

June 1st: 1994.

Memories of my Pilot W/O R.B. Cant.

Captain of Lancaster PM-S shot down on 5/6 Sept 1943 returning from Mannheim on the 20th operation.

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I first met Bob at RAF Blyton (near Gainsborough) when I was an instructor at 1662 HCU (Heavy Conversion Unit) I had completed my first tour of 30 ops with 460 RAF Sqn at Blyton and was near the end of my 6 months "seasoning" when I learned that I was to be crewed with one of the 12 crews currently at Blyton and destined for 1103 Sqn at Elsham Woods I took the opportunity (as an instructor) to head all the crew interviews and opted to join Bob's crew as they had the best record as a crew. - "above average" and "likely to make a good Lancaster crew" -

When we examined the records at Elsham in 1980 of the 12 crews (84 men) only Bob's crew of 7 and 9 other individuals from the other crews survived the war - we were the 11th of the 12 to be shot down - "Groucho" Lee of Zebra was the last to go - a fortnight afterwards - all killed - W/O Lee was always known as "Groucho".

Points raised by Paul Canadian contact: It was only after the war that I (as a member of the Air Ministry Evacuees Panel on A.I.I.) learned of the coded letter system - the details of which are still secret; but it was generally limited to those aircrew who had a literary or journalistic background.

Escape kit and genuine money (about £20). Each kit was buried in the breast pockets of the battle dress blouse. Secret compasses - I had a collar stud - Bob had a pipe with a special bowl! Silk escape maps were sewn into our clothing and could not be detected. The escape kits held many useful things; fishing lures, energy tablets, Harlicks tablets, matches, a file (encased in rubber to secrete within the body!), signalling mirror, burning glass, water purifying tablets, Rubber Bag, 16 hold water. Another compass - diagrams of edible fungi, iodine tubes and elasto-plast dressings. The aircraft was on fire - both port side engines were "dead" and the aircraft hit the ground and burned out at "Houzelot Farm" near a place called Le Jars near to a small village called KOEUR

The Germans informed the locals that all members of the crew had been killed and their bodies buried - this to prevent the locals from searching for us. Already though some members of the French Society were aware that 2 members were alive (Possibly Bob and Bill Milburn who had been picked up already by the Resistance).

I cannot tell you of course of Bob and Bill's route but I can say that when I was picked up by the Resistance they knew everything about me. I found out later when we met up in Switzerland that it was the same group that handled Bob and Bill and of course learned from them all the details of the other members of the crew. We were handled by Anne CRAIG who was later handled by Anne and "disappeared" - a very brave lady. I already had civilian clothes but the Resistance provided false documents, railway tickets and so on.

The crossing point into Switzerland was now to Delle - but no idea where. I arrived at Belfast as a Tech. College student - was passed out of the station and dressed into the "Interdite Zone" hidden in a fabric coat - there I lived in a hollow hay stack for some days until I and a German Soldier - deserting from Mannheim on the night we bombed it - we made an unusual couple to the smuggling party across the Frontier. I expect Bob and Bill must have followed much the same route.

Please understand that names and places were never learned - it was too dangerous for others if we knew - that was where Jimmy the navigator had such a tough time at the hands of the Gestapo - it cost him one of his legs and two drowning experiences.

When I surrendered to the Swiss I spent 3 weeks in prison while they interviewed me intensely to ascertain if I was English, an airman, an escapee - who had helped me how I had crossed the Frontier and so on. Most of my replies were "number Rank - home and a suggestion to contact the British Legation

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who could vouch for me. I was then transferred from Penitentiary Prison to Berne and even locally handed over to the British Legation. There I met Bob and Bill and we were all warned and sworn to secrecy about our adventures because of active German interest in us. There were about 20 of us Evadés scattered about Switzerland and it was decided to house us all together at the Gentane Hotel in AROSA.

Under the Geneva Convention - as Evadés - we could claim to be repatriated to our country of origin and, through the Swiss Government, we all made individual applications to be repatriated but naturally the German Government formally refused us permission to travel through countries occupied by them. This left the Swiss with a problem - they could not intern us as repatriate us - so they imposed that we surrendered our military status and became civilian aliens. Noted that the British Government paid our clothes and provided us with food to engage in any hostile or war-like activity. Could so, living together as civilians, we might feel by the British Government we had a wonderful holiday experience - civil Swiss rations (and ration cards) - no restrictions that any other alien suffered. - It was a relaxing and gentle life.

We had our own ski instructor (Willy Blum) and a Swiss Army officer (Lt. Schumacher) - technically watch over us.

In Dec. 43 I was admitted to CHUR Hospital with kidney trouble (caused by exposure and other problems) while I was in hospital Bob and Bill visited some business associates in Zurich - what I was told there I do not know but I believe that their tail files were paid for by the Swiss friends - all this took place about 6 months before 'D' Day. No body came to visit Bob, and I am sure that the enquiries they made were to ensure that we were comfortable in our circumstances.

At the end of the skiing season early in May we were moved from AROSA to a village above Montreux on Lake Geneva - the village was CHAM or Cham-sur-Montreux and were accommodated in

The Hotel Bellevue - Bellevue, the many army people who escaped from POW camps and Italy were now flooding in but were not accorded civilian status. They were housed in a large hotel high up the mountain and lived in uniform as an army unit. Naturally they resented our superior status and the army authorities tried hard to take us over and conform with them. There was of course a great deal of bad feeling between the two groups as they had nothing like the freedom which we enjoyed. The CAUX PACE hotel became a sort of British Army Headquarters.

As the fighting in Italy became more intense the Germans demanded a right of passage through Swiss territory to supply and withdraw from Italy; it was of course refused by the Swiss Government who called up Swiss Reserves and intensified their security. We wondered what would be the position if the British contingent in Switzerland were invaded - speculation led us to believe that an allied invasion was near and would take place in south east of France.

When I Day took place we were all surprised and covered the walls of the Hotel with large scale maps of usine allied German and Swiss paper reports could follow the progress of the war very easily. When the South of France was liberated by the Americans who pushed up to Lyons and were fighting towards the "Beaufort Gap" people began to vanish overnight into France in attempts to contact the Americans. This face was discouraged by the British. Negotiation and the Swiss as it was very dangerous - Absentees were in civilian clothes with no identity - The Magis were very active there were plenty of German deserters looking for entry into Switzerland - shoot first words - the I began and after a number of us were caught and returned, the practice was officially forbidden. When the German Frontier Guards were withdrawn from St Gingolph (on the Swiss French border across Lake Geneva, Bal, Bill Millon Jean Pivé and I had a long evening conference. Jean Pivé was a Free French Blenheim pilot forced down in the Sahara captured by the Italians and was being transferred from Italy to Germany

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He escaped and crossed into Switzerland and had been our companion since I was at Berne. Bob and Bill were all for going back into France and I was against as I've had been "laid" and knew the difficulties of living and walking alone - Bob and Bill had seen David for long - they would be the Resistance and were sure that they would be picked up again. It was agreed that if we went it should be in pairs as 3 or more were more likely to be picked up by the Germans - and as civilians that would be fatal in the Haute Savoie at that time.

In the event Bob and Bill disappeared one night and crossed into France by St Gingolph. I packed up their kit and reported their absence. A few days later we were forbidden to leave and were ordered to wear British Army uniforms with "Royal Air Force" flashes. We were again under British military discipline. About a fortnight later we heard that both Bob and Bill had arrived safely in North Africa. That they had been picked up by the Germans and had been flown to Africa to check their identities.

Shortly afterwards we were secretly collected in the early hours of the morning (about 2 AM) and packed in a train to Geneva - from there we passed into France without any formalities and dumped at a remote station in France; collected by American trucks and whisked off to Lyons and eventually flown back to England.

To Margaret - "The Souvenirs" of Bob's flying career
you may find:

1) "Joe" a small 6" high knitted doll in RAF uniform - he always flew with us, sitting on the P4 (magnetic compass bracket). When Bob was about to leave the aircraft and follow me he remembered "Joe" and went back to collect him - I had already "baled out" and so we were separated and never met up in France. Joe was the first object Bob showed me when we met in Berne. Joe flew with Bob in India where we met a few times in Calcutta - I was then on York long range transport after VE Day.

- "Joe" was present in Bob's pocket when he was Best Man at my wedding on Apr. 12, 1947. The last time I saw him was at the Elsham Woods reunion in the 1980's.
- If he still exists he is probably a bit senile now but he has had an eventful existence - "If you ever find him please cheerish him for us all!"
 - Bob had in 1980 his parachute harness release box
 - There might be still among Bob's papers a photograph of my wedding group with Bob standing by my side.
 - Bob was good enough to obtain both Bronze and Silver Ski Competence Badges - Triangular badges inscribed by ski's - entitled "Bronze Test" and "Silver Test" British Ski Club.
 - There may be an oxidised silver badge - rectangular entitled "Hörnli Hutte" and an altitude in metres. This was obtained by a long cross country ski test climbing to the top of the HÖRNLI - a local high mountain peak.
 - There may be an oxidised silver flying boot in the shape of a Wellington boot with wings
-  This shape - we called ourselves
- The late animals club and all AAF Sunders in Switzerland each bought one!