

Chapter Extract from "One Man's War" - The War Memoir's of G M Hyde

Stirling Bombers

From Chipping Warden our crew was graded for immediate conversion to four engined bombers. Most crews went straight to operations on Wellingtons. We got Stirlings.

R.A.F. Waterbeach was a peace time station just a little North of Cambridge so the amenities were good though strangely enough it wasn't lit for night flying. We had to set up goose neck flares for night operations which was a pretty primitive form of flare path after Chipping Warden.

The Stirlings themselves were great lumbering beasts over a hundred feet long with a wing spread just under a hundred. They had been originally designed more conventionally with a greater wing spread than length, but just as they were starting to build someone realised that they would not fit in any of the existing hangars so they had to hurriedly crop some of the span off. This left them with very strange handling characteristics. To get themselves into the landing position they had to have great high undercarriages that left the pilot twenty two feet off the ground.

Everything was big about them, the flight deck was big enough to have accommodated a small billiard table. Even then the pilots seat was on a sort of dais so that he could see out at all! Power plant was four Bristol Hercules aircooled radial engines which were a bit temperamental. If they had not been shut down correctly according to the drill they could, on the next start up, blow themselves to pieces. The torque effect when taking off with a full bomb load was so great, that an uncontrollable swing to starboard could easily develop before there was enough airspeed to give rudder control. The drill was to open up the starboard outer flat out at the start of the takeoff run and then catch up with the other three as she gathered speed.

We acquired another two crew members, a mid-upper gunner and an engineer bringing our total crew to seven, eight on the rare occasions that we carried a second pilot. The engineer's main job was fuel control. This took a constant nagging worry off my mind. It would have been almost impossible to have left fuel handling with the pilot as the Stirling had fourteen fuel tanks and a most elaborate system of plumbing. Usage had to be accurately monitored and switched carefully at the right time.

It was however a pleasant station with the little village of Waterbeach just down the road from the main gates, a very well established N.A.A.F.I. on station and good messes. This was the first station I had struck which ran to the North Country pattern of four meals a day, a substantial high tea being on about 1700 hrs and supper (light) at 2000 hrs. We were adopted by an erk on the station who used to bring us a big dixie full of boiling hot 'Sergeant Major's tea' every morning at 0600 to wake us up.

He was a great acquisition. Sergeant Major's tea is very strong, very sweet and with a lot of milk. This same erk was one of the biggest skivers I ever came across, his sole discernible job on the station was keeping the tips of the billiard cues in the sergeants and officers messes up to scratch.

He had also got alongside the Padre and looked after the portable altar cross and other religious paraphernalia for the reverend gentleman whom he had convinced that a secure room was needed to store these goodies. Having got his lock-up room he installed a bed and other conveniences, shoved the altar and other gear into a corner cupboard and made himself a very comfortable little bed sitter. It was also rumoured that for a reasonable consideration he would let the room if it should be required to entertain a lady---To a private religious service of course!

Flying the Stirling was quite a trick. With any normal big aircraft to make a turn all you needed to do was put on a bit of aileron, maybe a little top rudder and ease the stick back and round she would come as if she was on rails. Not so

Mistress Stirling, if that course was followed she would fall into a lumbering diving turn from which the recovery would cost some effort and about five hundred feet of altitude which of course could be critical. When you wanted to turn it was necessary first to give a good hard tug on the stick to start the nose lifting then go into the standard routine, she would be quite well behaved then.

Also coming in to land, because of the large change of angle required on flare out she required quite an amount of physical strength. The trim control was a silly little crank on the overhead panel not like the later Lancaster which had a seat mounted wheel for trimming. This meant you could not make sensitive adjustments all the way in but had to crank up a compromise setting on finals and stick with it. Consequently she was tail heavy on approach and very nose heavy on the flare. You therefore had to come in pushing the stick away from you with all your might then at the flare stand up on the pedals and haul back as hard as you could muster to get the tail down.

However this was all duly mastered and we were posted to 218 Squadron R.A.F. Downham Market. This was a wartime station and as such was quite a change from the comparative luxury of the conversion unit. For a wartime station they would start by building a good long runway over some cow pasture, then they would put up some administrative buildings and finally almost as an afterthought some Nissen huts as living quarters stores etc. and some flimsy 'temporary' type buildings for messes. These would all be dispersed which meant that they were miles from anywhere you wanted to be and at the end of a very muddy track. This was late October and the fens were really suffering from cold winds from the North Sea.

We realised that we were at war and that life was very real and earnest. Particularly so when we heard that nobody on the squadron had ever succeeded in completing thirty ops.

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# One Man's War



Galbraith Hyde MBE

For information on the full book or to read another Chapter Extract - "The Raid on Genoa" which describes a full Night Operation with Bomber Command, please visit

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G M Hyde had an extraordinary war.

In the 4 years he was away from New Zealand he had ... bicycled his way across occupied France after surviving the shooting down of his fully laden four engine bomber, spent eight weeks on the run, served six months hard labour in a military jail, spent six months in solitary confinement and had been strenuously interrogated by the Gestapo. His bold and hair raising attempt to steal a German aircraft led to a Court Martial for "attempted sabotage of the Third Reich" and then a second semi successful escape led to him narrowly avoiding a sentence to Buchenwald. Then followed the 3 month "Long March" across the snows of Northern Europe before liberation by the 2nd US Armoured Division.