

Bombs Away

The First Mission on a Coastal Command Liberator

D. Joseph Matthews

The three hundred and one entries in my flying log book have become an amalgam. Memory distinguishes operational from training and transport flights, but only in a most general way. Dozens of things which happened spring to mind but on which flight they occurred, I am at a loss to say. There are a few exceptions and my first operational trip is a case in point. It sticks out in my log because it is identified with the numeral one, and because the flying time is recorded as 14 hours and 35 minutes. It sticks out in my memory for reasons about to unfold.

No.547 Squadron RAF had converted from Vickers Wellingtons to Consolidated Liberators just before we arrived on the scene. Our crew was one of the first to complete training flights and secure an operational rating. It is with some satisfaction we lift off on our first sortie from St. Eval, Cornwall, at 0729 hours on 3 February 1944. First assignments are normally arranged to avoid probability of enemy interception. We are to find and escort an inbound convoy far out in the Atlantic.

It does not matter that we are flying V for Victor, an old machine handed down from another squadron for training purposes. The main and auxiliary petrol tanks are full and the bomb bay is stuffed with lethal charges. On this, as on all future assignments, we stagger off with a 6,000 pound overload.

Our captain, Flight Lieutenant Kenneth Dart, DFC, is just 22 but a seasoned skipper fresh from flying boats. We call him "Daisy," but never to his face in the aircraft. I am pleased when he thanks me for guiding him directly to the armada of merchant vessels dotting the horizon ahead of us.

For several hours, we look for stragglers and conduct searches as requested by the Senior Officer Escort. It is late afternoon when we take our leave and set course for home.

There is an unfamiliar ring to the cry which shatters my eardrums.

"Fire! Skipper! Fire! Number three engine's on fire!"

That must be one of our gunners, either in the mid-upper turret or perhaps, farther back at the beam. I look out the side window of my compartment. Our starboard inner engine is engulfed in flames. They stream back over the nacelle and the wing itself. A main fuel tank is lodged in the wing.

"We have blown an engine, Gunner. We are shutting it down. Keep an eye."

"It's just black smoke now, Skipper. It seems to be dying out."

"Navigator?"

"Navigator here, Skipper."

"How far is the convoy?"

"Twenty-two or three miles."

"Jettison the load, please. Now!"

I flick the toggle to arm the charges. They will fall live and so destroy themselves underwater. I roll the jettison lever through its first quadrant and pause. A rush of cold air sweeps through as the belly of the plane opens up. I push the lever hard forward. The upward



Matthews' Liberator crew shown in early 1945. Those present on 3 February 1944 are marked with an asterisk (). Back row (l. to r.): Flight Officer D.J. Matthews*. 1st Navigator (Cdn); Bill Alcock, 2nd Pilot (Brit); Albert Tizley*, Flight Engineer (Brit); Art Scarlett, 2nd Navigator, (Brit); Jack Wozniak*, Wireless/Air Gunner (Cdn); Front row: Jackie Hough*, Wireless/Air Gunner (Brit); Harry Thomas, Wireless/Air Gunner (Brit); Bill Smith, Skipper (Aussie); Ken Hunt, Wireless/Air Gunner, (Brit); and Frank Sydenham*, Wireless, Operator, Mechanic/Air Gunner (Brit). Not shown from the original crew are the Skipper, Kenneth Dart, RAF; 2nd Pilot Gene Seward, RCAF; and Wireless/Air Gunner Bernie (?), USAAF. (The difference between the crew of ten pictured and Matthews' original crew of eight lies in the fact that by 1945 they had upgraded to the Liberator Mk.VI from the Mk.V which required a 2nd Navigator and a Nose Turret Gunner.)*

leap of the aircraft, a shudder and an enormous thud are simultaneous.

"Navigator, what was that?"

"I'd better go and see."

"Do, please, and report at once."

I make my way on hands and knees under the flight deck and stand up to enter the forward bulkhead of the bomb-bay. Hold it! Take a deep breath first! A narrow catwalk runs the length of

the passage, suspended on stanchions. There is nothing beside or below it but air and ocean. The two forward bomb doors, one on each side, hang from their uppermost edges, twisting and swinging in the slipstream like a pair of elephant ears. The two rear doors are rolled neatly up the sides of the fuselage, as they are designed to do.

The cause of the shudder and the thump is apparent. The two front doors were not fully open when the explosives dropped. The safety lock to prevent such a mishap had failed. The ribbed sheet metal panels had buckled at the centre.

The dozen or so three-inch lugs at each end had sprang from the channels in which they are secured and in which they should roll when the doors are operated. Not only are we struggling to maintain altitude on three engines, but we now have two barn doors flapping in the breeze as well.

I hurry forward to report the catastrophe. I am not on intercom, so Daisy and I have to shout. I hear his message.

"Go and get those doors in, or cut them off. We'll never make it if you don't."

I retreat muttering *to* myself about folk who expect you to be a damn magician. Do this, do that, but never how. I step out on the catwalk to find Albert Tizley, our Flight Engineer, has managed to close the two rear doors during my absence. The hole is only half as big as it was before.

Tizz is from Nottingham, a big kid with a wide grin and a Roman nose. He is strong as an ox and a great one to have when we need brawn as well as brains. We try but never manage to imitate his salutation, "ello Skipper, h'engineer 'ere."

He works his way forward and sticks his face to my ear. The shout and spittle arrive together.

"Whad h'ar we goin' d'do?"

"Let's find some intercom wire."

He disappears through the door in the rear bulkhead. I feel dizzy. I get down and straddle the catwalk. I bend forward until my head touches it. This is awful! Dear God, why? Why me? Why now? What next?

Tizz returns with strands of insulated wire. I take one and fashion a loop at the end. With my shoulder braced against the bulkhead, and my leg wrapped tightly around the catwalk, I lean out as far as I can. I toss the loop into the slipstream. It flies back against the edge of the door. Two more tries and I snag a lug near the bottom. Gently I draw it towards me. Tizz grabs the collar of my jacket and pulls me erect. He moves back, drops to the catwalk and reaches for the other end of the door. We retrieve the



Flight Officer D.J. Matthews, pictured at St. Eval, Cornwall, England, September 1944.

second door in the same fashion and lash the two together with a sling over the catwalk.

I do not return to the flight deck but crawl back to my compartment in the nose. I am feeling sorry for myself. I wanted so much to face and finish my first op like a cool cat. Now, somehow, I have messed up and spoiled it for everybody. I feel the fool, tried and found wanting. Oh well, let's get on with it.

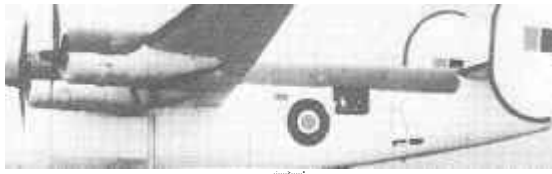
"Navigator here, Skipper."

"Go ahead, Navigator."

"Bomb doors up and secured." "Thank you, Navigator. Oh, I say, are you still there, Navigator? Sorry about this. We have no hydraulic pressure. The pump runs off our duff engine. Too bad about those bomb doors! I say, we have been in touch with Group. They want our position, course and ETA. Work them up, will you, and pass them back pronto."

It turns out Group wants our position and revised ETA every half hour. I sight Polaris. I

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Consolidated Liberator G.R. V aircraft of RAF Coastal Command escorting trans-Atlantic convoy, ca. 1943.

shoot the moon. I take radio bearings. Eventually, I pick up Gee signals. My log and chart are as complete and neat as I can make them. If there is a shortcoming, it won't be in my navigation.

The hours grind by. Our three good engines are working hard to maintain altitude. We burn more fuel to travel more slowly than normal cruise. We take no comfort in the two gravity-fed fuel gauges of the Liberator. They are notoriously imprecise.

Around 2100 hours, the Skipper comes on the intercom.

"Attention everyone. I am afraid it is touch-and-go, fellows. Make sure your Mae West is

securely fastened. The sea looks calm, not bad. really, if we must get wet."

Petrol supply is a worry. We have another. We know how to drop the gear manually but we need hydraulic pressure to lower flaps and a great deal of it for braking after landing. (We have not forgotten the story of the Liberator which landed on the Salt Lake Flats and coasted for 13 miles!) There is a hand pump on the pressure line but Gene Seward, our second pilot, reports problems with it. Apparently, it is in no better shape than some other things on this old crock.

Daisy has been in communication with the tower. It has been decided we should land with gear down and hope for the best. If necessary,

we can always swing off the hardpack into the mud. I'm glad the decision isn't mine. All other traffic has been alerted and we are cleared for an emergency landing. I can see the lights of the aerodrome. Wheels are down and undercarriage locked. If only the petrol holds out!

Daisy's idea of safety is to come in high and fast. He is not going to fall out of the sky short of the runway. His final approach is steep, alarmingly so. He slews the big machine to starboard, then hard to port, scrubbing off speed. Our landing lights describe a wide arc over the apron of the runway. Fire trucks, ambulances and a crash crew sit on the holding pad waiting for us, waiting for something to happen.

We lose altitude abruptly. Something vise-like grabs the gut. This is a new way to land a Liberator! We glide over the perimeter lights in an eerie silence. The Skipper is going to stall the huge bird and drop it on. Our forward speed will be the very minimum. Even so, we shall need every foot of the runway, if our brake pressure is deficient.

The nose rises, falls, rises, falls. He is stretching it out. Reaching. Come on, Daisy, you can do it! The nose lifts, this time until the landing lights are lost in the blackness of the winter sky. They roll down again, and the main gear touches the hard surface as softly as a kiss upon a baby's cheek. This guy is the greatest!

We are slowing. Yes! Yes! We do have brakes. I could cry, but one does not do that in the Air Force.

We taxi to our spot at dispersal and shut down. Someone hammers on the bomb doors and shouts authoritatively to open up. Jackie Hough, our Cockney rear gunner, who always removes his dentures on aerial missions, is making his way forward. He silences the clamour outside with a classic rejoinder,

"Oh, stuff it, will ya! The fuckers 'er bust!"

It isn't until we crawl forward and squeeze out over the nose wheel that we discover the welcoming party is not just our ground crew; it includes: Group Captain Mead, Station Commander, Wing Commander McKern, Squadron Commander; Squadron Leader Terry, O.C. "B" Flight; and Flight Lieutenant Miller, Medical Officer. They seem glad to see us despite Jackie's obscenities.

Flight Lieutenant D.J. Matthews, FCA, served in the RCAF attached to RAF Coastal Command Squadron 547 from November 1943 to April 1945 as Navigator on B-24 Liberators. Now retired from Coopers & Lybrand, he writes memoirs and short stories for family and friends.