

BOTTESFORD

Mrs. Marie Claridge, nee Cooper.
WAAF S/O, Int Ops.

Lincolnshire mud was even worse than Limavady mud and the aerodrome at Bottesford still under construction. WAAF quarters not yet finished, so I was billeted on a local farmer, with a bicycle to get to them. Oil lamps that I broke regularly through inexpert use, hams and onions hanging from the ceiling of a vast kitchen, a strange dialect and a routine in the household largely unchanged from Elizabethan times; chamber pots and all. Three generations in the farmhouse and the daughter on the point of delivery of another child which duly occurred with all the old ceremony of lying in state in a special bedroom to receive congratulations from a stream of visitors the following morning. Inevitable time contrast to the operations of the Manchester aircraft above – ah war!

As 207 was to be the first squadron I knew as a whole (as opposed to the individuals I had known in Coastal Command where WAAF officers had their own mess) and the aircrew were so varied in temperament and background and some of them larger than life, this squadron meant for me the beginning of a serious war.

If I were writing a novel instead of these notes, I could perhaps avoid the inadequacies of the clichés I find myself forced to use. It is almost impossible to conjure up in another's mind the special mixture of feeling such a situation can produce, but in brief – as each name became a personality observed over weeks and months and somehow blended into a group identity that kept going in spite of losses. One came to resent the wastage of wit courage and talents that winning a war entailed.

Resentment at the female invasion was mostly on the part of older members of ground staff in the hitherto male reserve of the Mess, and of course in Intelligence itself. Once 'trained' and allowed to keep watch on my own, and attend briefing and debriefing, I decided that anyone doing this job should know at least what it was like to fly in various positions in the aircraft, if not on ops themselves! Because of a bit of amusing and quite harmless horseplay on Ruth's part in the early days, a rather sourpuss member of ground staff wrote a screed in the 'Line Book' on the lines of "I told you what would happen if we got women living in the Mess....this disgusting exhibition", etc, etc!

"Right Ruth" said I, "you can take me flying next time you are on circuits and bumps!" (My 'log' goes on from here).

In March the conversion to Lancasters was in progress and, (and one can almost use the phrase), we all fell in love with it!

In spite of its death-dealing properties, it was a beautiful machine in the sense that some old motor cars were and some still are; something more than just an assembly of mechanical parts; it was graceful in spite of its size and it had a soul, as it were. Such nonsense would never be admitted to verbally, but the 'bus drivers' came to have an empathy with their

machines similar to Alexander's with his horse; 'hung' them with trophies and were mighty put out if and when they had to fly in another.

To this day I find it difficult to do justice to Ruth's personality. A Wykehamist with a staunch Anglican family background an adored younger brother, he somehow managed to lift everyone's spirits and imply that everything was really alright with the world. Along with his ability to command, (in its proper sense), and his swift and unequivocal decisions; he could just as swiftly reverse these if proved wrong.

I witnessed a great performance over in the Flight Office one day, when he looked out of the window and saw someone make an appalling landing.

"Send that chap in!"

Before the culprit could utter a word, Ruth launched into a tirade tearing him off a strip with enthusiasm. When the abashed pilot had retreated, the ground crew detailed the list of defects the aircraft had landed with.

"Send him back in!"

On entry Ruth flung an arm round his junior's shoulder, laughing his rather high-pitched laugh, and said; "I gather I owe you an apology! Congratulations on that splendid landing you made – can't think how you did it!"

Ruth often took a Lancaster airborne by himself - no other crew – if there is such a thing as a natural pilot – would never stop flying and after three tours went missing flying Catalinas on a training flight from flying training school. (Actually Sunderlands and lost on ops – see below).

We had several cases of LMF on the Squadron and when for some reason maximum effort was required three nights running, I saw the look in the eye of a Flight Sergeant down for a third night and had a firm feeling that if he went he would not come back. Borne out by events, I tackled Ruth as to why he had sent him in spite of signs he too must have seen.

Silence, then; "I had to, because it's a question of morale – if we do this for one, what about the others....? This with a shrug.

I couldn't really understand this, but of course he was right – it wasn't a deliberate sending of someone plus crew to their death – they might have come back! I admired Ruth greatly and wrote to the family when he went missing, and they visited me when I got back from Germany after the war.

Friend rather than boyfriend; not conventionally at all handsome, he was 'straight', capable and good to have around and one of those who should, I felt, have survived in the post-war world. (See portrait photograph).

DOBLE ('Dodo') was another outstanding personality – an Oxford aesthete, witty and passionately interested in our architecture, he was a most unlikely warrior. Married to a fitting counterpart, Margot, and father of a very small daughter, he had more than most to lose.

He also had a Southern Irish Navigator in Clitheroe, with a rich accent and a full-blooded Irish sense of humour. This unlikely combination managed to both to carry out their wartime duties and to tease the Establishment on every occasion that they could possibly get away with!

Two incidents: The first, one evening in the Mess, with our group gathered round one of those primitive Crimean War iron stoves; Victorian but effective. A raid on Cologne triggered Dodo off to deliver a lengthy lecture

on a famous triptych in the cathedral there. Hardly a subject to commend itself to the majority of his listeners, Ruth included, (though in King's Ecclesiastical his family seemed to know the vicars for miles around!), but it was delivered with such wit and interesting detail, the group was soon enjoying rather than enduring it, and others even came up behind us to listen.

Minions were summoned to provide beer all round and a spirited and not always to the point general discussion got under way, as to the merits and demerits of destroying such works of art, as we seemed all set to do. (As it was, of course, the cathedral was later to escape the almost total destruction of its immediate surroundings in Cologne).

(By maverick association with King's Ecclesiastical, I remember Uriah Heep! The unfortunate young man doing this job (Padre) had a cadaverous face, very pale with atrocious acne. So thin, his clothes hung on a skeletal frame, and he was constantly rubbing his moist palms together to deserve his nickname. His gloomy presence haunted every briefing until it got too much for the assembled aircrew, who requested that this apparition, who looked like 'death warmed up', was not good for morale and could he please not attend in future.

I often wondered how, whoever's job it was to break this to him, this result was obtained, as he seemed convinced that without his ministering presence, the souls concerned would be headed for the wrong end of the Cosmos if suddenly asked to account for themselves!

Sure, they knew they were 'dicing with death', but this had to be kept at bay, and Uriah was just too vivid a reminder!)

Incident 2:

One of my sidekick jobs was to keep up the German Air Force map and the strength of the fighter bases. This involved coloured pins and rolls of sticky tape to mark up routes and the strength that would be encountered there and back.

Dodo and Clitheroe came into the room where I was thus employed and to tease me tried to guess the target for tonight's briefing by trotting me round all the masques of main targets pinned up on the walls and trying to guess which it was by my reaction.

As it was as much as my life was worth to give this away, they failed to do this. So in revenge for this frustration, Clitheroe suddenly pinned my arms to my side and piloted me to a chair in the right corner while Dodo armed himself with the rolls of coloured sticky tape and trussed me very firmly to its back. They continued to improve on this round legs and ankles – well and truly anchored I couldn't move, which was just as well, as the door suddenly opened and the Station Commander and the Group Commander stuck their heads round it! Simultaneously both Clitheroe and Dodo took up close formation in front of me and saluted smartly. With a casual remark, the G/C and other visiting gold braid withdrew. We just managed to remain silent until they were a safe distance down the corridor, then they happily set about the dismantling process; rather more difficult than light-heartedly wrapping me up.

I got to know Margot quite well, as they had lodgings near the aerodrome. By the time Dodo went missing we had our own Mess, and after Anne Couson had joined me (Linton-on-Ouse), others brought the complement up to six.

Margot rang me up to say she had come to collect the car and she would bring it round to the WAAF Mess.

We looked at each other.

"Oh dear Marie, you couldn't - you couldn't possibly come with me on my drive back home? I know it's a lot to ask, but this car is so full of Dodo! My family gave it to us when we got married and it has been a part of our lives – you understand."

I did but I couldn't and I still remember how rotten I felt getting out and leaving her to do the journey alone – and the lump in my throat I had to battle with at dinner that night.

When they converted to Lancs, INGS, who had been Ruth's second pilot, got an aircraft of his own and another stripe. He was small and neat and very quiet in contrast to his former pilot. He looked far too diminutive to handle such a large aircraft but he did so with great skill and demonstrated this in no small way when I flew with him on the low level practice for the LE CREUSOT raid, (daylight over France). It was the ultimate thrill to go skimming over the dykes and tree tops, as well as roof tops, where an error of judgment could be final with no hope of survival for any member of the crew. Little INGS (have forgotten his first name – Jeremy? – actually Gerald) took it all in his stride. Not so me! When we landed I was almost breathless with the suspense.

At some point Gerald and another pilot got married, and all four were staying in a local hotel on leave. I had to go and warn them they were both on ops that evening, and when I got there they hadn't yet decided to get up and were all sitting up in the one bed. The wives looked rosy and attractive in their civilian negligee. Somewhat embarrassed to burst in on them like this, I thought how happy they looked and did not like the message I had to bring them. However, 'such was life', or rather 'death' as both went missing on that night's raid! On my way back to the Station after telling them the time of briefing, the thought had flashed through my mind, to be hastily put aside. "How awful if..... A presentiment perhaps...?"

PENNY BEAUCHAMP married Lianne, who had just joined the intelligence staff and came with her trousseau already provided. She had apparently worked on this for years and had brought it to war with her just in case. Penny was, (and is), a handsome chap whom I did not know very well, and his height contrasted with that of Lianne who was, (and is), what was known as 'petite'. This occurred before the Squadron was moved to Syerston where Lianne left the service after she became pregnant.

Penny and F/Lt Green were both excellent pilots and both survived the war. Of my first experience in F/Lt Green's rear turret I remember only that it gave me a healthy respect for rear gunners, and my second, with Huntly-Wood when I rotated the wretched thing confirmed that you had to have nerves of steel to occupy this position, and, when debriefing, they always got special recognition from me as a consequence.

The entry against F/Sgt CHASTER was a spectacularly quick return along the resistance escape route via Portugal – the details of which I don't remember, but could be looked up in the annals. After a successful return the usual drill was to send them lecturing round the Stations, and because of my brief term at MI9 I was detailed to go out to dinner with one such escapee to help him to relax!

I don't think this could have been Chaster, as it was someone who had had a pretty bad time and spent longer as a POW and who turned up wearing a Russian-style hat. His war had been so different, I felt rather out of my depth. As we talked however, I realised that there were many different types of courage and hoped his experiences would not have too permanent an effect.

GORDON EASLEY was another sensitive and talented individual who seemed always a bit out of place in his crew and indeed in the war in general. His finely chiselled features, (born in Patagonia – actually Abertillery, Monmouthshire) gave a clue to his quick reactions and sensitivity; kept under control, but very near the surface.

Before take off one night, Gordon marched into the Ops Room and deposited a pair of socks in front of me on the desk.

"Darn these for me and I'll collect them when I get back!"

He whisked out before I could protest, and left me thinking what a curious thing it was for him to do!

Later about five of us went on a kind of picnic expedition somewhere on a day off. Gordon's chatter was the kind to lift our spirits, (other kinds of chat simply deaden them),. Gordon talked about life as an actor and ballet dancer and quoted poetry at us, intrigued as we were by this opening up of a past existence.

Later, Ruth had arranged to meet members of his crew, (officers not meant to mix with other ranks in public), or we met them by chance in a modest local pub.

I had to get back and Gordon offered to go with me – we walked miles in those days as a matter of course. When we got outside it was brilliant moonlight and a full moon, and one of those nights when you feel if you reached up you could gather an armful of stars from the sky, and we were a little drunk. As we started out, Gordon said, "Listen to this!" With a fairly broad acquaintance with eng. lit. and poetry, I quite failed to identify and came to the conclusion that what Gordon was declaiming to the stars he had written himself.

He went missing soon after. The war should not have claimed you, Gordon and I understood why I had been asked to keep your socks, (which didn't have a hole in anyway), until you got back!

As I run my eye down the list of names, many faces come to mind but I have no personal incidents associated.

Of (W/Cdr) FOTHERGILL I remember only a luxuriant moustache. Of (W/Cdrs) BAIN and PARSELLE almost nothing, as it seems they came and went fairly quickly. I associate W/Cdr JEFFS with Langar, where he and his wife and their Saluki for mention later.

PATTINSON, PORTER, ROPER, WARD HUNT, HUNTLY-WOOD, (of the rear turret rescue); PARKYN, of the USA, and others including possibly WOOLDRIDGE, (not down on either list 207 or 467, but whom I remember playing classical composers for hours on the dreadful old Mess piano, more suited to accompanying 'Waltzing Matilda' when the Australians came to Bottesford! For some reason he was known as 'Dim'.

Everything at Syerston was bigger and better on a peacetime scale, and with the 'tour finished' exit, a lot of new faces came in.

I remember only three things about Syerston. Lianne fainting in the middle of a Mess party, (she was now pregnant), causing great consternation.

The walls in the room where I slept ran with water from the heavy condensation, and I developed an ague that at one point entailed hobbling along with a stick.

The cross-country with S/Ldr Clift, OBE for services in the field of navigation! When on a beautiful day and a five-hour cross-country, he decided to test his Bomb aimer's capability in map reading. He kept absolutely quiet while the B/A and the rest of the crew decide that below must be the Bristol Channel, while we are all set for the coast of France; fortunately now flying above cloud. When a burst of ack-ack fire was seen, swift but dignified retreat to a wail of, "Oh Lord that must have been the Channel!" Clift enjoyed this hugely. We got out our sandwiches and ate them flying in my favourite conditions; sun in a clear sky above and arctic wastes of snowy cloud below.

Well, perhaps a funny little postscript in Tedder's daughter holding forth on the difficulties of having a 'famous father'. Other complaints of this came later!!

In spite of it being a new aerodrome, the move to Langar seemed relatively cheerful. Its quota of mud not so muddy, the huts and quarters sunnier and lighter. I first remember W/Cdr Jeffs from Langar days and since it was small and less formal, his wife came quite often into the Mess with that graceful and disdainful Saluki.

I was now debriefing and strays seemed always to be finding their way to us. One such, obviously not accustomed to being interrogated by a female gave grudging answers to questions until, quite without warning, the Pilot banged the table, and at the top of his voice almost screamed at me that I wanted them to describe what had obviously been a traumatic experience for them on this trip; the witnessing at close quarters of a fellow bomber hit and going down in flames.

"Down in flames you understand – all of them. Not a fucking one got out! It is nothing to you – you don't care!!"

Two of his crew try to calm him down and in the interval, I realise just how near he is to breaking down and change a rather angry reply into quietly stating that so far from not caring, I had had to hear such reports on people who were my friends, but we had to try and identify the aircraft concerned, no matter how badly we felt about it.

Was this a friend of his? Yes, U-Uncle, etc. "Bad luck. I'm sorry." We filled in the rest of his report and directed them to a meal and bed for what was

left of the night, and told them we would of course let their Station know where they were, but they could ring up themselves from the Mess.

When I thought they had gone off, his Navigator came back and apologised for his Pilot's behavior.

"No, no, I understand how he must feel, but....." "Just wanted you to know – not against you personally, just against bump and Ground Staff in general."

Debriefing over, I realised that one half of one's brain observed the fact of 'went down in flames', but the other half prevented one dwelling on the full horror of what these words meant if the imagination were allowed to take over. A control shutter had to come down, and he was right in a way; we didn't care to the full extent – we couldn't care.

I still find this operating with such things as 'necklace killings', where a full understanding would be unsupportable.

At Langar also, the ATA woman pilot arrived just before lunch. Word had gone round that a replacement Lanc had just landed, apparently with only a woman behind the controls. A reception committee lined up in the Mess.

"Let me get you a drink. We are all longing to ask if you really flew that thing in alone – pretty good landing it was – I watched it!"

(As I said earlier, not all male Pilots would handle a Lanc on their own).

Amused at the male incredulity and the sensation she was causing, the ATA Pilot tossed off her whisky, whereupon, we all raised our glasses to her.

VIGIL FOR THE WING COMMANDER.

We dreaded the nights when Jeffs went flying. This entailed keeping Mrs. Jeffs and the Saluki company through the long hours, awaiting his safe return. You can imagine how we ran out of amusing or just ordinary conversation – the Saluki's diet and state of health making the last resort, and, fortunately, it never failed. I think no one was more surprised than Jeff when he did come back! I can't remember, but have an idea that one night he failed to do so – I hope I am wrong!

DANIEL (DANNY).

Danny had an interesting background. Son of an apparently impeccable Anglo-Indian family, he had, unaccountably, features Dravidian, but a not unpleasant mix that must have been embarrassing on home ground. Sent, as was usual, to a Public School in England, he described his reception:

"You speak English jolly well!"

About half way through his second tour, I learned from the crew that Danny could hear only one voice on the intercom. I forget whose, but let's say the Navigator, whose register was high-pitched. Danny could have been taken off flying for this, but his crew didn't want to fly with anyone else, and, so long as they were happy, Danny was determined to carry on – ear trouble smacked of LMF anyway, so not a word to anyone about this.

THE DH 86.

I was back at Bottesford, Danny still at Langar. I don't know how he had come by this aircraft – possibly ferrying it back. We left with thunder and lightning all around, and it felt very strange flying in a small aircraft again. After drinks and a meal, we emerged into the blitz – bombs and

incendiaries going off all around. Spent the next two hours sitting on a bench in one of those little gardens one finds in London squares, which the incendiary fires lit up as if it were day! The drama of the scene seemed to conceal out what it meant in terms of destruction and human lives, and it doesn't seem to have occurred to either of us to vacate our park bench and make for shelter. Discussing the dilemma of the war, with the senseless destruction of human lives at random, but a war that had to be won by this means, to be the last-ditch stand against the complete domination of Europe, including ourselves, by the horrors of a Nazi and SS regime. Damn those besotted Germans for making us fight such a war!

Another incident took place while I was still at Langar. A head appeared round the main door of the Mess and shouted:

"You are ordered by the Station Commander to lie flat on the floor – aircraft just landed with a hung-up bomb that might drop off and detonate at any moment."

About a dozen of us were in the mess, which was not far from the runway, including F/Lt Porter (Ted?), and we felt rather ridiculous sprawled on the floor. The news got through that the crew had been ordered not to move in case their movement set it off. We set to thinking how they must be feeling and also the armourers or bomb disposal unit, or whoever had been called in to deal with it – in either case there would be no hope of survival if anything went wrong. By comparison, we were not nearly so badly off.

As time went on we got up off the floor and armed ourselves with a drink, talking about anything that would take our minds off what was happening out there as the minutes dragged by. The tension, until something did happen, was almost unbearable and thoughts kept reverting to that crew still in the aircraft.

When at last we were given the all-clear, as it were, I realised I had been gripping the arms of my chair so firmly that my knuckles were white! I must have sounded as relieved as I felt.

The bomb defused and dropped on a 'cushion', the crew were out on the tarmac. It wasn't a crew I knew well, if at all, and Ted Porter surprised me by saying; "You do care about all of us, don't you – didn't think you did?" The implications of this didn't strike me until later, and then I wasn't quite sure what he meant, as celebrations set in almost immediately, as those in the 'front line' poured in, with questions all round.

Danny in sick bay recovering from jaundice got out his oils and tried to beat boredom by painting. He wanted to be an artist if and when..... I was a bit doubtful of his real talent, but I carried a painting he did for me around for years after the war. He finished his second tour, but I don't know what happened to him after that, but I hope he survived and went on painting regardless.

Langar was a cheerful little aerodrome, and I still identified with 207 Squadron when I was posted back to Bottesford, now, after alterations, inhabited by an Australian Squadron, 467. What would they be like?

As a last little postscript here, I heard for the first time a rich Southern American drawl – one of our strays reporting back to base. This only

confirmed my opinion that the Confederate troops should not have lost the war, and the South remained separate to counterbalance that 'pushy' north. Other accents awaited me at Bottesford, though I soon learned that there were many versions of 'Australian'; many quite comprehensible, and very few of the 'Emma-chizzit' variety!

END

Fates & Some Photographs



RUTH, WILLIAM DENYS BUTTERWORTH 'Ruth'

Rank:

Squadron Leader

Service No:

33397

Date of Death:

12/06/1944

Age:

26

Regiment/Service:

Royal Air Force 201 Sqn.

Awards:

D F C and Bar, Mentioned in Despatches

Panel Reference

Panel 201. Runnymede Memorial. **Note the irony of fate that makes his Memorial Panel No. - 201, the same as his Squadron.**

12th June 1944. Sunderland ML760. 201 Sqn. Pembroke Dock. Shot down by a U- boat - Bay of Biscay.

BAIN, FRANCIS GEORGE LEVETT

Rank: Wing Commander

Trade: Pilot

Service No: 28259

Date of Death: 08/12/1942

Regiment/Service: Royal Air Force

207 Sqdn.

Grave Reference
Coll. grave VI. E. 1-10.

Cemetery
MILAN WAR CEMETERY
[8-9/12/42; Turin. Lancaster I R5570; EM-R. All Crew killed.](#)

BELL-BERRY, RAYMOND

Rank: Sergeant

Trade: Pilot

Service No: 1076769

Date of Death: 06/08/1942

Age: 22

Regiment/Service: Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

207 Sqdn.

Grave Reference
4. H. 3.

Cemetery
UDEN WAR CEMETERY
[5-6/8/42; Essen. Lancaster I R5761; EM-T. All Crew killed. \(F/E to F/Lt G.A. Ings – see below.\)](#)

EASLEY, GORDON

Rank: Flying Officer

Service No: 103574

Date of Death: 11/08/1942

Age: 21

Regiment/Service:

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

207 Sqn.

Panel Reference

Panel 66.

Memorial

RUNNYMEDE MEMORIAL

[10-11/8/42; Mining. Lancaster I R5499; EM-O.All Crew killed. \(Nav to F/O J.G. Spier, RCAF.\)](#)**HUNTLY-WOOD, IAN MCARTAIR****Rank:**

Squadron Leader

Service No:

62322

Date of Death:

03/09/1943

Regiment/Service:

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

207 Sqn.

Awards:

D F C

Panel Reference

Panel 118.

Memorial

RUNNYMEDE MEMORIAL

[3-4/9/43; Berlin. Lancaster III ED832; EM-X . All Crew, incl G/C A.F. McKenna, the Station Commander, killed.](#)**INGS, GERALD ANTONY****Rank:**

Flight Lieutenant

Trade:

Pilot

Service No:

61471

Date of Death:

06/08/1942

Age:

25

Regiment/Service:

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

207 Sqn.

Grave Reference

4. H. 4.

Cemetery

UDEN WAR CEMETERY

5-6/8/42; Essen. Lancaster I R5761; EM-T. All Crew killed.

PARKYN, ALFRED JOSEPH

Rank:

Pilot Officer

Service No:

J/16080

Date of Death:

25/11/1942

Age:

27

Regiment/Service:

Royal Canadian Air Force

207 Sqdn.

Panel Reference

Panel 101.

Memorial

RUNNYMEDE MEMORIAL

25/11/42; Haselunne. Lancaster I R5695; EM-G.All Crew Killed. An American citizen.

LA SALLE, JOSEPH DANIEL LEO

Rank:

Flight Sergeant

Trade:

Pilot

Service No:

R/77173

Date of Death:

24/07/1942

Regiment/Service:

Royal Canadian Air Force

207 (R.A.F.) Sqdn.

Grave Reference

28. D. 7.

Cemetery

REICHSWALD FOREST WAR CEMETERY

23-24/7/42; Duisberg. Lancaster I R5867; EM-T. All Crew killed.



S/Ldr 'Penny' Beauchamp & his wife, Lianne.

Marie Cooper & Lianne were close friends and she is mentioned often in Marie's account.

**'Penny' Beauchamp later became a W/Cdr and led a 100 (Bomber Support) Group Mosquito Fighter Squadron – No. 157 – at Swannington in Norfolk late in the war.
He survived.**