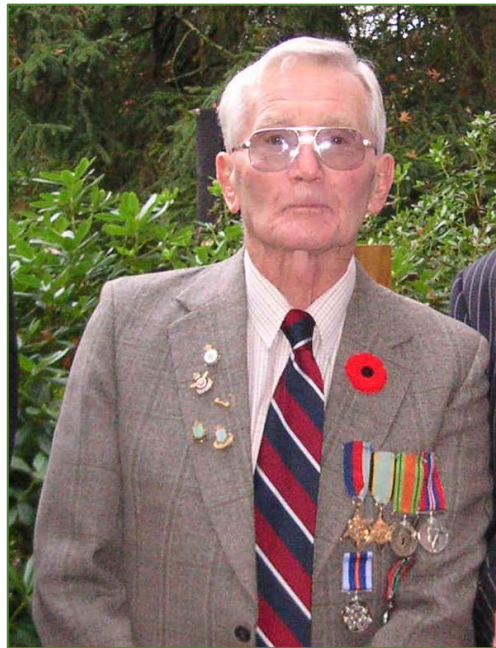


‘ONE MAN IN HIS TIME - -‘

David A.J. Griffin*¹



*‘All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits, and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.’*

Shakespeare : AS YOU LIKE IT, ACT II, SCENE VII

*David Griffin BA

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SYNOPSIS

“I -INK”, the four-engined Halifax bomber had hit hard. Its bombs had cascaded down on the German target, and now it was home to an eggs and bacon breakfast.

However, the terse warning, “Look out” Skipper: Fighter to Starboard” is the beginning of the end for the gallant old Lady and six members of its crew: Pilot John Farmer, Wireless Operator Eric Springett, Mid Upper Gunner Alf Stewart, Rear Gunner William Musson, Bomb Aimer Jack Wilson, and Flight Engineer John Satchell.

The aircraft, a flaming torch, explodes and the only survivor is David Griffin its Welsh navigator, who lands in Holland and becomes a prisoner of war.

David, with other unfortunates, becomes human flotsam, and during his nineteen month’s captivity is cattle-trucked hither and thither in search of a home, the prison camp.

In East Prussia, he is introduced to the raw life: the complete lack of privacy; the thousand and one rumours and prophecies which are believed, because they are desirable, the indomitable Allied airmen in adversity; the effect of letters or lack of them from loved ones; the gnawing hunger and perpetual cold, life in the Lager with its humour, pathos, repartee and longing for freedom; and the illicit daily BBC News bulletin, and David finds himself in an army camp in Poland with Dunkirk veterans- the forgotten men of yesterday. He meets McLeod, a grizzled veteran who has soldiered all over the world, and whose stock-in-trade is relating sexual experiences.

The summer of 1944 is hot, the hunger pangs are assuaged, and one feels that freedom is near.

However, the Russian enigma, halting their advance in front of Warsaw, when they had urged the Poles to rise and kill the German garrison was hard to fathom.

Again, they are forced to move westwards into the heart of Germany. The winter of 1944/45 is spent without Red Cross food parcels, without cigarettes and showers, assailed by the biting cold and slush mud, and the confiscation of the Paillasses, the last vestige of prisoner comfort, when the Gestapo swoop in the morning dark. However, humour and optimism still prevail and the fluctuations and vicissitudes of war are eagerly discussed and analysed by the prisoners. Finally, Montgomery’s armies cross the Rhine at Wesel and the camp takes to the road on foot. Trials and tribulations beset the marchers, and the problem is to survive. Finally, David accompanies by his friend, Wellings, escapes from the column and endeavours to make his way to the “front”, and link-up with the advancing Allied armies.

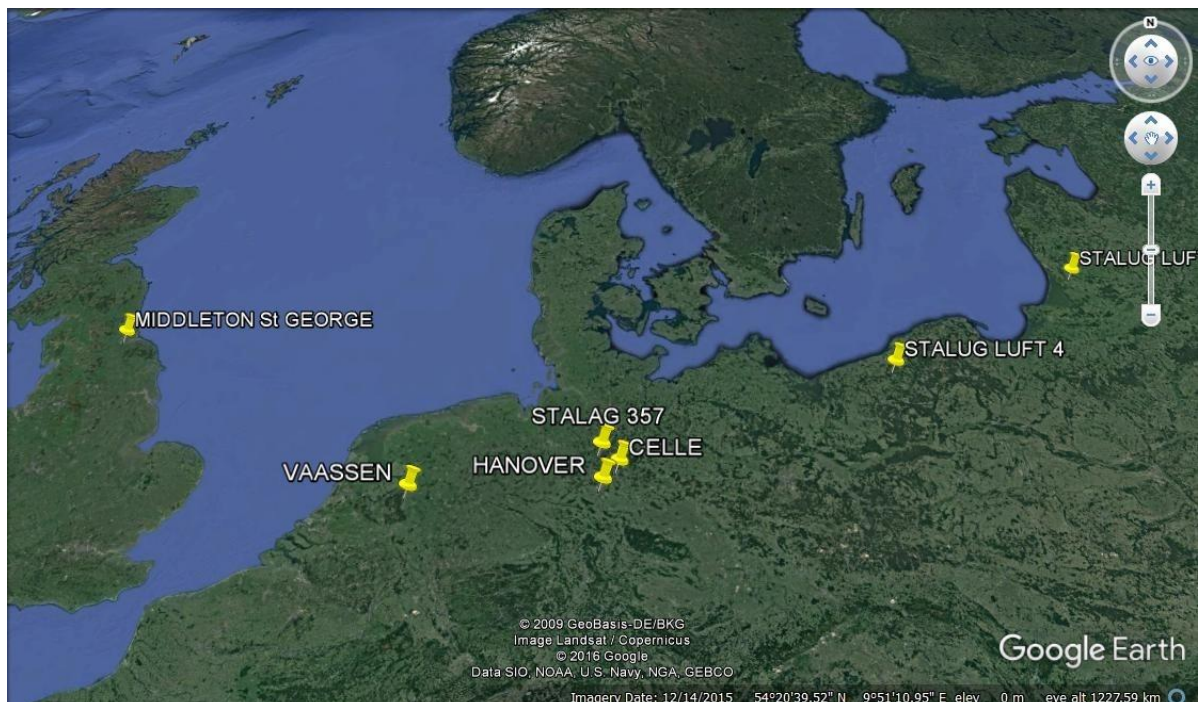
They are recaptured near Belsen, but regain freedom and finally security when they live with Polish slave workers in a big barn. Freedom is theirs when the 11th British Armoured Division overruns the area and David meets Sergeant Bill Woodward, Military Medal, who had fought in the North African Campaign and helped to liberate Brussels.

HANDLEY-PAGE HALIFAX B.MK II SERIES 1 (RAF*)



AUTHOR: WARRANT OFFICER DAVID GRIFFIN (~1945)

Referenced Locations



Referenced Locations as located within 2017 international borders.

Both images on this page attributed to Google Earth, data provided by SIO, NOAA, US Navy, NGA, GEBCO, US Dept of State.

CHAPTER I

It was the night of 28th September 1943. Crump! Crump! Went the bursting venom of the anti-aircraft shells, and the Halifax bomber seemed to buck and leap several feet in the air as the explosion reached upwards to claw it from the sky. This sudden, feverish burst of activity subsided almost as soon as it had begun, as if the German range finders, 21,000 feet below, now disclaimed all interest in their target.

'Christ! That was close,' exclaimed Alf Stuart, the mid-upper gunner, 'If that was their first attempt, I'd hate to be around for the second.'

'Me, too,' chimed in the bomb aimer, Jack Wilson, 'the sudden racket frightened hell out of me.'

'Okay, let's settle down then,' commanded the skipper, 'we've just crossed the Dutch coast and that was the welcoming committee. So stay off the intercom! By the way, navigator, what's our ground speed?'

'One hundred and seventy-eight knots, Skip. We have a headwind and a full bomb load, but I estimate we're bang on track.'

Communication and the cackle of the intercom were turned off by the clicking of a switch, and everyone went back to his appointed task of keeping the ship airborne. The gunners, mid-upper and rear, scanned the darkened skies for possible attack; the wireless operator, Eric Springett, fiddled with the W/T knobs and slowly turned the direction-finding loop antenna for a bearing; the pilot, John Farmer, and flight-engineer, John Satchell, carefully scrutinised the dials of the aircraft's controls; while the bomb aimer, Jack Wilson for the umpteenth time, checked the bombsight to ensure all was in readiness. The navigator, David Griffin, meanwhile, was on his hands and knees looking for the transparent, celluloid 360° protractor, which had slid off the chart table when the aircraft had been uplifted.

'Bloody thing,' muttered Dave, 'it's always slipping and sliding, and in this black hole it's impossible to find.'

His fingers groped along the aircraft's floor until contact was made, enabling him to slide his fingers under the elusive protractor and return it to the table on which the Mercator's projection was pinned. By the faint beam of light, he viewed the table's unholy mess: the once blank map now rapidly filling with straight lines, figures and E.T. As, the highly gleaming dividers for measuring distances; the pencil perched on the edge and ready to do a vanishing trick; and the ICAN computer which provided most of the answers to the problems besetting him. However, something was missing.

'Where's the bloody rubber?' he asked himself. He knew the answer and was just about to seek it out in the darkness below the table when he heard the clicking of the intercom.

'Captain to Navigator, what's the E.T.A. target, and give me a course for home when we've dropped our bundle.'

'Okay, skipper!'

Dave went to work with feverish energy. He drew straight lines on the map, measured distances meticulously with the dividers, worked out the new wind speed and direction and then, with the aid of the computer, arrived at an answer.

'E.T.A. target, 2325 hours, skipper, and the course home will be 278° magnetic.' The captain acknowledged, and then there was silence save for the steady drone of the aircraft's four powerful engines drawing them irresistibly towards the target.

Dave checked his calculations for possible error and then transferred the findings to the log sheet. Everything was shipshape so far and going smoothly. Once the bombs had gone and they'd cleared the target area, the danger of plummeting earthwards would slowly recede and the odds of getting back to base and an egg and bacon breakfast would look rosier. Still, there was many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, as Dave knew only too well, and the homeward path would be fraught with difficulties, especially the German night fighters who'd be waiting for them.

At briefing, the navigation officer had told them that the actual bombing of the target area was to be completed within forty-four minutes - saturation bombing they called it - allowing each wave of 150 aircraft 11 minutes to perform its task. Dave's squadron had been allocated to the third wave, and as the first wave was due to commence at 2300 hours, Dave knew he was bang on time and would be away before the fourth and final wave did their destruction. In the early days of the war, raids had dragged on interminably as solitary bombers found their way to the target area only to be overwhelmed by the ground defences. Now, however, saturation meant that the greatest number of aircraft was over the target at one time and the defences could not cope with the avalanche that swept down upon them. The intensity of the attack would ensure that the ground defenders would be unable to leave the shelters to extinguish the incendiaries and so the target would be well ablaze and, hopefully, out of control by the time the fourth wave departed.

Dave tried to adjust the thin pencil-ray of light above the navigator's table so that it would reveal the elusive eraser, but failed. He bent down to commence a square-search of the blackness and his efforts were immediately rewarded.

'Got it!' he exclaimed triumphantly, and then his short-lived joy was abruptly terminated by his knee coming into hard contact with the sextant.

'Jesus Christ!' he groaned, 'My bloody knee'. He sat on the seat and nursed the hurt, feeling very sorry for himself.

'Only birds and fools fly', he mumbled, and then added as an afterthought, 'and birds don't fly at night.'

However, his feelings of self-pity were short-lived when the cackle of the intercom was immediately followed by: 'Navigator, I can see the PFF flares going down, and the target is ahead and slightly to starboard. Well done!'

Dave knew that the Path Finder Force, the elite of Bomber Command, always went ahead of the bomber force to ring the target with different coloured flares. The following bomber force bomb aimers were instructed to bomb on a particular colour. I for Ink, the aircraft in which they were travelling, was still thirty minutes away, but at 20,000 odd feet one could see for miles.

'Good stuff', we won't get lost now,' he mused, then laughed at himself for being self-congratulatory. Then it was back to the Mercator, groundspeeds, tracks, courses, airspeeds and the ever-fickle wind speed and direction. It was feverish and painstaking activity, but Dave knew from experience that the hairline between life and death depended on Lady Luck and the vigilance and dedication of each member of the crew.
