTER ERIC CLARKE

Born 22nd April 1913

Served with 49 Squadron - Bomber Command
Royal Air Force - Scampton (Lincoln)
20th September 1941 to 18th November 1942



Sergeant Wireless Operator/Air Gunner 'B' Flight Commissioned 7th July 1942 - Signals Officer (Air).
I/C 'A' and 'B' Flights Wireless Operators (Air).

26 Operations - France, Germany, Italy etc. Including 1st and 2nd 1000 bomber
raids - May 30th and June 2nd 1942.

10 Operations on Hampdens.
4 on Manchesters.
12 on Lancasters.

Mentioned in despatches June 1944.

What is it like to be on 'Ops' ?

How often has this question been asked?

On Sunday the 21st September 1941 I arrived at RAF Scampton, along with another Wop/Ag, Sgt Patrick Maloney (an Irish Cockney) having completed a 12 week course of operational training at No.16 OTU at RAF Upper Heyford on Handley Page Hampdens. I was to learn later that our course , No 21 I think, suffered the most losses in training.

Pat and I became very good friends and left Scampton on the same day Friday the 13th 1942 having completed 14 months on operations. He was posted north to RAF Lossiemouth and I was posted south to RAF Pershore, 23 OTU. I did not see him again until August 1943 when he called to see me at my unit on his way home on leave - I was a Flight Lieutenant, he was a Flying Officer. We were both very lucky survivors, but Pat did not survive. He volunteered for a second tour (with 83 Sqdn I think). In August 1944 I received a letter from his brother informing me that Pat and crew baled out over Lincolnshire but Pat's parachute failed to open. His crew survived only to go missing on a further Op. Some years ago I found that Pat was buried in a North London Cemetery with his Mother and I visited the grave. The War Grave Commission headstone was almost covered in weeds. I learned that the Cemetery had been sold for £1. Pat had gained F/Lt rank and had been awarded the DFM. He will always be a 4T9er to me.

On arrival at Scampton we carried out the arrival procedure which consisted visiting certain Sections and `signing in` the final visit was to Station Headquarters which, among other things, ensured we were on the payroll. We were billeted in the former married quarters.

The following morning we found our way to the Wireless Operators crew room in No.2 Hangar which looked out on the airfield. Wing Commander Guy Gibson`s dog Nigger`s memorial is now there.

There were about 20 Wop/AGs consisting of A and B Flights where Flight Sergeant Jack Gadsby said we were in his Flight, a Flight Sgt Wally Ellis who had a DFM and Bar was NCO in charge of A Flight. I learned later that both Ellis and Gadsby joined the Squadron in 1938, and that Jack Gadsby had done his first Op as an LAC, before all aircrew were made Sergeants. He also had a DFM and was on his second tour. Jack and about 5 or 6 others would be in their late 20s the rest seemed to be quite young, around age 20. Pat and I were both 28 - old boys !- new boys !

The Hampden bomber had a crew of 4 - Pilot, Navigator (who also combined Bomb Aimer) Wireless Operator and Rear Gunner. Apparently there were no `straight` Air Gunners so the crew comprised Pilot, Navigator and 2 Wireless Ops. One Wop would be `on the set` in the upper position and the other in the lower gun position, known as `the Tin`.

I was not to know until Monday 13th October 1941 Normally, we got word in the crew room by 9am that aircraft, say 9, were serviceable and F/S Jack Gadsby would detail us to carry out a DI (daily inspection) on a specific aircraft and usually it would be the aircraft that you later flew in on an NFT (night flying test) to certify its fitness for an operation.

This involved a 10-15minute flight with the Pilot, usually the Pilot with whom you would fly that night, but this did not always happen Later in the morning, we could see from our crew room window a tractor towing a string of bomb trolleys and we might just get an inkling of the type of operation that night. Ruhr, Happy Valley or mining, known as gardening, but we just speculated.

Sometimes F/S Jack Gadsby would be able to say that you were flying with such a Pilot in, say , K King. The rest of us would not know until we saw the Ops board at briefing but if your Pilot was an NCO, he would know and he would contact you but if your Pilot was an Officer you would not see him until briefing.

There were a few occasions in the early days where a crew stayed together in the Hampdens but not many. The merits of the Pilots were certainly discussed in the Wops crew room, comments like "spot on" "super", "wizard" and so on but also not so others who might merit "dopey", "crazy" and other unspeakable sorts. Obviously, affinities were formed but of a tenuous nature.

When we got the Manchesters, we had seven crew and the majority stayed together, but we might not see much of the Officer members until we assembled for boarding. They had their own crew rooms.

When Pat and I walked into the Wops crew room that first morning I must say I felt a sense of disappointment, the room was full of blue smoke, a crowd of Wops looking somewhat dishevelled, sitting round small tables playing cards or dominoes, and the floor looked as if it had not been swept for weeks. Battle dress had not yet been issued and they looked a very untidy lot. Somehow I expected some thing different, however Pat and I fitted into and getting to know the routine. I stuck it for a week or two and then arranged with Pat to go down with me early one morning and clean the place up. We tipped all the tables and chairs out on the grass frontage, borrowed some sweeping brushes from the Hangar staff and gave the place a through clean up, much to the surprise of the arriving Wops. I suggested to F/S Jack Gadsby that a cleaning rota be set up and he agreed. I asked his permission re-arrange the notice board and he agreed. The first time I got home on a `48` I returned armed with card, lettering pens etc and set the board up afresh.

The daytime was a mixture of DIs, NFTs, a lecture, parachute repacking, and some local flying, otherwise it was cards and dominoes for some. I only occasionally joined in when pressed but always refused to gamble. Pat was of the same mind.

Amazingly, I did not get airborne until the 12th October, actually 0010 hrs on the 13th and it was an Op. I had not been informed that I was flying that night until F/S Gadsby told me at tea time to be at briefing 1800 hrs.

Arriving at briefing I found I was crewed with a Sgt Pilot Robinson, Navigator Sgt Black, and Sgt Mossop Wireless Operator. I was in the Tin.

The target was Halse (also called Huls) and it was to be my first flight with 49 Squadron and it was to be an Op. I did not know the Pilot or Navigator but of course I knew the Wop Sgt Mossop, he was a buddy of F/S Gadsby and a 'veteran'. I did not know it at the time but in September Sgt Robinson and crew, including Sgt Mossop, crashed short of petrol near Banff in Scotland and all the crew were injured They were part of a force flying from Lossiemouth to lay mines in the approaches to Oslo Fford where the German battleship Von Scheer was moored In December Sgt Robinson and crew crash landed at Bircham Newton in Norfolk after a raid on Bremerhavenn in which Sgt Black was killed by a cannon shell. The others were unhurt.

The briefing was short, the Squadron Commander pointing out the target and the reason for the operation, and the route out and back and followed by specialist Officers, meteorologist, navigator signals and intelligence and take-off times were also announced ,then the individual crews got into a huddle over the navigator's chart after which we returned to our Messes for a 'night flying supper'. There was no excitement, just quiet conversation and discussion.

We all met at 2300 hours in front of the Hangar, fully kitted up, extra jerseys and the like as it was very cold in the Hampdens and along came the Wagon. No more smoking, cigarettes stubbed out. An officer would sit in front with the WAAF driver and we piled in, 2 or 3 crews at a time and we were off to dispersal. No sign of nerves but quite a lot of banter. I think to some of the younger ones, it was an adventure of a sort with little thought of the possible horrors. You would hear, "I have done 10 now, how many have you done?" or "Get some in" or similar. I did not announce it was my first.

The Pilot, who, at this time was addressed as `Skipper` was in conversation with the ground crew Flight Sergeant, after which he just said, "Lets get going."

All this was in 'black out' conditions and then the sound of engines starting up and some shouting.

The Pilot and Navigator entered through the front hatch the Wireless Operator and myself through the rear lower gun position - the Tin . I was the last, we were all in and individually commenced connecting up routines, I stowed my chute, checked the safety catches on my guns- twin Vickers gas operated, plugged in the oxygen tube, a bayonet type, and then listened in to the crew checking intercom contact with each other but firstly with the Pilot.

"Hello Skipper, Navigator here" and similar from the Wop and myself. Good intercom was so vital, just one defective headset could cause the whole intercom to fail and possibly the whole operation. For take-off and landing, the Tin gunner had to squeeze in with the Wireless Op. The engines were started up, with some vibration as they were warmed up and we checked the intercom again and then we commenced the taxiing to take off.

Waiting for take off, I found myself musing, if that is the right word, I went back to the time , while at Yatesbury Wireless School, I hitch hiked home on a '48' (48hr leave pass) and found myself on the London North Circular road, making my way to a Lorry Park at Finchley where I could get a lift up the A1 to Yorkshire through the night.

The 'All Clear' had just sounded and I had to wend my way (incidentally with a veteran hitch hiker who certainly knew his way around) through bomb damage, with fire engines and others doing their job, water mains burst, shop windows out, glass and goods all over the place, maybe because we were in uniform the Wardens took no notice of us.

As I sat in my bomber, I began to ask myself what damage were we going to do. I also remembered, when on leave, the red sky over Sheffield some 18 miles away. I thought of the reports by radio and newspapers of the damage, and countless civilian deaths in London and our big cities.

Why was I here?

Listening to the engines of my bomber about to take off to do untold damage and death to another people. I consoled myself that my country was fighting for its very existence, and that I was a very small cog in a massive war machine. Germany had over run Europe and England could be the next victim. So horrible to think and yet possible?

With these and other thoughts I began to ask myself, "What happens now? Are we going to be successful and carry out our mission with a safe return, to do more? Or are we going to be shot down, shall I have to bale out?"

I had no qualms about baling out, but would I be able to?

I certainly feared coming down in the sea. We now know that the North Sea is a graveyard of hundreds of our bombers.

My musings are interrupted, "OK boys we are off" and with a surge of the engines we rumble down the runway gathering speed and then the rumbling ceases and we sense a slight lift - we are airborne and I feel as if I am sweating. Some people say "God defend the right," but as I muse I hear the Navigator telling the Pilot "Wheels up OK".

Then he reminds him of the compass course to the coast. Bill Mossop gave me a `thumbs up` signal and I clambered down to my lower gun position, and then re-checked my intercom. During the steady climb I swung my guns from side to side checking my view and began musing again, "I did not want this."

I wanted to be on the set, however, my turn will come.

We were now flying level and the engines droned, what is to be will be??!!
My thoughts flew home, to my wife. Past midnight, she would be in bed.
We married in 1937, I was 24 she 21 and we lived with her widowed
mother and right now we are expecting our first child - about the end of
December, I suddenly felt very much alone, isolated, apprehensive?
What am I doing here?

When War broke out I knew I was of military age and in the 1930s, as I
worked in a Doncaster office, I got used to seeing various aircraft
flying around and in 1936 RAF Finningley (5 miles south of Doncaster)
opened and I also got used to seeing 'the boys in blue' in the town mostly
wearing an aircrew brevet, Pilot, Observer etc.
The aircraft were Handley Page Hampdens.

I did not fancy myself with a Lee Enfield .303 plus bayonet and I had
some ideas about becoming one of those 'boys' so at the first opportunity
I visited the recruiting office at Sheffield and applied for aircrew
navigation but refused on the spot as I did not have Grammar School
education, but I was offered 'Wireless Operator/Air Gunner' which I
accepted. I was called up on 13th August 1940.

My wife and I had decided not to have children -because of the War- but
when I commenced flying training she changed her mind and now we
awaited our first child.

Suddenly I heard the Navigator give the Pilot a new course, we were
crossing the Norfolk coast, good-bye England!
Hopefully just for the time being.

I think we were at about 10 to 12 thousand feet, and the Navigator
sounded crisp and confident and the W/op reported 'nothing from Group'.
Throughout the trip the W/op must listen out to Group HQ every 15
minutes from the hour in case of recall or diversion, W/T silence was
observed except in case of emergency and only with the Pilot's
permission.

As we approached the enemy coast the Pilot warned us that we were in a night-fighter zone but there was now a lot of cloud and I could see nothing.....my first operation!

In the next 14 months I was to survive 26 operations with 9 different Pilots, in 3 different bombers, Hampdens, Manchesters and Lancasters.

The Air Ministry report reads : " AD979 Sgt.Robinson, 10/10th cloud at Wesel on ETA, set course for target, dropped flare without success for 25 minutes at 2000 -4000 ft looking for target spending 50 minutes in area, Essen and Ruhr under 10/10th cloud, bombed drome and flarepath in Holland on return."

We landed at base at 0750 hrs, we had been airborne 6hrs 20mins. We piled into the waiting wagon, to de-briefing and then to breakfast, somebody said everybody's back. With a strange sense of elation I went to bed. In the billet Pat was just leaving for breakfast - he had not been on that Op. The next day I was able to have a talk with Bill Mossop, the W/op, and discussed the flight, my first Op. He laconically summed it up as "a fat lot of good !!" He said he was about finished and I don't remember seeing him again. I think he had completed his tour. There was constant `movement` in the W/ops crew room - on leave, on a course, failing to return, new arrivals. One Sergeant arrived (Sgt Way) who made it known that he was expecting his commission to come through. He was on the Channel Dash detail the same week and did not return. He was posted missing as Pilot Officer W S Way. We lost 15 NCO aircrew, including 7 W/ops.

I went on to do 9 more Ops (raids) 1 in the Tin and 8 on the Wireless, with 6 different Pilots, including 2 with Sqdn Ldr P D S Bennett DFC our B Flight Commander. I was happy to be on the set and felt that I was really doing the job I was trained to do.

My second Op was with Sgt. Pilot Bow and a different crew - I didn't know if they were veterans or new boys.

The target was Mannheim and the Air Ministry reports reads "Flak and searchlight opposition over Belgian coast, cloud necessitated flying at 18000 ft. Target bombed at 14000 ft and aim point at river junction seen. Electrical storms prevailed over target area"

We diverted on the return to Horsham St. Faith in Norfolk in pouring rain. We slept in the Sergeants Mess lounge and flew back to Scampton next morning. On the Op we took off at 1800 hrs and were airborne 7hrs 35mins. I was able to receive Group HQ transmissions but I would not have been able to transmit if required due to heavy static.

My remaining Ops on Hampdens were:-

- PO Donald. Mining of Brest - mines laid but bombs returned. Airborne 7hrs 45mins.
- Sqdn/Ldr Bennett DFC - Bombing Brests. Bright moonlight, chased by ME 109 on bombing run causing evasive action, could not bomb target, bombs returned. Landed on snow runway. Airborne 8hrs.
- Sgt. Downs - bombing Brest - cruisers, hazy conditions, bombs seen to enter dockyard. On landing found 6" hole in starboard wing near petrol tanks
- Sgt, Slingo - Bombing Wilhelmshaven - bombs dropped in dock area but unable to distinguish bursts from flak. Airborne 6hrs 39mins
- Sgt. Slingo - Mining off Heligoland laid in target area. Airborne 5hrs 55min
- P/O Jefferies - Essen. Returned Intercom u/s. Landed Waddington. Airborne 3hrs 05mins.
- Sgt. Slingo - Bombing Lubeck (Baltic) dropped burners from 1000 ft whole town ablaze. 8 bundles of leaflets released. Airborne 8hrs 40mins.
- Sqdn Ldr Bennett DFC - Bombing Cologne and dropped leaflets. 9/10` s cloud, bomb bursts not seen. Airborne 6hrs 55mins.

Then we got the Manchesters, like going from a Ford 10 to a Rolls Royce.

We certainly felt that the Hampden had reached the end of its service. It had however, produced a Victoria Cross, F/Lt R A B Learoyd gaining the award in August 1940. Incidentally, Scampton also gained a second Victoria Cross, Sgt Hannah, a Wireless Operator of 83 Squadron. It is recorded that the Hampden did more sorties than any other Squadron in 5 Group.

The last time I got airborne in a Hampden was, in a way, unique, since it was a lift to Doncaster Airport for me going on leave. The pilot was F/Lt Massey, and it was April 13th 1942, in Hampden AT217.

On April 19th Sgt Frank Slingo and crew in that Hampden failed to return from a mine-laying sortie off Terscshelling - it was the last 49 Squadron Hampden crew to be lost in WW2.

I was on leave on that date but flew with Sgt Slingo on the Lubeck 'burner' sortie on March 28th being airborne for 8:40 hours.

In late 1941 news began filtering through that Coningsby had got a twin-engined heavy bomber called a Manchester and we began wondering how long it would be before we got them.

In early 1942, 83Sqn were equipped with Manchesters, we always seemed to play `second fiddle` to 83Sqn but rumours began to float around that there was a lot of engine trouble with the Manchester.

My initiation with the Manchester occurred on 21st April 1942 when I was detailed to fly with the Squadron Commander Wing Commander R D Stubbs DFC in Manchester L7524 for local circuits and landings. I learned much later that he had flown Ops in Manchesters with 61 Squadron at Coningsby.

The next day I flew with our Flight Commander S/L P D S Bennett DFC and later the same day I flew with my Hampden pilot F/O Jeffreys on conversion flying. I was called again to fly with W/C Stubbs also on local conversion flying but then found that I had been crewed with F/O Jeffreys and four other strangers!

On May 2nd 1942 I did my first Manchester Op, a leaflet raid on Rennes and we were airborne for 6:20 hours. The Air Ministry report reads, "Unsuccessful sortie. Primary target not located. DR compass unserviceable, last resort target used to release nickels (leaflets) from 10,000ft at 0030 hrs."

The next few days we did local day and night flying and on May 8th we did our second Op laying mines off Heligoland Bight. The report reads, "A successful sortie carried out under ideal weather conditions. Mine seen to enter water."

By this time I was beginning to feel comfortable in this big bomber, mainly because, by contrast with the cramped Hampden position, I could get up from my platform seat and do a 'walkabout'. The wireless installation was upright with a narrow but ample desk and I could reach round and pass notes to the Navigator at his table. My position was immediately forward of the main spar and down to the left was the trailing aerial reel and the heating control and it is well reported as the hottest spot in the aircraft, almost a 'sweatbox' much to the dismay of the rest of the crew.

I could stand up and with one step to my right I could put my head in the astrodome for a 360 degree look around and similarly from there I could operate the Loop aerial for direction finding. I could get up and walk forward, past the Navigator up to the Pilot or to the rear towards the rear gunner's turret. A major contrast in every respect as far as the Hampden was concerned.

As I have said, "like converting from a Ford 10 to a Rolls Royce."

In size, the Manchester had a wing span of 90ft as against the 69ft of the Hampden and powered by two Rolls Royce Vulture engines, each engine consisting of four banks of six cylinders. It was once described as two Merlins in one.

We did not know it at the time but the Vulture engine became a serious problem resulting in the Manchester being taken out of service and, on the 9th July, 49Sqn got the Lancaster.

During the rest of May we were briefed seven times for targets which were later 'scrubbed'.

On May 30th 1942 we were briefed for the 1000 bomber raid on Cologne. I do not remember any particular emphasis on the number except that some OTU crews would be taking part.

49Sqn supplied thirteen Manchesters and 83Sqn supplied twelve Lancasters. The raid was fully reported as a boost to morale and that we were now taking the war to the enemy.

The report reads....."R5775 P/O Jeffreys. 2303-0457. Light and visibility excellent. No cloud. Load dropped on target and bursts seen. Successful in every respect".

I recollect that when we arrived at the target there were a great many fires and palls of smoke. Our bombing run seemed strangely devoid of flak although there were many searchlights. Of 1047 aircraft taking part 41 failed to return. 49Sqn lost two aircraft, its first Manchester casualties.

The second 1000 raid (actually 956) took place on June 2nd and the report reads, "Primary attacked from 9000 feet at 0203 on 40 true. Light and visibility excellent, bombs seen to burst in target area and large fire started."

To me the raid seemed quite uneventful - 49Sqn lost one Manchester. It turned out to be my last operation in the Manchester (the Squadron's last Manchester operation was on 25th June 1942 to Emden).

On June 14th I was on a weather test detail with a new arrival, F/O Cooke DFC. On the 27th June he was a Flight Lieutenant and did a couple of 'dual' details with S/L Couch (our Flight Commander) and from then on F/L Cooke was my pilot, on Lancasters.

Countless books have been published on the now famous Lancaster, the 'Flying Legend' the Manchester with four Merlins, an extended wingspan to 102 ft, the weapon of death to the enemy, a weapon of peace and so many tributes to its ability and achievements. Its reputation will live forever.

On 9th July 1942 'Cookie', as he became known, collected me to fly to Swinderby and when we landed he just said, "Get your stuff, we are collecting a Lanc!

That was the start of my unique association with my famous 'Cookie'. On the take-off he got me to hold the throttles until he got airborne, that was my initiation to the Lancaster. I flew with him continuously until 19th September 1942 which was an operation on Munich lasting 8hrs 55mins (the last of eight ops with him).

During my Ops with Cookie he became my 'icon'. I had a warm feeling for him and I think he was a little older than me. He had a sort of laid back attitude, a very dry, laconic humour, and a slight speech impediment.

His style was, "You clueless clots, pull your finger out!"

Somehow I felt so safe with him. On three occasions we returned to base on three engines, even two and a half engines!

I was instructed to break W/T silence and obtain emergency fixes, QDM`s and the like for the Navigator. When we disembarked he just said, "Good show Sergeant."

My last Op with Cookie was on September 19th to Munich and we were airborne for 8:55 hrs and our new Squadron Commander - Wing Commander Slee signed my logbook for September 1942.

When 'Cookie' left me at Scampton I really felt so desolate, I had a few Ops to do to complete my tour.....who would I be crewed with?

I did not fly again until 12th October and it was an Op with a Sgt Jimmy Thom....a Scot. I did not know him or the crew. Our first Op was to Wismar in the Baltic with the target being the Dornier factory and town.

On the 15th October we bombed Cologne and all 49Sqn aircraft returned to base safely, but eighteen from the main force failed to return.

On the 24th October we bombed Milan, an operation I do remember vividly. After an early briefing we took off at 12 noon in our regular Lancaster, W4761.

After high level, night bombing since October 1941 this was a low level daylight operation!

88 Lancasters from 5 Group, independently flew south from Scampton over the Channel and to the river Loire where we turned to port for the Alps and we rendezvoused at Lake Annecy from where we flew through the top of the Alps to Milan.

As we did so, I had my head in the astrodome and an unforgettable experience was looking forward, easterly. I saw at eye level a big white full moon and, looking aft, I could see an equally large orange sun.....quite unique.

Down in the now dark valleys we saw quite a lot of twinkling lights, no black out there.

We bombed Milan at dusk at about 1700 hrs, descending through cloud. We had a real scare on our bombing run as a Stirling crossed just below us. The force dropped 135 tons of bombs in eighteen minutes. We bombed below the cloud base at 4500 ft and returned in the dark over Germany fortunately without hindrance after steering round two flak concentrations.

On the return I was instructed to break W/T silence to obtain radio navigational aids, M/F fixes and QDMs after which we landed short of petrol at RAF Upper Heyford having been airborne for 9:00 hours. We slept in the Sergeants Mess lounge returning to Scampton at 1100 hrs next morning.

We lost one Lancaster, Sgt Bonnett and his crew crashed on the south coast and all were killed.

This Op turned out to be my last, although I did not know that. I did some local flying, all in the same aircraft (W4761) with Sgt Thom and was briefed twice for Stettin in the Baltic; operations which were 'scrubbed'.

I was sent on leave, returned on the 8th and on November 12th I was posted to Pershore. Sergeant Pat Maloney who arrived at Scampton with me fourteen months previously was also posted off Ops to Lossiemouth. That same day King George VI visited Scampton.

My association with 'Cookie' was quite unique. Our crew had qualified for posting to the now famous Pathfinders - but without me and I was never informed why I was not included. However, I think the actual reason was that I had been operational for a whole year and had only a few Ops to do to complete my tour. On the 6th October 1942 the crew said good bye.....I was a Sergeant, 'Cookie' was a Flight Lieutenant.

Ten months later he arrived at my unit, 23 OTU satellite of Pershore, RAF Atherstone, near Stratford on Avon where I was a Flight Lieutenant Senior Signals Instructor (and Officers' Mess Secretary). He was a Wing Commander DSO & DFC.

I felt great and when he arrived at Atherstone as my Commanding Officer my joy was boundless.

Our meeting was quite heart warming - he looked at me, congratulated me on my rank and said, "Where is your DFM?"

I replied, "No DFM, Sir."

He said, "You were recommended twice to my knowledge."

Some days later he told me had examined the London Gazette in Station Headquarters but found nothing.

I enjoyed a splendid association with him at Atherstone and we worked well together. We parted again in March 1944 when I was posted to Penrhos in Wales on a special Signals Leaders Course where I obtained the `Special Category` classification. From there I was posted to 24 OTU Honeybourne as Senior Signals Leader, and later, again, as Officers Mess Secretary.

In 1986 I attempted to trace 'Cookie' but Air Ministry Records just replied, "Wing Commander J K M Cooke DSO DFC died in 1967."

What was it like on Ops?

In my 97th year (2009), 67 years on, I have tried to answer that question.

Why was I on operations ?

Our country was fighting for its very existence.

I have had to live with the knowledge that some of the bombs from my aircraft must have killed many innocent civilians, women and children. I think I have read somewhere that our enemy killed 30,000 civilians in Britain.

What of the many colleagues, pilots and crews, some very close friends who were killed or missing - they were denied the life that I have had.

Bomber Command lost 55,500 aircrew. My own Squadron lost 907.

I shall continue to mourn them for the rest of my days.

In memoriam

Eric Clarke

August 2009