



Hero of the Skies:

Squadron Leader Thomas Page DFM



2016 marks the 75th birthday of the Lancaster bomber, one of our greatest wartime aircraft. 94-year old Squadron Leader Thomas Page, DFM, who has lived in Hythe for 15 years, was part of Bomber Command, flying Lancasters under the command of Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris. Here, he shares his memories of taking to the skies in the iconic aeroplane.

It was my boyhood ambition to fly aeroplanes and so, in April 1940, aged 18, I enlisted in the Royal Air Force and was part of a group of airmen mustered for training as mechanics. When I was servicing an aircraft at RAF Manston, the Station Commander came to the hanger to fly a small aircraft and I asked him if I could fly with him. We flew over Canterbury to see the damage caused by the German raid during the previous night. This experience – my first ever flight – triggered a drastic change in my service career and I volunteered for flying duties as a Flight Engineer to assist pilots flying the new, four-engine bombers that were coming into service: the Lancasters.

After 53 hours of flying training, my crew was cleared for full operational duties. We went to No 49 Bomber Squadron at RAF Fiskerton, just outside Lincoln. For the next few weeks, we completed practice bombing sorties, air-firing and cross-country flying. On the ground, there were drills for emergencies and explanations for what to do in a crash landing, how to escape from the aircraft by parachute and survival if forced down into the sea.

On 13th April 1943, my crew's names appeared on that night's Battle Order, to fly a Lancaster bomber in an operation. The decisive moment had come for us and the apprehension

before each bombing operation was to start, although these feelings were somewhat relieved by doing all the preparations necessary before take-off.

The first thing to do was to fly the aircraft on a Night Flying Test. This was to ensure that everything was working satisfactorily before the bombs and the correct fuel load for the flight were loaded onto the aircraft. Later, we went to the locker room to collect flying kit, helmet, parachute and flying boots. We would dress in clothes suitable to withstand the cold in the aircraft.

Now came the worst part of the preparations: waiting outside the locker room

for the buses to take each crew to their aircraft. It was at these times that the stomach would churn as one thought of what lay ahead. There would be banter for some, quietness for others. As the engineer, before the flight I would conduct a variety of checks before taking my place on the right hand side of the cockpit beside the pilot. The aircraft gathered momentum down the runway and it took the entire 6,000ft stretch to gain flying speed. This

was one of the most anxious times, as the loss of an engine when fully loaded with fuel and bombs would be disastrous.

Our first target was the docks at La Spezia in the north of Italy. This would be a very long flight, requiring full petrol tanks and flying time at maximum range, with 208 Lancasters and 3 Halifax bombers involved in the attack.

FLIGHT TO LA SPEZIA

We set off for La Spezia but at H-hour there was no sign of a raid anywhere. We soon realised the aircraft was off course. With over half of the petrol gone, I knew that, if we did not get rid of the bombs, we would not get back to base. We released them into the sea and turned for home but there was very little fuel left. We needed to find an airfield fast. There were anxious moments as we watched for any of the engines to cut out. We got no reply to emergency calls for identification and landing, but by chance, saw an airfield. Without contact with the control tower, we landed. We had flown alone across the hostile territory of France for many hours, expecting opposition at any time. An examination of the navigation chart and check of the compasses revealed that the main compass was out by thirty degrees! That was a very long, first operational bombing flight and had been quite a lesson.

On another operation, we were returning below cloud at 3,000ft with our navigation lights on. Suddenly cannon fire – from the British Navy – hit the aircraft. The noise was uncanny as red-hot shrapnel passed through the fuselage close beside us. The Wireless Operator was hit: he had received wounds to his legs and shoulder area, but the most serious was a hole through one of his hands. Getting the first aid kit, I squeezed through to apply bandages and put a tourniquet on his wrist before going back to my duties.

At one time, we flew a total of 22.15 hours on four nights in seven days in stressful conditions. On the 15th March 1944, I flew my last operation to Stuttgart. I had flown 211.5 hours by night on 30 sorties over enemy

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territory; above all, I just remember the pride of belonging to Bomber Command. 906 aircrew of No. 49 squadron failed to return, a loss of 33% of the aircrew who flew with the squadron. I remained in the RAF until 1968: it was my love of flying, rather than knowledge of German tyranny, that made me volunteer for aircrew duties. But to look down from 20,000ft and see the great areas of fire and the bombs bursting was a sight I would never forget.