

Thoughts and Life as a Member of Bomber Crew

My Story

On volunteering for the RAF very early in the 1939-45 war (such was my keenness to fly), that on being told that due to the numbers wishing to train as Aircrew and the shortage of training facilities, I would have to wait some months. However, although I was at that time about two years away from when I would be called up, I asked could I be trained in some ground crew trade, until I could later be accepted for Aircrew training. My request was accepted and duly I received papers asking me to report to RAF at Uxbridge. This was then February 1940. There I did part of the usual training drill etc. At this early stage, I wondered what I had let myself in for., and thought a great deal of home and my family. Drill training etc completed, this took several weeks, I then underwent many months of Technical Training at several RAF schools.

During this time, great disasters overtook this country; France, Belgium etc collapsed, and our armies were driven back across the Channel - the days of Dunkirk etc. These were really grim days, and invasion of our shores by the

Germans seemed imminent; at this stage, I and no doubt thousands more, wondered if we would ever see home and family again, but generally the spirit of the British people was great - Oh, that this spirit would return. 1940 was a glorious summer (the weather I mean), but the country was undergoing a tremendous onslaught from German bombers; docks, airfields, industries and cities. We were also losing heavily at sea, everywhere seemed disaster. The bombings continued, and RAF Fighter Command (to which I never belonged) eventually defeated the German Air Force's intention of bringing the country to its knees.

My Technical Training completed, I joined a Squadron of Hampden Bombers, as a Fitter Armourer, quite a good trade, but shortly afterwards I was summoned to the C.O. who said my opportunity to train as Aircrew was now to hand, but it was still open for me to turn it down. (No-one was forced to fly; all members of the RAF who flew had volunteered to do so.) But I was still very keen, so soon I was off to an Initial Training Wing (ITW) to start further training in Maths, some knowledge of the Theory of Flight, some Radio and Morse Code, and a host of other things intended to make us tough and super fit (tough weeks.) Then off to Wireless School for a lengthy course, followed by Gunnery School, to eventually gain my Wings and Sergeant's stripes - I was very pleased and felt

proud. Following I think a week's leave, I was off to Operational Training Unit (OTU) to join up as a crew, training in Wellington twin-engined bombers, for what was to follow. As it happened, we didn't make any bombing operations in Wellingtons, but were then sent to a Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU) to convert to four-engined Stirling bombers, then on to join a Bomber Squadron, and extremely keen to get cracking. Each day or night we would do more training, then eventually the great day - our first operation against the enemy. At this stage, during the morning, we didn't know where, but carried out the Night Flying Test (NFT) on our aircraft, making sure all was OK. Then late afternoon we were summoned to Briefing, along with other crews of the Squadron (this was obviously a very secret and closely guarded event, which occurred before any operation.) On this occasion, we learned that we were to carry out mine laying operations over the Bay of Biscay; excitement and a touch of butterflies were evident. However, the weather took a hand and the operation was "scrubbed."

Soon we were on the Squadron Battle Order again, followed by Briefing etc - this was to be Kiel Canal and Dockyards. This time the raid was on, our first taste of Aerial Warfare. We had the usual Aircrew supper of bacon, eggs etc, and then out to our aircraft. At this stage, the waiting and taxiing out to the end of the

runway, and knowing we were heavily laden with bombs, brought a sickening of my tummy; this was to happen exactly the same many times. However, as soon as the aircraft was airborne, things were more settled. Realities were soon upon us, the Anti-Aircraft fire, searchlights etc, but eventually we reached the Target after being shot at by all types of "flak", light, medium and heavy. For all our keenness, not a very pleasant experience - also knowing that if the "flak" abated, we could expect German night fighters. Anyway, we carried out our bombing, and then proceeded to weave, dive, climb and turn away from the target area. At this stage, I think we truly realised what this was all about, seeing aircraft of our own Squadron being shot out of the sky in front, alongside, or behind us. However, eventually back to Base, which to all of us then felt almost like home. Interrogation or Debriefing followed, when each of us told all we knew of the raid and any other information. While this was going on, the Padre and other ground Officers were helping us to coffee, rum and coffee, or even neat rum - we were well looked after. This over, we were driven back to the Sergeants' Mess, for egg and bacon breakfast most likely, and then to our sleeping quarters for a welcome bed, roughly 5:30 to 6am. We had been in the air probably about 6 ½ hours, with about 5 hours of this being over enemy territory, bearing in mind at this time that Holland, Denmark, Norway, France and Belgium were all occupied by the Nazis. We would rise again later in the morning, with the possibility of another "trip" tonight.

Sometimes, depending a lot on the weather, we would have a few nights off. If this occurred, what we knew as a “Stand Down”, and we knew early enough, then we’d try to get to the nearest town for a “bit of a binge.”

During this, my first tour of operations against the enemy, I did as I suppose most Aircrew did, and wrote a letter to my family and left it amongst my belongings; a letter that would have been my last letter, in the event of my not returning. My family were never far from my thoughts, my Mother and Father at home alone, my married sister, and by this time my five brothers were in the Forces - the elder one RAF ground crew, the other four in the army, one of whom we were to lose in the Middle East. Another one was with the 1st Airborne Division, destined later to take part in many landings, including Arnhem. My youngest brother was later badly wounded in Italy. So one can imagine I had plenty to think of, besides myself and my own job.

Back in the Squadron we still pressed on and during this stage, what was later to be known as the Battle of the Ruhr (Germany’s heavy industrial area) commenced. The targets varied of course. Eventually I became a Flight Sergeant,

and after several months our crew completed their first tour of operations, but during that tour, although none of us had been killed, three crew members were wounded - on one occasion the Pilot, on another occasion the Navigator and the Bomb Aimer. Not many times did we return from a raid without some damage, major or minor, to our aircraft due to enemy action.

On completing our tour of operations (what a relief really, a relaxation) our crew were sent to various OTV's to instruct other new crews - this instruction was both by lecturing and flying. During my period of instructing I was commissioned as an Officer, and was very proud.

Eventually I returned to a Squadron, and carried on our more intimate war with Nazi Germany. Soon I was a Flight Lieutenant and apart from the obvious dangers, life was pretty good. The companionship amongst Aircrew was something like I had never before experienced or, for that matter, since. It had to be experienced to understand.

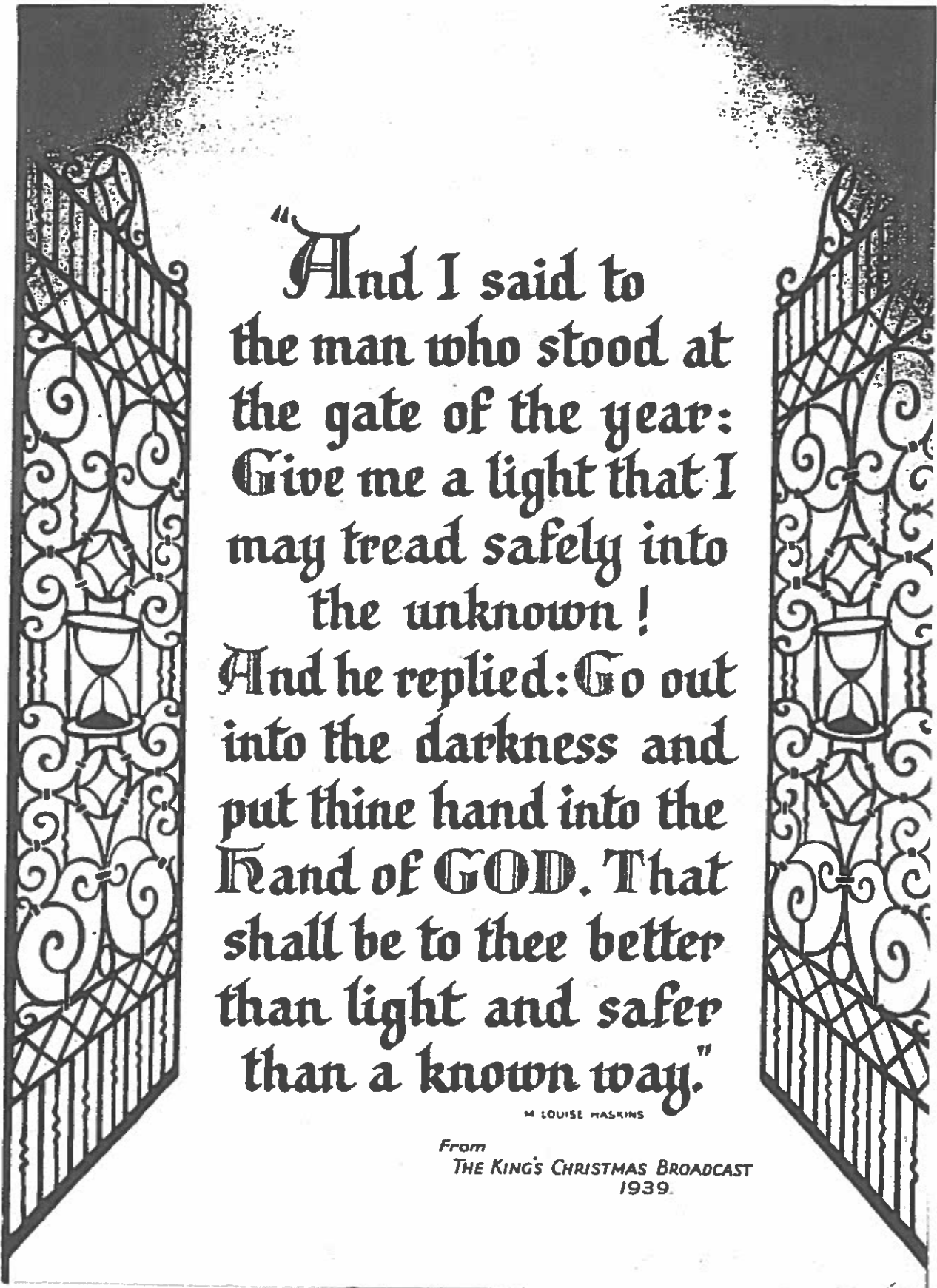
The war had now taken a strong turn in the Allies' favour, and to everyone's relief came to a conclusion in Europe, May 1945, and whilst we were preparing to go to the Far East, that one also ended August 1945 I believe.

I, like many Service personnel, remained in the Service until September 1946, still flying quite a lot, but now not in anger. On leaving the RAF to return to my family, I had been in the Service for six years and seven months, and was still only 25 years of age.

Notes.

Interrogation or Debriefing also took place after every raid.

During the period between the very bad (Page 1) and the better times (Page 7), of course the USA entered the war after Pearl Harbour, and the USSR were in the war. Then the invasion of Europe by the Allies, June 6th 1944 took place.



“And I said to
the man who stood at
the gate of the year:
Give me a light that I
may tread safely into
the unknown!
And he replied: Go out
into the darkness and
put thine hand into the
Hand of GOD. That
shall be to thee better
than light and safer
than a known way.”

— LOUISE HASKINS

From
THE KING'S CHRISTMAS BROADCAST
1939.

BEFORE TAKE-OFF ON EACH BOMBING RAID
THE 7-MAN CREW RECITED THE ABOVE PROSE
SO WELL-LOVED BY SO MANY — 38 MISSIONS
IN ALL