

A TALK GIVEN BY
FRED BOWMAN 138 SPECIAL DUTIES SQUADRON
to
PROBUS CLUB OF WAHROONGA EAST

I joined the Air Force on my 18th birthday. I was trained as what was ultimately called a wireless operator air, and when we finished that training in Australia, the whole of our course was sent over to England to be attached to the Royal Air Force.

We went to the UK, first by crossing the Pacific on the S.S. Matsonia to San Francisco and then across America from San Francisco to New York by train. We then went across the Atlantic from New York to Greenock in Scotland on the Queen Elizabeth. We also had on board the Queen Elizabeth 15,000 American troops who were going over to build up the American forces in preparation for D. Day.

When we got to Greenock we went on down to Brighton on the south coast where the RAAF had established a holding centre. The holding centre consisted of two of the largest hotels on the waterfront, The Grand and The Metropole. It was marvellous planning by the RAAF.

We then went on to do further training over there. We did an advanced flying unit on Avro Ansons, we did an operational training unit on Wellingtons and then we went to a heavy conversion unit to convert on to four engined Stirling bombers.

At the conversion unit we finished our crewing up with a crew of 7. We had a NZ pilot/skipper, myself - we were referred to as the two colonials by the crew - and we had five RAF boys, a navigator, bomb aimer, flight engineer, mid upper gunner and a rear gunner.

At the conversion unit they asked if we would volunteer to serve on a special duty squadron of Bomber Command. That required skills in low flying, navigation and map reading.

We did volunteer and we were posted to No. 138 Special Duty Squadron which was based at Tempsford in Bedfordshire, not far north of London.

When we got there they briefed us as to the duties of the squadron. We were to assist the resistance movements that had cropped up in the German occupied countries of Europe namely; Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France.

We would be assisting by dropping into them much needed equipment and also dropping in their required personnel. There were two squadrons at Tempsford, there was us, 138, we were flying four engine Stirlings and there was 161 Squadron and they were flying little single engine Lysanders and twin engine Hudsons.

The Station Commander at Tempsford was Group Captain Fielden. He was also Captain of the Kings Flight, in other words he was the pilot to King George VI. But I will get back to him later.

These resistance groups that had risen up in these occupied countries were just the local indigenous people, who were rebelling against the Germans having walked in and occupied their countries. These people were saboteurs. They were sabotaging everything to do with the Germans and the German war machine. They were sabotaging their equipment, their infrastructure and anything else they could get their hands on. But these resistance groups needed supplies, they needed explosives, they needed arms, ammunition etc and they also needed expert people to lead them and to advise them on special projects. Their needs were met by an organisation in England called Special Operations Executive (SOE). So whatever they wanted, SOE would fix it, they would arrange to get the equipment etc and then they would also arrange the date, time, place for the drop.

Your question will be how did these two communicate with each other? Well, the resistance movements communicated, with SOE by means of a portable radio transmitter. These had been dropped to them incidentally, and they would go out into the field and they would send off a very quick morse message back to SOE. They had to be quick because the Germans could hone in and trace these transmissions and they would be in big trouble if they were caught. SOE communicated back to the resistance groups, believe it or not, over the BBC radio network. They had time slots during the day and SOE would have the BBC transmit their messages. They were just little phrases, little words, little sentences and to anybody listening they would be meaningless, but to a particular resistance group over there it would be a message for them and they would decode it and between the two of them the drops were arranged.

We were the last link in the chain, we had to do the delivery. These operations by us were all done on a single plane basis, we went on our own, we had no accompanying planes with us and we had no fighter escort. Some of these trips were quite long and the longest one I did was 8 hours and

10 minutes to Norway. That's flying there and back and that was a long time flying on your own over mostly enemy territory.

These operations were done at night and it was low flying from the time we left Tempsford till we got to the drop zone and all the way back. We flew at low level to keep out of the German radar. The German radar couldn't pick you up, or we were hoping couldn't pick you up at those low altitudes.

Because we were flying at night, and low flying, we had to be able to see where we were going, so we only operated during the moon period of the month, and that's a fortnight. The other fortnight was the dark period and there was plenty of leave and London wasn't far away.

Everything was dropped by parachute. The supplies were carried in long cylindrical containers and they were pulled up into the bomb bays and released from there. Anything bulkier, and the resistance personnel themselves, would be dropped through a trap door in the floor at the rear of the Stirling. We used static cords because we were dropping at a low level and the static cord enabled the parachutes to be opened as soon as they were clear of the aircraft.

Now I will come back onto specific operations. The first ones we did were to France, that was the Free French not Vichy French. As I say we only had the one pilot and the co-pilots seat was usually taken up by the bomb aimer but as we approached the enemy coast he had to go down into the nose, to do his map reading and he would map read us all the way from the enemy coast to the drop zone. So when he went down there, I went up and sat in the co-pilots seat. From there I had a fantastic view of all that was going on. You had to be pretty good with your navigation when you were approaching the enemy coast because you had to know exactly where you were and where you wanted to cross-in. The flak positions and fighter strips were marked on our maps and you wouldn't want to be flying up and down the coast trying to find out where you were because you could quite easily be picked up visually. As we approached the drop zone we had the bomb doors and trapdoor open awaiting a signal from the resistance group, just a torch signal usually a morse letter. This was a bit dicky too as you are making these approaches you wondered whether the Germans had got there first and taken over the drop zone and instead of getting the torch signal we would get the wrong end of a German machine gun. It was very exciting as we made these approaches because we were all looking out for the signal on the ground and when we got it the resistance guys would come out and they would be waving to us and we would make the drop and they'd be running towards the parachutes as they were floating down. Then they would just gather them up and put them in whatever transport they had and get out of there as quickly as they could.

Now, I will tell you about dropping the special agents. They were code named Joes, don't ask me why. I'll tell you two stories about them. First, a Joe we took to Denmark. It was 26th November 1944, we were also taking containers to drop at the same time. When you are dropping Joes, we would go out to the aircraft we would know the takeoff time, and we would do all our checks and tests. We would be standing outside the aircraft waiting and up draws an army staff car, two army officers get out and they are attached to SOE. Then the Joe gets out and he has all his parachute gear and other equipment. He is quickly introduced. Incidentally, that little group have come from a little farm house at the end of the airfield, it was called Gibraltar Farm. That farmhouse had been taken over by SOE and that's where they would spend the day briefing these Joes. So, the Joe gets in, SOE go back to their comfortable quarters at the farm and we head off to Denmark.

Everything went well, and as we approached the drop zone, we had the bomb doors open but we couldn't get the trapdoor open. What had apparently happened we'd gone thru rain on the way over and that had formed ice around the edges and the trapdoor couldn't be lifted. So we had no alternative but to drop the containers and fly the Joe back to Tempsford. We were half way back across the North Sea when we got a radio signal that we were diverted to Lossiemouth, a RAF station in North Scotland. We landed, had something to eat and they found us a bed. The next morning we were assembled outside the aircraft, the 7 crew members, and this Joe who had taken off his jumpsuit and his parachute equipment and put them inside the aircraft and he was there in his suit, just looked like your local bank manager. So we had a long chat to him, a very interesting guy, we asked what happens if you are captured by the Germans. He said well first of all they would interrogate me, then they would torture me to find out as much as they could about my resistance group. And then he said, they would shoot me. He said I am a civilian I would not be treated as a military prisoner of war, I would not have the advantages of the applicable conventions. The Germans would also try and get at my family who were still living in Denmark. It was an interesting story and at that stage a little RAF corporal guard came over to us and saw this civilian and asked to see his identity card. Well the last thing this guy would have on him is a British identity card. Our skipper said to the guard, come on, over to station headquarters. They went and the CO phoned thru to Tempsford to get confirmation that we were carrying an unidentified civilian. I often wonder what the CO and the corporal guard thought was going on.

We flew back to Tempsford, SOE came out and picked up the Joe and they took him back to Gibraltar farm and we wished him all the best.

The next story I am going to tell you, is in my opinion, the highlight of my little chat here today, so if you could just sort of stay awake a bit longer.....

It was the 28th December 1944, and we were briefed to take 2 Joes to Norway. The drop zone was north of Oslo. Two things slightly unusual with this. First of all that there were two Joes, normally only one. Second thing was that there would be nobody to meet them when we got there. None of their compatriots. So we had to be spot on with our navigation and our map reading to drop them in the right spot. If we dropped them in unfamiliar territory they would be in a lot of trouble.

So, we were out at the aircraft doing all our checks and so forth and up came the staff car and out came the two Joes. They were two young Norwegians and they were carrying their skis with them, which were to be dropped as well, and they would use those skis to get away to their destination. So once again, the SOE officers went back to the comfort of Gibraltar farm and we got into the aircraft and took off to Norway.

We were pretty confident that we had found the right drop zone and as we dropped them, the last I saw of them they were disappearing away from the aircraft with their parachutes open and we flew back to Tempsford.

A few days later we were told by SOE that the drop had been successful, so we were very very relieved.

When I was writing these memoirs, a couple of years ago, I thought I will try and find out whatever happened to those two Joes, who were they, why were they dropped, were they still alive, where were they living. So I wrote to the Norwegian Embassy in Canberra and told them the story. A couple of months later I got a letter from them informing me that one of the Joes was still alive and they gave me his contact details.

Now I was amazed, I just couldn't believe that this information was available. So I got on the phone to Norway. I will just say that I have changed the name of the agent as, even today, he still does not like to talk about his work nor be identified. I started off saying, I can only speak English, I cannot speak Norwegian, my name is Bowman, I live in Australia. The voice at the other end said "don't worry about that, I'm a Scot". She said "I am Mrs Olsen". I said "great, that solves a big problem". So first of all I asked about her husband; she said "he is here right beside me, he can't speak on the phone, his hearing is bad". She confirmed that the drop had been successful and I asked her was that the only drop her husband made into Norway. She said "yes it was, he only went the once and he was sent over there to organise the resistance group in that area, which he did and at the end of the war on VE-Day he took the surrender of the German troops in that area".

I asked was her husband in Norway when the Germans marched-in in 1940. She said that yes he was, and 30 of them, Norwegians, including one woman went across to Bergen and at Bergen they acquired a fishing boat. I don't know what 'acquired' means but they sailed it across to the Shetland Islands and there they must have turned themselves in. They were sent down to Aberdeen and finally onto London where they reported to the Norwegian Embassy.

Mr Olsen then joined the Norwegian army that was being formed and he volunteered to be dropped back into Norway as a special agent. He was sent up to Scotland to do his training and while he was there he met Margaret who I was talking to on the phone. Mr Olsen went back to Scotland in July 1945 after V-E Day and they were married.

I sent them a photograph of our crew that was taken outside our Stirling in our flying gear. It was the same plane and the same crew that had taken her husband to Norway all those years ago on that very secret and dangerous mission.

I said I would come back to 161 Squadron and Group Captain Fielden. 161 Squadron was flying these little Lysanders and they were actually doing pickups. They would fly these things usually into France, on a moonlit night, low level and they would land turn around and pick up their passengers, possibly returning agents, and take them back to Tempsford. The story goes that the French resistance groups would often drop in a carton of wine. They were still producing wine in France and of course when it got back Tempsford, Group Captain Fielden who was at the top of the pecking order would get his share and we were down the bottom, so we never saw it. I read the following extract from an article on 161 Squadron.

"King George VI received from Group Captain Fielden (the King's pilot), after a RAF pick up operation of the type run for SOE, a couple of bottles of 1941 Burgundy, one of which the King served to Churchill at one of their regular Tuesday luncheons. Churchill asked sharply how the King had got hold of it and was much put out to be told that 'Kings have their secrets'."

At the end of 1944 the work of the resistance groups was coming to an end as the allied armies were sweeping across Europe, and liberating most of those occupied countries. So Bomber Command in their wisdom decided that 138 Squadron would be more gainfully employed if they converted to Lancaster bombers and took part in the main force night bombing of German targets. This we did and the Squadron was reformed at Tuddenham in Suffolk.

I will just tell you about one of those bombing trips we did on main force. We were briefed to go to Kiel up on the Baltic, we were told we would be attacking U boat pens and dock installations. As we were doing our run up to the target the bomb aimer was in the nose doing his left-left right-right thing and we could see the target well ahead of us as there had been a previous wave of bombers in just before us. So there was fire, there was smoke, search lights and the coloured pathfinder flares and the smell of cordite from the flak. The master bomber was circling above giving instructions when there was a huge explosion from somewhere below us. We were blown off track temporarily and then resumed our run-up, dropped our bombs and back to Tuddenham.

We reported this at interrogation when we got back, other crews had done the same. Photo reconnaissance planes would have been sent out the next day, to take photographs. I went up to the mess a couple of days later I picked up the newspaper. And here it is, head lines in the "Daily Sketch": *"Pocket Battleship Admiral Scheer has been sunk by RAF Lancasters at Kiel"*. A description of the raid follows. It had been bombed and blew up beneath us.

I go on now to 30 April 1945. We were still at war with Germany, and we were dragged out of bed at 4.30 in the morning to go to briefing. Parts of Holland had not as yet been liberated and this included the two major cities of Rotterdam and The Hague. The dykes around these cities had been burst with the bombings and the area was flooded. They couldn't get food into those two cities by rail or road and the only way in was by air. The King of Sweden which was a neutral country, in conjunction with the International Red Cross, approached the German High Command and they gave permission for the RAF to fly in the food. The food was carried in a type of sling that was stretched across the bomb bays, and the food was just loaded in on top of that sling. There were no parachutes and when we got to the drop zone one side of the sling was dropped and out would come the food on to a muddy playing field. We were a bit wary about this as we were still at war with Germany and here they are giving us permission to fly in over their most heavily defended areas, flying straight at them at low level. The German army honoured the agreement thankfully.

The first drop we did was to Rotterdam and when we got there the Germans were very much in control. They were running the whole operation, no emotion, very efficient. We flew in low level of course, over the Port of Rotterdam, and we had a very good look at what had happened to Rotterdam with the bombings, I had never seen such devastation. How they ever got that port up and running again I will never know.

The next day we were briefed to go to The Hague. When we were approaching the drop zone we looked ahead and the Dutch people were out in force. They were waving flags and banners and all sorts of things at us. The Germans had packed up the night before and had gone back to

Germany. It was an entirely different scene. The Dutch people had erected a sign on the embankment...sheets or something, and this sign read Thanks RAF. It was great to see. It was one of the more humane things that Bomber Command did during the war.

We now move on to VE-Day, the 8th of May 1945. We listened to Winston Churchill's speech and when that was over the CO from the Tannoy loud speaker system said that the station was now stood down and we could go into Mildenhall to celebrate. "But he said before you go", he said, "I am going to tell you that I am going out to each of the aircraft and I am going to lock them, each of them. I am going to put the keys in the safe and the safe keys will be in my pocket so don't try and get back to Australia or anywhere else"!

Such confidence in his crews.

Well, no need to describe what happened in Mildenhall that night. It was a fantastic celebration. I have the greatest admiration for the English people for what they put up with during that five or six years of war and they really celebrated that night.

The next day after a few hours sleep at best, we were dragged out of bed, to go to a briefing. We were told that the British prisoners of war who had been held in the German POW camps, had been released and were assembled in a place called Juvincourt in France. They couldn't get them any further because the rail and road systems had been bombed and the only way they could get them back to England was by air. We were to go over and pick up 24 of them in each plane. There was no seating in the Lancaster for anybody other than the crew but these guys couldn't care less as they were on their way home. The first group we picked up were Indian Sikhs. I had my little box brownie camera with me and I asked if I could get a photograph. They lined up on the side of the Lancaster and a lot of them wanted a copy so they wrote down their addresses in India and with the compliments of the Squadron photographic unit, they were sent a copy.

Walking around Juvincourt waiting on one occasion, a Canadian came up to me and saw my Australia insignia, and said "would you like to come over here - there's a few AIF guys who would like to have a chat to you". These fellows had been captured in North Africa and Greece and were they glad to be talking to an Australian who could fill them in on what was actually happening over there. They had heard nothing but German propaganda for four or five years.

The first lot of British POW's, we took back we decided to give them a treat and fly them low level across the English Channel straight towards the White Cliffs of Dover. We tried to give them all a vantage point to look out from and as we approached low level looking at the white cliffs. I looked

around and you can just imagine the emotions on the faces of all those guys as they saw the White cliffs of Dover. The RAF soon put a stop to such sight seeing.

We now go to 22nd May 1945, and it was the day that they took our squadron photograph. We all had to line up in front of a Lancaster and they took the photograph. At the end of that the CO announced that he had just received word from RAAF headquarters that all Australians would be taken off flying duties on 24th May, that was two days away. They were later to be sent to a holding unit to commence the process of repatriation to Australia and return to civilian life. This was a bolt from the blue, a great shock, gee whiz, I had better start thinking about what I am going to do. I mean after all I was getting on and in three weeks time I was going to turn 21.

So I decided to go back and continue my studies to become a chartered accountant. It wasn't quite as exciting as what I had been doing for the last few years but the life expectancy tables were much more favourable.

And I may just talk about that for a second. You all know that the casualty rate on Bomber Command was quite high. Our squadron strength would have been about 20 aircraft and 20 crews. During the 10 months that I was on that squadron we lost 18 aircraft. Only one of the crews was taken POW and that's when they crash landed in Denmark. The other 17 crews were killed outright.

Well, early in June it was goodbye to squadron life and goodbye to the crew. We had been together for about 13-14 months. We became the best of mates, we'd been through some pretty dicky times together and we trusted each other with our lives. It was a bonding which could never be repeated in civilian life. We kept in touch after the war, we wrote, we phoned, we visited each other. There are still 5 of us living, myself and four of the RAF boys our - bomb aimer, flight engineer, mid upper gunner and rear gunner.

Well, that's my experiences on 138 Special Duty Squadron. It was a very interesting squadron with quite a variety of operations as I just told you. There were very interesting people on the squadron and amongst the crews there were guys from all the Dominions, mainly RAF of course, but there were Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and South Africans.

That is the story of 138 Special Duty Squadron for the period that I was on it and I trust that you've enjoyed my little chat and thank you for being such a good audience.