LANCASTERS OVER EUROPE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL 'RUSTY' WAUGHMAN DFC, AFC

WORDS TOM GARNER

Rusty Waughman flew Lancaster bombers and miraculously survived 30 missions over some of the deadliest skies of World War II

The RAF's bombing offensive against Nazi Germany was one of the longest, most expensive and most controversial of the Allied World War II campaigns. Its aim was to severely weaken Germany's ability to fight, which was strategically vital for victory. This effort came at a huge price, with 55,573 airmen of Bomber Command losing their lives – a death rate of 44.4 per cent. The men were mostly very young and from many nationalities.

For those who survived, Bomber Command's reputation was widely debated in later years but victory in Europe could not have been achieved without its relentless efforts to divert German forces to defend its airspace. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel even despairingly remarked, "Stop the bombers or we can't win!" Whatever the debate, Bomber Command was crewed by courageous airmen who repeatedly risked their lives in extremely dangerous conditions. Among them was Russell 'Rusty' Waughman who flew 30 missions as a Lancaster bomber pilot in 101 (Special Duties) Squadron. Now aged 95, Waughman describes in vivid detail how he survived everything from enemy flak and fighters to a mid-air collision.

Left: Rusty Waughman now talks regularly to schoolchildren and at events about his experiences flying in Bomber Command during World War II

Canadian training

Born in 1923, Waughman had a difficult childhood where he suffered many illnesses, but he was determined to join the British armed forces. "At the age of 17 I volunteered to join the navy mainly because Dad got himself a DSM as a leading seaman during World War I and I thought I was keeping up the family tradition," he said. Waughman's attempts to volunteer were roundly dismissed, which led to him joining the RAF. "When I told Mum and Dad I was going to volunteer they said, 'You'll never get in with your health record.' I went down to the recruiting centre to join the navy, but the recruiting officer was my own doctor so I went next door and joined the RAF. I was very surprised I was accepted and poor old Mum wept buckets."

Waughman travelled to Canada and initially trained on Tiger Moth and Stearman aircraft at

Left: Airmen of 101 Squadron filling thermos flasks after a briefing before a raid on Berlin in early 1944. Waughman is pictured in the centre taking the top off his flask. The blanked out part of the photograph was a map of Europe that was eliminated for security reasons

***Right:** Waughman seated in the cockpit of his second Lancaster LL757 'Oor Wullie' with flight engineer Curly Ormerod standing up through the window*

"VICTORY IN EUROPE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED WITHOUT [BOMBER COMMAND'S] RELENTLESS EFFORTS TO DIVERT GERMAN FORCES TO DEFEND ITS AIRSPACE. FIELD MARSHAL ERWIN ROMMEL EVEN DESPAIRINGLY REMARKED, 'STOP THE BOMBERS OR WE CAN'T WIN!'"

Avro Lancasters were the RAF's most effective heavy bombers. Waughman flew two of these aircraft during World War II

Image: Peter van Stigt

De Winton Aerodrome near Calgary. Towards the end of this training he was given a choice: "I took to flying quite naturally, but at the end of the course they asked what we wanted to join: Bomber or Fighter Command? Of course you can imagine about 99 per cent of us said Fighter Command so I was sent to Bomber Command!"

Now training on the Airspeed Oxford on the Canadian prairies, Waughman experienced an incident of bird strike. "We did a bit of low flying over a lake, which we shouldn't have done, and flew through a flock of geese. We had these geese wrapped round the aeroplane and they broke the Perspex. I was sitting in the navigator's seat and had a wet duck wrapped round my face! We managed to get back but that experience helped us during the war because similar things happened."

***Above:** Rusty Waughman's fellow pilot and friend Paul Zanchi joined 101 Squadron shortly before Waughman. Zanchi and the majority of his Lancaster crew were tragically killed on 26 November 1943 shortly before Waughman arrived on the 28th*

***Above:** Waughman was commissioned as a pilot officer on 6 February 1944 and flew Dakotas during the Berlin Airlift, before retiring from the RAF as a flight lieutenant*

Piloting the Lancaster

Waughman had now gained his 'wings' and continued training in England on Wellington and Halifax bombers before finally converting to the Avro Lancaster at a finishing school. He described the aircraft as "a different aeroplane altogether. It wasn't easy to get in and out of and you had to get into your seat sitting on the parachute. However, it responded and really was a remarkable aeroplane. Right from the very beginning you gelled with the thing."

Nevertheless, flight training was highly dangerous. "Unfortunately, the aircraft we were learning on had been withdrawn as unfit for operational flying. Consequently, the casualty rate for learning to fly in Bomber Command was 25 per cent, mainly through engine failures or people getting lost on cross-country exercises."

Waughman became a fully qualified heavy bomber pilot and aimed to join 101 (Special Duties) Squadron with his friend Paul Zanchi. "Paul went and joined 101 Squadron and when my turn came a few days later I asked the flight commander if I could join him. He said, 'It's a special duty squadron, we only send the best ones there', but a couple of days later he said, '101 Squadron: off you go.' I said, 'Oh, change of assessment?' but he replied, 'No, it's the squadron with the highest attrition rate in the service and you got the first call on the availability of aircrew.'"

The flight commander's ominous statement was tragically fulfilled when Waughman joined 101 Squadron on 28 November 1943 at RAF Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire. "The day I arrived on the squadron my friend Paul had been shot down and killed the night before, so I never did see him again. Then you started to realise that it's tough, people shoot at you and it's not fair."

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'Special Duties'

Waughman would serve with 101 Squadron for a complete tour of operations between 28 November 1943 and 26 June 1944 and collected most of his Lancaster crew before

Aircrew waiting for the 'off' to go on a bombing mission after a main briefing, February 1944. 101 Squadron flew more raids than any other Bomber Command unit but 1,176 of its airmen were killed

Catering staff from RAF Ludford Magna prepare flying rations for aircrews of 101 Squadron, including Waughman's. Missions could last as long as eight hours

A rear gunner of 101 Squadron is helped into his heated suit before a mission. Temperatures were frequently below freezing at high altitudes in Lancaster bombers

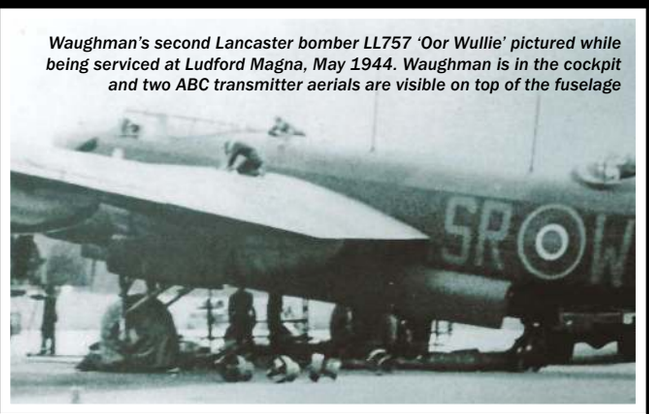
WAUGHMAN'S 'BAND OF BROTHERS'

RUSTY WAUGHMAN COMMANDED A CLOSE-KNIT CREW WHO HELPED EACH OTHER SURVIVE – THEY ARE STILL FRIENDS TODAY

Waughman commanded the same basic crew of seven airmen plus a special duty operator in two Lancaster bombers between 1943-44. The crew became very close friends and worked as one to survive. "We all became a big band of brothers and we just gelled, it really was a wonderful crew. I was responsible for the aircraft but on operations the crew were telling you what to do. The rear gunner would shout, 'Dive starboard, go!' when we were being attacked, and if you asked why it was too bloody late – you'd be shot down. So you had to obey and do what the crew suggested. You had the final decision to make, but you were just another crewmember."

Waughman was awarded the DFC for completing 30 missions but felt it should have been a shared award: "I look upon it as a crew medal. It wasn't just mine because at the end of a tour the skippers got decorations but the crew didn't get anything."

Four of the eight crewmembers – Alec Cowan, John Ormerod, Norman Westby and Waughman himself – are still alive as of February 2018. As Waughman touchingly said, "You had many good friends, which I am lucky enough to still have now."



Waughman's second Lancaster bomber LL757 'Oor Wullie' pictured while being serviced at Ludford Magna, May 1944. Waughman is in the cockpit and two ABC transmitter aerials are visible on top of the fuselage

NORMAN 'BABE' WESTBY

BOMB AIMER

"Norman started life in a gypsy caravan around Manchester but now lives in Andorra, and we still keep in touch."

EDWARD 'TED' MANNERS

SPECIAL DUTIES OPERATOR

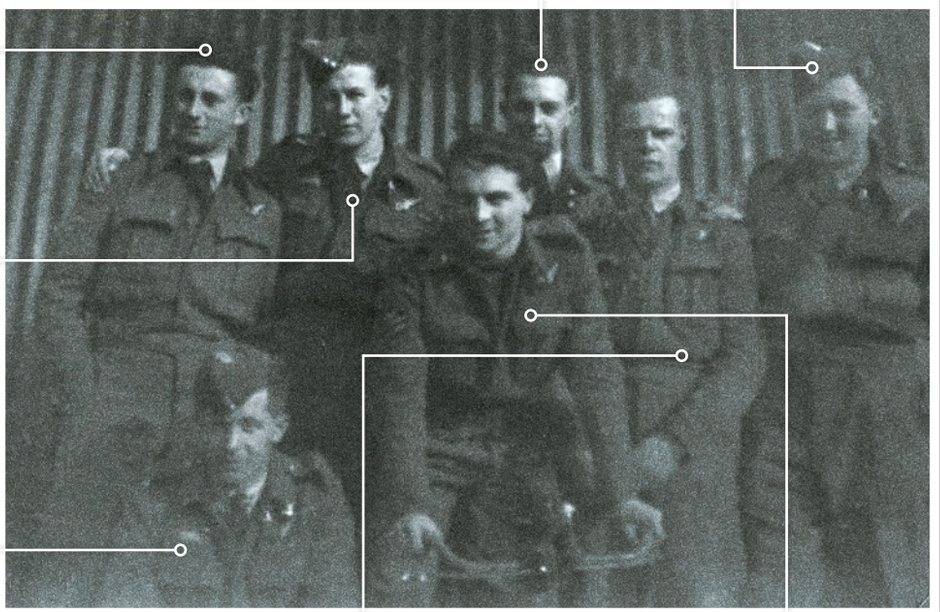
"We had Ted in later days who worked the ABC equipment. He sat down the back in the dark all the time and never saw daylight at all."

HARRY 'TIGER' NUNN

REAR GUNNER

"Harry was a wonderful Canadian lad who volunteered to join the RAF. He saved our lives two or three times just through his diligence."

Rusty Waughman



ALEC 'JUMBO' COWAN

NAVIGATOR

"Alec had just started work. He lied about his age and joined up when he was 16. He was a conscientious navigator and got us into places where even some of the main force couldn't go."

"WE ALL BECAME A BIG BAND OF BROTHERS AND WE JUST GELLED, IT REALLY WAS A WONDERFUL CREW"

THOMAS 'TOMMY' DEWSBURY

MID-UPPER GUNNER

"Tommy was the 'old man' of the crew. He was a council worker from Oldham and was 26 so he was quite old. I was the next oldest at 20 but all the rest were younger."

JOHN 'CURLY' ORMEROD

FLIGHT ENGINEER

"Curly was basically my 'first mate' and was an apprentice engineer for Rochdale Council aged 19."

IDRIS 'TAFFY' ARNDELL

WIRELESS OPERATOR

"Taffy was a little rebel and a great tease. He was full of mischief and always swore he was going to come aboard drunk, but he was very conscientious and worked wonderfully."

he arrived at Ludford Magna. The squadron's 'Special Duties' brief was the carrying of a classified radio jamming system in each Lancaster, known as 'ABC' or 'Airborne Cigar'. RAF ground stations in southern England manned by German speakers could tune into enemy night fighter frequencies and either jam information or give false instructions. But the ground station's ABC range was only 210 kilometres (130 miles) and couldn't penetrate far into Europe to protect the bombers. Waughman explained, "An astute technician in Bomber Command said, 'Let's put it in an aeroplane.' 101 Squadron was given this equipment in 1943 and we had an extra crewmember working on it. He had a three-inch [7.6-centimetre] cathode ray tube, which could tune into the night fighter frequencies and get a strobe on a little screen. He'd cover that with the aircraft strobe, lock it on, decide that it was German speaking and then press another button, which blasted engine noise out on the frequency."

ABC was a valuable tool to protect other bombers, but 101 Squadron paid a heavy price for carrying it. "Our operators didn't have to speak German – it was purely jamming – but it was very effective. Consequently, our attrition rate was very high, mainly because we were used on every heavy bombing raid that went out. We acted as ordinary bombers too, staggered every 90 seconds throughout a bomber stream, which could be 60-70 miles [90-110 kilometres] long. That made us very vulnerable because we were using their frequencies, but the German night fighter radar could hone onto our frequencies and aircraft very easily."

"IF YOU SAID YOU WEREN'T FRIGHTENED YOU WERE TELLING PORKIES. YOU BECAME A BIT ZOMBIE-ISH, YOU JUST HAD TO GET ON AND DO IT TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY"

This hazardous task was daunting for rookie Lancaster crews and Waughman admitted, "My first operation was a disaster mainly because my first engineer couldn't cope and things went wrong. We lost part of our instruments and systems went wrong in the aircraft. I turned round and aborted the trip, which the boss wasn't very happy about. On the first five operations our casualty rate, mainly through inexperience, could be up to 40 per cent."

Battle of Berlin

The first few operations were a baptism of fire, as 101 Squadron took part in what became known as the Battle of Berlin. Between November 1943 and March 1944 the British bombed the German capital with 16 massed attacks and 9,112 sorties, but the RAF lost 495 aircraft and over 2,500 men killed.

Waughman recalled the intense loss of life and his own inexperience: "During the Battle of Berlin our attrition rate was up to 60 per cent. I didn't have any experience on operational flying at all. Normally when you went into a squadron you did a couple of operations, as a pilot, with an experienced crew so you knew what it was like, but the Battle of Berlin was completely different. It was just, 'There's your aeroplane: off you go.'"

Flying over Berlin was "frightening. If you said you weren't frightened you were telling porkies. You became a bit zombie-ish, you just had to get on and do it to the best of your ability. It was a question of survival because on a bombing run you couldn't take evasive action at all. On our first successful Berlin raid you had fighter attacks over the Dutch coast and we were taking evasive action for over 30 minutes. There were two more attacks over the target, but you couldn't take evasive action. Then if you dropped the bombs you couldn't get the hell out. You had to fly for another 20-30 seconds because you took a photograph of where your bombs had burst. You were flying dead straight regardless of what was going on round about – including flak and fighters – and that was hairy." Attacks on Berlin were not just scary but long. "On a raid, you'd perhaps have about 50 per cent reasonably peaceful flying and 50 per cent panic. On the Berlin raids they were usually anything between 6-8 hours long."

"DURING THE BATTLE OF BERLIN OUR ATTRITION RATE WAS UP TO 60 PER CENT"

During attacks, Waughman had to avoid searchlights, fighters and flak. "You flew in a corkscrew pattern, diving down and climbing up to escape the fighters. You could be doing that for up to 30 minutes, and with a heavily loaded aircraft it was bloody hard work. Those periods on your flight were very hectic, and it was the same with the searchlights because the German radar was brilliant. They could put their night fighters into the bomber stream and even the anti-aircraft guns could attack an individual aircraft."

Although the RAF failed to achieve its primary objective, in Berlin 50,000 buildings were destroyed and 80,000 documented civilians were killed. This carnage was not entirely planned, because Bomber Command's targets had been largely industrial. "The industrial areas were selected out, and the pathfinders marked where you had to bomb, but the bombing equipment wasn't 100 per cent efficient, so it was a direct hit on Germany and Berlin itself got a hell of a blasting."

The Nuremberg Raid

Shortly after Berlin, Waughman survived a disastrous raid on Nuremberg on the night of 30-31 March 1944. Bomber Command suffered its heaviest losses in a single night when 96 out of 795 aircraft (along with 545 aircrew) failed to return after being attacked by German night fighters. Waughman recalled receiving the battle orders with trepidation: "When the orders came up on the wall and you saw your name on it, the first thing you did was change your underwear."

The raid was delayed twice, but when it happened Waughman's Lancaster was staggered two-thirds of the way back through the bomber stream. The bombers had to fly 425 kilometres (265 miles) in a straight line across the southern Ruhr, but clear weather wreaked havoc. "The route was meant to be in cloud until the target, but freak winds blew the cloud away and so we were flying in a nearly half moon, which was more or less daylight. With our contrails it was almost sunny daylight on this 265-mile leg."

16 aircraft were shot down by the time the bombers reached the German border. "It was quite alarming and we were concentrating all the time. We saw lots of fighter attacks. It only took an hour to fly this long leg, but in this hour 60 aircraft came down. That's one a minute, and you saw these aircraft literally falling out of the sky. There was a little gap where the fighters went back and refuelled but they then sent more up. 17-18 aircraft were also shot down on their way home."

Although Waughman's Lancaster managed to reach Nuremberg, many did not and the damage to the city was insignificant. When Waughman finally reached home the statistics were grim for 101 Squadron. "We sent 26 aircraft and lost seven. That's 26 aircraft with 208 aircrew and we lost 56. That was just over a quarter of the squadron lost in one night."

The raid had an exhausting psychological impact on the surviving airmen. "We were like zombies and just plain knackered. When you normally get back from a raid there's a bit of banter and chatting going on but because we were concentrating so hard all the time the unwinding period was very difficult. We never spoke, which was quite unusual. When we got down to the mess for our post-op meal none of the girls or wives were there, they had all gone into a restroom and left the meals out with a little notice up saying, 'Please help yourselves'. The lady mess sergeant said, 'When you come in, all sit at the same table so you won't see so many empty tables.'"

The grief had spread across the aerodrome. "The ladies had gone to the restroom crying because they were losing their friends. The staff were wonderful, so sympathetic. We went back to our billet and just sat on the bed and couldn't sleep. Bomber Command didn't operate fully for another fortnight after that."

"Fear, panic and terror"

Throughout his time on operations Waughman had to contend with not just the enemy but also the elements. "We flew regardless of the weather and in some dreadful

The Avro Lancaster was the most famous and successful RAF heavy bomber of WWII. Waughman described it as "a remarkable aeroplane"

Rusty Waughman giving a two-finger salute as he boards his Lancaster. He attributed surviving 30 hazardous missions to "about 90 per cent luck, pure luck"

Inside Waughman's Lancaster: this view is taken from the navigator's position with Norman Westby at his bomb-aiming control panel in the nose of the aircraft

conditions. We flew through thunderstorms and you had ice and turbulence to contend with. You couldn't always dodge the thunderstorms and if you were struck by lightning – it didn't come inside but went around the aeroplane, and you got the smell of hot metal. The trailing aerial was burnt off a couple of times…"

These dangerous conditions meant that survival was the paramount thought. "On the first four operations you knew things were a bit dicky. Later on you just accepted it. You knew that your chances of survival were negligible because we were losing so many crews and you became fatalistic. One of the things we used to do was invoke the Grim Reaper and say that Death put his bony hand on your shoulder and said, 'Live child, I am coming'. When you lost a comrade you would drink his health in the mess and say, 'Here's to good old so and so and here's to the next one to die.'"

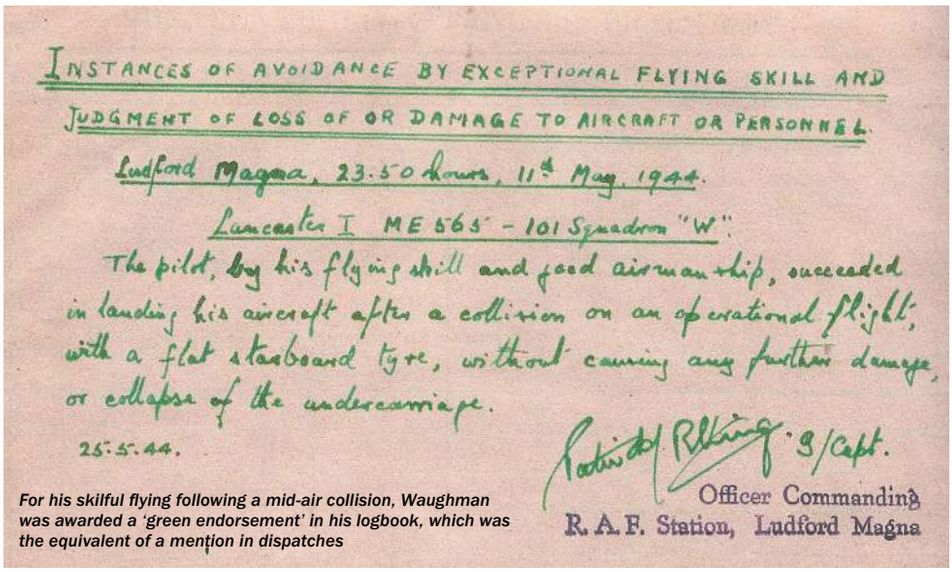
The mental strain on bomber airmen varied. "It affected some more than others. I think I was too thick: you knew what the risks were but some of the thinkers who really realised what was going on with the losses suffered quite a lot. The stress rate at Bomber Command was very high and I must admit I suffered afterwards. I didn't realise it but I developed a stress-induced stomach ulcer only a fortnight after I left the squadron."

Waughman expressed great appreciation for the station staff looking after the airmen. "They were wonderful people and didn't get the credit for what they did. I remember when I went to get my parachute one night one of the girls said, "Can I borrow your battle dress?" When it came back she had sewn a lucky threepenny piece onto it on the wings."

Throughout his missions Waughman maintained his professionalism, but he admitted he was not immune from experiencing pure fear on a raid over Essen on 26 April 1944: "We were flying into a huge box barrage and the flak was so thick you could get out and walk on it. It was really alarming and frightening. With the fighters and searchlights it looked impossible, and that's the first time I ever experienced fear, panic and terror. I dropped my seat so I couldn't see out and I was shaking. It felt as if needles were being pushed into my head."

Waughman went on, "For some unknown reason I said a little prayer, something I had never said since I was six years old… The fear and the panic disappeared. I don't know why but I got back on my seat and carried on perfectly alright. Although we experienced the same situations several times again on other raids, I never had that fear and panic again. It was quite strange."

"WE WERE FLYING INTO A HUGE BOX BARRAGE AND THE FLAK WAS SO THICK YOU COULD GET OUT AND WALK ON IT… IT LOOKED IMPOSSIBLE"



INSTANCES OF AVOIDANCE BY EXCEPTIONAL FLYING SKILL AND JUDGMENT OF LOSS OF OR DAMAGE TO AIRCRAFT OR PERSONNEL.

Ludford Magna, 23.50 hours, 11th May, 1944.

Lancaster I ME565 - 101 Squadron "W".

The pilot, by his flying skill and good airmanship, succeeded in landing his aircraft after a collision on an operational flight, with a flat starboard tyre, without causing any further damage, or collapse of the undercarriage.

25.5.44.

Officer Commanding
R.A.F. Station, Ludford Magna

For his skilful flying following a mid-air collision, Waughman was awarded a 'green endorsement' in his logbook, which was the equivalent of a mention in dispatches

Above: Waughman's RAF service medals include the Distinguished Flying Cross (far left), Air Force Cross (second from left) and the Légion d'honneur (far right)

Barrel-rolling a Lancaster

On the night of 3-4 May 1944, 346 Lancasters attacked a German military camp at Mailly-le-Camp in France but were attacked by German fighters. 1,500 tons of bombs were dropped, causing considerable damage and casualties, but 42 Lancasters (11.6 per cent of the attacking force) were shot down with around 300 personnel.

Waughman was among this large bomber stream, when pathfinder problems contributed to the chaos. "The first raid was held up and the second raid caught up with the first, so there were nearly 400 bombers circling just by Reims. It just so happened that there were German night fighters stationed nearby and they got in amongst us and created mayhem."

Radio contact between other bombers was usually strictly forbidden but "on this night that disappeared completely. One lad called up and said, 'For Christ's sake pathfinders, pull your fingers out. I'm being shot at, I'm on fire,' but a very broad Australian voice came over the air saying, 'If you're going to die, die like a man.'"

When the call came to attack Mailly-le-Camp the bombers descended en masse, which resulted in great danger for Waughman. "It was just like Derby Day with all these aircraft descending. We flew at about 12,000 feet [3,600 metres] and dropped our bombs. Norman, the bomb aimer, was on the lookout below. He said a rude word and an aircraft flew underneath us and turned us onto our backs."

The aircraft had caused Waughman's Lancaster to turn upside down under one wing. "This is where the training came in. If you tried to struggle to get it level again you would most probably get high speed stalls and it would be a hell of a struggle. So we just carried on with the roll and rolled it out. We were at about 1,000 feet [305 metres] when we came out. The speed of a Lancaster is supposed to be 360 miles per hour [590 kilometres per hour], but we were doing over 400 [645 kilometres per hour] when we came out."

For Waughman's wireless operator Taffy Arndell, the barrel-roll had unfortunate consequences: "The lads had a big fruit tin with the top cut off, which they passed between themselves as a 'pee can'. Taffy told me that when we were turning upside down he could see this pee can rising with 'negative gravity' and it tipped all over him!"

Collision over Belgium

Only days after the Mailly-le-Camp raid, Waughman found himself in an even more dangerous situation on the night of 11-12 May 1944 during a raid on Hasselt in eastern Belgium. "We had just passed Antwerp and Curly, the engineer, was standing up looking out of his window beside me. He said, 'Oh Christ, bloody hell!' and this aircraft appeared

ARTEFACTS OF THE AIR

RUSTY WAUGHMAN KEPT SOME REMARKABLE SOUVENIRS FROM HIS WWII MISSIONS THAT RANGE FROM PERSONAL & PRACTICAL TO EXTREMELY DANGEROUS

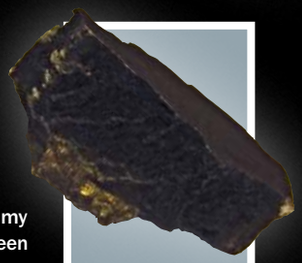
SILK SCARF

"I wore this on every operation I went on. When you were flying you needed a woolly jumper, gloves, long johns and a scarf of some sort. It was a lucky talisman."

SPENT REAR GUN ROUND

"I picked this up in the bottom of the aircraft. Harry [Nunn] fired the guns and when they were fired these were ejected."

GERMAN FLAK SHRAPNEL

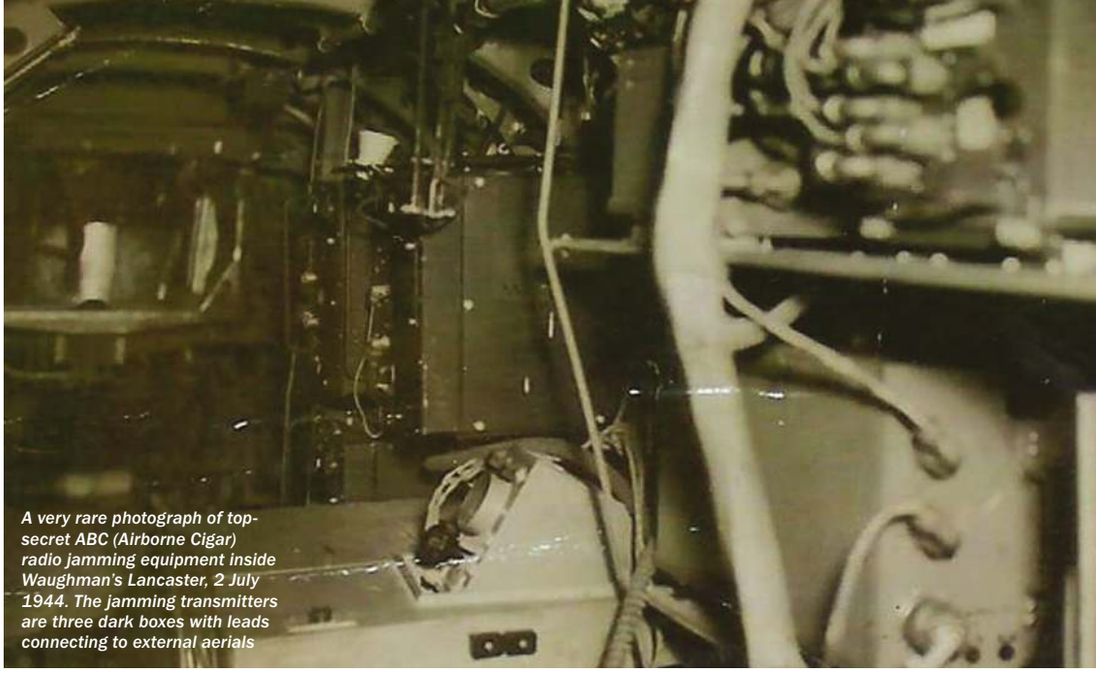


"This bit of shrapnel came in just behind my head. I must have been leaning forward when it came through the Perspex. It might not have necessarily killed me but it would have given me a nasty headache. It was quite well spent because it didn't come over with a great crash or bang. It was flak shrapnel from anti-aircraft guns, most probably 88mm, which was a marvellous gun. When it came into the aircraft it would be red-hot normally, but I didn't find this until we got out."

ESCAPE COMPASS

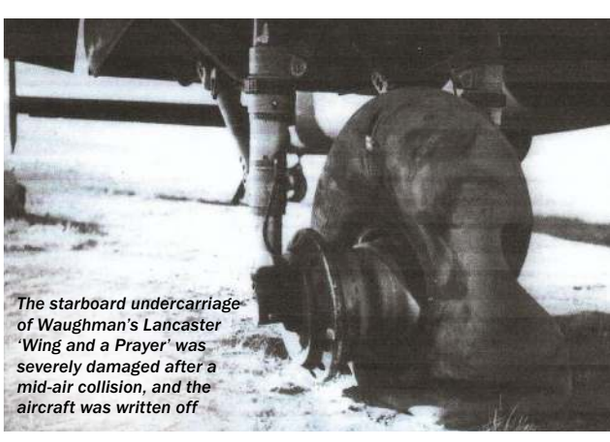
"If you had to bail out and were captured you had escape photographs and a compass to find out where you were. You wore it in your collar stud, and in those days you wore separate collars so that they weren't attached. The compass still works. You could have another one in the heel of your shoe."

Curly Ormerod and Norman Westby in the cockpit of Waughman's first Lancaster bomber LM575 'Wing and a Prayer'. This aircraft was wrecked after a mid-air collision but Waughman piloted the crew to safety



A very rare photograph of top-secret ABC (Airborne Cigar) radio jamming equipment inside Waughman's Lancaster, 2 July 1944. The jamming transmitters are three dark boxes with leads connecting to external aerials

Waughman was part of the introduction committee for the RAF Bomber Command Memorial in London, which was unveiled on 28 June 2012. Waughman remarked that although the memorial is "wonderful" its commissioning came "far too late" for veterans



The starboard undercarriage of Waughman's Lancaster 'Wing and a Prayer' was severely damaged after a mid-air collision, and the aircraft was written off

"IT WASN'T UNTIL AFTERWARDS THAT WE REALISED THE IMPLICATIONS OF WHAT WE WERE DOING. ALL THESE THINGS COME IN RETROSPECT: HOW MANY PEOPLE MUST I HAVE KILLED?

from nowhere and stabbed straight into the side of us. He slid underneath us and his canopy took off our starboard wheel. His propellers were slightly behind ours and they cut through our bomb aimer's compartment, just behind his feet.

"His turret cut through our fuselage just behind the bomb doors and we had a big hole right across the back. This damaged the two main longerons, which hold the aeroplane together, and we lost part of the tail and our electrics. I didn't see this aircraft at all, the only sensation I had was his propellers churning into us, but the controls and my joystick went completely limp. It seemed a long time but it was only a matter of seconds."

Despite the damage, Waughman continued to the target. "Our engines were choking on and we thought we might as well go and drop our bombs on the target as we were pointing in that direction. The master bomber had said, 'Don't bomb', but we carried on, found the railway lines and dropped our bombs on the marshalling yard, albeit four and a half miles [seven kilometres] north of where we should have done. It was pretty rough flying, but we managed to fly back."

During this perilous flight, Waughman's crew showed great bravery and solidarity. "We knew the back end of the aircraft was very badly damaged and if we had taken evasive action we could have broken up. I told Harry [Nunn] in the rear turret, 'Get your parachute and come up front. If we have to bail out you'll have a better chance.' He said, 'No, I'll stop here and keep a look out.' We then cut back over the UK but knew we were going to have to make a crash landing because the starboard wheel was wonky. I gave the crew a chance to bail out over the base but they said, 'No, we'll stop with you.' These were the characters they were."

Upon arrival at Ludford Magna, Waughman performed a crash landing."We did a single-engine, one-wheel landing and skidded off the runway in the dark, hurtling towards the control tower and stopped just short of it. Most of the control tower staff came out to see the upended aeroplane. The only casualty of that flight was one of the girls who jumped back and sprained her ankle as we came hurtling towards her!"

Waughman had brought his crew home safely with no injuries, was recommended for a medal and received a 'green endorsement' in his logbook, equivalent to a mention in dispatches. Despite his courage and skill, he was modest: "We were very fortunate and lucky largely through the efforts of the crew."

"A very lucky life"

Waughman's last mission was a raid on Sangatte on 5 June 1944 as part of the deception operations that preceded D-Day. With his operational flying now over he was interviewed by the station commander. "He had a crew statistics chart on the wall and said, 'There you are, you're the first crew that has finished your flights in over six months.'"

Having survived 30 deadly missions, Waughman's primary feeling was tired relief: "I've always found it a very difficult emotion to explain. You were a bit zombie-ish and the winding down was quite considerable, but you certainly went out and had a good few beers!"

The mass attacks conducted by Bomber Command over Europe killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, and subsequently made the RAF's strategy become highly controversial. Waughman reflected that, "It was a nasty business. It wasn't until afterwards that we realised the implications of what we were doing. All these things come in retrospect: how many people must I have killed? It's really quite strange. At the time you're just doing a job, but it is very difficult to put over the emotions that you felt at the time and afterwards."

Waughman now speaks regularly about his experiences in schools and events: "Its very flattering and I'm grateful I can talk about it but some people can't. When I talk about it I think, 'Did it really happen, am I making it up?' It feels good to give something back. I've had a very, very lucky life."

Images: Alamy