

Long Flight Home – Part 1.

The Long Flight Home story starts in 1917, and is continuing to this day. You may read the article and think ‘Hollywood scripts’ and ‘fantasy’; you might possibly think about the power of coincidence. This is, however, a recounting of a remarkable, true, story.

The place to start is the beginning; maybe now is a good time to let you know that if you are seeking an article about cars, then stop reading. The eventual link to cars is quite tenuous occurring only at the end of the tale, so you might lose patience waiting for it to materialise.

The Long Flight Home centres on a real aircraft and a real person. Our boy was born in February 1917, just over 18 months before the ‘Great War’ touted as the “war to end all wars” was to stop. Our boy grew up fast – he had to – as first a brother, then a sister arrived in the family, followed by a gap to the third brother and the last child.

Our boy left school at 15 (that’s what they did in those days) and started work as a junior clerk at the National Coal Board offices in South London, the year was 1932. Our boys’ family needed the money – unemployment benefits didn’t exist in the 1930’s – and the world was still recovering from the US led ‘Great Depression’ of 1929. Times were hard.

By our boy’s 19th birthday, in 1936, things in a place called Europe had begun to get agitated; rumours of atrocities were spreading throughout Britain. Countries that were, in those days, the power houses of Europe (Austria, Poland and Hungary) were beginning to twitch and fret over an uncertain and aggressive Germany.

Our boy knew what he wanted to do and had spent his spare time studying hard to make sure his maths and physics were up to entry level standard.

By 1938 Europe was tense as Hitler annexed the Sudetenland and began looking further afield. Our boy had passed the entry exam for Cranfield, the training school for the Royal Air Force, and was working furiously to become a pilot.



Our boy was awarded his wings in late 1938, gaining an operational posting to 144 Squadron, RAF Bomber Command in Lincolnshire to fly twin engine Handley Page Hampden bombers.

The inevitable happened and, as the world knows, the Second World War erupted in September 1939.

By now you will have worked out that at the age of 22, when most of the current generation are leaving University or have been working for a while, our boy was about to go to war.

144 Sqn. had nothing to do for all of 3 weeks, as turmoil and confusion reigned across all of Britain’s armed forces.

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Our boy recalls that the Royal Air Force was singularly ill equipped to begin any kind of warfare against the German's and yet here they were going to war.

Despite the initial confusion the Government of the day was fighting a war, and to do that meant putting men and machinery into the 'front line' to stop the enemy advance. All sounds very simple, except the supply lines (nowadays called logistics) were nowhere near prepared to support a rapidly expanding armed forces.

The first sortie that 144 Sqn. flew was a simple maritime patrol on 26 September 1939.

For the next few months 144 Sqn dropped propaganda leaflets into Germany until the Invasion of Norway in April 1940, when leaflets were replaced with bombs, finally.

The Handley Page Hampden is not one of the best designed aircraft ever put together, the



fundamental flaw is that the Hampden is susceptible to side on (or beam) attack to which it has no defence. This was to prove the aircraft's undoing in many ways.

Early in 1942 the RAF restructured and 144 Sqn. found itself being transferred to RAF Coastal Command, where they commenced training for Torpedo dropping against enemy shipping. Our boy proved to be one of the

better pilots at flying only 30 feet above the waves, something which was to prove not very useful before the year was out.

1942 was a busy year for 144 Sqn initially moving to Leuchars, Scotland, in April 1942, before adding a detachment to Wick and Sumburgh during the summer of 1942.



144 Squadron 02 September 1942.

August 1942 saw preparation for the 'big move' as our boy put it, to transfer the squadron en masse to Afrikanda in northern Russia, along with RAAF 455 Squadron, also flying Hampdens. The transfer was scheduled for 4 – 6 September 1942.



P1344 and air crew 03-09-1942

Each aircraft was loaded with additional fuel, personal effects and, in our boys' case, carried the ground engineer on transfer. Fully laden – according to the ground engineer over loaded – Hampden P1344 climbed into the sky and headed North-North-East to Afrikanda and Vaenga. Estimated flying time was 9 hours. Each aircraft flew independently, no formation flying on this transfer.

7 hours later and the pilot was ordering all non-essential equipment to be jettisoned, in front of the aircraft was a range of mountains, the Swedish Tsatsa's, at this point our boy realised that the aircraft was too far north and needed to get over the mountains turn east and head for Murmansk.

Clearing the mountains and heading east the aircraft was again too far north, the crew spotting the Luftwaffe base at Petsamo as confirmation of being off course. Tired crew, low on fuel and with only forward and rearward facing guns, the Hampden was effectively a sitting target for the two ME 109's sent to shoot it down.

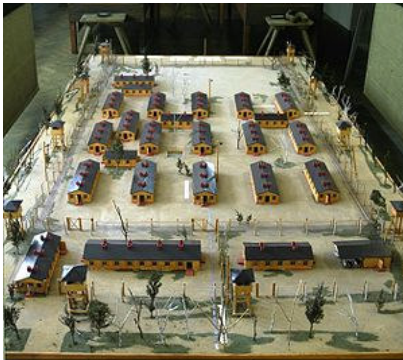
The pilot took a large shrapnel burst into his legs, as P1344's gunners punched holes in the side skin of the aircraft in a vain effort to fight off the ME 109's.

The pilot crash landed the stricken Hampden 40 miles south-east of Petsamo into a tundra wood area. The pilot had smashed legs and was pulled clear of the wreckage by the travelling ground engineer; the other three aircrew were dead.

Temperatures were falling as night descended, the ground engineer having the foresight to use the flight suits of the dead crew to keep him and the pilot alive.

Dawn broke with the locals coming to scavenge the wreck, and finding two live and armed British airmen, one injured and barely alive, they fled, abandoning the two airmen.

The Luftwaffe sent a party out to find the wreck and ascertain any information on why so many aircraft were flying to northern Finland capturing the two crewmen. The pilot was transferred to Petsamo and then to Germany where the Luftwaffe Surgeons – against the direct orders of the Gestapo – saved his legs.



Captured RAF personnel were confined to the StalagLuft POW camps, our boy finding himself in Camp # 3 for the rest of the war. Yes *that* StalagLuft 3. The gates were flung open in early 1945 and the Germans, on the point of defeat, simply pointed the prisoners to the west. If you could walk you went west, as part of what became called “The Long March” our boy spent 12 days walking and scavenging food, avoiding stray German and advancing Russian patrols, until found by British troops and repatriated to Britain.

After the war our boy stayed in the RAF until 1966 whereupon he retired to a less eventful life initially as a shopkeeper. In 1972 he moved his family to Kent, taking up a position with the Royal Armament Research and Defence Establishment near Sevenoaks, where he stayed until his retirement in 1982.

Years later, in 1987, our boy went on a cruise of the Swedish Fjords and crossed into the Arctic Circle. Crossing the Circle – like crossing the Equator and the Antarctic Circle – prompted some bizarre rituals amongst service personnel in this case pouring a bucket of, freezing, sea water over their heads. Our boy looked on in astonishment as another old man on the cruise did the same. The two old men looked at each other in surprise and shock that each would know the ritual, considering that one was British and the other German.

For the next two days these two, one a retired Luftwaffe pilot the other a retired RAF pilot, slowly discovered that one had shot the other down in Finland in 1942.

Some freak of coincidence had introduced these two old men long after their first encounter in that fateful September. Both men kept in touch with each other for the next few months until our boy died of heart failure in 1988.

Our boy, faithfully recorded the lat/long (E32^o N70^o) of that September day in 1942 every year in his diary, the final diary entry exists to this day.

The Hampden, P1344, remained covered in permafrost and snow south-east of Petsamo, Finland for the next 45 years.

The Long Flight Home, pt 2 picks up the story of P1344.