

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with George Davies (GD) on June 1st 2004

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K)

GD: George Davies is my name. I originally come from London, and have settled for the last 35 years in Bolton.

At the commencement of War I was just on holiday from school where I was training to be a deck officer in the Merchant Service, but things decided that my mother wouldn't let me go into the Merchant Navy because of the problems one would get at sea. So I had to remain at home until the London Blitz started and we lost our home during the bombing in the September of 1940, which decided I would then enter the Royal Air Force where I was selected and accepted to be trained as a navigator in the Royal Air Force.

After a period in the UK I was sent off to South Africa to do my flying training and in 1942 I sailed out for 6½ weeks to Durban where I disembarked.

One year later I sailed out of Cape Town on the old Queen Mary coming back to England and into the darkness where we found there were very many shortages of food, fruit and things which I had been used to while I was in South Africa.

After a further period of 6 months training in the United Kingdom getting ready for operational flying, in November 1943 I was posted to a bomber Squadron in the middle of Lincolnshire some 20 miles to the west of Skegness to a place called East Kirkby. The Squadron was 630 Squadron, Wartime Squadron.

At the beginning of December of 1943 the targets were selected by our Air Chief Marshal 'Bomber' Harris as he's known, and we were given a selective target of Berlin which went under the code name of Whitebait. All targets had these code names, and every time we used to go into the briefing room and see Operation Whitebait we knew that the target was Berlin, but other towns were attacked such as Leipzig, Dortmund, Frankfurt, and Stettin. These were various places we did visit overnight, but our main thrust through the winter of 1943 / 44 was the destruction of Berlin. Of the 32 operations that I carried out, 12 of these were attacks on Berlin during that winter. We found that as the nights wore on the German night fighter system got more intense and we were more subject to greater attacks at night and at risk from the night fighters rather than the flak and the balloons. I remember on one occasion that after we'd attacked Berlin and we turned north and headed over towards Rostock and then back to the United Kingdom, that we were picked up and followed by an ME210 which was their night fighter version. He kept attacking us for nearly two hours or so, until we exhausted our ammunition and we could offer no more resistance but we had the bright idea to fire off our red Verey cartridges from the gun from the astrodome, which must have frightened the guy off because after this he disappeared away into the dark and we were left unscathed and finally returned back safely to our base in the United Kingdom.

Many other operations followed this, one of the most terrible I think is when we lost 94 bombers over Nuremberg in one night. When you think that everyone of those aircraft had a young man of 17, 18 and 19 and there were 7 in a crew, multiply that and you can see the loss over one night of the young youth of this country in that period. To accumulate all this at the end of the War when they did size up the casualties, in Bomber Command alone we had 87,000 casualties of which 55,000 of those young men were killed. And the Command in my mind was the only Command operated from day one to day X during the War. It was out every day and every night in one activity.

After I completed my tour of operations, which was a very easy target, I had been to a place called Clermont-Ferrand in the South of France, the home of the Michelin tyre people. They had suspected that the launching of the V1s, which was the flying bomb, was being tested there and there were skid marks on runways where they had been launched into the Bay of Biscay. Having attacked this place we missed all the bits we had to hit, and knocked out the canteens and the works area but we had to go back a second time, and the second time we visited it, it was a little bit different because they were waiting this time. We flew moonlit, low level across the France area and down toward Bordeaux, and we arrived there and were circling for nearly 20 minutes whilst the markers went down and then this time they were ready for us and had their guns. It was a bit hectic at low level, but having done that we got back. This trip was carried out on a Saturday night, and I remember on the Sunday morning that my captain came into my room and said to me 'Get up, the Station Commander wants to see you' and I thought 'Oh my God, what have we done this time'. And lo and behold he said 'Sadly I've got to tell you that

you've finished your tour of operations.' We all gave a big cheer, went out, got blind drunk that night, and I was posted then to a Wellington Operational Training Unit where I spent about 8/9 months training other people to replace us.

K: So you were only allowed to do a certain number?

GD: We were allowed to do up to 30, but we did 32 because 2 of them were kind of an abortive and we used them by bombing Caen and Dieppe on the way back rather than waste our bombs. We did a radar run on those, but yes, the average tour was 30 but after 6 months you could reapply to go back again and do a second tour. I did apply to go back and do a second tour of operations but I was told that there were sufficient people coming through the pipeline now to keep us going for the rest of the War. I was, well, not rejected but told 'stay where you are required' - mainly training. And shortly before the end of the War I was given a posting and I arrived at Binbrook on Number 12 Squadron but unfortunately the War had ended and the remainder of the time was filled in by taking the young airmen and women on flights across Germany to see the devastation of the cities, which had been carried out during the War itself.

Other Squadrons were involved in the repatriation of the prisoners of War which they had released from the German prison camps in various areas and the Lancs at that time were carrying back 20 or 30 people in the hull, inside the fuselage, to bring them back to England again after 3 years or 4 years incarceration.

My War was relatively hectic during the operation period but I can only say, compared to the soldier or the sailor, it was a clean War because we had clean sheets on the bed, we had a bed, we had eggs and bacon every morning, we had eggs and bacon on return from a trip, we were treated well. The never-ending supply of baked beans was always on the plate and I've always said along the line that every Royal Air Force station was built on a bean mine!

Having said that, I did have another delightful letter that came from the Royal Family that I was invited to Buckingham Palace to receive an award for our attacks on Berlin, and that was my War basically.

Having enjoyed it so much, on my demobilisation after some 6 weeks after my leave had finished I received a letter from the Ministry of Defence or the Air Ministry as it was at that time, asking me if I would like to come back on a regular engagement. I went back into the service and after extending my engagement I finally left the service at the age of 58 in 1981, so from 1941 till 1981 I completed 40 years of service, flying all the time.

Although the War ended in the August of 1945 several skirmishes had been going on since then - Aden, Cyprus, Borneo, Malaysia and the Congo, and all along the line and the Berlin Airlift. Somewhere along the line I was involved in these in some flying capacity, passengers, evacuation, ferrying food or even bombing terrorists, and that is the end of my flying career!

K: Well, that really is service, isn't it? Did you say you were navigation?

GD: I was at the School of Navigation in London at the outbreak of War - for sea navigation - but I was inveigled into being an Air Navigator, having said to the officer who interviewed me, 'But it's totally different to sailing on a ship'. He said 'Oh well, it's all relative' which I did find out later on where in an hour you only do 10 miles in a ship, in an aeroplane you do 200 miles!

K: So where were you based in 1981 when you finished?

GD: I was based at Royal Air Force Finningley, Near Doncaster. This is an aside from my wartime, but I was on an engagement to my 55th Birthday, and I'd retired from Royal Air Force Finningley. I was dined out the mess, given my silver tankard, it was bye bye George and off he went. In the middle of my leave I had a phone call from the Ministry of Defence and a friend of mine up there said 'Would you come back for 3 years into the Royal Air Force'. I said, well my wife doesn't really like the idea but having persuaded her I went back in for a further 3 years - so the continuous service went on. I reported back to them at a station called RAF Leeming teaching pilots, air navigation and airways type flying. The Squadron moved back to Finningley to the consternation of all my fellow mess members who said 'What are you doing back in uniform?' and I explained to them, and of course 3 years later I was dined out again, given another silver tankard, and flown out in the City of Lincoln Lancaster as the only surviving member on the station who'd actually operated on Lancasters during the War. The ultimate was that once again before I left - at this age I was 58 - my CO at the time said 'George would you extend to 60?' I said 'Enough's enough, with 16,000 flying hours and not a scratch on my body - Goodbye!'

K: Good decision!

GD: Yes.

K: So did you come to Bolton after that?

GD: No, my reason for coming to Bolton was that in 1971, I'd been 16/17 years flying the routes on Britannias and other types of transport aeroplanes, and with all due respect they told me to put away my suitcase and lead a normal life. They asked me what I would like to do, and I said I would like to go and recruit people for the Royal Air Force. I was sent to Great Moor Street, in Bolton as a careers officer, where I spent 3 years. At the end of that 3 years my CO - sorry, my Captain during the War had been raised to the rank of Air Commodore and he was going on his way to Norway as the Air Attache in Oslo, and he phoned me from the Ministry and said 'Would you like to go back on Britannias'. I said yes, but unfortunately he went off to Oslo, and when my posting came through, I was posted out to the Gulf to a little island called Masirah as an Operations Officer, much to my disgust. Unfortunately whilst my tour was on in Masirah they scrapped the Britannia fleet, and the Air Ministry, in all its niceness, posted me to Farningley as an instructor again and I went there. It was really the period of 1971 to 1974 where I settled and lived in Bolton and have stayed ever since.

Unfortunately my wife died some 16 years ago and I've so many friends in Bolton, as you may know, and all over the town, and if I went back to my own suburbs in London, it does not exist.

Possibly you know our bombing attacks didn't last all day and all night like the Germans, they were sharp and sweet, they lasted about 40 minutes and there were 3 to 4 waves went in at 150 aeroplanes at a time spaced at 10 minute intervals. It saturated the defences, bombed it to God knows how, and just as all the rescue services and things were coming out, then the second wave would go in at the same time and just keep the repetition. Within an hour the whole bombing raid was finished and people were returning, so the objective of the German defences was to stop you getting there.

K: Oh I see.

GD: But although they wanted to get you on the way home when you're tired and happy, if they could stop you, they would, because they got the gist of it you see, it was short, sharp and sweet. Having said that, you were in waves, and you were staggered at different altitudes, and of course there wasn't the air traffic control as you get in the modern thing, and radar going. You could sometimes look out above over your Lancaster through your canopy and see another one with his bomb doors open going across. What must have happened once, one at the higher level had discharged his bomb load with the incendiaries, and one of them had gone into the wing, but being a self sealing petrol tank, it doesn't show. They just saw a hole in the skin of the aeroplane and said 'Oh a bit of flak here' and patched it up. But apparently they found this incendiary bomb on the starboard wing in the tank when it went in for its inspection. Of course it was brought to notice because they drain the tanks and the thing is that being self sealing for bullets and that they probably just thought it was a scratch mark there. I don't know the real story on it, but it was a bit horrific.

K: You say you did 6 or 7 ops after, with that in..?

GD: About 6 I should think. On another occasion we took off one night, and where the escape hatch is on the top of the aeroplane it came off, but we continued all the way with it. It was perishing cold, the temperature is about minus 57 up there, and although you're wrapped up you're cold. We realised that if it had gone through the mid upper turrets as it skimmed off it would have beheaded a mid-upper gunner. We didn't tell him about that for a long time, so I mean this is one incident.

The station I was on, the two Squadrons, we used to despatch between about 40 and 45 aeroplanes per raid, and you'd see them all queuing up in the dark, no lights on and then you'd get the red Vereys, and the green light, the Aldis lamp, to attach you onto the runway. The one before us was a fellow crew which shared our billets with us, and they went bombing down the runway and as they took off they had engine failures and they finished up in the field with this enormous explosion. Everything went up with a bang and the incendiaries on it were scattered far and wide and they were at the far end of the runway. My skipper said at this time, 'Goody good!' he said, 'it's a daylight take off' because they were burning like the clappers, and you know, we just laughed at this, but when we realised who it was when we got back, we were a bit sad and disheartened. The other thing is that you see a crew arrive in the morning, they haven't even unpacked their bags and they were on ops that night. You'd come back in the morning and their bags would still be there, because they hadn't come back to collect them, and the average age was what? 19 or 20...

I mean it's not as horrible as sitting in El Alamein being shelled to death, you know but it had its horrors.

K: I'm sure it did.

GD: Yes, and we were all you know, susceptible to a bit of emotion at that age although we were crackers, well not crackers, but treated it as a bit of fun as it were, but anxiety was there but not fear, because I can't ever remember being frightened. I can remember being a little uptight you know. There was this incident on flying boats. I was at Pembroke dock at the time and we went down to display our flying boat in Guernsey in the harbour there for the Battle of Britain week. On the way we decided we were going to pick up the football team from RAF Mount Batten, near Plymouth, so we picked the football team up and one WAAF who lived in the Channel Islands going on leave. So we nipped across the channel, lined up for the approach coming in towards Guernsey Harbour and there's a bit of a squall and rain. We touched down on the water and then there was a long slicing noise and we wondered what it was and we went down below decks and we'd got a slit in the wall about 23 feet long, and she was sinking fast. We were going like the clappers to get through the harbour gates to get into the shallow waters, firing off reds and all the holiday makers on the beach at Guernsey thought we were giving our display on our arrival. It was only one of the other flying boat crews who'd been there a couple of days said 'They're in trouble' because at this stage you know you had floats on the wing. Well it stopped it toppling over and he notices both floats in the water, and said 'Something's wrong here', and that's what happened and we had to abandon it. We jumped off and let it settle in about about 8 or 9 fathoms of water, and it's just sitting above the water. They managed to prop it up when the tide went out. I hosed it all down, stripped the electrics and we were going to fly it back to Belfast with nothing on board just concrete up the hole, but the tide came in and washed all the props away, so finally they took it out, about 10 miles out of Guernsey and detonated it and blew it to the bottom. It had had two dunkings and salt water is most corrosive and it wasn't worth the money to have it re-hashed. Well these are into post-War incidents. Engine failures outside of Cyprus, and passengers refused to get on board after three attempts. Oh, there was a whole host of them. Meeting the Royal Family a couple of times, post-War, flying Charles and we brought Lady Mountbatten's body back. She died in Borneo you know.

K: Did she?

GD: Yes, we brought her body back to Singapore, in a flying boat, and despatched it to England in a more conventional aeroplane. A flying boat takes 4 weeks to get to Singapore, it's 120 miles an hour. You can drive down the motorway as fast as that. You get a head wind and you're only doing 90 knots. Nice to fly in, and comfortable, in flip flops and shorts in the Far East, with port holes open. Down in Aussie, Sydney, we'd had a long flight down from Darwin and we had a few beers and in the morning, well you know, it's so hot there, you're sleeping naked, I went to the window and threw it open wide to get the air. About 10 yards away was another wall and a window and there are all the typists there. I got cat calls from all these Aussie girls, you know!

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