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BOB CANT.....The bomber pilot.

I suppose my initial interest in flying was first revealed when I used to run around the school playground, with arms outstretched, making aeroplane noises. By the age of fifteen I was making balsa wood models, doing little sketches of aircraft and very much detesting life at Grammar School. So, very much against my parents wishes, I joined the Royal Air Force as an Aircraft Apprentice, having signed on for three years apprenticeship to be followed by twelve years service. My mother was greatly distressed by this, my father requested a compassionate discharge and after three months paid for my release.

A few years later war was declared. Although my education was very limited I volunteered to become a pilot. A couple of interviews gave chance for my enthusiasm to be emphasized, stringent medical and aptitude tests were overcome and I was deemed fit to undergo training.

After a brief experience as a pupil flying in Tiger Moths I crossed the Atlantic on board a cargo boat travelling in convoy.

From New York a train journey north to New Brunswick then a further journey, five days, across Canada to a newly constructed air base, out on the prairie, named Pearce, Alberta.

I completed the course, flying Boeing Stearman aircraft then moved to North Battleford, Saskatchewan and began training on twin engined aircraft.

One day, after a series of 'circuits & bumps' I had become deaf and after a few days in the Station Sick Bay I was taken off the pilot's course altogether.

This was utterly heartbreaking, so many of my colleagues had failed at various stages of training, quite a considerable percentage really, while I still soldiered on.....until now.

I wasn't going home to England as an R.A.F. Pilot, no, I was just another 'WASHOUT' the word I'd heard applied to dozens of devastated young trainees.

Such dejected, rejected personnel with their ambitions shattered were posted to Trenton, Ontario, some even committed suicide there.

However, having done a requisite number of hours solo flying, I was eligible to train for a recently created flying trade as 'Air Bomber'. This entailed success at Air Navigation School, Mount Hope followed by similar result at Bombing and Gunnery School, Picton.

The outcome would then be that I would fly as Second Pilot, would aim the bombs and would be able to take over the duties of any member of the crew in emergency. The rate of pay was to be the same as for a pilot and a double brevet to be issued with a 'B' in the center. I received the pay but the brevet never materialised, so I received the single winged 'Flying O' as worn by the Observers of World War One.

Canada was a wonderful country to be in, having left behind the blacked out windows and food restrictions of war time Britain, so much so that on a couple of occasions I chanced an odd day or so of absence without leave, thinking I wouldn't be missed. But I was.

The massive liner "QUEEN ELIZABETH" eased gently away from the dockside, the luxurious fittings that had served an opulent peacetime trade of 2,500 ocean going passengers had been stripped out, making way for 15,000 American Servicemen and a small number of R.A.F. Leaving the Hudson River, the legendary Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty behind she headed towards the European hostilities. After being away for almost a year I was fortunate to be back home for my 21st Birthday and Christmas.

My first posting was to Harrogate which seemed to be a dispersal depot, where everybody wasted time while waiting to be told to go somewhere else.

Eventually I was sent to Hixon and found that I was one of about 15 Air Bombers on the site and that in due course we would be joined by a similar number of pilots, navigators, wireless operators and rear gunners to make up Wellington crews.

The weather was wretched rain, wind and some snow. All anyone had to do was to leave the cold concrete floored billet twice per day, squelch through the mud across to the orderly room and to be seen as in attendance.

After a couple of days I walked in and the clerk said , " Are you Sgt. Teare or Sgt. Lindsey ? I can't tell the difference". This was an opportunity that mustn't be missed.

Next day I was at home in Liverpool and Lindsey was doing double appearances.

Looking back on those days, with little acts of bravado rather than any dire necessity , I have become aware that I was too immature to have made a good bomber pilot and Captain of a crew.

I was however, very concerned about what sort of newly qualified pilot was going to be at the controls when I was flying over Germany in the alarmingly near future.

Eventually the full compliment of flying men had arrived and although the initial tendency might have been to spend most time with the particular tradesmen you have been living with and training with during recent months it was essential to intergrate with all. We were to attend lectures, eat, sleep and drink with this shower of aircrew but within the space of a few days we were to sort ourselves out into five-man-teams that would face life-or-death situations.

There was a Sergeant Pilot who's behavior I watched. He was thickset and his hands looked as though he would be capable of holding a heavy bomber as it heaved it's way across Europe in the darkness. He had no frivolous conversation, he wasn't trying to impress anybody. He took a drink, but not too many. (As some of the others did each night) He just seemed to be quietly weighing up the situation.

In due course we spoke, I asked if he'd got a crew. He hadn't but he'd been in conversation with a couple of lads from Wigan, one of whom was a rear gunner and the other a wireless op.

I don't think much more was said but the other two came along and we started sipping beer and looking for a navigator.

Bob Cant came from near Nottingham, had trained in America and was the same age as myself.

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Syd Horton was a Wireless Operator, he was twenty-two and married. Bob Parkinson was a few years older and was a family man.

Our choice of navigator was "Tommy" Thomas from London, about the same age as Bob Parky and married.

The more we were together the more the team spirit developed, each team member had his particular training excersizes to complete while the pilot himself took his tuition on flying a Wellington.

The first day that I actually flew with Bob Cant was 13th. March 43 from the Operational Training Unit at Seighford, this was followed by several daylight flights on cross-country trips and visits to bombing ranges till the end of the month.

In April we moved to Lichfield, completely as a crew now and did more bombing and cross country runs, firstly in daylight and for the latter part of the month in darkness. Night flying over England was vastly different from North America with all the townships fully lit. Apart from the noise of the engines there was just an eery blackness that revealed nothing without the dimly iluminated instrument panel.

Bob Cant's handling of the Wellingtons must have been to the instructors absolute satisfaction, for we were chosen to go to a Conversion Unit where we would go onto the four engined Halifaxes then onto the best bomber of all, the Lancaster.

To use these larger aircraft our crew was increased to seven, by the incorporation of Bill Milburn from Whitehaven as Mid-Upper Gunner and Eric Dickson "Dickie" from Cheltenham who was a Flight Engineer.

Eventually we were posted to 103 Squadron, No 1 Group, Bomber Command, stationed at Elsham Wolds in Lincolnshire.

On the 24th June 43, more than two years since I was first accepted for training as aircrew, we were loaded up and ready for action. This was to be our first operation, we would be given one day leave each week which were accumulated to make one week leave every seventh week. We would stay on duty at the Squadron until we qualified for a rest period on the completion of thirty operations which were called a 'Tour'.

They did not tell us that nobody had survived a Tour at Elsham Wolds for several months previously !

The target was WUPPERTAL and the bomb load consisted of :-

one 4,000 lbs High Capacity Bomb.

seven containers carrying 30 lbs. incendiary bombs.

six containers carrying 4 lbs incendiary bombs.

Having spent so much time peering into a bomb sight on training flights and calling into the intercom Left, Left Steady and so on, and having a pride in the accuracy of my bomb dropping , for (I actually held record results on certain bombing ranges) and having arrived safely at our target with no bother, except for seeing lots and lots of fireworks, I wanted a really good precision run.

Allowances had been calculated for the height, wind direction, type of bombs etc.etc. but the target was not quite in line to score a perfect bulls-eye.....

" Dummy run ! Round again Bob !" I called into the microphone and so we circled, amongst all the exploding shells and the searchlights to get a perfect aim and produce a BullsEye photo-flash for the Intellegence Section

When we got back to base and eventually learnt how many lads had failed to return I realised how very very naive I had been and assured the crew that never again would I call DUMMY run !

Before they both died Bob Parky and Syd used to visit me in the Isle of Man and I used to see them over in England.....
Every evening would end up with leg-pulling about ROUND AGAIN TEARE

The precise losses on that night of our first operation were -
10 Halifaxes, 10 Stirlings, 8 Lancasters , 6 Wellingtons.

The following night	June 25	the target was	GELSENKIRCHEN
	then June 28		COLOGNE
	July 3		COLOGNE again
	July 25		HAMBURG
	July 27		do.
	July 29		do .
	Aug 2		do.
	Aug 7		TURIN
	Aug 9		MANNHIEM

We were attacked by an ME 110, rear gunner fired, Bob dived and I went deaf and was grounded for two operations.

Aug 14	MILAN(Pirelli & Breda factory special low-level attack. 9hrs 45mins.)
Aug 27	NURNBURG
Aug 30	MUNCHEN GLADBACH
AUG 31	BERLIN
Sept 5	MANNHIEM (went down)

Although loosing height rapidly Bob stayed at the controls to keep the aircraft as level as possible to give the crew a chance to bail out..... he has always had the respect of us all.

Denys Teare,
56 Ormly Rd.,
Ramsey, Isle of Man.

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According to the records of the R.A.F. Escaping Society in London the people who helped Bob and Bill Milburn to evade capture and reach Switzerland were :-

A lock keeper, Les Cours, Meuse.
M. et Mm. Poitier, Les Rochelles Glorieux, Verdun.
Mlle. Jamin, Quai de Londres, Verdun.
The Padre, Les Glorieux, Verdun.
Mrs. Craig, Toul.
M.A. Cattant, CFT Air Chalons, Marne.
Fernande Block.

Years ago Mlle Suzanne Jamin gave me a booklet which I posted to Bob. She was a remarkable woman, assistance given to Bob and Bill was only the start of an incredible humanitarian career. She was a Dentist and also became a pilot who flew her light aircraft in and out of danger areas in different parts of the world picking up dozens and dozens of wounded. She became the most decorated woman in France. Last time I saw her she was a frail old lady but she still remembered the two British airmen of 1943.

I can answer none of your questions whatsoever regarding the time Bob spent in Switzerland but maybe Dickie, the Flight Engineer could help you.....

Eric Dickson,
163 New Barn Lane,
Prestbury,
Cheltenham, GLOS.

D.T.

What, however, of the pilot, Bob Cant, whom both Parkinson and Horton had praised in their debriefing for his handling of the aircraft?

'For the first twenty hours,' he recalls, 'I stayed in a little hut, then crossed a canal. As I did so two Frenchmen approached, who had seen me come down. They took me to a house, and after two hours, in walked my mid-upper, Bill Milburn, who had come down about five miles away.' They heard next day, that the Germans were in the area looking for them, and later they were taken to another house, where they were given civilian clothes. No shoes could be found to fit Bob Cant so he stuck to his flying boots. Two boys on bikes then escorted them to Verdun, where they were taken to a Mme Poitieux. They stayed with her for ten days. Forged papers and ID cards were provided, and Cant became a Corsican who was deaf and dumb. Two ladies, Susan Jamin, the wife of a local dentist, and Mme Krieg, whose husband worked on the railway, were to take them on further. They then had a celebration party with cigars etc. One young girl scrounged some cigarettes from the Germans and gave them to Bob. Next day they left on the 5 a.m. train, destined for Belfort. At Belfort they saw, to their alarm, that the platform was packed with Germans waiting to board. They quickly avoided the main entrance, as it was being checked and escaped through a back door in the ticket office, which led outside where a pony and trap was waiting.

Finally they arrived at the Swiss frontier. As soon as they crossed of course, they were arrested and for many months they remained living in a hotel, as internees, leading a heavily restricted life, although they were allowed some skiing in the mountains. But they decided that the time had come to escape back into France. Here they were invited by the Resistance in one town to shoot two Gestapo agents that had been caught, but they declined. By the time that they reached Grenoble, it had been liberated by the Americans. Here Bob met Wynford Vaughan Thomas, the war correspondent. From this area they were flown out in a Dakota to Naples, Casablanca, Algiers and then to England, landing exactly one year after they had left to bomb Mannheim.

Sadly their helpers' fates were not so fortunate. Mme Krieg and her husband were later shot while helping evading airmen, while Mme Poitieux and her husband were arrested and ended up in concentration camps. Her husband died under torture; she survived the war, but only just.

Extract from :-
FREE TO FIGHT AGAIN
by Alan W.Cooper.
Published by William Kimber Ltd. in 1988
ISBN 0-7183-0678-3

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On the night 5/6th September W.O. Bob Cant's aircraft was badly hit on his second trip to Mannheim, he gave the order to bale out. His Lancaster, 'S' Sugar, ED751 of 'B' Flight crashed into the ground about 50 miles from Luxembourg. All crew parachuted safely into France, and later were indebted to members of the French population who took grave risks while helping them to evade capture and escape.

Bob Cant, Bill Milburn's (mid-upper) and Dicky Dickson (F/Engineer), eventually reached Switzerland. Bob Parkinson (Rear-gunner) and Syd Horton (W.Op) reached Paris by rail. There a priest arranged for them to be taken to the coast and brought back across the Channel by a fishing boat. The navigator of the crew, Tommy Thomas, also passed via Paris, and by December 1943 had reached the Pyrenees. Unfortunately, he was caught after three days in the snow, almost within sight of the Spanish frontier. He was brought back to Paris and interrogated in the notorious Fresnes Prison. Accused of espionage, he was transferred eventually, in a very poor state of health to a prison camp in Germany, where he survived the war.

Denys Teare, the bomb-aimer in the crew commenced an exciting time in France, and make a closer acquaintance of the Germans! He became involved with the French Resistance Movement, and wearing civilian clothes, carried out operations for over twelve months that had not been taught in the bomb-aimer's school!

Cant's crew were told (and by their own admission were a very lucky crew), that they were the most successful escapers of the war. They have the further good fortune (at the moment of writing) to be still alive today. Six out of the seven attended the 1981 Elsham Wolds Association reunion. They all remember with deep respect the members of the 'Secret Army' who helped them at their own peril. But more evasions by squadron members were to come!

Extract from :-

BLACK SWAN by Sid Finn, Aug. 89
Newton Publishers.
ISBN 1 872308 00 7

STATISTICS suggest that aircrew had about a one in 8 chance of escaping from a stricken bomber. The war claimed the lives of 55,500 aircrew. Another 9,838 became PoWs. A very small number made it back home.

Some entire crews survived, although this was rare. Occasionally one, two or even more got out before the spin became too vicious or before the bomber exploded in mid-air.

The crew of Warrant Officer Bob Cant, however, must have set some kind of record on the night of September 5/6, 1943 when they left Elsham Wolds for Mannheim in their Lanc, U-Uncle. They were shot down south of Luxemburg and not only did all seven get out, but five made it back to England, a sixth remained with the French Resistance until he rejoined the Allies and the seventh member of the crew was only captured on the Spanish frontier.

Cant himself, and his mid-upper gunner Sgt Bill Milburn, managed to reach Switzerland

They were later joined there by the flight engineer, Sgt Dickie Dickinson and eventually they were all eventually repatriated.

The rear gunner Sgt Bob Parkinson, and the wireless operator Sgt Syd Horton, went the other way. They travelled across France to the coast and eventually found their way back to England on a fishing boat.

The navigator, Sgt Tommy Thomas, was not so lucky. He travelled through France to the Spanish frontier where, by now, winter had come with a vengeance. He spent four nights in the snow of the Pyrenees trying to cross the frontier into Spain before he was caught by a patrol.

He was handed over to the Gestapo and interrogated before being imprisoned in the notorious Fresnes jail,

the same prison which was to send more than a hundred of its aircrew prisoners to Buchenwald.

The bomb aimer, Sgt Denys Teare, was still on the run a year later. By this time he had become involved with the French Resistance and was living under the assumed name of Denis Lebenec.

Several times schemes to get him back to Allied lines failed, including one abortive attempt to fly him out in a Lysander which was bringing in a British agent.

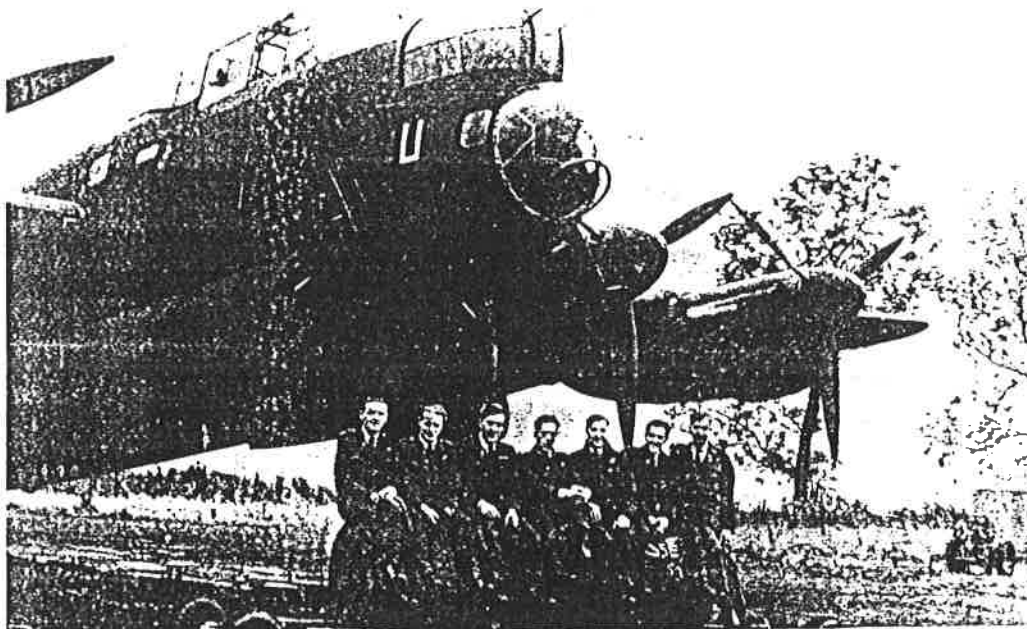
Denys Teare later recalled his adventures in his book, *Evader*, which was first published in 1954



Denys Teare, who evaded capture for over a year before joining up with Allied ground forces.

Extract from :-

MAXIMUM EFFORT III by Patrick Otter,
Hutton Press Ltd 1993
ISBN 1 872167 52 7



The lucky seven of U-Uncle. Six of them escaped when their aircraft was lost on a raid on Mannheim in September 1943. They are, from the left, Syd Horton, Denys Teare, Bob Cant, Bob Parkinson, Tommy Thomas (the only one to be captured, and then on the Spanish border) Bill Milburn and Dickie Dickson.