

The Estaminet Times

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Massed formation of Lancaster bombers : pleszak.blog

The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

Editor's Notes

Welcome to the Summer 2026 edition of *The Estaminet Times*.

One of the pleasures of editing this magazine is discovering how the great events of history are often best understood through the experiences of individuals. This magazine ranges widely but, in this issue, we encounter ordinary people whose lives became caught up in extraordinary circumstances.

John Birtwhistle tells the remarkable story of his father, Robert, whose business journeys to Germany during the 1930s brought him face to face with the growing power and brutality of the Nazi regime. What began as commercial travel gradually acquired another, more secret purpose, as his observations of German industry were passed to the British authorities.

Peter Liddle's interview with William Reid VC provides an equally personal perspective on the Second World War. Reid's calm recollection of flying a badly damaged Lancaster, while wounded and with members of his crew injured or killed, gives us a compelling insight into the courage, concentration and sense of duty demanded of Bomber Command aircrew.

Rob Hamilton takes us back ninety years to July 1936 and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War—a conflict which divided a nation, drew in the major European powers and foreshadowed the much wider war that followed.

Alan Rhodes contributes the extraordinary story of Private Harold Haw. His journey from the theft of two marked eggs in a Calverley hen-house to distinguished service on the Western Front reminds us that history rarely follows a predictable course.

Editor's Notes (continued)

The Quintinshill railway disaster of May 1915 underlines one aspect of war touched on before - not all casualties are caused by direct combat. The tragedy claimed more than 220 lives—most of them soldiers of the Royal Scots travelling south for service. It remains one of the most tragic episodes of the First World War Home Front.

My thanks, as always, go to all our contributors and to Alan Rhodes for his very thorough job of proof reading.

I hope you enjoy this varied collection of personal stories and military history.

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A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

An account of my Father's business trips
to Germany from 1932-38.

John M Birtwhistle

The Beginning

My father, Robert William Birtwhistle, was born in Halifax West Yorkshire UK on January 8th 1900, the second son of William and Martha Jane Birtwhistle. After leaving school at age 15, Robert began an engineering apprenticeship in Halifax and on completion he joined the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in 1918 and was posted to Ireland. Within a year he was promoted to Lance Corporal and given the responsibility of overseeing the physical fitness of the enlisted men. In May 1924 he married his sweetheart, Lily Noble, and they were to be together for 46 years. Earlier that year he was taken on by a large local textile manufacturing company, John Holdsworth & Co Ltd based at Shaw Lodge Mills in Halifax. Each morning, he walked 3 miles from his home in Greetland to the factory where his first job was sweeping the weaving shed floor and making sure any reusable waste was recovered.

His engineering background stood him in good stead and after a few months he was transferred to the mechanics department in charge of a group whose job it was to maintain the jacquard weaving looms. He soon learnt the weaving processes and it was around 1927 when he came to the attention of the Chairman of the company, Arthur Holdsworth-Groom.



Shaw Lodge Mills, Halifax

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

A vacancy had arisen in the contract sales department and recognising his potential and enthusiasm the Chairman offered my father the position of assistant salesman on an annual contract with a salary of £200 per annum – quite a fortune in those days.

At the age of just 27, he changed out of workman's overalls and into a smart suit, bought a new house and drove a company car (a Hadfield Bean). Life was very much on the up. His initial sales duties involved dealings with bus and train companies in Britain and Ireland. With many new contracts secured and the mill working at full capacity, my father was promoted to assistant sales manager in 1932 with a new contract, and a salary increase which included a percentage of the company profits. A remarkable personal advancement in just eight years.

His new duties now involved overseas travel to France, Belgium and Germany, and it is in Germany that this story really begins.



Robert and Lily Birtwhistle passport photographs

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

My father's employers promoted him to Sales Manager and gave him a brief to source and purchase specialised textile machinery and at the same time locate customers for the company's textile products. These highly intensive trips rarely lasted more than a week and involved multiple destinations including Berlin, Cologne, Dresden & Leipzig.

From 1932 to 1938 my father made 8 trips to Germany. My mother accompanied him in March 1936 on a visit which included sightseeing at "Sanssouci" - the summer palace of Frederick the Great in Potsdam. They joined a group which included some American tourists who had crossed the Atlantic on a German Zeppelin airship.



Outside the summer palace of Frederick the Great in Potsdam. Robert and Lily are at the back on (their) right, 1936.

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany



Robert and Lily by the
summer palace



Lily poses by herself
outside the royal
palace

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

Successful contacts were established in both areas, especially at the large textile fair held annually in Leipzig. Technologically advanced looms were purchased and served my father's company well over many years.

During those years, the Nazi party, under the charismatic leadership of Adolf Hitler, came to power and their totalitarian regime - the Third Reich - dominated the lives of all German citizens.

My father witnessed several examples of Nazi brutality. He saw Jews being attacked in the street by members of the Hitler Youth, business premises daubed with "Juden raus" (Jews out) slogans, piles of books burning in streets. He was in Berlin in 1933 when the Reichstag parliament building burned down, and on Kristallnacht in 1938 when Jewish premises were attacked.

He was acutely aware of the fear and uncertainty which permeated daily life in those troubled times. He was able to observe at first hand the fanatical devotion with which many citizens felt towards the Fuhrer whom they regarded as having rescued the country from the long years of economic catastrophe. For them he could do no wrong and they turned a blind eye to the brutal repression of minority groups that was taking place all around them.



Hitler Youth on the march

This was the Germany that my father first ventured into in 1932, and where for the next 6 years he studiously conducted his business affairs with, ultimately, a sideline activity about which, until his death in 1982, I had been completely unaware.

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

The following are actual events as told to me by my father.

An encounter with the SS.

Leipzig August 1936.

This account was written by my father on the back of a postcard featuring Augustusplatz.

On Sunday noon during my visit to Leipzig (alone) I was walking across this square when a Nazi band playing in front of the theatre struck up with the Nazi national anthem. Everybody except me sprang to salute. I was instantly surrounded by six SS men brandishing truncheons. I took off my bowler hat, placed it across my chest as at a funeral, and called out "English" - and thus avoided a clubbing.

Meeting a Hitler Youth.

Leipzig August 1934.

In January 1934 the Hitler Youth movement numbered 50 thousand. By December there were over 2.5 million members. The following incident made my father acutely aware of the disturbing changes that were taking place within families across Germany.

I attended a Trade Fair in Leipzig in March 1934 and through business contacts I was invited to stay at the house of a professor who was a director of a local textile machinery manufacturer with whom I hoped to do business.

On arrival in the early evening my host and I were conversing in his study prior to dining. Suddenly I heard a door slam loudly followed by the sound of boots on the wooden floor of the hallway. The door to the study was flung open to reveal the professor's teenaged son dressed in the uniform of the Hitler Youth. Without any greeting the boy demanded "Father, who is this man?"

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

The professor introduced me. The boy made notes as he spoke. "And what is the purpose of his visit?" Again, the professor explained that I was a businessman from England seeking to purchase textile machinery.

"I have noted this", said the boy. He gave a raised arm salute, clicked his heels, and left the room. As the sound of his boots echoed down the hallway, the professor turned to me with tears in his eyes. "I am most dreadfully sorry", he said, "You will understand that I have lost my son".

An uncomfortable overnight train journey.

During the 1930's the German public generally had friendly feelings towards the British. However, one night he experienced the result of a deliberate policy devised by the Third Reich to stir up anti- British feelings.

In August 1936 I travelled from Cologne to Berlin on the overnight sleeper express. Because I had made the booking at the last minute, I was not able to reserve a sleeping berth or a seat. As the train pulled out of the station at 11.30, I made my way down the corridor, suitcase in hand, looking for a vacant seat. But the train was packed with Germans travelling to Berlin for the Olympic Games which had just begun.

Presently two uniformed guards approached me and asked for my papers. "Englander - komme mit mir!" I followed and was horrified as the guards flung open a compartment door and ordered the six occupants out with shouts of "aus, aus, schnell!" As the bewildered occupants trooped into the corridor one of them asked the guard "weiso - why?".

The guard replied in broken English "the Englander has no seat". I protested, but to no avail. I was ordered into the by now empty compartment and spent a sleepless and acutely embarrassed night until the arrival into Berlin at 6 the following morning.

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

Postscript to this story:

After my father's death aged 82 in September 1982, I decided to take a sentimental journey in his footsteps by travelling on the overnight sleeper train from Cologne to Berlin. It was the exact train journey that my father had taken 44 years earlier. I had reserved a berth and as the train departed at 11.30, I settled down along with 3 German fellow travellers - two of whom snored loudly. Unlike my father's experience, no-one was ordered to leave!

We were woken at 4-o'clock by guttural shouting: "*Aufstehen, schnell, schnell, reisepasses*" - get up, quickly, passports. At the time Germany was still a divided country and we were about to cross the border into the East. The armed guards were cool and efficient, but it was a shock to be woken in such an abrupt manner.

My father was a spy!

During the course of his later life my father never ever revealed to his family or his employers the fact that he was passing information gleaned on four visits between 1936 and 1938 (the year before war was declared) to the Ministry of Defence in London.

It was only quite by chance when ploughing through his effects after his death in 1982 that I came across a tightly rolled bundle of decayed papers at the bottom of a tin box. I carefully opened up these faded closely typed sheets.

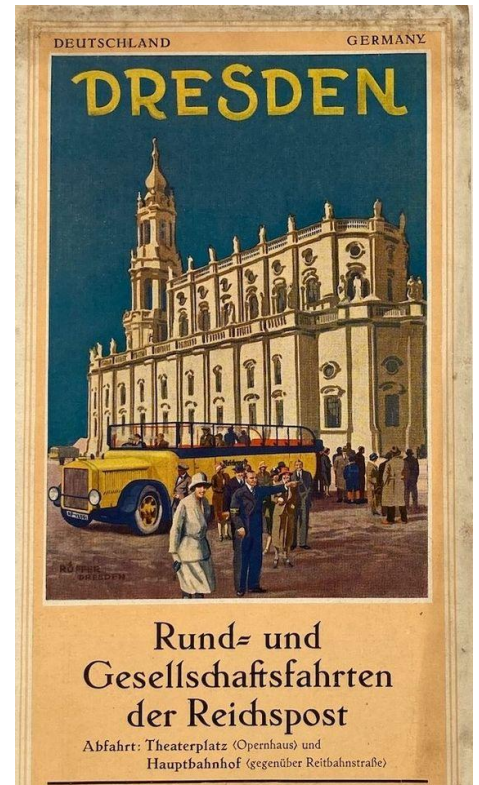
Now, years later, I can still recall the spine-tingling sensation as I gradually realised that as well as buying textile machinery and selling moquette fabrics there was a third string to my father's bow. He was actually a spy!

A British Businessman in Nazi Germany

Whilst visiting the factories of *Gusken & Tonner* in *Dulken*, *Zangs & Beim* in *Krefeld*, *Schonerr & Vogels* in *Chemnitz*, and *Wurker* in *Dresden*, he became aware of the reduced floor areas devoted to textile machinery manufacture from one visit to the next.

He could see where new walls had been erected to disguise areas to which his hosts politely but firmly refused access. He could hear the noise of much activity and machinery behind those walls, and it became apparent to him that these areas had been set aside for the manufacture of armaments. There was no other explanation. Germany was preparing for war.

Quietly and unobtrusively my father made notes. Had his detailed observations been discovered by the Nazi's at the time, retribution would have been swift.



1930s Dresden poster

As it was, he returned safely to London following his final visit to Berlin in 1938 with no-one except for his contact at the Ministry of Defence any the wiser that he had provided clear evidence of the scale of German rearmament. There was no official recognition of my father's role in the supply of vital intelligence which I have no doubt was used to pinpoint targets in the first Allied bombing campaign in 1940.

It is ironic that after enjoying cordial relationships with many German business contacts over several years during the 1930's my father was responsible in no small way for the destruction of their factories!

July 1936

Rob Hamilton

Part of a continuing series published in the Grapevine Magazine looking back at what was happening this month 90 years ago in the leadup up to WWII.

The political events of July 1936 were dominated by the outbreak of civil war in Spain, a conflict that soon became one of the defining struggles of the twentieth century and a stark warning of the wider European war that would follow only three years later.

Spain in the early 1930s was a nation riven by deep political, social, and religious divisions. The establishment of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931 brought ambitious reforms aimed at modernising the country—land redistribution, curbs on the power of the Catholic Church, military restructuring, and improved rights for workers. These measures were welcomed by many on the left but fiercely opposed by conservatives, monarchists, and influential army officers who feared the erosion of traditional authority.

Tensions escalated throughout the decade. Strikes, street clashes, and political assassinations became increasingly common as rival groups battled for control of Spain's future. When the leftwing Popular Front won the February 1936 election, conservative fears of a revolutionary shift intensified.

By spring, several senior military figures—including Generals Emilio Mola, José Sanjurjo, and Francisco Franco—were secretly preparing an uprising. The situation reached breaking point in July with the murder of conservative politician José Calvo Sotelo by men linked to Republican security forces. His death convinced many hesitant officers that rebellion was now unavoidable.

July 1936



Francisco Franco, leader of the Nationalist forces: Wiki Commons.

On 17 July 1936, army units in Spanish Morocco launched their revolt. The following day the uprising spread to mainland Spain. Rebel forces quickly secured parts of Seville, Navarre, Galicia, and Old Castile, while major cities such as Madrid and Barcelona remained loyal to the Republic. What began as a coup attempt rapidly escalated into a full civil war. Spain soon became a battleground of competing ideologies.

The Nationalists, eventually led by Franco, drew support from conservatives, monarchists, the Catholic hierarchy, and the Falange. The Republicans—an alliance of liberals, socialists, communists, anarchists, and regional nationalists—fought to defend the elected government.



Published by the Daily Mail in 1936. this photograph shows a Communist firing squad aiming at the colossal Monument of the Sacred Heart on the Cerro de Los Angeles, a hill a few miles south of Madrid which is regarded as the exact centre of Spain.

July 1936

Foreign involvement deepened the conflict. Germany and Italy supplied aircraft, troops, and matériel to the Nationalists, while the Soviet Union aided the Republicans. Thousands of international volunteers, including many from Britain, joined the International Brigades, viewing the struggle as a crucial stand against fascism. By the end of July it was clear that Spain faced a long and brutal conflict. Cities were divided, atrocities occurred on both sides, and Europe watched anxiously as the war foreshadowed the wider catastrophe that would soon engulf the continent.



Surrender of red soldiers, Somosierra, Madrid : Google Art Project

William Reid VC

Bomber Command, Lancaster Bomber Pilot WWII

Peter Liddle

One of twenty-three Bomber Command holders of the Victoria Cross, Bill Reid lived in retirement in Cardiff. I went to see him in April 2001. My diary records him as being very easy to work with and making a first class tape. With only one other airman, again a Bomber Command veteran, Angus Robb, with a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal award, can I remember feeling as close to the demanding requirement of remaining composed and performing effectively under such prolonged fearsomely testing circumstances. Heroism is displayed by people of very different backgrounds, make-up, and training. By definition the circumstances under which it is demonstrated are usually as different. Here an example of the nature of the man, and of the circumstance, is made clear.

I was born in Baillieston near Glasgow in 1921. My father was the local blacksmith. I had two brothers and two sisters. Well, I actually had three sisters but one was killed when she was about 16, by a bus. I went to the local school in Baillieston and then at eleven we sat an exam after which I went to the higher-grade school in Coatbridge which meant going on to your Higher Certificate and Matriculation. I didn't leave school until I was 18 and that would be in 1940.

I remember the impact of the outbreak of war in our family because my brother was in the Volunteer Reserve of the RAF as a Wireless Operator and Air Gunner, and he had been called up earlier of course, and one or two fellows at school were over eighteen and they went off to join the Services as soon as they could.



AI enhanced from newspaper cutting

William Reid VC

I was going to join up straight away when I took my Higher Certificate in June 1940, because my brother George, in Blenheims, had told me I would easily get selected for aircrew with my "Highers", but just about this time he had gone missing. My mother asked me to hold on because we hadn't any further information about George. In fact, we were not to learn for eighteen months that George was confirmed as killed. So I then took a job and because I had taken science in my "Highers", I took a job at the Clyde Alloy Steel Company which was at Motherwell about nine or ten miles away from where I lived. It was of course, a thriving business then because of the war.

In fact, the pay that I got as a trainee in the laboratory hardly paid my bus fares to get there and back and I remember mother kept asking if I were enjoying it and I simply had to say I didn't fancy it and would rather join the RAF. I had had to go to night-school too and as I was in Steel, I began to get worried that as Steel was a reserved occupation I wouldn't be able to leave for the RAF. I joined the Post Office as a student postman to avoid this. Then my mother relented. I applied for the RAF.



Motherwell Skyline. jbarchive.co.uk
AI enhanced.

William Reid VC

I had an interview in Edinburgh, went for a medical board and they then put me on deferred service. That was just before Christmas, 1940. I was not in fact called-up until August 1941. I had to go down to London for my initial training, the square-bashing and getting your uniform and so on. While I was there, a week after I was there, I had a telegram to say that my father had died and this was tragic, but I felt I had made friends, didn't want to lose contact with them, so I had all the inoculations required before going home for the funeral.

With the forty or fifty people I had got to know, we were then sent to Newquay in Cornwall and this was like a holiday to me from Scotland. Away down to the West coast and lovely sunny weather in August, September and October and we had a great three months there learning everything about basic things. That was your real initiation into the Air Force and yet the only thing you really learnt to use in later life in the RAF was the signaling. We got training in Morse and lamp signaling.

I was then posted to Wilmslow where they then eventually sent you off abroad, wherever it was you were going - in our case Canada - because you knew the difference in the fact that if they gave you hairy underwear that meant a cold climate and if they gave you a pith helmet and drain-pipe trousers that meant Rhodesia or some place like that. We got hairy underwear!

Off we went in this little boat from Avonmouth. It was a frozen meat boat in which there were two hundred of us trainee pilots or trainee air crew and it took eleven days. It seemed a really long journey, like Columbus seeing America for the first time, when we saw Canada and Halifax.

William Reid VC

We were taken to Monkton and here we had, luckily, a great Corporal, a chap called Paddy Rice from Ireland. He organised us well. It was a reception centre and Paddy successfully seemed to ensure that we got posted to a British Flying Training School in the Mojave desert at Lancaster in California. Here we saw an aeroplane for the first time since we joined up!

It seems that the training station at one time was in Glendale on the outskirts of Los Angeles and it wasn't so good there because so many British actors were taking all these trainee pilots out for nights out that it interfered with their flying training. I always felt that was why they moved it way up into the desert, but it was marvellous because the whole reason in training abroad was that you could fly every day. It was sunny weather and it was possible to fly every day and you could allocate the pilots a specific time and you knew they would carry out the flying.

We did all our training there right through to getting our Wings, elementary, basic, operational. It took about seven months for us to do that training, and it was while we were there, in December 1941, that they bombed Pearl Harbor and then America of course, came into the war. With regard to the training of Britons, that made a bit of a difference but not until after we had left because they then took more pilots in, though we had some American pilots training with us for the Eagle squadrons in the Air Force and they were trained separately from us.



Many British air crew trained in America as part of the lend lease agreement. This is one group at Terrell, Texas. www.bftsmuseum.org

William Reid VC

When we got our wings in June 1942, we headed back to the UK and we finished up at Bournemouth for reposting and at that time, if I had been asked what I would have liked to have gone to, I would rather have gone on to more than single-engine aircraft. I would have probably asked for twin-engine night- fighters. That was my feeling then because there were Beaufighter squadrons which became Mosquito squadrons eventually, but I didn't get any choice. We were just posted to Little Rissington and that was an advanced pilot training unit on twin-engine Oxfords and we flew there until we had learnt how to fly them and do a bit of navigation and then we were posted to an Operational Training Unit at North Luffenham in Rutland.

This was where you started crewing up because you are then on a Wellington and you crew up with your Navigator and your Bomb Aimer and your Rear Gunner and Wireless Operator. However, with fewer operationally-experienced pilots now available as Instructors, because of the casualty rates over Europe, it was as an Instructor that I was to find myself next. This was not my preference, but the Chief Flying Instructor here guaranteed me a posting to a Lancaster operational squadron if I were to agree to three months instructing.



Vickers Wellington Bomber: Wiki Commons

William Reid VC



Airspeed Oxford
Trainer aircraft:
Wiki Commons



Bristol Beaufort
multi-role
aircraft:
Wiki Commons

I actually stayed for about seven months and then was posted to a Lancaster conversion unit at Wigsley and converted onto Lancasters. Of course, here we picked our crew up. I had already lost a Navigator because he had been sick and so I had changed him while at OTU and then, after we finished our conversion course at Wigsley, you sometimes did what they called a second fishing trip on an actual raid over Germany and I was going with one crew from 619 and my Navigator was going with another crew from 9 Squadron, I think it was. His crew didn't come back, so we had lost our Navigator again. We got another Navigator who was an odd bod at the conversion unit and we didn't really know him. He hadn't been trained with us.

William Reid VC



Avro Lancaster
heavy bomber:
Wiki Commons

We had to pick up an Engineer too and a Mid Upper Gunner. I had been posted to 61 Squadron at Syerston. As far as apprehension before an operation is concerned, mine was about getting the job done more than anything else. I remember that I didn't seem able to get enough height to undertake an operation, so I jettisoned a 4,000 lb bomb in order to gain height and proceed towards the target as my logbook confirms so I wasn't unduly troubled by fear of night-fighters or flak.

I think the thing folk forget is that when you are actually flying as a boy of twenty or twenty one, you are keen on doing all the things that matter to get this thing in the air and your mind is taken up with your actions on flying it. Remember it's in the dark and you are keeping your eye on your instruments and keeping the thing in the air. You have no time just to sit there wondering if there will be anybody coming to shoot you down or whatever and you accept all the other crew members are looking out for what they have to do. And you must check with them every five minutes or so to see that they are alert and all is well. They haven't been sick in their masks or anything like that.

As it happens, on the first eight operations I did, we diverted four or five times. I actually didn't get back to base because of weather conditions in the main and once I landed on Newmarket Heath which was an aerodrome then and in the morning I saw there was an incendiary stuck in the top of my wing from somebody dropping incendiaries above me. Luckily it hadn't gone off.

William Reid VC

My crew for the Dusseldorf operation when we got into trouble, included an exceptionally young Flight Engineer, a Welshman named Norris. He was pretty new to us and was standing in for my regular Flight Engineer, still on leave. My Navigator was an Australian, Jefferies, a really nice chap but we hadn't had him for long either. He was a bit older than us, twenty nine or thirty. I didn't realise he was married until after he was killed.

The Bomb-Aimer, Leslie Rolton, had been with me from the very start at Luffenham and he had been helpful in getting a crew together there because I was Commissioned right from my Wing and this is in some ways a problem because you weren't mixing with the Sergeants in their Mess when you all went to the one station and I had to find a Sergeant that I fancied, in the way of "flying". I found Rolton and asked him if he would look out some crew that will convert to Lancasters and he did. I knew him well and stayed with him.

The Wireless Operator was a nice chap called Mann, again with me from the beginning. I had stayed in his house in Liverpool for his twenty-first birthday party. He was engaged to be married at the time. A lad called Baldwin was my Mid Upper Gunner and on his second tour was the Rear Gunner, Frank Emmerson, who had a Distinguished Flying Medal.

The actual operation was just a normal one on the Ruhr and Dusseldorf and we took off and as usual we climbed to 10,000 feet over Syerston because if you climb straight away to head for your course over the Dutch coast you would have been too low at the Dutch coast. So we set course at 10,000 feet and we had gone up to about 19,000 to 20,000 and the Mid Upper Gunner said he didn't think his heating was working too well in his suit and could I come down a bit and there was no way you could come down a bit. Once you got up to the height you wanted to be at, I just stayed where I was and I turned the oxygen up a bit and I said: "How are you feeling now Geoff?" and he said he was okay and we carried on and it was maybe ten minutes later, there was suddenly a great bang in my face - right in my face - and we lost about 2,000 feet.

William Reid VC

It was a bang on the windscreen. I pulled up and pulled out and my head was cut because something had come in and cut my head and my hands had been sort of skinned because I didn't wear gloves until near the target in case of fire. Without gloves you can feel the switches better in the dark. So I pulled on my white gloves because my hands were just sort of gravel-rashed with this, probably the windscreen coming in and they made a fuss about this and they said nothing about my wounds. I thought what is the point of me saying I am wounded because what can they do about it? Nothing. And I didn't feel as if I was going to keel over. So we were flying and I said it must have been projected flak and then the Mid Upper Gunner said no, it was a Me 110, and I thought well, I will not develop that because there was no point in again harassing each other over the intercom.



ME 110. One of Germany's most successful night fighters.
[Wiki Commons](#)

If the Mid Upper had seen it, the first thing he should have shouted for was to dive Starboard, or dive Port or whatever to avoid the potential fire of the enemy aircraft. Then the pilot can react. I was thinking about that. So I checked up with them all and they were all alright and then we flew on. We were at about 19,000 feet. The next thing thing that happens is that I felt a hit in the shoulder and the Engineer was hit in the forearm and we lost about 2,000 feet again and this time the plane was hard to fly because as it happened, the Port elevator had been shot away or badly damaged or it didn't function. So you were only using one elevator to keep your flight straight and level and I was holding the stick, well, all I did was to hold it back. I knew my shoulder was hit but it wasn't painful.

William Reid VC

So I just held my hands together and pulled the stick. Our intercom had gone, our compass, the P4 compass, was shattered. It was glass and the master unit had stopped. So I pointed to the compass after we settled down and pointed back at this to the Navigator behind me because we couldn't hear any words spoken and the Engineer comes forward and pointed to the floor. So I thought the Navigator was knocked out but would recover and take over again.

The Navigator sat not necessarily with his cumbersome flying jacket on because he is in a little compartment behind you and because of the big flying jacket sometimes it was dispensed with so he had more room for his drawings and maps, but he would have to cope with the cold air coming in. I had umpteen things to concentrate upon now and put the question of the compass and the Navigator to the back of my mind. We were then at about 17,000 feet on the top of misty clouds. We stayed there and the engines were all still flying but the oxygen had been hit too. That was a hell of a problem because no oxygen could come through so the Engineer then got these little bottles that you carry, eight or ten bottles, in case you want to move about the plane and fitted them onto my mask and they last for about fifteen or twenty minutes and I thought, well, that night at briefing they had shown us that they were actually going to drop flares on Cologne which was right, we were aiming at Cologne really, and then, at the last twenty minutes, we were turning up onto Dusseldorf to bomb. I thought, if I am going to over-shoot or get things wrong here because all these things happened at definite times, I could see another plane off!

I thought, well, I am still in the slip stream with the other bombers and I could see the Pole Star and there was about a "third" moon that night too and that was up my Port Quarter. That was a help too for where to look for the Pole Star and I was flying at 120mph and sure enough saw the flares come down on Cologne. Turned, and then we started to go down on Dusseldorf and, of course, I couldn't talk to the Bomb Aimer and he couldn't talk to me. So I told the Engineer to give him a kick and he sort of did this.

William Reid VC

He put his thumb up and indicated he would manage and I then steered it as best as I could to these target indicators and just held it straight and level and I opened the bomb door up with the handle down anyway and I thought it's all set and I just held it steady and of course, you feel the bombs going away and we turned off and then headed back home.



A Lancaster navigates the hostile night sky over Germany

William Reid VC

I knew the first thing I must do was to get below 10,000 feet, because of the oxygen but I didn't want to come down over land. I wanted to wait until I saw water and then I would get right down, but in the meantime the crew were helping me and then the Bomb Aimer came up too and helped to pull the stick back a bit because Norris had his forearm badly broken and he was just using the one arm and then we had come down towards the sea, right down to 7,000. I thought this is it. All I want to do is hit the English coast somewhere and find out where we are, and then the four engines cut out.

With all these concerns we'd had, the Engineer has forgotten to switch the tanks over from the main tanks to keep the engines supplied with fuel. You usually tried to keep them all balanced up. Well, he just turned the taps over and we started up again. We headed on and then we came over land and saw a little beacon flashing, ES or something, and we got the Wireless Operator's flimsy and read this off and it was a Training Station somewhere and then ahead further North, there was a canopy of searchlights moving on.

We headed for that and on the way there I saw this big drome lit up below us. It looked as if it was quite a large aerodrome. So we circled that and I couldn't call them up. So I flashed. I came down to 4,000 feet, flashed my landing lamp on and off and then I went to bend to work the gear to get the undercarriage down because there was no hydraulics and in doing this the bleeding started from my head again. It wasn't all that bad and I circled round and got the flaps down, twenty degrees a flap. Circled round and we came in and we signalled to come out in case we had a crash-landing.

As we touched down the undercarriage collapsed and the aircraft flopped down onto her belly and skidded for about fifty yards and stopped. Then it was that I found out that Jefferies, the Navigator, had been killed. He had slid up beside me on the floor and was lying beside me.

William Reid VC



It was an American aerodrome at Shipdham in Norfolk we had landed at a Liberator aerodrome, and they all piled onto the plane and we opened up the dinghy escape hatch and they took us all out through that including the Wireless Operator who walked out of it himself.

William Reid's shattered Lancaster after landing at Shipdham

Unfortunately he died from his chest wounds the next day. They took us into their medical quarters and sorted us out, and put us to bed and the next day we were then taken to Norwich hospital. We were there for about three days while they cleaned up our wounds and gave us blood transfusions and whatever and then we were taken to the RAF hospital at Ely. That is where I was when a surgeon looked at my shoulder, put a graft on it and cleaned it up. My hands had been skinned and my head cut, but with my shoulder injury that was all.

Now when we were in hospital, Air Vice Marshal Cochrane came to see me and said he had talked to the other surviving members of the crew and he wanted me to tell him my story of the raid. I told him as it had been and he asked me why I had not turned back. I replied I didn't turn back because I thought it was safer to go on. The four engines were still flying. I didn't feel as if I was going to pass out and if you think about ten miles long and three miles broad of 600 Lancasters, how do you get back, down through them? It wasn't a case of press on regardless or anything like that. I thought it was the safest thing. Now had an engine packed up I would have been re-thinking it quickly and then only how to filter out of this lot. Oh had I known that I could have helped any of the crew by getting back, that might have been another thing, but we had no intercom. Nobody knew what was going on.

William Reid VC

The Air Marshal said that since your raid, the number of returns on operations has been drastically reduced. And it was true that some used to return because of faulty altimeters and that sort of thing and it is possible that there had been a change of thinking among the airmen in command but I would suggest that it was a question of thinking logically about the options.

Sometime after the first week or so in the hospital, Jim Norris, our Engineer, came in and said he had been awarded the CGM, the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, and that was the first time I really thought of any medals and I thought Goodness, I will get a DSO, the comparable award for an officer. What happened was, while I was still convalescing, my award came through. I was in a Nissen hut in Ely – we called it Oflag 10, it was so Spartan, - and we were sitting over our dinner and the Matron came in and said: "Flight Lieutenant Reid, there is a phone call for you." So I went into the phone box and a voice said: "This is Air Vice Marshal Ralph Cochrane. I am very pleased to tell you the King has awarded you the Victoria Cross." I nearly fainted. I really did.



Above: William Reid's VC

Left: Air Vice Marshall Ralph Cochrane.

William Reid VC

Well when I went back to join the others and told them, of course they all cheered. I think some of them knew because there had been people up taking pictures. They said we will need to have a party because umpteen of the others there had been wounded too, at the same time as me, and they were all in for DFCs and what not. There were a few to be in the same Gazette as me. The doctors came in and congratulated me and they said remember no drinking, handing me a bottle of whisky.

I remember the Investiture quite well. I was at Woodhall by then. When I came back from my sick leave, I met Cochrane again and he said that I must be fed-up with all the adulation and told me that I was going to 617 Squadron at Woodhall Spa. I replied that that was fine as I had lost contact with almost all my surviving crew. I would like to take Rolton with me, the others having since been crewed up. I remembered a Wireless Operator I knew from OTU, phoned him, and he said he would come to Woodhall Spa so that was two of my new crew I knew.



The famous 'dambusters' 617 squadron (taken before William Reid joined)

William Reid VC

So, before the Investiture in July 1944, I was flying from Woodhall. Then I had to go to Buckingham Palace and the unfortunate thing was that, in July 1944, the Doodle Bugs were dropping on London and the South-East. and they couldn't make the Investiture a sort of public exhibition. Nobody was allowed but the recipients, which was a pity. My mother could not be there. Anyway, I took my crew down with me and Rolton lived in Romford in Essex and he said I could stay with him for the night too. Two of the crew were Canadians and they came down with me for a night on the tiles too.

After this I went up to the Palace and walked through the gates. Most of the other people arriving seemed to be in Humber Super Snipes or Buicks. I suppose they were getting Civil Honours. An Officer in the Household Division, checking us as we entered the Palace, asked what I was there for and when I told him my name, he couldn't see it down and wondered whether I'd got the right day. I told him the award and he apologized because he had not looked at the top of the list where the VC's were.

I was ushered in through the door to a large room and I saw an Air Force uniform though with great big blue stripes compared to mine. I was introduced to numbers of Senior Officers in the Services. Then this old sea dog came in and said to me: "Just a minute Reid, what we will do is this. You will get a clip put on your uniform for your medal but your medal gets a clip stuck in and you will walk straight in that door and the King will be standing on your left and you will stop and turn left. Take one step forward and then they will read out the presentation and then the King will present the medal to you and when he shakes your hand that is the end of the interview. You will stand back and all these others will follow you like lambs at the slaughter." Then he said: "Medals are Honours and they are just stuck on your lapel so that you can just hang the medal." And this is what we did.

We went in the door, turned to where the King was with a window at his back, and of course, he was much smaller than me and he chatted on and he asked if all my wounds had healed up and if I was flying again and where was I flying and how are my crew and have I made up another crew. You know just normal good questions and then shook my hand and I stood back and went out and the chap at the door had this box for the medal.

William Reid VC

The crew were waiting outside. So we had one or two pictures taken where I was holding the medal up and that was it. It was just a pity that my mother and sisters couldn't have been there and seen it.

When I got home to Baillieston from my leave, they had a March-past for me, and I took the salute and they had a collection for me too. It raised over a thousand pounds which helped me through University. There was a three-handled silver loving cup with the citation on it, presented from the people of Baillieston.

I should remind you I had only done three trips, not anywhere near a full tour, and I accepted that I would go back and fly again and was quite content with that rather than be used in public parades and recruitment rallies in Glasgow.

Bill Reid's service with 617 Squadron, the "Dambusters" Squadron, was to be full of drama too. Though not presented here, his interview continues with memories of leading personnel in the squadron, an account of several highly significant raids – D-Day diversion, "coned" by searchlights over Munich, E-Boat pens, V1 and V2 launch sites - but most particularly the raid on a V2 storage tunnel near Rheims, during which his aircraft, having just released its 12,000 lb bomb, was struck and ruinously damaged by bombs dropped from an aircraft flying above them. He escaped by parachute but was captured. This took place on July 31st, 1944. His experience of captivity, just after the disastrous consequence of the Great Escape, lay ahead, as did the Long March, decreed by the Russian advance from the East. If Bill Reid somehow felt that he had achieved fame from relatively short active service in 1943, no such sense of inadequacy could possibly have assailed him at his liberation in 1945.

ED. This and many other interviews can be found in Peter Liddle's book *Captured Memories 1930-1945*, (Pen and Sword, 2020)

Private Haw - from Egg Thief to War Hero

Alan Rhodes

My curiosity was roused when I read about an auction for “An interesting Victory Medal awarded to Private H. Haw M.M., West Yorkshire Regiment, who was caught stealing eggs from a Yorkshire hen-house in a ‘sting’ operation reminiscent of a modern-day children’s animation”.

Auctioneers Noonans of Mayfair had provided additional material. I went on to contact Tricia Platts of the Bradford World War One Group <https://ww1bradford.org> and she kindly researched the story.

What follows is a combination of their efforts.

Harold Haw was born in Bradford in 1890 and spent his childhood at Fieldhouse Farm, Farsley. In the 1911 Census, market gardening is listed as his occupation. In 1914 he is married and a father to two small children and his food related activities could well be a reserved occupation. There was something of a hierarchy of occupations and, despite their status, 'starred' men were encouraged to attest under the Derby Scheme. In late 1915. Harold did so on 11 December but was not called-up and he remained in the reserves.



Victory Medal
1914-19 (49515
Pte. H. Haw. W.
York. R.) edge
bruising, nearly
very fine

His quiet life was rudely interrupted when he caught the attention of the local authorities and The Shipley Times and Express on 22 June 1917: ‘Robbing a Calverley Hen-Roost - How a Thief was Captured and Punished At the Bradford West Riding Police Court, on Monday, Harold Haw, labourer, of Pudsey, was charged with stealing two eggs on June 14th, the property of Mr. Henry Jagger of Calverley. He pleaded guilty.

Private Haw - from Egg Thief to War Hero

Mr. Wm. Walker, surveyor to the District Council, and also a special constable, said that on May 31st he called to see Mr. Jagger on business connected with Council matters, and Mr. Jagger said that on particular days he did not get many eggs from his poultry. He suspected that this shortage was possibly connected with the visits of a man who was in charge of a horse and waggon (traditional English spelling) delivering goods for the Farsley branch of the Leeds Industrial Co-op. Society.

The thefts had coincided with the man's visits so often that they could hardly be a coincidence. Witness arranged with Mr. Jagger that on the 14th inst. a trap should be set, and that they would watch the man. Three eggs were punctured with a pin, and placed where the hens usually laid. This method of marking was adopted as being less noticeable than any other way, and also that it could not be rubbed off.

Witness attended as arranged as about 10 a.m. on the 14th inst., and along with Mr. Jagger, went into a bedroom of the farm-house, from which a window overlooked the farm-yard. Shortly after the accused, accompanied by two youths, brought his waggon into the yard. He then carried a sack of bran into the mistal (cow shed) through the top door. One of the eggs was on some hay near the door.

Accused shortly afterwards came out and sauntered down the yard and again entered the mistal by the lower door. He did not stay inside many minutes, and later paid a short visit to the hen-house. The boys were delivering goods in a box, placing them in an old cottage, as the house was locked up, in the absence of both Mr. and Mrs. Jagger on business.

Accused and the boys then went to the waggon and across to an adjacent farm occupied by Mr. Newton Wood. Witness and Jagger then went down and found two of the marked eggs gone. The third egg was in a nest in the hen-house, and a hen which was wanting to sit had gone into the nest and thus covered the egg.

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Private Haw - from Egg Thief to War Hero

Witness followed accused and caught him just as he was delivering a sack of meal at Mr. Wood's. Witness said: "I want those two eggs you have got from the other farm." Accused replied, "What eggs?" Witness said, "Those two eggs which you have got, and which are marked." Witness drew his attention to his badge of special constable, and informed him that he should search him if the eggs were not given up. After some little hesitation, accused handed over the two eggs, one from each side pocket of his inside coat. Witness then took his name and address, and told him that he should report him. Accused was subsequently arrested by P.C. Woodhouse.'

At trial the Clerk asked the farmer, Mr. Jagger, if the hens laid in the mistal: "Yes, but they don't lay marked eggs!" (laughter)' In summing up the case, the chairman described Haw's actions as rather despicable and mean and he was given the choice between a 40 shilling fine or a month in the cells; it seems likely that he chose the latter.

But on 23 July 1917 his war service began. Was this a result of his court appearance 4 weeks earlier? Was there a friendly hand on the shoulder suggesting *"It might be a good idea m' boy if you were to . . ."*

He attested for the West Yorkshire Regiment and commenced training as a Lewis gunner. The Army Service Record confirms his address at this time as 11 Croft Place, Pudsey.

His Medical Report mentions tachycardia and, just over a week later, he was admitted to hospital for 84 days; 'neuritis' being one of his problems but much of the entry is indecipherable doctor's handwriting. After discharge, Harold was attached to 2nd Battalion West Yorks (Depot) before crossing to France on 13 March 1918 to join 2/5th Battalion.

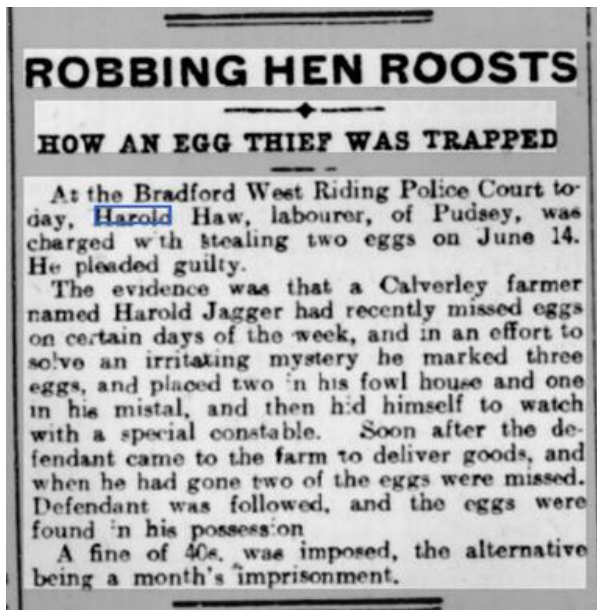
Private Haw Victory Medal

He might well have been involved in the attack on Marfaux on 20 July 1918 and Bligny on 27th July. On 13 -15th August half a dozen officers of 2/5th were transferred to 8th Battalion which coincides with the transfer date in Harold Haw's papers.

He appears to have been awarded his Military Medal when serving with the 8th Battalion but no date has emerged: could it be in early September during the actions at Vaulx Vraucourt or near Tronville where he suffered a shrapnel wound to the right thumb.

On 10 March 1919 he was attached to 1/6th Battalion, a reduced unit involved in the occupation on the Rhine. His discharge came on 19 October 1919.

Harold Haw received his medals in April 1921 and died on 13 July 1921 at the age of 31. Both his daughters had died as infants. His wife re-married in 1923 and named her second son Harold.



WWI Military Medal: Wiki Commons

The Quintinshill Rail Disaster 1915

David Millichope

On 22 May 1915, approximately 500 soldiers of the 7th Battalion, the Royal Scots, boarded a troop train from Larbert, Stirlingshire, destined for Liverpool, where they were to embark for service in the Gallipoli campaign. The journey ended only a few hours later in Britain's worst ever rail disaster killing almost half of them and injuring most of the rest.

Near Quintinshill signal box, close to Gretna Green, a local passenger train had been temporarily moved onto the southbound main line. Through a series of errors, the signalmen failed to move it away and the approaching troop train, of 21 crowded carriages, smashed into it at high speed.

The impact was devastating. The troop train, of almost 200 metres length was instantly compressed into little more than 60 metres. Its largely wooden carriages splintered and telescoped into one another, trapping soldiers in its tangled wreckage.



Fire rages through the carriages: Devil's Porridge Museum, www.devilsporridge.org.uk

The Quintinshill Rail Disaster 1915

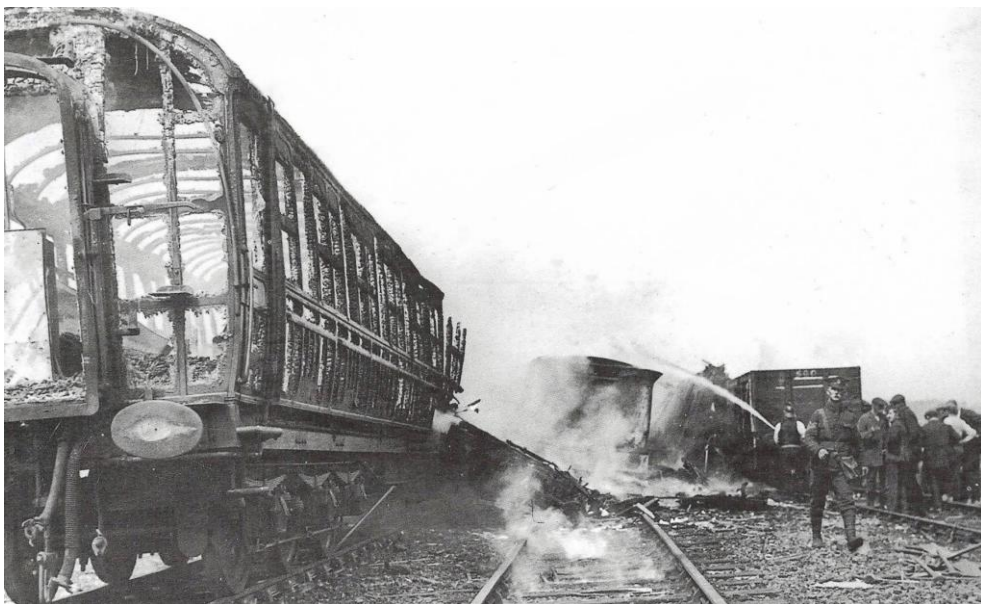
One survivor, Private Peter Stoddart, recalled being thrown through the air and losing consciousness:

"I came to, halfway down an embankment by the track".

Only minutes later a northbound sleeper express from London weighing more than 600 tons and travelling at speed, smashed into the wreckage.

Escaping gas escaping from the trains lighting system was ignited by the engine fires and spread through the shattered wooden coaches engulfing the entire wreckage. Many soldiers who had survived the collisions remained trapped and could not be reached.

Local farmworkers and villagers helped doctors and rescuers as they worked among scenes of extreme suffering, treating the injured beside the tracks. Some men underwent emergency amputations to release them from the wreckage and there were later accounts of officers having to shoot soldiers trapped by advancing flames.



Burnt out wreckage :
Devil's Porridge Museum, www.devilsporridge.org.uk

The Quintinshill Rail Disaster 1915

The fire burned with such intensity that the exact number of victims could never be established. At least 229 people were killed with 246 were injured, many seriously. Eighty-two bodies, including some children, could not be identified, while the remains of another 49 victims were never recovered. All but twelve of those who died were Royal Scots. Of approximately 500 soldiers who had left Larbert that morning, fewer than sixty were later able to answer the roll call.



Roll call of Royal Scots: Wiki Commons

The disaster brought grief and uncertainty to hundreds of families. Relatives gathered at offices and public buildings waiting for news. In Leith, where most of the soldiers had lived, a large crowd assembled outside the Drill Hall to hear the names of the dead read aloud.

The victims were later carried through Edinburgh in a vast funeral procession. Many were buried with full military honours in a mass grave at Rosebank Cemetery in Leith.



Funeral procession in Edinburgh: Wiki Commons

The Quintinshill Rail Disaster 1915

The official investigation concluded that the two signalmen on duty, James Tinsley and George Meakin, had acted carelessly and had failed to follow essential railway procedures. On 24 September 1915, they appeared at the High Court in Edinburgh alongside the fireman, James Hutchinson. Hutchinson was acquitted, but Tinsley and Meakin were found guilty of culpable homicide caused by gross neglect of their duties. Tinsley was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and Meakin to eighteen months.

The sentences caused considerable controversy. Railway unions argued that the men had been working under exceptional wartime pressures and that insufficient allowance had been made for the strains placed upon railway staff. Protest meetings were held.

Nine members of the jury, including the foreman, signed an appeal to King George V asking that mercy should be shown. The Secretary of State for Scotland, the Rt Hon H. J. Tennant MP, also wrote in support of clemency:

"I would beg of you to urge His Majesty the King to extend His gracious act of clemency, as I am satisfied these two men have already undergone sufficient punishment to have more than met the demands of justice."

The appeals were eventually upheld resulting in the release of the men.

The Quintinshill disaster remains the deadliest railway accident in British history and is located close to the site where later the world's largest munitions factory was built at Eastriggs.

Its story is included in the exhibitions in the 'Devils Porridge Museum' built within the former Eastriggs complex.

