

*In the unlikely event that at some time in the future I should find myself being interrogated by St Peter, he might well ask what, outside inter-personal relationships, had given me most satisfaction and pleasure. Without doubt I would answer, "Flying Lancaster bombers". If he went on to ask of what I was most proud, I would have no hesitation in replying, "Commanding a squadron of Lancasters".*

*I had progressed from being a homeless, jobless outcast at the age of 16, chucked out of home and obliged to leave school. By 1944, I had transferred to the R.A.F., been promoted four times, and was now commanding a heavy bomber squadron with the rank of Wing Commander. Looked at baldly set out like this, I find the transition very hard to believe.*



Thrown out of his home at sixteen, in 1944 Ernest Millington became a Wing Commander. A by-election in 1945 while the War was still underway made him the youngest – and most reluctant – Member of Parliament, and the only elected representative of the left-wing Commonwealth Party. This is his story. It's a life that has led from Essex to Bomber Command; then to the House of Commons, a teaching career in inner London and, finally, to a long and happy retirement in France.

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Was That Really Me?

Ernest Millington



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by

Ernest Millington

Edited by Caro Millington

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You will have gathered by now that I had been fortunate enough to have gained the experience and to have been awarded the grading of Above Average (*not* Superior) as a Multi-Engined Pilot, and also an Above Average Instructor. Perhaps it would be appropriate to put the two qualifications together and to take you on an operational flight over enemy territory one night in, say, October 1944. Not yet mid-winter, but quite dark fairly early.

We go out to our Lancaster. You are a newly qualified Lancaster operational pilot who has not yet flown in anger. You are about to get a Cook's Tour running commentary on what we see and hear. At the aircraft we go through a series of checks which range from ensuring the engines are in good working order and that the bomb doors are closed and locked, to simple but important details such as checking that none of the tyres are punctured. Once in the cockpit the checks continue.

(There is a dreadful story of a pilot who took it for granted that all his flying controls were connected properly – so that when he pulled back the control the elevators on the tail would come down causing the aircraft to climb, and when he pressed his right rudder control the rudder would move to the right, causing the aircraft to turn to the right. When he took off, he reached the appropriate speed and pulled back on his control column. Instead of climbing gently off the ground, the nose of the aircraft went down instead of up. He was racing towards a hedge. There was a gap to the right of him. He trod hard on his right rudder and the aircraft started to move to the left. He must have been a very good pilot because he realised at once that his controls were connected to operate in the reverse way to what was expected. He straightened the take-off run by pressing hard on his left rudder. The aircraft moved to the right. He then pressed the control column forward and the aircraft took off. With superb skill selecting the opposite use of control column and rudder to what was instinctive he managed to do a tight circuit and land without damaging himself or his aircraft.

Rumour has it that he was awarded an immediate A.F.C<sup>44</sup> for his superb flying, and also received a severe reprimand for not having done his essential checks before starting engines. If he had operated the rudder controls he would have looked out of the window and seen that they were working in reverse. Similarly one of the checks which he failed to carry out was to push his control column forward and look out to see that the elevators moved for descent and vice versa.)

We have gone out to our aircraft and carried out all the checks and found that everything is in order. The sergeant in charge of the ground crew who has prepared the aircraft for flight receives a signature confirming that the machine is in order and has been taken over by the pilot. The rest of the crew, having courteously greeted the passenger, climb into their allotted places: navigator behind the main spar (a thick girder which connects the wings of the fuselage); the wireless operator behind the navigator; mid-upper and rear gunners to their turrets; the bomb-aimer sits on a step down from the main cockpit (rather than in the nose of the aircraft), whilst the flight engineer busies himself checking gauges as the aircraft starts up and taxis out ready for take-off. You, the passenger, are stowed somewhere near the pilot. Special provision for passengers has not been made by the manufacturer. A signal is given from the control tower and the aircraft of the squadron begin to line up fairly close to one another on the perimeter track and to move slowly forward until the leading aircraft is beside the upwind end of the runway to be used for take-off. It turns on to the end of the runway. The control tower signals with a green Aldis lamp and it takes off.

When our turn comes we turn on to the end of the runway and put on our brakes. An aircraft with a full load of petrol and bombs needs maximum possible speed for take-off. Opening the throttles, we bear down hard on the brakes – we hold the aircraft straining to get off until we also receive a green ‘all clear for take-off’ signal. The brakes come off and with a sigh of relief the Lancaster leaps forward and as I open all four throttles we rapidly gather speed down the runway. I keep the aircraft straight by gentle use of the rudders, and by correcting any tendency to swing by opening the throttles of those engines towards which we might swing to help keep us going straight.

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<sup>44</sup> A.F.C – Air Force Cross for distinguished flying other than against the enemy.

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The propellers of the aircraft may be designed to rotate in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction. The rotation of four engines all turning in an anticlockwise direction, as in a Lancaster, sets up a force known as *torque* which seeks to swing the aircraft, when on the ground rolling for take-off, to the left. A heavily laden aircraft must therefore, as it gathers speed for take-off, be constantly and carefully corrected to prevent it veering off the straight line it needs for a safe and satisfactory 'unsticking'.<sup>45</sup> At the speed laid down for the present all-up weight I slowly pull back on the control column and the aircraft takes to the air. On the ground it has been a large and cumbersome crawler. As soon as it is airborne, our Lancaster is a bird – a great, graceful, beautiful bird.

Once sure that we are safely airborne I select 'Up' on the lever that controls the wheels and, at my command, the flight engineer takes up the flaps a few degrees at a time to prevent too violent a change in lift.

Airborne and trimmed for a steady climb, we go straight ahead to clear the environs of the airfield then turn gently to the left to take our place amongst the other aircraft from our own airfield and the two or three others which are very close, for we are in flat Lincolnshire, site of many war-time airfields and often with aircraft taking off on the same mission from several airfields at the same time. If it is dusk or dark all the aircraft will be showing navigation lights. The risk of collision is very great when as many as forty or fifty machines, heavy with fuel and bombs, take off very close to one another in time and space.

We like to be as close as possible on take off, because later we will be flying near to one another in the dark skies of Europe for our mutual safety. I may be exaggerating, but I seem to remember 227 Squadron getting twelve aircraft airborne in about five minutes. Good discipline, good flying, maximum vigilance and an eye to what will be best for us all. Our target tonight is Brunswick, so we set course at about 065 degrees, north-north-east. We do not want to go due east for this would take us near the heavy defences of the Ruhr. I must explain things to my passenger as the flight goes on.

We have decided to go low over the North Sea, entering Europe between Leewarden and Groningen in Holland, still flying very low down, hoping to go undetected by radar. Half an hour before us two flights would have taken off, also for Germany. The first would consist

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<sup>45</sup> Unsticking – implies that the aircraft is 'stuck' to the ground until flying speed is reached

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of five Mosquitoes flying very high and dropping quantities of ‘window’<sup>46</sup>. They would fly between Hamburg and Bremen, alerting the defences of these two important target towns, but would continue, very high and very fast as though making for Berlin. The other flight, also of Mosquitoes carrying ‘window’, would divert southwards as though making for the Ruhr.

If you look at the map you will see that to fly between two heavily defended areas, one round Bremen and Hamburg to the north and the other to the south, towards the massive industrial conurbation of the Ruhr, will bring their heaviest anti-aircraft gun and fighter aircraft defences into action. As you can see there are considerable signs of enemy activity on both sides: flashes of guns on the ground; clouds of smoke as flak shells burst in the sky, and searchlights seeking – as their name implies – to illuminate any aircraft which appear to be flying in their neighbourhood. With luck, and we seem to have a lot of luck this evening, we are having a fairly clear passage in the corridor between the two heavily defended areas. You may have seen an aircraft with half a dozen searchlight beams focused upon it. Searchlights are not directly lethal, but they give a strong indication, if not a clear view, of an intruder aircraft. This greatly facilitates night-fighters in their search for the invader and the crews of the anti-aircraft guns who are seeking to shoot it down.

Our bird is a wily bird. He has, as you may be able to discern, varied his speed and altitude and is continuously changing direction. Look: he has eluded the searchlights and stands a good chance of getting back on track for his own target, Brunswick. The skies are clear of hostile defence.

Suddenly – “Corkscrew port!”. The shout is from the rear gunner. He must have glimpsed a night fighter. I hurl the aircraft into a steep diving turn to the left. At the bottom of my dive I call, “Changing course. Climbing starboard”. If the night fighter had in fact been following us the gunners had a short-lived steady platform at the bottom of the dive to attack it. We seem to have evaded him. I get back on a course which will take us north of Hamburg. Again, as you can see, there are strong indications of defence activity as we pass a few miles north of Hamburg. We turn and fly south-by-south-west towards Brunswick.

Look straight ahead. Now a little to the right. Can you see a glow

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<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 8 for description and function of window

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in the sky? Good. That means that the Pathfinder boys are already engaged in ‘marking’ the target. As we get nearer you will see the bright lights in the sky. They are called ‘chandelier’ flares. They are dropped over the target from high above, and when they light up the light is intense enough, even on the darkest night – indeed, especially on the darkest night – to enable one to read a newspaper in the streets below. By the light of the flares the Controller of the operation, who tonight is flying in a Mosquito, is looking for the agreed aiming point. Tonight it is a bend in the river. (In Munich, it is a kidney-shaped sports field a little outside the town on the south west side.) When he has identified the aiming point he will either drop a coloured marker on it himself, or he will call in one of his support crews to mark it. Tonight it will be a red marker.

There it goes. We can see it burning on the ground ahead of us. Then a yellow marker right on top of the red. The Controller is not satisfied with the accuracy of the first red marker and has called for it to be cancelled by having a yellow marker dropped on top of it. These markers are a very special type of firework. It is calculated that each will burn for about half an hour and cannot be put out by normal fire fighting apparatus on the ground. Another red is going down. It has been assessed by the Controller and found good. He orders the other marker aircraft to drop their markers on the second red. As you can see, all this is going on as we move with our bomb-load towards the target. When the markers are all down and we have a good clear patch of red fire at which to aim, we are called in to drop our bombs. We may be told to aim at the nearest edge of the red fires. Or the furthest. Or a bit to the left, or a bit to the right. The Controller is responsible for giving the bombing aircraft information, as accurately as possible, of precisely where to aim.

*I live in France nowadays. One day a French neighbour was clearing out his dressing table drawers. One drawer was lined with a copy of the local newspaper – the Sud-Ouest. It contained a vivid account of a raid on the gunpowder factory which is about ten miles from my house. The report gave a description of the raid, starting with the flares. They warned the civilian population to seek shelter. Most ran away on the only road opposite which went for about a mile into the heart of a vineyard. From this vantage point they could see the busy little Mosquitoes laying down their markers. Then the bombers came over. According to this newspaper report every bomb but one fell within the perimeter walls of the powder factory. Of the seven buildings in the enclave, six were hit and completely demolished. The only casualties amongst the civilian population were a fifteen year old boy, who was so fascinated by what he was seeing that he refused to look for shelter, and the victim of the only bomb that failed to*

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*hit the target. It fell on open ground near the neighbouring village of Cours de Piles. The shaking of the ground rattled the cottages and afterwards an old peasant was heard to complain that the vibrations had shaken off a shelf his year's supply of goose fat, broken the glass containers and ruined his fat supply. Small price in the conduct of a great war for an attack which robbed the enemy of the output of a gunpowder factory. It was valuable corroboration, forty years on, of the kind of accuracy we managed to achieve.*

As we get nearer you can see the flares falling and eventually fading. On the ground there is a red marker cancelled by two yellows. Further red markers accumulate in a patch. The Controller is calling us in: "Aim as near as you can to the centre of the reds". The most frustrating thing for a Controller is the phenomenon known as 'creep back'. Remember that the crews will be with a skipper who may have only been on a few trips. He may only be twenty years old. He is inexperienced, but has got to the target. He instructs his bomb-aimer to drop his bombs as soon as he can see the marker in his bombsight. The bomb-aimer will also be young and inexperienced. He can see that they are tracking so that they will arrive over the target. As soon as he has a clear view of the red markers, but not 'as near as you can get to the centre of the reds', he presses the bomb release button. The bombs fall and explode too soon. The next aircraft may aim at the explosions and a whole chain of bombs may be dropped off the target, prematurely released. Result: partial failure of the raid.

In our own aircraft we are approaching steadily. Our little foray with the night fighter brings us in about 2,000 feet below the briefed height. The bulk of the flak is bursting higher than we are flying. We can see the red marker cancelled by the yellows. Just ahead of them is the big concentration on the ground of reds. We hear the Controller call us in to aim at the 'centre of the reds'. The bomb-aimer takes over directing the flight. "Left, left.....r-i-i-i-i-ght.....steady.....left, left a little..." The pilot obeys with slight movements of the controls. From our vantage point we can see the nose of the aircraft getting more accurately aimed.

"Bombs doors open". The bomb doors are opened. A few final corrections, then "Bombs gone!". There is little need to report that the bombs have gone – as they are released the aircraft goes up as though in a lift. The bomb aimer makes an inspection and reports that every bomb has gone. "Bomb doors closed".

Then come the most stressful few seconds of the attack. The release of the bombs activates a camera which exposes a film for the few seconds that it takes for the bombs to reach the ground. The aircraft

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continues at the same speed, but the bombs drop in a parabolic curve and will hit the ground after the aircraft has passed over the point of impact. To get an accurate picture of the point of impact, badly needed by the Intelligence department which will be assessing the accuracy of the raid, the camera is set with figures of height, direction and wind speed. From the moment of 'Bombs gone' the aircraft must be flown with great accuracy for the number of seconds that it will take for the bombs to reach the ground. If the target is well protected, as in a few minutes we will find Brunswick to be, the thought of flying through predicted flak for even a few seconds is very nerve-racking. This I explain to my passenger, who really expected me to wheel away as soon as the bombs had gone.



**227 Squadron reunion, 1988**

However, we emerge from the camera run and seeing a bank of heavy cloud just below us and to the west – the approximate direction we must go for home – I dive for it. Once in the cloud I call for a course to steer for the first leg of the return flight. Behind us we can see the cloud lit up from time to time by search lights or heavy explosions. The navigator gives a course to steer to avoid ground artillery hot spots. A sharp-eyed gunner calls "Coast ahead". At maximum speed we drop

down over the coast and settle for home at an exhilarating but definitely not recommended height above the waves. Release from tension must not cause relaxation of concentration, especially at the height above the waves we are flying.

“Land in sight”, from the sharpest-eyed look-out. It is the little pier at Skegness. Once again the navigator has brought us accurately to our destination. It is as though the aircraft knows its way home from here. We make our way to our home base and land, tired but gratified to have achieved one more towards our target of thirty trips, and then a rest from operations. Our round trip of six and a half to seven hours has been successful.

“How did you enjoy it?” I ask my passenger. “Very interesting. From time to time I was very frightened”.

“So was I. So was I. I always am”.

\* \* \*

A tour of operations which, when and if completed, would lead to a less dangerous occupation in the service, consisted of thirty to thirty five operational sorties. Anyone completing more than seventeen sorties was living on borrowed time. This makes the treatment of Jimmy Brown, my first navigator, all the more barbaric. Jimmy expected to be dead in the near future. He could not face up to the prospect. What authority did to him was a disgrace.



**227 Squadron reunion, 1988**