



RAF Warrant Officer Ernie Reynolds

Ernie Reynolds was born in 1925. He left school at 14 to start work at Furnace Shipyard, Haverton Hill in Middlesbrough.

From 1939, Ernie followed the progress of the war with interest. The Battle of Britain inspired him to join the Air Training Corps, and as soon as he was old enough, the RAF.

Ernie's initial training was a three-day exam in Doncaster. He completed a medical examination and written exams. He particularly remembers the Morse code exam.

You had to sit with a tape on for a full hour, and two lots of Morse code came over your earphones and you had to put a tick if they were the same, identical, or a cross if one got shorter or was different - that was for a full hour. Obviously the ATC training helped on that ... when I went into the interview, naturally they asked me what I wanted to be and I said I want to be a fighter pilot and they just laughed. The indication was such that there was no way that I was ever going to be one but they said the pass mark I had was such a good one that I could go as a wireless operator / air gunner.



Ernie Reynolds

Ernie was aware that the training for a wireless operator / air gunner would take 18 months and requested a place to train simply as an air gunner, a shorter training course of 5 ½ months.

The course was designed to coincide with his nineteenth birthday, as aircrew had to be nineteen before they could take part in operations. The next part of his training began with three weeks at Lords Cricket Ground. He was billeted in a flat in St Johns Wood, London, had his inoculations and was issued with his uniform (with a white flash on his caps). Ernie particularly remembers learning foot drill in the streets.

The white flash meant that when we got time off, we could walk into any pub in London and we never bought a single pint of beer! The people in there, that had gone through the Blitz, when they saw there were aircrew in there said, "Give them a pint," and nobody would let us buy beer. We used to stand about drunk.

The next stage in his air gunner training began at the 14 ITW (Initial Training Wing) in Bridlington on 27 December. The boarding house where Ernie stayed was very cold, coal was delivered once a month and when he arrived, the month's supply had all been used. Here the trainees spent their time marching on the beach and learning Morse code and aircraft recognition.

From ITW, Ernie went to EAGS (Elementary Air Gunner School) in Bridgenorth.



In the main we were taught turret work ... we learned how the turret lifted the guns up and down again, how to harmonise the guns - you've got four guns and so what you want to do is put the most bullets in the centre, so when you're looking down the sight you can see the dot in the middle, and you want to put your bullets there. So your four guns, to give out a cone of fire, the bullets don't follow one another, they come out as a cone, so you put the four of them so they overlap, and that's called harmonising the guns.



10 AGS Air Gunners School. Ernie bottom row, left.

They also learned about the 'bullet drop', calculating the curve of fire and learning how to aim at targets considering this curve, how to build and strip down the .303 guns, eventually assembling them blindfolded, and finding faults on these guns.

At 10 AGS Walney Island (Air Gunner School), Barrow in Furness, Ernie started to fly. The turrets were fitted with cine cameras, which recorded the accuracy of fired shots and showed whether the gunner was aiming above or below the target. Three trainee air gunners would take turns to fire 200 to 300 rounds of ammunition; the bullets of each were painted a different colour for identification afterwards. The targets were drogues towed by planes with mostly Polish pilots, who could not be shot down over Germany and be taken Prisoner of War whilst completing these duties.

Although it was essential to learn how to hit a moving target whilst actually moving, there were sessions in turrets mounted on the ground and powered by car engines from which the trainees fired live bullets at moving targets. On completing this training, Ernie got his wings and passed out as a Sergeant, with a Sergeant's pay (8 shillings a day).

He was then sent to the Operational Training Unit (OTU) in Bedfordshire, sat another exam - had he failed this he would have had to return to AGS. Usually, newly qualified aircrew would group together themselves - a Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer, Wireless Operator and an Air Gunner but Ernie was allocated to a crew who's Air Gunner had failed the exam.

The crew began working and training together, all perfecting activities vital to their individual roles. The Australian pilot spent hours and hours taking off and landing, cross country flights helped the navigator and the wireless operator was tested with various messages. Ernie concentrated on using his knowledge of aircraft recognition to estimate exactly where to fire his guns, considering the target's wingspan.



Ernie Reynolds, Rear Gunner
and Gerry Digby Mid-Upper
Gunner.



Jack Lee - Navigator, Jim
Coughlan - Pilot, Pat Heal -
Bomb Aimer.

You would look through your sight and if it had a thirty-foot wingspan, it would be 300 yards away and you'd aim thirty yards in front. The first thing you did when you saw a German fighter was to fire some rounds at it, we called it the 'scare burst', some of the German fighters would bugger off - some of them wouldn't but most of them would go on, looking for a gunner who was asleep. As you came in to attack, you had to tell the pilot when to dive port and he'd dive that way 1000 feet, then he'd roll over and dive starboard 1000 feet. Then he'd change and come up starboard for 1000 feet and port 1000 feet, so eventually what he was doing in the air was a diamond, which meant he hadn't steered off the route. The idea was that the Germans would have their guns fixed on the wing and by the time they'd had chance to line you up again, you were over on the port side and it took them about another 1000 feet to get you lined up again. After a bit the German fighters would give up and shove off somewhere else. We called this corkscrewing.

The crew was still training on 2 August 1944 when they were sent to France as a decoy. The Germans, on seeing them would expect an air raid and send their fighter planes to attack, and to search the skies for other bombers. Ernie's crew then turned back and the 'real' bombing party would then take off, timing their raid for when the German fighters would be grounded for refueling.

The Wellington ran into problems on its return. They flew over the Channel, over Cornwall and then over the Bristol Channel when one of the engines began spluttering.

I still remember the Australian pilot shouting, "Bail out, bail out," and I looked out at the sea down below and I said there was no way I was going to bail out there, and the others looked down and there was no way they were going to bail out either. You could imagine your head sticking out of the sea! (They decided to find somewhere suitable to attempt a landing.) I still remember the pilot because he said "Mayday, Mayday, for Christ's sake Mayday!" and then he said, "well, I'm going to go for this". Then the Wireless Operator realised he had his trailing aerial out, a long wire which gave you a better reception, and if you landed with that out you could be on a charge, it could take someone's head off or something, but he still wanted to be on the wireless in case something happened or somebody called, so I got out of the turret and I started winding this bloody trailing aerial in and then we came down in this airfield



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The Wellington overshot the runway and came to a stop in a wooded area. The crew was shaken and, apart from the pilot banging his head, unharmed. They were, however, slightly bewildered when asked to help push a broken down fire engine, that had been sent to their aid!

After lunch, they headed back to their airfield. They travelled by train wearing fire kits, with no caps or ties, and carrying parachutes; no one questioned this at all. It seemed that the Wellington had been fuelled with dirty petrol that choked the carburettors on both of the engines. The pilot's head injury was serious enough to stop him flying and the crash had severely damaged one of the airfield's two gyrocompasses.

The crew was allocated a very experienced pilot and moved on to a Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU) near Nottingham to practise flying multi-engine bombers, particularly Lancasters. This involved more taking off and landing exercises for the pilot, who also flew as a passenger on experienced crews' ops, and cross country flights allowing the navigator to become familiar with the radar equipment. A flight engineer now joined the crew, an ex-policeman from North Shields.

On 6 November 1944, Ernie joined 195 Squadron at Wrating Common, in Cambridgeshire. Ernie felt secure with his crew, all married with children, who tended to behave more responsibly than some of their younger colleagues, and the crew forged a strong friendship. Their first real operation was on the night of 23 / 24 December 1944, bombing an airfield at Bonn (while the German crews would be starting their Christmas celebrations.)

I thought that the hardest part of flying was the first five trips you did. The next hardest part was the last five trips you did. The first five were hard because everything was new and you'd see something and wonder, 'what the hell's that?' but the last five, you'd think 'are we going to make it, are we going to make it?' you'd seen that many shot down, In between, the twenty were okay, you thought 'where the hell are we going here?' Now when you were going on a trip you had a good idea where you were heading because you looked at your bomb load; if it was a full bomb load fifteen 500s and a 4000 it was the Ruhr. If it was a smaller bomb load with more petrol you were going further. So you had a rough idea of where you were going, Berlin, Dessau or somewhere like that. The usual run in our Squadron was you got an hours longer petrol than you needed. If you weren't back in that hour, your petrol had run out and you were reported missing, believed killed or whatever, because they knew you had no more petrol ...



Back: Bill Marot - Flight Engineer, Jim Coughlan - Pilot, Jack Lee - Navigator.
Front: Ernie Reynolds - Rear Gunner, Gerry



The same crew with, far right, Dick Perkins - Wireless Operator.



Digby - Mid-Upper Gunner.

As a rear gunner, Ernie often felt isolated. He couldn't see anything that was happening at the front of the aircraft and so was oblivious to any danger ahead. His biggest fear was the turret coming away from the main body of the plane so he would occasionally blow into his microphone, checking it was still working, and thus still attached to the rest of the aircraft. Contact during ops between the rear gunner and the other crew was discouraged unless absolutely necessary. He also felt very vulnerable and exposed.

You'd seen them swilling out of a turret all the bits of meat and bones coming out because they'd automatically attacked the rear if they tried to attack head on they'd be passing each other in seconds... the Wireless Operator, if he didn't take three photographs of the target that you'd bombed it wouldn't be counted as an operation. That was to stop anybody flying to the North Sea, circling round for five or six hours chucking the bombs away and coming back, and to make sure that you got the photographs there was this photo flash that you used to slide out.

It was very cold in the rear turret.

Every so often I'd snap off the icicle that was hanging off my oxygen mask and chuck it out. I had electric suits. One time, the hardest op I ever did, suddenly my foot started burning and the electric suit had short circuited on my foot so I turned the heating off straight away and after a bit I was shivering so I turned the heating back on and my foot burned again... I had a bloody great burn on my foot when I got back. Those at the top end of the Lanc, they had heating from the engine.

I remember on a daylight trip I saw these four Lancasters in a diamond formation and I thought there's twenty-eight men flying aeroplanes, Wireless Operators doing this that and the other and in a split second, nothing. They'd all gone, one of them had their bomb load hit and their bomb load had hit the other three.

When we were flying to Berlin, the Berlin defences were the best in the whole world, they had about seventeen miles of searchlights, and as we approached we got picked up by the searchlights. I don't know whether the Wireless Operator shot off colours in the day, but in that split second I've never felt so happy, euphoric. No worries, no problems in my life. It was maybe only a second, or two seconds but that euphoria - everything was wonderful - the next second I was scared and frightened ... when we came out the other end, I heard the Navigator saying, "look over on the port side," he said, "that's Dresden." And when I looked over I could see the fires and all the bombs that were falling down. That was the night that Dresden



Photograph taken over Germany on a daylight raid.



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was attacked, the big raid. I think the Americans bombed it in daylight and we bombed at night time.

Ernie and his crew also practised 'low level sandbag dropping' whilst flying at 50 feet over playing fields marked with targets. This was in preparation for 'Operation Manna' dropping sacks of dried eggs, dried potatoes and dried milk over flooded areas of Holland where the isolated inhabitants were starving. The Germans agreed this aid, but the aircraft involved were to fly with their guns unloaded. Ernie never went on one of these sorties; inexperienced, newly qualified crews were given these duties.

Ernie was not de-mobbed until 1947. He joined the fire service in Middlesbrough in 1948 and had a long and varied career, spending some years representing the fire service abroad. He retired in 1978.