



RAF F/O Ron Fairburn

Ron was born in Leeds in 1923. His father was a maintenance engineer at Leeds Steelworks and Ron's first job when he left school at fourteen was in a gentleman's outfitters. Ron then worked at Fairbairn Lawson Comb Barbour Ltd as an office boy in the buying dept, moving to the Accounts Dept on the outbreak of war. In the winter of 1941 Ron applied to join the RAF as he was keen to fly and had been interested by the development of the airships pre-war. He was sent to Cardington for assessment:



Ron aged six

We had rigorous medical tests and exams and then I was put on deferred service because they couldn't cope with the numbers of people. I had been accepted as a Wireless Operator / Air Gunner, then when the Lancasters came on the scene they sent a circular round to aircrew other than pilots, asking them if they wanted to re-muster as this new position of Flight Engineer, so I sent it back straightaway and said "yes".

After a week at the reception centre in Padgate, Ron went into civilian billets in Blackpool during his initial training and then passed a Flight Mechanics' course:

You had to know something about the aircraft. I mean, there is very little you could do once airborne except perhaps put out a fire, but if you are driving a car and you hear a 'clunk, clunk', you would know there is something wrong, you have an idea what it is.

The course comprised two parts, and lasted around six months. Subsequently Ron went on a very detailed engineering course, learning about all the engines used by the airforce, from the Gypsy Moth engine to the Merlin. At St Athans in South Wales, Ron learned about the airframes of the Stirling, Halifax and Lancaster aircraft as well as attending a gunnery course at Pembrey, since as Ron maintains, the Flight Engineer had to be:



Ron on the right, at initial training in Blackpool

a Jack of all trades, except navigation, I had to be a gunner and to operate the radio. I had learned morse code as a civilian under RAF tutelage, in Leeds. Flying the plane came later, under the supervision of the pilot. He used to get out of his seat and put me in, and he would tell me what to do, because I was supposed to be an emergency pilot if the Skipper got hit or something like that. The Flight Engineer would assist the Pilot on take off and landing, as well as observing the fuel supplies and oil temperatures and pressures. It meant knowing where the fire extinguishers were and the inside of the airframe generally in case there was something you could do, which was very rarely possible, because if you were hit you



were hit, and that was it, you blew up and went into the ground in a ball of fire. Before an operation there would be a pre-flight inspection and the Pilot and I used to walk round the aircraft. First of all we would start at the nose and check that the Pitot head cover was removed, and then we would inspect the port wing underneath to make sure all the studs were in place, otherwise in flight you could have the whole thing whip off the front and disaster followed. Then you would inspect the engine covers, make sure they were fixed. We would go right down to the tail and make sure the rudders were free, because they used to be wedged closed in case of heavy winds, and that the elevators were free, and then down the starboard side doing the same thing. During the day any Flight Engineer worth his salt would go out to the dispersals and talk to the Flight Sergeant in charge of the maintenance crew and maybe do one or two little jobs for him. In that way, of course, they got to know you and you to know them. Then the Pilot would sign the Form 700 to say it was OK and there is one important point that I think not many people would be aware of, and that is, *anybody* in the RAF can put an aircraft out of service, U/S (unserviceable) if they see something is wrong.

Ron was then sent to Moreton Hall, Training Command, to find a crew. The rest of his crew had been at Lichfield, training on Wellingtons and they came to Moreton Hall to find a Flight Engineer:

I am a procrastinator and I didn't bother searching out anybody in particular. I was reading a book in a chair and I looked up and there was Bruce Webb, the Bomb Aimer. He said "Are you looking for a crew? Would you like to join ours?" He told me who the skipper was and I said "Yes, I don't mind" and he took me off to meet the crew. The Pilot, Bomb Aimer, Navigator, and Rear Gunner were Australians. They had no heavy bombers in Australia, so had no need for Flight Engineers. We then went to Swinderby for Heavy Conversion Unit training. For a couple of weeks we were flying Manchesters and then we went on to Lancasters. At the end of September 1943 we were posted to Bottesford, to 467 Royal Australian Air Force Squadron. Our Pilot, OC of C Flight, was Squadron Leader Rollo Kingsford-Smith.

In November Ron moved from Bottesford to Waddington and he and the crew formed 463 Squadron. Sqn Ldr Kingsford-Smith was promoted to the rank of Wing Cdr and he was CO of 463 Sqn:

The Battle of Berlin commenced in November 1943, the month the squadron hived off one of its flights of ten aircraft and crews to form the nucleus of its sister squadron No 463 Lancaster squadron, which



The crew October 1943, at 467 Sqn, Bottesford: Navigator N H Kobelke, Wireless Operator M J McLeod, Bomb Aimer B Webb, Pilot R Kingsford-Smith, Flight Engineer R Fairburn, Rear Gunner D Proctor, Mid Upper Gunner J E Raw Rees.



immediately went into action, the two squadrons operating side by side from a new base, Waddington near the city of Lincoln.

The Battle of Berlin was a nightmare for the crews and almost a disaster for the Bomber forces. The strengthened German defences meant the bombers had to battle against the enemy fighter force all the way on the long haul to what Winston Churchill called the "evil heart of the Nazi empire" and which Hitler had promised would never be attacked. The long return flight was only made possible by the darkness of the long winter nights and that winter was one of the worst on record.

Taking off overloaded with full bomb load from Waddington in snow storms, finding freak winds and temperatures of minus 45 degrees C at cruising altitude, the tired crews were extended to and beyond the limits of their capabilities.

Prior to June 1944 in its fourth and most important battle, the squadron switched to a tactical role before D Day, the day when the joint Allied land and air forces invaded the strongly defended coast of occupied France. No 467 turned its attention to German military camps, ammunition dumps and railway junctions, all in France, all important to the enemy once the invasion was launched. On the day of the invasion it attacked and destroyed German coastal guns and later it battered a concentration of enemy tanks. On following days it continued attacking the enemy land forces until the Allied troops had built up their strength on enemy soil.

Although the enemy defences in Germany cost the squadron the most lives, the attacks on the military targets in France were not without losses, when captains of aircraft took extra risks to avoid unnecessary harm to French lives or property. They flew very low over sometimes heavy anti-aircraft fire and took their time to ensure they had the right target in the bomb sights. One instance was the attack on railway yards in Lille shortly before the invasion when 467 and 463 squadrons suffered their heaviest joint losses. The target in the city was difficult to identify and to ensure it was correctly marked by the Pathfinder aircraft, the bombing force held back for ten minutes giving the German fighters and anti-aircraft gunners the opportunity to shoot down six Lancasters killing forty men.



Ron throwing snowballs,
Waddington Winter 1943/44

(W/Cdr Rollo Kingsford-Smith DSO, AM, DFC from 'Wings' the RAAF Association Magazine, summer 2002).

Ron's logbook describes one raid to Berlin as a 'shaky do' and another, in November 1943, as a fireworks display. In May 1944 Ron's aircraft had a fire in the starboard outer engine, caused by flak during the attack on the marshalling yards at Lille. For the D-Day landings in June Ron's crew took part in an attack on a battery of artillery at dawn near Cherbourg,



followed by a moonlight attack the following month on a road and rail junction at Argentan. On 14th July Ron's crew was accompanied by two Film Unit members on an operation against a Panzer concentration at Aunay-sur-Odon close to the Allied line. Preparations prior to an operation included different briefings for each crew member:

It was very theatrical really, because at the end of the briefing room the map of Europe was covered by a sheet. The Squadron Commander would march in along with the Group Captain and dramatically move the covering sheet from the map and there would be a gasp of "Bloody hell, not Berlin again" and then you would be given a pep talk and some information from Intelligence. We would then go for eggs and bacon, and if you got back alright you would have another round of eggs and bacon and toast and marmalade. We also had flying rations; at one time they were quite generous but then it just developed into boiled sweets and chocolate. I would get kitted up in Long Johns, a white sweater, which was like a fisherman's jersey, my normal battledress and then silk gloves, a pair of woolly gloves and a pair of gauntlets. I used to take the gauntlets off when I had to write the fuel log up. The Bomb Aimer and Gunners had fully-heated suits because it was very cold but the Navigator and Wireless Operator used to complain bitterly about being too hot. Quite often the Wireless Operator would turn the heat off and we would curse him and say "Put the bloody heat back on". It was very, very cold.



Ron, Dai and Bruce, 1944 Waddington

The duties of a Flight Engineer were varied and entailed working closely with the Pilot:

On take-off you would roll on to the end of the runway and put the brakes on and the Skipper would run up the engines against the brakes after the green light from the control caravan. As we got up speed he had to concentrate on the aircraft so I would take the throttles up to the take-off position and turn the knob to fix them. When we got to a suitable height the Skipper would say "Wheels up" and I would operate the wheels-up lever and then he would say "Take the flaps off" and I would take the flaps off very gently, because if you took them off suddenly the aircraft would do a dive; it was like hitting an air pocket. Then I would set the climbing boost and revolutions, and when we got to operational height I would set the cruising throttle position and the RPM levers. I would be stood eight or nine hours, depending on the length of the journey. You couldn't do your job sitting down because you would be up and down all the time checking your fuel supplies and checking the oil temperatures and pressures and you couldn't do your job spotting for enemy aircraft sitting down. It was everybody's job to look round the aircraft for enemy aircraft, and I used to look at the starboard bow side. The Pilot would, as far as he could, look after the port side. The Bomb Aimer would look underneath, the two Gunners would do their stuff, and the Wireless Operator would stand with his head in the astrodome. At all times you had to cruise at optimum control setting, because you never knew what you might meet on



the way back. You had to conserve your fuel supplies, because if you got hit and lost the fuel out of one or two tanks, you had to make do and mend with what you had left. Being a CO and crew, we didn't have an aircraft of our own, we took the aircraft of whoever was standing down, so you will see in my logbook R's, S's, P's and O's and so on; you just took whatever was going.

The operations against Berlin and Nuremburg remain vivid in Ron's memory:

All the Berlin ones were the same, because over the target it was particularly heavy stuff, but the raid that sticks out in my mind was the Nuremburg raid because all the way into the target you were seeing aircraft going down in flames. We lost 96 that night and it was appalling watching the aircraft go down.

When the crew was not required that night for an operation there were local distractions!

We would go down to The Horse and Jockey in Waddington. I remember the landlord had a lovely daughter called Penny and she was the object of every single RAF lad who went into the pub, but he guarded her very well.

Ron enjoyed operating with an Australian crew:

Everybody was relaxed. There was no bull as far as the Aussies were concerned, and if they had a complaint and they couldn't get it sorted out, they would ring up The Australian High Commission in London and get it sorted. They were a grand lot, yes, and I enjoyed being with them.

When the tour was finished, Ron and his Pilot, Wing Commander Rollo Kingsford-Smith, transferred to the Heavy Conversion Unit at Wigsley. Rollo went as Chief Instructor, and Ron as Staff Flight Engineer. Ron went on a conversion course on Stirlings, an aircraft which he liked and his role then was to supervise the newly-recruited Flight Engineers. The Pilots too, were new to the heavy bomber. In April 1945 Ron was posted to 75 (NZ) Squadron for a second tour but did not do any operations, as the war ended, and he applied for transfer to Transport Command, joining 102 Ceylon Squadron in October. He went on another conversion course for the Wasp engine and found the Liberator:

very luxurious, the seats were well upholstered. You got your own ashtray in the arm of the seat. The strange thing about the Liberator was that it had its own power supply



Briefing April 1944 before Ops on Juvisy, France. At bottom, clockwise from left - Kingsford-Smith, Webb, McLeod, Proctor, Fairburn, Rees, Kobelke, Hodge (Sqn Adjutant).



Ron far left at the wedding of Bruce Webb to Barbara, 30 March 1945



The Second World War Experience Centre
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<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/air/alliedbrit/fairburn/default.asp>

for topping up the batteries, you got a two-stroke engine, which after you had landed, you would pull a toggle and it would start, and it would generate power and the same thing after take-off. Once airborne you would shut it down.

The crew began trips to India, carrying passengers and mail. During one trip Ron was taken ill:

The Skipper had to radio Castel Benito to have an ambulance ready, and I spent a fortnight in hospital there with enteritis. It was not very pleasant. Strangely, you could have anything you wanted to drink, but nothing to eat. They brought me Guinness, bottles of beer, orange juice and all that sort of thing.

When the war ended, Ron wanted to stay in the RAF and applied for a Short Service Commission but was unsuccessful. In January 1947 he was demobbed and returned to Fairbairn Lawson Ltd until 1959 as assistant to the Director's secretary. The Company had been generous to Ron during his years on active service - his mother had been sent £1 per week, quite a lot of money in the 1940s.

Ron's papers include a copy of Sir Arthur Harris' tribute to the air-crew under his command during the war, taken from his memoir 'Bomber Offensive' and which is worthy of repeat:

There are no words with which I can do justice to the air-crew who fought under my command. There is no parallel in warfare to such courage and determination in the face of danger over so prolonged a period, of danger which at times was so great that scarcely one man in three could expect to survive his tour of thirty operations; this is what a casualty rate of five per cent on each of these thirty operations would have meant, and during the whole of 1942 the casualty rate was 4.1 per cent. Of those who survived their first tour of operations, between six and seven thousand undertook a second, and many a third, tour. It was, moreover, a clear and highly conscious courage, by which the risk was taken with calm forethought, for their air-crew were all highly skilled men, much above the average in education, who had to understand every aspect and detail of their task. It was, furthermore, the courage of the small hours, of men virtually alone, for at his battle station the airman is virtually alone. It was the courage of men with long-drawn apprehensions of daily "going over the top". They were without exception volunteers, for no man was trained for air-crew with the RAF who did not volunteer for this. Such devotion must never be forgotten. It is unforgettable by anyone whose contacts gave them knowledge and understanding of what these young men experienced and faced.

Ron also feels strongly that the ground crew, on whom so much depended, deserve the highest tribute, since they worked in all weathers, with extraordinary dedication.



W/C Rollo Kingsford-Smith DSO, AM, DFC and F/O Ron Fairburn at their reunion at Waddington November 2003.