

# A Trip to Remember

## An Airman's view of D-Day

**Gordon Gross**

Our bomber crew arrived at Skipton-on-Swale in mid-May of 1944 and was adapting to the ways and discipline of life on an operational unit, No.433 Squadron (The Porcupines) of 6 Group RCAF in RAF Bomber Command based in Yorkshire. We had completed conversion training to fly in Halifax III bombers in the previous weeks at Topcliffe Airbase near Thirsk. Following Operational Flying training at Pershore in Worcestershire we had completed special training for operational aircrews at Dalton airbase on how to conduct ourselves if shot down over Europe, how to survive, evade the enemy and find possible escape routes for return to Britain, and instruction on proper conduct if captured and made a prisoner of war.

Our crew had learned a lot in the previous months about working as a unit in the air and on the ground in all kinds of circumstances, whether it was coping with heavy icing that nearly brought down our Wimpy over the North Sea, doing dinghy drill in the swimming pool at Harrogate, evading the patrols in the Yorkshire moors when on escape exercises as part of the Dalton training program, or our early morning delivery of leaflets to Paris to mark the end of our OTU program. We came together as a crew at Pershore and as mid-upper gunner I was the last to join it and was delighted to be part of a regular crew.

It is likely that our crew was typical of the diverse group of airmen that manned the heavy bombers. Tom Prescott, our pilot, had left college in New Brunswick to join the RCAF. He received his pilot's wings in Canada, had served on a prestigious RAF station in England as a flight instructor, and had married a charming girl from Bournemouth before being posted to Pershore and later to 6 Group in Bomber Command. Tom was an excellent airman and insisted on high

standards from his crew members and tried to be fair and firm in his leadership.

Bill Caton, an unassuming congenial business type from Toronto, was a very competent navigator who always had a humorous quip to alleviate a dull or tense situation, and occasionally after a heated debate on crew matters would conclude with "now if we were in the Luftwaffe I would be captain and you would do things my way or else."

Dave Harris, our bomb aimer, was a quiet spoken rather reserved high school teacher from Whitby. At about 30 years of age, was the oldest in the crew and took all the "old man harassment" from the others with good-natured humour often making us envious by responding "you're a lot of 'sprogs.'" His dedication and conscientious approach in his work was an inspiration to all who got to know him.

Hank Gilpin, our wireless-air gunner and part time radar operator, was a mature good-natured farmer who operated a country store when home in Alberta and had a great sense of humour. He seemed to have a natural feel for the various kinds of wireless apparatus on board and his capable handling of all communications in the air was never questioned.

Jimmy Willet from northern New Brunswick brought the skills of a keen observer, hunter and outdoors man to his task in the rear gun turret and was always ready with his sage comments and dry humour.

I was in the mid-upper gun turret. I had left high school to work for about a year and a half as a machine fitter in a Hamilton factory that was building 17-pounder and 4-inch gun mountings for the Royal Navy that were being



F/O Gordon Gross preparing his mid-upper gun turret for an operation.



Gordon Gross at the Operational Training Unit at Pershore in 1944.

rushed out for arming merchant ships. I started my training with the RCAF in January of 1943 and arrived in England in November shortly after my 20th birthday. With my usual serious approach I found gunnery in the air force a new and very different challenge from making naval gun mountings.

Felix Smith, our flight engineer, was the youngest in the crew and a very serious, affable RAF type from Felixstowe northeast of London. Felix took care of the aircraft assigned to our crew in the most conscientious and proprietary manner and maintained close relations with the ground crews.

As a crew we found the Halifax III aircraft a real challenge. We had completed our operational training on twin-engined Wellington bombers, some with twisted frames or other strains acquired in operational flying before being passed on for training crews that would fly the big four-engined Halifax and Lancaster bombers. We were delighted with the performance of the sturdy Halifax III which gave new confidence and assurance and was often referred to as the flying tank.

Our crew's first trip to Aachen to strike the marshalling yards had not been an easy one, heavy flak, search lights, fighters, signal jamming, and all that we had been trained to deal with. We arrived back on base a bit shaken but with the good feeling that we could cope as a

crew and that we were going to work well together.

Trips laying sea-mines off the enemy coast near Dunkerque and Normandy, and a strike on a gun battery at Le Clipon on the Cherbourg Peninsula followed shortly and we were beginning to get the feel of our gun turrets and equipment and the challenge of keeping a constant pattern of search and vigil in the night sky. The final words of the instructor at the Gunnery School at Pershore Operational Training Unit had registered deeply, "It's the one you don't see that will get you."

Everyone sensed that the time for the invasion of Europe was very near but we had no idea where it would take place. Southern England from London to Bristol had been out-of-bounds for leave or travel all spring and the rumour mills operated in "overdrive." Some suggested that we probably would have nothing to do with the invasion as recently we had had glimpses of the twin-engine tactical force bombers painted with new black and white stripes and gliders and their Stirling and Halifax towing craft as well as numerous fighter aircraft bearing the same distinctive marking.

When we reported to flights late in the afternoon on June 5th for briefing for an operational trip there was no doubt that this one was going to be different. Our aircraft was being bombed up with 500-pounders with no

incendiaries which indicated a tactical target and not an industrial target in Germany. When the cover sheet was removed from the operations map for the night the route was shown south along the east coast of England, east of the Pas de Calais, deep into France nearly to Paris, a leg west then north to the coast almost directly south of Le Havre where the target was marked at Houlgate, then west across the channel and a turn north somewhere near Lands End, so it seemed, to return to base in Yorkshire. Our target was the coastal gun batteries at Houlgate and the briefing was loud and clear, these guns must come out so Jerry can't shell the navy. Upon your return, you will stand by for a diversion to southern England to be bombed-up and you will be going back again and again until they are cleared - these guns must be silenced. No one doubted that this was the beginning of the "Big Invasion" and we were going to have a part in it. The crews began to feel a special sense of anticipation and excitement. When the time came for questions at the close of the briefing someone asked why the diversion route went so deep into France. The reply came that the Americans were going to have a go at night flying and they were being given an open sky. Everyone in the room burst into loud laughter. I think it was one of the few times I ever heard crews laugh at a briefing session.

We took off from Skipton about 1 am along with 20 or more other Halifax bombers and climbed to height over base to get above the heavy cloud and set course south off the east coast. As we were passing east of the mouth of the Channel near Dover, Dave reported with great excitement that the H2S radar had picked up images of a set of large islands in the channel that were not shown on the maps. It was easy to guess that our night fighters had been out doing their bit to jam and confuse the enemy defences along the coast. I do not recall that we encountered any flak that night along the ever hot Pas de Calais coast.

We flew on, much of the time between clouds, and Bill gave a change of course west and then another course north that started our descent through heavy cloud to the target area at the coast. Signs of icing showed up on the wing tips in some of the clouds and the gunners were frantically searching for other bombers that might be converging on the target area through

A Halifax bomber of No.6 Group RCAF bombing a target in France.

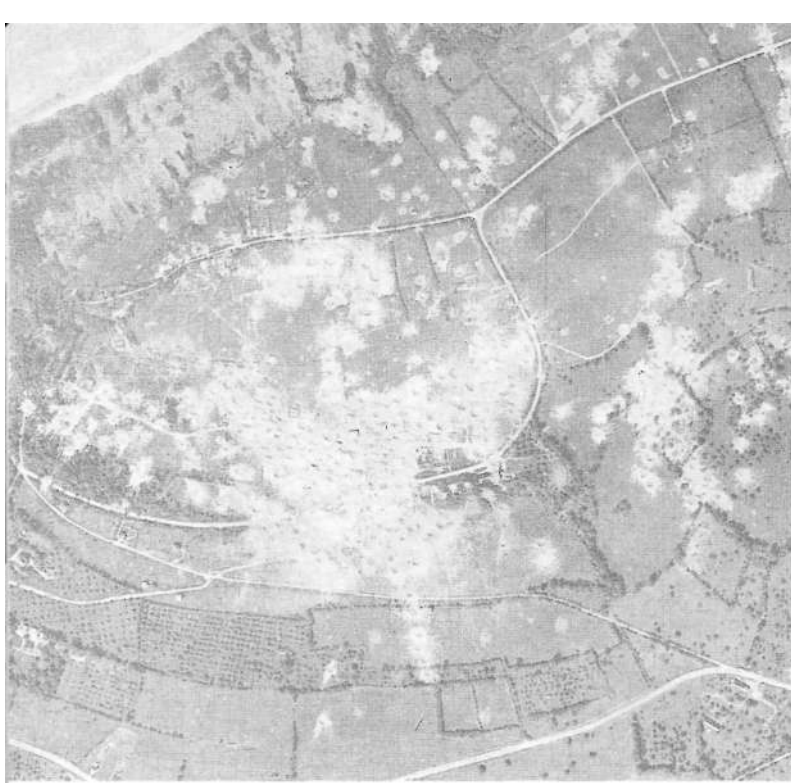
the heavy cloud and for any signs of ice accumulation on our aircraft. Felix was busy monitoring the engine dials and looking for any signs of technical malfunction that might spell trouble.

The cloud was beginning to break in great grey billowy masses when suddenly Dave took over with "I can see them, target markers spotted ahead." Bill once again had brought us right in to the target in spite of unpredictable winds, cloud, ice and all. Dave was already busy with his left, left and steady directions to Tom and was totally occupied with the bombing run, noting that the markers were scattered but he was lined up well. I felt the Halifax lurching as the 16 - 500 pound high explosive bombs were released from about 9,000 feet, about a minute before 4am. The break in the clouds had now opened enough to catch a glimpse of land and sea below. "Bombs gone," Dave shouted ecstatically, then after a pause "I am sure it's good, they are bursting amid the markers, I'm sure we got a strike." Bill came on with a change of course west and we could scarcely realize that we had actually bombed a target in the D-Day operations.

Heading west we were suddenly captivated by the ships seen below through the broken clouds, all shapes and sizes, anything you had ever seen in the recce books and some not yet registered. Row after row of them in neat lines



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WLU Air Photo 100/4003

An aerial reconnaissance photo taken on 31 July 1944 showing the German gun battery at Houlgate.

what we had seen seemed to be of interest. Why the indifference, we thought? Certainly nothing was said to confirm that it was indeed the beginning of the big drive to liberate Europe. The usual routine warning was given before leaving the hut, "Remember chaps, no talk, no one is to know about what you did or saw. Get some rest now in case you are called out soon." We began to realize that this was what we should expect on such a special occasion.

As crews headed to the mess for a meal all felt restrained, thoughts were very much on the channel. They would be landing by now, the army had "the ball," suspense prevailed, as yet we had heard nothing on the radio. How was the assault on the beaches going, were they able to get through the defence wall, how many had died, or were wounded on the beaches? There was nothing we could do but hope and pray for those who were now storming Fortress Europe. The first news was very brief, to the effect that Allied airborne and army units had made successful landings in France. It would take days, weeks and even years before we would learn specific information about what actually took place that D-day morning.

We were left to assume that since we were not called back to our target that Dave's assessment had been good and that we had been successful. With the development of events some reports suggested that all of the bombers had not achieved their objectives but nothing specific was heard about our target area except for the reporting in time of the airborne division's dramatic success at nearby Pegasus Bridge.

Fifty-six years later when my wife and I were touring Normandy with Professor Terry Copp and his history group we visited the museum at Pegasus Bridge. I had been having some of the most rewarding days of my life with the group as we travelled over the ground and reviewed the amazing achievements of the Canadian and Allied forces in the battle of Normandy. Many of our crew's operational trips in that fateful 1944 summer had been in support of the Normandy campaign including laying mines to block the enemy shipping, bombing railway marshalling yards in France that were vital links in supplying the enemy armies in Normandy, strikes at their supply depots, ammunition dumps or oil depots, along with our many daylight strikes at the

all headed to the Normandy coast. It was an unbelievable sight, the largest armada ever assembled, and we were getting a special panoramic view of it. The sight was overwhelming and Jimmy Willet, who had the best view from the rear turret and was always ready with a bit of dry humour, fulfilled his duty by reporting, "Skipper, there are too many ships to count." As this unforgettable view below began to register on our minds we all suddenly wanted to talk and express some of the exuberance we felt, but heeded Tom's "Cut the chatter, it's not over yet." It was one of the most exciting events of our lives. We had had a part in the Great Invasion, no doubt about it, we had bombed enemy guns and had actually flown over the Invasion Armada only a few hours before Allied troops would start landing on the Normandy beaches.

West of the Cherbourg Peninsula we turned north to return to base in Yorkshire and the hundreds of bombers began to converge into a neat stream. The flight back was something different again, everyone circumspectly followed the flight plan and instructions, kept radio silence as always, but obviously all were excited. As aircraft merged in the stream in the early dawn sky amid the heavy clouds all saluted by dipping a wing. No signals for diversion were reported by Hank and we could assume for now at least that our mission had gone as intended.

Back on base all was routine and at the debriefing session the specific flight data was recorded as usual. None of our comments on

launching sites for Buzz Bombs directed at London and southern England.

As I was absorbed in watching a video that reported the airborne glider landings and securing of Pegasus Bridge, which was one of the greatest feats of airmanship known, the record continued with pictures of the gun batteries at Houlgate and an account of the bombing on the morning of D-Day by 6 Canadian Group of RAF Bomber Command. I suddenly realized that I was actually seeing documentary pictures of our target. At last final confirmation for me of our strike. The narrator used almost the same words that I had remembered from the briefing for the trip on a cold wet day in June in Yorkshire. "These guns have to come out and you will be sent back again and again until you get them." Like so many other events of that 1944 summer this one had finally come into its full historical perspective for me.

Only Felix and I of our bomber crew are here now to rejoice in that "Great Victory in Normandy in 1944," to remember that grey D-Day morning and the operational tour of one of the best crews that ever flew a Halifax bomber.

On returning from overseas in 1945 Gordon Gross completed high school before entering Queen's University where he graduated with a BA in geology and mineralogy in 1950, and a MA in 1952. He continued graduate work at the University of Wisconsin and received his Ph.D. in 1955. Shortly thereafter he joined the Geological Survey of Canada, and as a specialist in iron ore geology carried out research in Canada, and assignments with the United Nations worldwide. Since 1989 he has been an Emeritus Research Scientist with the Geological Survey of Canada.