

# Butterflies in the Stomach

By air gunner W/O Tom Lockett GM R.A.F. (Rtd.)

**At a coffee party in Skarrild village hall in May 2002 RAF veterans were asked for their thoughts on the journey home whilst flying over Denmark knowing full well that one in seven aircraft might not make it back.**

**“What were you thinking on this treacherous journey home?”**

Warrant Officer Tom Lockett GM R.A.F. (Rtd.) answered without a manuscript as follows:

I'll tell you. I'll start with my crew. My own crew. I don't know about anyone else. My crew consisted of four New Zealanders. That was the pilot, navigator, bomber aimer and wireless operator and we were three English, one was the flight engineer, my uncle, and there was a Yorkshire man and myself as the two gunners.

And it started with a trip to Königsberg. We first knew about it in the morning, 9 - 10 o'clock in the morning. They just used to put a form up, it used to say: "There is a war on to night".

We never knew where we were going to go. They never told us that. You would never tell anything to anybody else but you got butterflies in the stomach, if you like-, that's the only expression I can give you. As the day went on you got your various duties to do and you made sure that everything worked so that everything was perfect in the air

You then went to a briefing. The senior officers briefed you then, and you then saw on the wall where you were going. Red tape used to go all from England from the base at East Kirkby and it went to the various places. We never looked at where it went up and down we looked at the end of it, which was Königsberg.

And if the goal, as we would call it, was a sticky one mostly you would go Bloody Hell!

After the briefing you then went to have a meal. Always had a meal and your flying meal. The only time you had it. For every time you were going on a flying raid you had an egg, a fried egg together with fried beans and things like that.

And once the time came you went to the aircraft for time to take off at HR? But you still got these butterflies, and then the time came to climb in the aircraft. Each one of you climbed into your stations where ever you were, and once you were in it and once you had started once everything had commenced and you had took off, it is a frightening moment in one respect, well not frightening, it's an anxious moment once you take off because you got a full bomb load you have got full petrol and seven of you are sat on it.

You have got four engines and you hope they keep the four engines going and you hope to get off the floor. Once you are airborne, once you done that you were airborne? Things settled down, your stomach settled down, your butterflies went, you got a job to do. And each one is there.

You were airborne and an air gunner, I am talking as an air gunner now, your guns were loaded, ready to fire, sights were set, you was set and you have made sure there was no light because you needed night vision. We were very careful, there was no light shining in our eyes because you got to keep your night vision.

From then on you just carried on then doing your job. My job together with the other gunners job was to continue, we never stopped right from take off, we never stopped, the turret rotated round and round and round you observed you kept your eyes open all time and by that time it was going dark, it went dark so all our air craft were in the dark and we were all in what we called a "gaggle" which is 10 Miles 17 km. wide and a mile/km deep and you were all in there.

By that time you became very lonely you sat in the turret on the top in the mid upper and in the rear turret, and it was cold, very cold, but we survived that, very small because you wore a lot of heat suits and gloves, about three pair of gloves, etc. and you just carried on searching you were avoiding collisions, tried to avoid collisions and you had no fear then, nobody had any fear then. You could hear the pilots, my pilot was 21 years of age and he could come over the intercom and he was very calm to all that was happening, very calm, and every now and again after so long? He used to call us up; the mid upper gunner and rear gunner just to see that we were OK. That went on and on the way there. We will go to "the getting near the target" We could hear what was going on all the time through the radio we could hear what was being said. Nobody was talking to each other in my aircraft on either side, just quiet from there.

Once you got towards the target, the ones in front had already started. Pathfinders like him (editorial: Wing Commander Jim Wright DFC RAF) they were already in front; they were doing their duty. They were already doing the marking the target. Once the target was marked you got the order from the master bomber he use to come on the air and used a little code. Once he told us, then you got excited and you weren't cold then, you were quite warm once you settled down you got on the bombing run, as we call it, you got a five mile then a five mile dead straight and level flight and what happened the bomber aimer took over and he told us, the pilot, to go left, left, steady, steady, steady, right, steady, keep it good, and then we used to do five miles with the bomb doors open ready to drop the bombs. We were probably frightened in one respect although you never learned you never heard it in the voice never ever anybody who sounded frightened you just did the job and every body spoke very coolly as if you were just flying normally. Once you were over, the bombs were dropped, and once the bombs were gone, that was the bomb aimer saying "bombs gone", and then you would carry straight on level take photographs: Sometimes you would hear the navigator say: "11 seconds" and we would take photographs, and once the photographs were taken the bomb doors were closed and you dived away from the target. Generally you would dive over starboard side. When you did that you then would say to the pilot: "Go like hell".

You could not see anything, because it was all a red light, because there were flares, there was all sorts, lots of flak coming up, searchlights, the German night fighters were about and we were lucky we were lucky, as we were never picked up by them.

I will just go on with that one raid on Königsberg. Our aircraft was coned in searchlights, "coned" "as we call it, coned in searchlight: The only way was to get out as soon as you got caught by the searchlights, then you were the target. The pilot put the nose down, dived down, screwed down and the flak was bursting just behind us. We were telling the pilot that: it was flying it did not have our speed. We flew down there. We flew down there; these are the actual words I can still remember. The pilot spoke to the flight engineer as we went down. When all this was happening and we were going down and they were shooting, and there was all this flak behind us and we could see it at the back because we were looking at it as it exploded. And as we were going down the pilot said to the flight engineer: "Oh! Look at the air speed clock!" It had gone right up, we had gone way faster than the plane was supposed to go. We were excited then, we were not frightened, just exited.

We were just over the Baltic over the water by then, away from Königsberg. And the searchlights, the cones, were right down by then and they went out. They couldn't keep us, so we were safe, we were out of it, but then we climbed back up to go into bomb. As we went into bomb again you could see everything because of fighter flares, our flares, lights on the ground, and the incendiaries had set fire to things. As we climbed up to bomb height, and went in to bomb, as we started to go in to bomb on our starboard side, a Lancaster went past us we could see it plainly with a Messerschmidt 109 right on his tail, right behind him. In other words obviously he is catching flames. When we came out of it then coming back across the Baltic towards Denmark on our starboard side we could see the lights of Sweden, the bottom end of Sweden, you could see the lights of the towns. At that time we found that one engine was running rough and there was something going wrong with so we feathered, we call it "feathered". So we were then flying on three engines. We found also the pressures had gone, so we knew and had experience as we had tried it, that we found we could put the wheels down to land, but not the flaps to land. We had tried it the other way around, with the flaps down, but then the wheels would not come down. So we had difficulties there. The bomb aimer answered that one, he said: "Why don't we go down in Sweden? I have heard there is free love with the girls in Sweden". The pilot won't do that he had just meet a girl back home.



Tom Lockett. Warrant Officer. Air Gunner.

When we were over the North Sea, on the way back we called up base, which you can do on the way back, they wouldn't let us land at East Kirkby base. They sent us away to land at another airdrome in case we crashed and blocked the runway. We went to a place called Swinderby (or something like that), which we knew. We used to fly Stirling from there and we went there, it is a long runway. We did wheels down landing, no flaps and three engines running. That was the end of that one. I flew with a very good crew and we looked after each other.

That was our raid on Königsberg. And after that one I did another thirty-five. I still got butterflies in my stomach when we were told to go, I still got exited at different times but was never afraid, really been afraid.

Tom Lockett.

That's me...

"...I dreamt upon respective wartime experiences: We up there and you down here when for five years Denmark was an occupied territory, and it donned upon me that the sound of Bomber Command over head was a constant reminder for you, that freedom was just over the horizon. And so long as we returned again and again, that sound was a rear hope for your future...."

Squadron Leader Mervyn Davis. 5<sup>th</sup> May 2002.