# FOREWORD

Shortly before 9.30 on the evening of Sunday, 16 May 1943, the first of 19 Lancaster bombers of 617 Squadron took off from RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire to attack the major dams in Germany's Ruhr valley, and the legend of the Dambusters was born.

At 3.23 the following morning, Lancaster ED 825, 'T-Tommy', piloted by Flt Lt Joe McCarthy, returned safely. Amongst his crew was the bomb aimer, George 'Johnny' Johnson. My father.

At the heart of this audacious attack on Germany's industrial heartland lay technical genius, the remarkable skill of some of Bomber Command's best pilots, and the outstanding bravery of the aircrews. Of the 133 airmen who set out on the raid, 53 were killed and three became prisoners of war, two of whom were badly injured. In any battle, a 42 per cent loss rate would seem unthinkable, and, in contrast to the public euphoria at the success of the mission, the mood in the squadron was

sombre. Everyone knew several people who had failed to return. Barnes Wallis, the scientific wizard who had made the raid possible, was said to have been in tears, blaming himself for 'sending so many young men to their deaths'.

Within four months, following two disastrous nights over the Dortmund–Ems canal in September 1943, where 617 Squadron suffered heavy losses, 11 of the original 21 crews that had founded the squadron less than seven months earlier were gone. By the end of the war, only 44 (one in three) of those who took part in the Dams Raid were still alive. Today, 71 years later, only the last three survive – Les Munro in New Zealand, Fred Sutherland in Canada, and Johnny Johnson in Britain.

It is impossible to overstate the sheer courage of these young men, most of whom were in their early twenties. In Bomber Command, over 55,000 airmen out of a total force of 125,000 (44 per cent) lost their lives in World War II. Of course, they knew the risks. It did not take a degree in mathematics to work out the odds of survival. Yet night after night they climbed into their bombers and took their chance. They were all volunteers, young men from all walks of life and from many different parts of the globe, united in their belief that somehow they had to win this war.

The origins of this book lie in a series of conversations I had with my father beginning in late 2007. My mother, whom he had adored for 65 years, had recently lost a long fight with liver cancer. A couple of years prior to that, there had been a resurgence of interest in the Dambusters' story. As my father was one of the surviving originals, he had regularly been asked to appear in television programmes and to give press interviews. He largely declined. We, his family,

had heard some of the stories about his wartime experiences over the years. After a glass of wine at a family gathering or under questioning he would relate a little anecdote or two, but not much else. After my mother died, however, and with no let-up in interest from the media and the memorabilia business, he changed tack. He appeared in a number of television documentaries, gave any number of speeches, and signed many hundreds of autographs. Most of the payments for these activities found their way to various RAF charities. The reason for this change of heart was obvious. It gave him a reason to live, and to live a life he could enjoy.

When he then said, completely out of the blue, 'I would quite like to write the story of my life,' I was considerably taken aback. I could see that, given the interest that was being shown in him as a Dambuster, his personal account might be something that people would want to read. But with so many hours having been given over to film and television programmes, together with so many millions of words in books and articles, would there be anything new to say? It would, of course, be a unique personal account of a young man going to war with the RAF and of a remarkable six weeks culminating in a piece of RAF history, but would my father's version really provide significant new insights?

As we continued talking over the following months and years, during long hours of conversation, he revealed stories I had never heard before. It became clear that the answer to my question was yes – he did have something new to say. He talked in depth about his childhood, his RAF training, what it was really like going to war in a Lancaster bomber and his life after leaving the RAF in 1961. As he did so, it became clear that this was indeed a remarkable tale but for different

reasons than either he or I might originally have envisaged. Gradually, I began to realise that his stories had something to offer on a number of different levels.

He was born in November 1921, the sixth child of an impoverished farmworker. Today, at the age of 92, he lives alone in a small apartment in a well-run retirement village in Bristol. He suffers the inconveniences and indignities that old age inevitably brings but he is well supported locally and by a large and devoted family. Had it not been for those six weeks in 1943, his life would probably have gone by unnoticed by anyone apart from our family and a few close friends. Yes, he is a 'war hero', and, like many many others who served in Bomber Command during World War II, he deserves to be recognised as such. But this is also the story of a young child who, in today's world, would be called 'neglected' or 'abused' and might even be taken into care. His is the story of someone who, through a series of accidents or twists of fate, was able to serve his country in a number of different ways and whose life has been far more fulfilling than anyone could possibly have imagined in those early years back on the farm. Throughout his life, a number of events, totally outside his control, have shaped his destiny. At first, he wanted to call this book *How Lucky Can You Get?*, and I understand why he would want to use this wartime expression. But there was far more to the way my father's life took shape than mere luck.

This is not a technical history book. It is a personal story of a young man growing up, beginning to make his way in the world and then fighting for his country, devoting himself to serving his country both in uniform and, in later years of public service, either through teaching or through caring for people with mental health problems. It is the story of a young man

leaving behind a beleaguered beginning and embarking on a quest for happiness and fulfilment. It is also a record of what it was like to live through most of the twentieth century and illustrates just how much our society has changed in one man's lifetime.

Morgan Johnson
January 2014

CHAPTER 1

# CHUCK-CHUCK AND A FAMILY AT WAR

I was never frightened. Not when I was standing right there by her side. I knew that she would look after us, no matter what. She was a real beauty in her own purposeful way, and truly inspirational. I felt a great glow of confidence and enthusiasm when I leaned against her. I certainly wasn't scared – not when I was standing next to Chuck-Chuck. I don't think any of us were at that point. Later, when we were up there in the darkness with German fighter pilots and flak gunners trying to seek us out and kill us, there would be plenty of time to be frightened. Chuck-Chuck, you see, was our Lancaster, our state-of-the-art warplane – the pride of RAF Bomber Command and the envy of every air force in the world in 1942.

Having just spilled out of the crew transport at our dispersal area, we had a few moments before we were due to climb aboard, the chat and banter flowing seamlessly from the cramped confines of the truck or bus that had brought us

across the airfield to the patch of grass where Chuck-Chuck was parked. Inevitably, cigarettes were fished out of pockets in our bulky flying gear and matches were struck. It never occurred to us that we shouldn't have one last fag before getting on with the job. Thinking back, it might indeed have been more sensible for us to have refrained. The Lancaster's four Rolls-Royce Merlin engines were notorious for leaking oil, and Chuck-Chuck's were no different. The ground crew used to cover the tyres on the undercarriage with tarpaulins to make sure that they weren't corroded in any way or made slippery by dripping oil. So, lighting up while standing on dry, oil-stained grass next to an aeroplane filled with more than 2,000 gallons of fuel and loaded with over 6 tons of high explosives and incendiaries might not have been entirely safe – but then, neither was flying off into the night to bomb Berlin. Even if it had been forbidden for us to stand there having a smoke, I daresay we'd have sneaked one in anyway. What could they have done about it? Told us we couldn't go?

The banter amongst the crew was always quite buoyant, exactly as you would expect with any group of seven lads in their early twenties – girls, beer, girls, football, girls, cricket, girls. I have to admit that I wasn't one of the most talkative of the bunch. For reasons that will become clear, I was a bit quiet, a bit of a loner. By no means did that mean that I was considered an outsider. I was very much part of the crew, one of the team, and that was the major contributing factor in the feeling of confidence that we all shared. We were a team and we knew that we could rely on each other. To say that your crew on a Lancaster was a 'family' is a much-used analogy, but it is much used because that's what it was like,

that's how close we felt to one another. For me, coming from a background that was sadly lacking any real family bond, the affinity that I felt with the rest of the crew was something new and intense. I treasured it, and still do.

I pitched into the chat from time to time and enjoyed my smoke, listening to the other lads taking the mickey out of each other. You might think that the chat was just bravado – young men putting up a front to hide their fear from each other, maybe even from themselves. I don't believe it was that sort of bluster at all. It was just the way that we did things.

I've heard a lot of stories about aircrew being so scared before setting off on a raid that they could hardly zip up their flying gear. Like most airmen, I flew with a few crews before finally being assigned one specific outfit, but I never saw anyone losing their head. Some authors over the years have delighted in telling tales about how young men who flew on bombing raids were regularly reduced to quivering wrecks, terrified of what lay ahead of them in the night sky over Germany. I flew on 50 operations during the war and I never saw anyone behaving in that way. You heard stories, but it was always something that seemed to have happened to a friend of a friend in another squadron, on another base. I know that the legendary Guy Gibson said that he found the time just before take-off to be the most stressful part of any operation. That was the time when he felt most afraid. I've always been quite surprised by that, yet Tony Iveson, a pilot who joined 617 Squadron a year or so after the Dams Raid, said much the same thing when he was once interviewed for a television programme. I suppose that, as pilots, they had so much to think about once they were strapped into their seat in the cockpit that their focus was then solely on flying the

aircraft and their responsibilities as captain. While they were still on the ground, maybe they had too much time to think about other things. Gibson certainly wasn't the sort to stand having a natter with the rest of the crew before take-off. Joe McCarthy was.

I was proud to be part of Big Joe's crew. To say that I looked up to Joe would be true on every level. He was a big man – 6 foot 3 inches – so I barely came up to his shoulder, and he had a personality to match his size. Born in New York, he had worked as a lifeguard and competed in swimming races, using his pay and prize money to fund flying lessons. Then, in May 1941, when the American Army Air Corps dragged their feet over recruiting him, Joe and his friend Don Curtin headed for Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) to train as pilots. By the summer of 1942, Joe was in England, posted to 14 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Cottesmore, flying the Handley Page Hampden medium bomber. While he was still in training, on the night of 31 July/1 August, the Hampdens were called on to take part in a raid on Dusseldorf. Joe's first operation as a pilot, therefore, had come just a week before my first operational trip as a gunner. A superb pilot, Joe instilled unshakeable confidence in us. With Joe in charge when we set off on a raid, none of us ever doubted that we were coming back.

As an RCAF pilot serving in the RAF, Joe had shoulder patches on his uniform with the word 'Canada' arching around the top of the sleeve. As an American in the RCAF, he also had 'USA' just below, he and Don Curtin being two of almost 9,000 Americans who had headed north, crossing the border into Canada to sign up with the RCAF. Anyone joining His Majesty's armed forces was expected to swear an

oath of loyalty to the King, but the laws of the United States prohibited Americans from doing so, the penalty being loss of their American citizenship. Until December 1941, of course, America was officially neutral, a non-combatant nation, and their government could not condone the actions of young men like Joe. To accommodate their American volunteers, therefore, the RCAF changed the rules, allowing them to swear to adhere to the rules and discipline of the RCAF instead of taking the oath of allegiance. However he managed it, we were glad to have Joe, and not having sworn loyalty to the King didn't seem to bother either Big Joe or King George VI when the two eventually met!

Chuck-Chuck was Joe's Lanc. From time to time a pilot and his crew would be given a new or different Lanc to fly and the way to personalise it was, of course, with a patch of artwork on the port side of the nose, beneath the pilot's position. Joe's nose art was Chuck-Chuck, a panda that was variously depicted driving a Jeep, carrying a Tallboy bomb or, to symbolise the British/American connection, wearing a top hat decorated with the American flag and a vest bearing the Union Jack and carrying a cigarette in a holder to represent President Roosevelt while smoking a cigar to represent Winston Churchill. Chuck-Chuck also appeared on a large red maple leaf to represent Canada.

Joe wasn't the only member of the crew with Canadian insignia. Bill Radcliffe was the rarest of things in Bomber Command – a Canadian flight engineer. Around a third of all aircrew on bombers were Canadian, but the vast majority of flight engineers, for some reason, were British. Bill Radcliffe's family had emigrated to Canada when he was a child but he had returned to England to live with his grandparents while he was

at school. In March 1939, with war looming, he had joined the RAF, training as a flight mechanic. That was a ground crew job, giving Bill hands-on experience of working with Merlin engines long before he was put through the flight engineer's course. There wasn't much that Bill didn't know about the Merlin and Joe had a great deal of respect for him. Even though the pilot is the aircraft's captain and the man in charge in the air, no matter whether there are any higher-ranking officers aboard, and no matter how forceful Joe could be when he wanted, when he called for more power or more speed, Bill would refuse to push the engines too hard, making sure that they were in good shape to get us home and that we had enough fuel. Lancasters had six fuel tanks in the wings capable of taking 2,154 gallons of fuel, giving the aircraft a range of around 2,500 miles. They weren't always full, of course. They gave us only enough fuel to get to the target and back – any more was a waste. There was no point in giving us fuel we shouldn't need because the weight of the spare fuel might just as well be taken up by more bombs. There wasn't much allowance for contingency and some Lancs made it home only to find that the bases they could reach with the fuel they had left were fogbound. When their fuel ran out, they crashed. It was part of Bill's job to switch between tanks, eking out the fuel to get us to the target and back, hopefully with a little to spare.

On every flight, Bill used to carry a small Chuck-Chuck panda bear toy tucked into his flying boot. I was never the superstitious type and I don't think that we were a particularly superstitious crew, but Chuck-Chuck was always with us and must have worked well as a mascot because we were to enjoy a healthy portion of good fortune on all of our trips. We had more than our fair share of luck.

We also had more than our fair share of Canadians. Dave Rodger was another. The son of an immigrant Scotsman, Dave had been a steelworker and served in the Canadian Militia before training as an air gunner. He was the comedian of the crew, generally at the centre of the banter and always game for a laugh. When he joined the crew in January 1943, a flying officer and our only other officer apart from Joe, he had already been in one crash and had had a spell in hospital with a smashed knee. Dave was our rear gunner.

Our third Canadian was Don MacLean. A teacher from Toronto, Don joined us on our last operation prior to the whole crew transferring to 617 Squadron. I remember him as a quiet man who always looked quite serious in photographs. Maybe that's understandable because Don was our navigator and, as I was later to discover, navigating is a serious business!

The daddy of the crew was wireless operator Len Eaton. We saw him as being far older than the rest of us, although he would still have been only about 28, and he was a quiet, calm character. Len had joined Joe's crew soon after Joe first started flying Lancasters in September 1942, with the final member of our crew, Ron Batson, having also first flown with Joe around that time. I actually shared a room with Ron and, with him being our mid-upper gunner and me having trained as a gunner, we immediately had something in common. We became firm friends during our time together on 97 and 617 Squadrons, which made it all the more frustrating for me that, despite making serious efforts, I was never able to get back in touch with Ron after the war.

We seven were the young men gathered around the crew ladder, chatting and smoking, getting ready to take our places

aboard Chuck-Chuck. There comes a point when, with one last drag, it's time to go and the cigarettes are ground out beneath flying boots as we all turn towards the crew ladder. There's a moment for one last look around, taking in the vast expanse of the airfield in the watery, evening sunshine, other Lancs parked nearby with their crews also climbing aboard, and beyond the airfield the flatlands of Lincolnshire stretching off towards the North Sea. Here, in the midst of the seemingly endless farmland, is where I was born and, despite fate luring me away time after time, I somehow always seemed to end up back in bloody Lincolnshire …

The hamlet of Hameringham lies about 20 miles east of Lincoln and is unlikely to win many prizes in any 'prettiest village' tourist awards. It consists of little more than a collection of three farms and a church. Most of Lincolnshire is given over to agriculture, producing huge amounts of wheat and barley as well as most of the common vegetables, including potatoes, sugar beet and, nowadays, acre upon acre of oil seed rape. This is an uninspiring countryside. Flat, open fields, the odd copse of trees. It is dull. Nothing to inspire the soul or to lift the heart. In the winter it can be bitterly cold. I've heard it said that, if you stand on the top of Lincoln Cathedral, you can see the Ural Mountains in Russia. In my bomb aimer's position in the nose of a Lancaster, I have flown low enough over Lincoln Cathedral to steal the lead off the roof but I don't ever remember seeing any Russian mountains. The cathedral was a useful landmark for bomber crews returning from raids as it was tall enough to poke its towers up through fog or low cloud, and for a long time it housed the only real memorial to the men of Bomber Command.

Whether you could see Russia from Lincolnshire or not, you could certainly feel it. When the winter wind came in off the North Sea from the east it was like standing in a blast from a cold store – freezing air that felt like it came straight from Siberia. Colder than a witch's tit was how we used to describe it, and when it brought with it icy rain or snow, it was a thoroughly miserable environment. This is the place where I was born in November 1921, the sixth child of Ellen and Charles Johnson. I was described as 'a weakling baby' delivered to 'a somewhat worried mother'. I'll bet she was worried. My father was the foreman on an average-sized mixed arable farm. To say he was the foreman would be to give him a rather grand title. There was only one other worker on the farm. I've no doubt that he would have made his feelings known about my arrival – I was another mouth to feed, a burden, a liability. One of my earliest memories is of my father in a foul temper (his usual demeanour) telling someone that I had been 'a mistake'. I don't think that he knew I could hear him, but, had he known, I doubt he would have cared.

I had four brothers. Fred, the oldest, was already 19. Albert, Percy and Bill were 15, 11 and nine years old respectively, while Lena, the only girl, was seven. We lived in a dilapidated cottage close to some of the farm buildings and there was, of course, no electricity, hot water or any other modern conveniences, but, in that respect, we were really no different from thousands of other families who owed their living to farming. The work was hard and the pay was poor, although my father's meagre income was supplemented to some extent with food and firewood from the farm. Nevertheless, it would have been far from easy to provide for the family, yet my father

would have seen this as entirely normal. This was the way that his father and, doubtless, generations before him would have lived. In the 1920s, we were living in a land of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', with the Johnson family languishing very much in the 'have-nots' camp. My father expected nothing of his boys except that they would leave school, work on the land and bring in a wage to earn their keep. Poorly educated, with little or no knowledge of life outside the farm, except for the odd excursion to the local town on market day, he held no high expectations for any of his children. We were raised with the attitude that you just had to get on and do what had to be done, day by day.

At the age of 19, of course, Fred had been working for five years. An accident on a farm led him to develop epilepsy for which he received little or no medical treatment. He went to London to work as a lorry driver for a few years but eventually returned and buggered about on farms. He died aged 47 from a heart attack, probably brought on by the strain of an epileptic fit. Albert became a worker on local farms until he retired in 1964, aged 60. He died in 2000 aged 96. Percy worked as a waggoner, looking after horses on another farm, before training with the St John Ambulance Brigade and becoming the company medical orderly at the local ball bearing factory. He lived to be 94. Bill was a lorry driver for a local building company until he retired. He died sometime in the mid-seventies. The mere fact that I can't recall the exact year should give you an inkling that this was not a tightly woven, cohesive family unit. As I grew up and the brothers went their separate ways, it would not have been difficult for me to keep in touch with them or for them to keep in touch with each other, especially as they lived not too far apart, but

I chose to remain distant from them and, as far as I know, they from each other. With the exception of Fred, they all married and had children of their own and I hope, like me, they enjoyed a happiness with their new families that helped them to leave life with my father behind them.

The earth-shattering event that dragged the story of the Johnsons down from the level of mere hardship to a realm of tragedy bordering on the Dickensian was the death of my mother in 1924, shortly before my third birthday. She had been suffering from what was then known as Bright's disease, which was a catch-all term that covered a number of kidney problems. Nowadays, her condition would be treatable, but in the harsh world of 1925, the lack of any viable remedy meant that I lost my mother and was left with only the vaguest memories of her. Lena was to be my salvation. She was the one who looked after me – had she not been there I don't know what would have happened. My father may have persuaded relatives to take me. I certainly knew of no friends nearby who could have helped. My closest friend at the time was a pig that was kept in the field next to our cottage. He used to let me ride on his back. Not a bad friend for a young boy, I suppose …

Lena, only a child herself, took care of me as best she could and my father somehow managed to find the money to hire a housekeeper, Mrs Smith. Within a few months, however, there were more changes afoot when he found himself a new job on a farm near the village of Langford, just outside Newark in Nottinghamshire. Today the journey between Hameringham and Langford would take you about 30 minutes by car. That, of course, wasn't an option for us and it took a great deal longer travelling by horse and cart. The date was 25 March

1926 – Lady Day. Lady Day, also known as the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, was the traditional day when farmworkers took up new jobs. Up until the middle of the eighteenth century, it had been seen as the start of the New Year because it generally marked the equinox, when the day and the night were roughly equal and the farming world was about to tumble into a new season. As such, it became the time when farmers entered into new contracts to take over new fields and take on new farmhands. Lady Day, therefore, was the day we moved to Langford.

Mrs Smith chose not to make the move with us and, with my older brothers all having left home, there was just me, my father and Lena. Lena was shortly to go into service with a Major Day and his wife in one of the local grand houses, leaving my father with his four-year-old 'burden'. Before long he had employed another housekeeper, Mrs Parker, who came with two young daughters in tow, Madge and Elsie, both a few years older than me. Quite what had happened to Mr Parker I have no idea, but Mrs Parker swiftly established herself rather too well for my liking. She and my father were married in early 1927. I suppose that meant he no longer had to pay her wages.

The accommodation in Langford was a few rooms at one end of a farmhouse. There was a kitchen and living room on the ground floor with two bedrooms upstairs. One bedroom was for the newly-weds and one was for the girls. I had a bed on the landing. It seems utterly primitive now, but these weren't unusual conditions for farmworkers in the 1920s. None of the things that we take so much for granted nowadays was available to us in Langford. We had no gas or electric power, with only the most basic sanitation and

hygiene facilities. The lavatory, nothing more than a deep hole in the ground inside a wooden hut, was across a small pathway outside the back door. Water had to be brought in from the outside pump. We had no means of communicating with the rest of the world other than by written post. There was no television, no radio and no telephone, mobile or otherwise. What that meant was that people actually indulged in conversation to entertain one another, although my father wasn't really one for conversation. He spoke and you replied. A one-word answer would generally suffice. After a few short months, however, Mrs Parker began to rebel against the regime, showing her true colours. She was a vicious and hellish woman. In retrospect, I think she was everything that he deserved, but at the time, to a young boy like me, she was terrifying. Her arguments with my father regularly exploded into fights and on a number of occasions she threatened to knife him. I remember being very worried and sleeping in my father's bed, thinking that I could protect him, although I wouldn't have been any use whatsoever against a madwoman with a knife. Maybe old Mr Parker had thought the same thing and had scarpered years before.

That my father tolerated having me in his bed indicates not only that his wife and the girls were occupying the other three, but also that he was happy not to be left alone. Maybe he saw me as an early warning alarm in case the harridan sneaked in during the night. The situation in the house deteriorated until the summer of 1928, when I was sent to take a short holiday with an uncle who lived in a nearby village. When I got back, Mrs Parker and her girls were gone. The couple had separated.

When the wicked stepmother leaves, everyone is supposed

to live happily ever after, aren't they? Not in the Johnson fairy tale.

My father was now left with no one to look after him except me. It's not that he was a lazy man, but as a farmworker he had to be up at dawn and generally worked as long as the light lasted. During the lambing season or the harvest, he might only be home long enough to eat and sleep before going back out to work. This meant that the housework, and often the cooking as well, were jobs that I was expected to take on. I also had to help out with farm work too, and, by the time I was 11, I was herding and milking the cows, helping with the harvest and haymaking, feeding the pigs and doing all manner of other jobs. I can't say that I felt too resentful about all that at the time. It was tough, but other kids who lived on farms also had to muck in and help their families. In that respect, I don't think I was very much different from a lot of other young boys. We had no choice in the matter, so we just got on with it. Not having a mother in the house, of course, was what made the biggest difference. Helping out with chores is one thing, but running a home is completely different, especially if you have a man like my father to contend with.

I have no doubt that he had a lot of worries to deal with, especially as he was now having to pay a separation allowance to his ex-wife and some kind of maintenance support for the girls. We were scraping by with no spare cash whatsoever, living off vegetables, eggs, milk or whatever else my father could bring home from the farm. Breakfast was generally bread and lard. All of that helped to turn a man who could best be described as foul-tempered into an absolute ogre. No matter what I did, it seemed that nothing could please him, and, when he was unhappy with me, I got a thrashing. He

shaved with a cut-throat razor and sharpened it with a long leather strop that he kept hanging on the back of the door. If ever he reached for it at anything other than shaving time, I knew I was in for it. Most of the time, I didn't even know what I had done to earn a beating but I do know that, to coin an old phrase, I had more beatings than hot dinners. Hot dinners were very few and far between.

That might make it sound like I was a poor, innocent angel suffering at the hands of a dreadful bully, which isn't entirely true. Like all young lads, I wasn't beyond getting into a bit of mischief. From the time I was seven I went to school in the nearby village of Winthorpe. It was a walk of about a mile and a half – a run if I was short of time. The school had just two classrooms: one for juniors aged seven to 11 and the other for seniors aged 12 to 14. Needless to say, I was expected to be home from school as quickly as my legs could carry me in order to get on with my chores. If I dawdled a little, maybe joining in a knockabout game of cricket in a field with some of the other boys, I would soon know that my father was home. He used to stand at the door and whistle, at which point I had better appear pretty damn quickly or I could expect him to be waiting with the razor strop in his hand. The one time that I may have deserved a whack was when I had managed to scrape together a few pennies – people might give me a penny for running an errand or suchlike – and went into the village shop to buy cigarettes. Naturally, I was too young to be smoking, and the lady behind the counter only gave me the fags because I said that George, one of the farmhands, had sent me to pick them up for him. It worked a treat and I left the shop the proud owner of five Woodbines. Unfortunately, later that

day, George popped into the shop to buy five Woodbines and was surprised to hear that 'Young Len Johnson came by to pick them up for you earlier'. Found out. I'm pretty sure that George would have thought this was hilarious. My father's reaction, on the other hand, was entirely predictable …

Although I acquired a taste for tobacco at a young age, the same can't be said for alcohol. I tried my first sip of beer one morning when I found my father sleeping in his chair by the fire. It was the lambing season and he had been up all night. When he got in, he had had something to eat and a glass of beer. The glass, almost empty, was sitting on the table beside him. As it was my job to tidy things away and wash up, I took the glass and, on my way to the kitchen sink, drained the dregs of the beer. I doubt very much if this had been the finest of quality bottled ales in the first place, but going stale sitting in the bottom of the glass would not have enhanced the flavour at all. I was almost sick. It tasted absolutely foul. For many years afterwards, I couldn't bring myself to go near a pint of beer. Even the smell as I walked past a pub or sat in an RAF mess was enough to remind me of the beer in my father's glass. It was enough, in fact, to remind me of my father and memories of him were something I could definitely live without.

Things weren't all bad at home all of the time. There was always something that I had to look forward to – a visit from Lena. She came home whenever she had a day off and would immediately get her sleeves rolled up in the kitchen to embark on mammoth cooking and baking sessions, as often as not using ingredients that she had brought with her. Lena was the only one who ever asked me about school or took any interest in anything that I was doing. Kind and gentle,

she gave me the attention and affection that every child needs. She looked after me as she always had done. Years before, when I was arguing with one of my older brothers, he shoved me over and went to give me a walloping. Lena stepped in front of him and started yelling at him, and his reaction to this was to draw back his arm to give her a slap. I remember being there, quick as a flash, and punching him right in the face. I was so small that it didn't have much effect – he barely flinched – but he must have got a bit of a shock because he thought better of what he was about to do, leaving us alone and storming off.

Imagine my delight when Lena came back to live with us permanently. That changed my young life entirely. Lena became my surrogate mother and, although I knew nothing of it at the time, she must have sacrificed her own independence to come home and make sure that I was properly looked after. Having Lena at home changed everything and was the first of a series of huge changes that were about to overtake me.

CHAPTER 2

# MERLIN MUSIC AND THE GREAT ESCAPE

Everybody hated it. It was a necessary evil – we all knew that – but that didn't mean that we had to like it. Well, what was there to like, really? A chemical toilet isn't exactly a thing of great beauty, is it? And the smell can be pretty awful. Yet when we climbed the ladder and stuck our heads through Chuck-Chuck's crew door, the Elsan toilet was always there to great us, emitting its least offensive pong – just a faint aroma of disinfectant. Fortunately, the greeting was brief and with a bit of willpower you might not have to see the thing again for the rest of the trip. Once in the air we avoided using it if we possibly could. This part of the Lanc didn't benefit from any of the heat that was channelled in from the starboard inboard engine. That blasted out from a vent by the radio operator's station. Len Eaton could be sitting there in a comfortable heat of 15 degrees Celsius or thereabouts, but, back there, the temperature might be minus 20 degrees or below. When it's that cold, you don't want to be baring any flesh unless it's an

absolute necessity. It didn't help that, if we were above 10,000 feet, you had to use a handheld oxygen bottle when you were moving about inside the aircraft, making fiddling around with gloves, zips and buttons even more tricky.

To avoid having to use the dreaded Elsan, and as part of their pre-flight routine, some aircrew liked to water the rear wheel of their Lanc before boarding. Some people came to rely on rituals like that – putting on their flight gear in the same order while sitting in the same spot by the lockers, or always being the third to board the aircraft. They believed that it brought them luck before setting off on an operation. I can't say that I was ever bothered by that sort of thing. For me, superstition counted a lot less than the faith that I had in the crew, and the unshakeable belief that Joe would always bring us back.

Directly ahead as you hauled yourself in through the crew door was the flare chute. When the bombs were dropped over the target, a flare would be released automatically to provide illumination for the camera to photograph our bombing effort. The photograph would be studied later to judge how close we got.

Prior to joining Joe's crew, I flew a few trips as a 'tail-end Charlie' rear gunner. That meant turning left at the crew door and climbing up onto the tail spar. I then had to clamber through a set of doors that separated the rear gunner's station from the rest of the aircraft, hang my parachute in its place on my left and slide forwards, feet first, into the turret. Even for someone as slim, fit and lithe as I then was, the rear turret was a cramped space. It didn't help that we had to wear so many layers of clothing. On my feet I had silk socks, woollen socks and my big sheepskin-lined flying boots. To keep the rest of

me warm, I wore silk long johns, a shirt, my blue battledress uniform, a thick woollen jumper, an electrically heated overall suit and flying overalls that covered the whole lot. I also wore at least two pairs of gloves, one pair electrically heated like the suit, and the huge flying gauntlets that came up almost to my elbows. Then there was a Mae West life jacket, my parachute harness and flying helmet with oxygen mask and goggles attached.

Once I had squirmed into the hard seat, I closed the turret's two sliding doors behind me and settled in. That was me for the rest of the flight – up to nine hours or more. I didn't want to have to move wearing all that kit and I certainly didn't want to start fiddling around with it all just to visit the Elsan. Apart from any inconvenience to myself, the gunners were the aircraft's early warning system and you weren't much use as a lookout if you were sitting on the toilet. Night fighters liked to attack from behind, making the lonely rear gunner the most important lookout. I had four .303 calibre Browning machine guns at my disposal but my primary job was to spot enemy aircraft and warn the pilot, who would then take evasive action. Shouting the warning over the intercom was more important than trying to take aim, and once the pilot started throwing the aircraft around all over the sky you had practically no chance of getting a shot in. Nevertheless, the rear gunner packed the biggest punch when it came to defending the Lancaster, and German pilots knew that perfectly well. If a night fighter pilot could take out the rear gunner, his path was clear to attack the Lancaster from behind, and the cannon with which the German night fighters were armed had a far greater range than the Browning machine guns. This meant that the rear gunner was the most vulnerable of all

of us aboard a Lanc, giving the tail-end Charlie the shortest life expectancy amongst Lancaster crews. On Joe's crew, of course, Dave Rodger was in the rear turret and, thankfully, he beat the odds.

Adding to the discomfort, although no rear gunner cared too much about that, was the fact that a large section of the turret's Perspex was removed – an alteration known as the Gransden Lodge modification – to give the gunner an unobstructed field of vision, free from frozen condensation or oil smears. Of course, this made the turret even colder, but it did mean that what you might have thought was a speck of dirt on the Perspex didn't suddenly turn out to be a Messerschmitt. The feeling was that it was better to be cold than to be cold and dead.

I didn't do many trips as a rear gunner so, for the most part, on boarding the aircraft I turned right, heading towards the nose, making my way up the sloping walkway inside the fuselage, the Lancaster sitting back on its tail wheel with its nose in the air when at rest. The Lanc was a big aircraft in its day. It would, of course, be dwarfed by a modern jumbo jet, the Boeing 747 having twice its wingspan with a fuselage three times the length of the Lanc, but, compared with four-engined bombers of the time, the Lanc was just a little smaller than the Stirling or the American B-17 Flying Fortress. Yet it could carry a greater payload than any other bomber until the B-29 Superfortress came along, and its huge bomb bay meant that there really wasn't a lot of spare room. Clambering through the fuselage, flanked by the ammunition channels on either side that swept down from a pair of hoppers near the mid-upper turret to feed a constant stream of .303 rounds all the way to the guns in the rear turret, it took just a couple of

steps to reach the first major obstacle. This was the mid-upper turret, which I had to dodge round and duck under. My very first operational trip was made sitting in this turret.

The mid-upper gunner had a far easier time than the tail-end Charlie. To install myself in the turret, I stowed my parachute in its space on the left, flipped down a step attached to the fuselage and climbed up into the turret, where my head and shoulders were inside the Perspex dome. I then swung a little bench seat into position under my backside. The seat was suspended on clips attached to either side of the turret, a bit like a hammock or a garden swing but not nearly as comfortable. Ammunition for the twin Brownings in the mid-upper was supplied via a belt feed from two hoppers that were built into the lower section of the turret. Although not as cold as the rear turret, the mid-upper gunner still needed to wear an electrically heated suit. The suit could become unbearably hot when the aircraft was still on the ground, so we usually preferred to wait until we were airborne before plugging ourselves in. Making any sort of equipment check was, in any case, better done once the engines had started up.

The majority of my trips were made not as a gunner but as a bomb aimer. That meant that I had to skirt round and under Ron Batson in the mid-upper turret, then take a step up as the walkway ran along the top of the bomb bay. There was now a good deal less headroom, so I had my head bowed as I made my way forwards where ducts for wiring and hydraulics lines laced the walls. The small window in the escape hatch in the roof shed a little light into the gloom. Early Lancs had a series of small side windows about a foot wide and six inches high that helped bring more of the fading outside natural light into the fuselage, but in service these windows were often painted

over on the outside with camouflage markings and on later aircraft they were missing altogether.

Next came the two wing spars. The smaller rear spar was easy enough to step over, and here there was a little space on the left taken up by the rest station. This wasn't a place for a quiet kip if you were feeling a bit weary, but was intended for wounded crew members. It wasn't a flat bed but a reclined bench where you could lie back but not lie down. I suppose it took up less room that way. I never had cause to try it out and I'm very glad to say that I never saw anyone else in need of it either.

Next came the main spar, requiring a bit of a scramble. The main wing spar on a Lancaster ran just behind the leading edge of each wing, supporting the four Merlins, and right through the fuselage, leaving an arched gap between the spar and the ceiling. Everyone had to bend double to climb through. It wasn't so difficult for a small fry like me, even with all of the kit I was wearing, but a bulkier bloke wasn't best suited to the Lancaster. How Joe managed, I've no idea.

By now, deep inside the fuselage, there were other smells taking over from the Elsan's disinfectant. The smell of the canvas and sheepskin of my flying kit was such a regular, commonplace thing that I didn't really notice it after a while. Even the whiff of the rubber and soft chamois leather of the oxygen mask dangling loose under my chin was such a routine sensation that it didn't make much of an impression, but the sweet aroma of engine oil, lubricating grease, aviation fuel and glycol (used as a coolant in the engine and also as a de-icer on the cockpit windows) was unmistakable. That was Chuck-Chuck's perfume. It was a heady scent.

On the left as you came over the main spar was the wireless

operator's station. Here Len Eaton sat facing forwards with a small desk in front of him and his radio transmitter and receiver towering towards the ceiling. Len did not, of course, have the luxury of voice communications with base when we were over enemy-occupied Europe, instead receiving and tapping out messages in Morse code. Stowed below Len's desk was his pigeon. As I understand it, military aircraft leaving the UK were supposed to be equipped with two carrier pigeons in case the aircraft had to make a crash-landing and the radio was knocked out. The radio operator could then send a pigeon with a message tied to its leg, letting those back home know the aircraft's location. I only recall Len ever having one pigeon, not two, and I think that, later in the war, they gave up on carrying pigeons altogether.

Forward of the radio operator was where our navigator, Don MacLean, worked his magic. He sat at a table facing the port side with enough room to spread out his maps, check his timings and keep us on course. Don had the luxury of a little more space, but, if he was sitting in his seat by the time you got there, it didn't leave you much room to squeeze past. There was another small space in front of Don's chart table where a 'spare' pilot could sit. Before they went out for the first time on an operation, pilots would do two or three trips as a passenger to get a feel for what it was like flying in the thick of it. Ordinarily, this would be where the flight engineer sat, monitoring his instruments and gauges that were on a panel on the starboard fuselage. When the pilot needed him, especially for take-off, the flight engineer would sit on a chair that folded down and swung out from its mounting close to his bank of instruments. Bill Radcliffe would spend a lot of the trip on this swing-out seat, because from there he could

scan the sky. Another pair of eyes looking out for fighters was always welcome.

Beneath the Perspex astrodome above Don's station and the whole 'greenhouse' canopy of the cockpit, there was plenty of light and I could clearly see the banks of gauges and dials that Joe and Bill used to monitor Chuck-Chuck's behaviour. Joe's seat was high up on the port side. There was a large section of armour plate behind the pilot's head in a Lanc – the only armour plating on the whole aircraft. The Lanc's skin was aluminium and just a couple of millimetres thick – not even as thick as the bodywork on your car. You could have stuck a screwdriver through it, so it was never going to stand up against large chunks of red-hot shrapnel, let alone the 20mm cannon rounds that a night fighter could send our way. Of course, all aeroplanes were the same, and still are. The skin has to be thin and light in order to keep the weight down. Cynics are prone to say that the armour plate behind Joe would never have stopped a cannon round but that's hardly the point. Any protection the pilot could be given was worth having because without him we'd all had it.

Once past the pilot's seat, I dropped down below the flight deck into my 'office'. I had to get to this point in the aircraft before Bill Radcliffe was settled into the swing-out seat, otherwise he blocked my way down into the nose. By rights, I should have been sitting in my crash position with my back to the main spar during take-off, but you couldn't see a thing from there and I much preferred to be down in my office. The entire nose section of the Lanc was forward of the bomb bay and down here I had more space to move around than most of the others but several jobs to do. Above me, but still below Joe's line of sight and forward of the cockpit, was my own gun

turret fitted with two .303 calibre Brownings. During most of the trip I was a gunner, but, because I had such a good view of the ground ahead through the Perspex bubble that formed the nose cone, I would also help out the navigator by picking up landmarks. Then, once we were approaching the target, I took up my position as bomb aimer. I had a padded bench to support me when I lay face down in the nose of the aircraft to use the bombsights during the bombing run.

From my office I could hear Bill upstairs helping Joe to strap himself in. I could watch the ground crew performing their final chores. One would remove the protective cover from the pitot head, the tube that pointed forwards and measured air pressure, which was transformed into the Lanc's speed on the pilot's air speed indicator. Another would be trundling forwards with the accumulator trolley to provide electric power to help with the engine start-up. And then the music would begin.

There is simply no other way to describe it. A Rolls-Royce Merlin engine on song is a beautiful sound. Four of them make music that takes your breath away – quite literally. Everyone knows that feeling when a big firework goes off at a display. You can feel the shock wave from the explosion hitting you, compressing your chest for an instant, making you gasp. Inside the cylinders of any combustion engine, like the engine in most cars, there is a controlled explosion when the fuel and air are ignited. That's where the power comes from. Most cars have four cylinders and the average car might have an engine capacity of 1.6 litres. A car engine can create a bit of a din when it's started up. The Merlin engine had 12 cylinders and a capacity of 27 litres, with an explosion firing in each cylinder several times a second. That is what created

the breathtaking thunder when a Merlin started up. One Merlin on its own made an incredible sound. Four running in harmony was simply sublime. I was always in awe of the power that created that sound, and still am when I hear those engines today.

The music began when the starboard inner turned over with a splutter of smoke, a bark, and then the mighty roar as all 12 cylinders began firing. If we were off on an op, the engines would rarely be started from stone cold. Either the ground crew would have run them up or Joe would have had us all aboard for an air test earlier in the day. Next came the starboard outer, the propeller turning slowly anti-clockwise before the engine caught and the prop turned to a blur. The entire aircraft was now vibrating, trembling as though anxious to get off the ground. The port inner came next, then the port outer, settling and balancing the vibration to a constant, insistent buzz.

If you compare a Lanc with a modern aircraft, you might think that it looks a bit primitive, but to me, sitting in the nose in 1942, it was a technological wonder. You have to remember that, only a few short years earlier, most aircraft were biplanes built from canvas and wood with wires bracing the wings to keep them in shape. These aeroplanes were slow and very basic. The Gloster Gauntlet biplane fighter, which entered service with the RAF just seven years before the Lanc, had neither the speed nor the service ceiling of our heavy bomber – it would never have been able to catch us. The Gauntlet was being phased out around the time that the Lanc was coming into service and the bomber was a far more sophisticated aircraft. In my 'office' in the nose I had banks of switches to deal with and an elaborate bombsight that could calculate the trajectory of the payload, taking into account wind speed and the terminal velocity of the

falling bombs. This was a £50,000 aircraft – a huge amount of money at a time when I was earning a reasonably good wage of just under £5 a week.

So there I was, smiling to myself in the nose of Chuck-Chuck with two Merlin engines howling either side, feeling the expectation build as the aircraft was prepared for take-off. Outside, far off across the runway and the various dispersal areas, were the fields and farms of Lincolnshire. How had a simple farm lad whose best friend was a pig come to be sitting at the sharp end of Britain's most technologically advanced war machine? Looking back, it's clear that Miss V. Boast had a lot to do with it.

I never knew her first name. After all, as a child, you're never actually on first-name terms with your teachers, are you? To me she was Miss Boast, the headmistress at Winthorpe Elementary School, not a friend or a relative whose first name I could be expected to know. It would seem, however, that Miss Boast knew me and my situation far better than I knew her. I was doing reasonably well at school, although I didn't have any academic ambitions at all. The clever kids went on from a school like ours to a grammar school, but there was no way that I was going to be allowed to sit the 'Eleven Plus' exam that you had to pass to get into a grammar school. Apart from anything else, even if I had passed, we would not have been able to afford the uniform. Miss Boast must have known this, just as she must have known all about my situation at home. I think that's why she came up with the idea that I should go to the Lord Wandsworth Agricultural College in Hampshire.

In 1932, aged 11, I had a chat with a man from the college. I don't remember his name but, at our school, it was a

red-letter day when a stranger came to visit, so I recall the interview well enough. It was a general chat rather than a test or an exam but I suppose that Miss Boast would have given the college access to my school reports to let them see what sort of a student I was. She had applied to the college on my behalf, having first learned all about the place and, I suspect, without having consulted my father at all. That got me as far as being accepted by the college without his being able to scotch the idea from the outset. I certainly don't recall telling him anything about it. There would never have been an opportunity, really. Any meals that we had together were eaten in silence and, in any case, he took no interest whatsoever in anything that I was doing at school. It was Miss Boast who officially informed him that I had been accepted into the Lord Wandsworth Agricultural College.

This was a boarding school that had been established for children of agricultural families – children who had been orphaned or had lost one parent. The school prospectus from the early 1930s states that: 'The Trustees undertake the entire responsibility for the maintenance and education up to the age of 21 years or such earlier age as the child may be judged to be in a position to earn its own living.' You might think that the phrase 'entire responsibility' would have been of interest to my father, especially as he now had Lena back as a domestic slave, but he didn't care enough about me, or care enough about anything to do with my education, even to read the prospectus. When he was told about the college plan, his reaction was typically blunt, forthright and entirely negative. 'No – you will leave school when you're 14, get a job and start bringing some money into the house!'

Far from admitting defeat, Miss Boast very astutely launched

a tactical counterattack by calling in reinforcements in the shape of the local squire's wife, Mrs Curtis. This lady took a keen interest in the welfare of the village children and treated my father to a stern lecture about how he was denying me the chance of a better education and considerably improved prospects for a better life. My father's response to anyone talking to him like that would normally have been short and far from sweet, but he was smart enough to know that, if he sent the squire's wife packing, the squire would get to hear about it and that could have serious implications for his future employment. Without even a hint of appreciation for those who had devoted their time and effort to my future welfare, my father washed his hands of me with the words, 'I suppose he'd better go then.'

In September 1932 I left Langford, Lena travelling with me on the bus to Newark and waving me off as I boarded the train bound for London. It was a daunting journey – exciting, but a little nerve-racking as well for a youngster who had never travelled more than about 20 miles on a bus before. The tickets, of course, had all been paid for by the college and I was met at King's Cross Station by a man from Lord Wandsworth's, Mr Brown, who took me on the London Underground to Waterloo Station. It's tempting to think that, as an 11-year-old country bumpkin, I was totally overawed by the great metropolis and the railway that ran under the streets, but my whole upbringing up to that time had made me a very pragmatic youngster. I didn't feel that I had been transported to another world, just that this was how the rest of the world lived. I think I was probably too concerned about what was happening to me to enjoy my first trip to London. At Waterloo, we met up with a group of boys who were also

bound for the college and together we boarded another train for the journey out to Winchfield. School transport then ferried us all to the college at Long Sutton.

Lord Wandsworth College is a remarkable institution. It still exists today, albeit now as a thoroughly modern school for boarders and day pupils, boys and girls. The school takes its name from Baron Stern, 1st Lord Wandsworth, who provided the funds used to establish it. Sydney James Stern was born in 1844, the son of Viscount de Stern, senior partner of bankers Stern Brothers. Educated at Cambridge, he spent some time working in his father's firm but was more interested in embarking on a political career. Having failed to be elected as an MP on four previous occasions, he eventually won the seat for Stowmarket in Suffolk in 1891. Representing a rural constituency, it's not surprising that he took a considerable interest in rural poverty and the well-being of working-class people in agriculture. During his time as an MP he was the author of a Bill for better housing for the less fortunate in rural districts. On the death of his father, he inherited not only considerable wealth but also the title of Viscount de Stern. In 1895 he was granted a peerage, largely as the result of a generous donation to Liberal Party funds. 'Cash for peerages' was clearly not of major concern at the end of the nineteenth century and he took the title Lord Wandsworth from the area of London where his family had significant property interests. He never married and when he died in 1912 he left a large fortune to charitable causes, including over £1 million (approximately £80 million at today's value) towards the establishment of a residential foundation for orphan children.

Lord Wandsworth had appointed four close friends as

trustees and his instructions for setting up the orphanage had been quite specific. He wanted to establish an orphanage for the upbringing of children, preferably from the families of agricultural labourers and with preference given to those born 'in the north-west parliamentary district of Suffolk for which I was a member of Parliament'. The trustees, however, chose to expand his lordship's proposed scheme into a far more ambitious project. A number of sites were considered and in 1914 they purchased an estate, comprising 950 acres and two farms, in the rather isolated village of Long Sutton in Hampshire. All the existing farm equipment was sold, and the intentions of the trustees were made clear in a notice that the auctioneers of the machinery posted, stating that: 'The Trustees intend to stock the farm with entirely new implements. The Long Sutton Estate has been acquired by the Lord Wandsworth Trustees for the institution of a fully equipped and endowed agricultural college where a scientific and practical training will be given in every branch connected with agriculture.' So much for the simple orphanage.

While development of the estate continued at pace, with 25 workers including labourers, shepherds, pigmen, cowmen, tractor drivers and a management team in place by 1921, people became concerned that there were very few actual 'orphans' around. Some 10 years after the death of the benefactor, there were only 17 children under care and little educational work was being undertaken. Lord Wandsworth's will had created considerable public interest and questions were raised in the House of Commons about what progress was being made. In 1922 the Trustees responded with a stroke of brilliance, or perhaps a little good fortune, by appointing Colonel W. L. Julyan. From the outset he saw the future of the establishment

as primarily educational, although this was to be no ordinary school. It would be an agricultural college, teaching a general education syllabus along with agricultural science and practical work. True to Lord Wandsworth's wishes it would be exclusively for orphan or one-parent children from needy agricultural families.

The prospectus stated that:

> *The general scheme of instruction is to provide a boy with a normal course of education until he reaches the age of about 14 years. He learns to read and write and to lay the necessary foundations of his mental development … The boy who shows the intellectual capacity is picked out for special instruction that will fit him to pass the necessary examinations and to proceed to some place of higher or technical education such as an Agricultural College or a University. If the boy is not of the type to make use of higher education as he grows older and develops an inclination to one side or another, his training becomes specialised so that he may eventually become qualified to take charge of a herd, a poultry establishment, the tractor equipment of a farm, farm accounts etc. …*

By the early 1930s the school was being run by the Principal, Colonel Little; the Warden, Colonel Julyan; the Secretary (Bursar), Captain Radcliffe; six masters and two farm managers. They took 'entire responsibility' for around 150 disadvantaged boys, providing them with whatever opportunities they could in order to create a better life. 'Everyone is good at something' was their credo. Their aim was to find that something and to build on it. This was not

like the schools that we hear so much of today, schools that appear to care more for their ranking in government league tables, protecting their status by rejecting those who do not achieve at the highest level. The college came to mean a great deal to me. It was my home for six years, but it took a little getting used to.

When I first arrived, like all newcomers, I went to the Junior House, across the fields from the main school buildings. We slept in dormitories of 12, making this a new, embarrassing and somewhat frightening experience. The boys had an initiation ceremony, which involved the large laundry basket that was put out at the end of the dormitory at the end of each week for the collection of dirty linen. At the earliest opportunity, a new boy was stripped, dumped in the basket, and taken on a high-speed ride down the dormitory, being pushed and shoved this way and that. You were then thrown into a cold bath. Horseplay like that was hardly a threatening experience, considering how I had been brought up, but it did nothing to calm my apprehension. With the initiation over, however, I did start to settle in to school life, and it wasn't at all bad.

We were equipped with school clothes, day suits, Sunday suits, shirts, underclothes, socks, boots and new pyjamas. I had never worn a pair of pyjamas before, or underwear for that matter. At home I would go to sleep in my day shirt. Food was basic but good and plentiful. We had breakfast, lunch, high tea and something to drink before bedtime. This was luxurious compared with what I had been used to. If any of us juniors stepped out of line, however, one of the punishments meted out by the prefects was the 'bread and water tea'. On one occasion, for whatever reason, the whole junior school

was subjected to this. The punishment backfired when the kitchen staff took pity on us and produced masses of freshly baked bread. It tasted delicious and we all enjoyed our meal just as much as we would normally have done.

Of course, this new kind of school life was thoroughly alien to me and I felt out of sorts for a good while. The daily routine helped but I struggled in getting to grips with being taught different subjects by different masters. Then there was organised sport – something else that was completely new to me. We had football (soccer), cricket and cross-country running. Those who were interested and had some musical knowledge, or aptitude, were encouraged to learn to play the piano. There was a lot going on and I don't think I was really comfortable with it all until I went up to the senior school. Perhaps I couldn't quite believe that this new life was happening to me. It was, after all, a far better lifestyle than I had ever known before, but it was all very strange. I was surrounded by boys from all parts of the country. They, naturally, all spoke with different accents, but before long we were all adopting the kind of 'neutral' accent that so many children of service families seem to acquire. It was something that we all did in an effort to feel like we were fitting in, although I admit that my broad Lincolnshire dialect took some getting rid of.

Going home on holidays (of which there were few – Christmas and a summer break) meant being escorted to King's Cross the first time that I made the trip. Once home, I made a point of going back to my old elementary school and showing off my new clothes and new posh accent, making a beeline for the senior girls who were still there and were very impressed. That, of course, was as far as it went. I had no idea what to

do with a girl, whether I managed to impress her or not. I met up with my old friends from the village but we didn't seem to have that much in common any more. I had most definitely moved on, my life had changed, and, through no fault of their own, they were still stuck in the same old rut. I should think that they even resented me swanning around and showing off. At home, Lena was the only one who wanted to know how I was getting on. My father showed his customary degree of interest – none whatsoever. With him it was back to the old 'speak when you are spoken to' routine. Naturally, I was also required to do my share of work on the farm.

When I was 13, I moved up to senior school, where things were very different. Classes were geared to preparation for the School Certificate exams, which meant eight different subjects – English, maths, history, geography, biology, chemistry, physics and woodwork. We also had to gain some practical experience working on the farm and in the school gardens. Sport became a serious interest and I played house football and cricket as well as becoming a pretty good cross-country and middle-distance runner. The years spent trotting a mile and a half to Winthorpe School had obviously paid off. In my final two years I played for the school first XI at both football and cricket. I thought I was pretty good at both, although an entry in the 1939 school magazine – *The Sower* – gives an entirely different impression.

> *Unquestionably the defence was not the rock-like structure we should have wished to see. The full-backs, Johnson, Searle and Davies (when he recovered from his accident) were not certain to clear the ball in an emergency and positional defence sometimes made dangerous gaps.*

*In the circumstances, our goalkeepers were sometimes overworked and likely to produce a jumpy state of nerves.*

I think that may be a little harsh, but the same issue of the magazine records me being second in the batting averages (23.2) and 'an outstanding fielder at point'.

The same year I won the inter-house 880 yards and One Mile events. From time to time girls from another local school would come to Lord Wandsworth College to watch our sports days and attend a dance afterwards. When I won both my races, my friend Bill Tacchi, who had beaten me in the same races the year before, said, 'You only did that to impress your girlfriend!' Girlfriend? That was news to me. I didn't know I had a girlfriend. I was painfully shy and had no confidence with girls. Bill, miffed at being beaten into second place, was just pulling my leg. At the dance, most of us boys, having been taught some dance steps at school, shuffled around the hall with some unfortunate girl, finding the enforced socialising incredibly awkward. Playing cricket or running was far easier!

Academically, I managed to keep my head above water, although I wasn't the most gifted of students. Our headmaster was called Mr Johnson, which didn't do me many favours. If you got caught doing something you shouldn't, he was the one who administered the caning. He used to boast that he could lay six of the best on the width of a sixpence. I only had one occasion to discover how right that was. I've no idea what my crime was, but I'm fairly sure I must have deserved it. Fortunately, you didn't get a caning for bad handwriting, otherwise I'd have been seeing a lot more of Mr Johnson. Our English master Mr James – inevitably known as 'Jimmy'

– once said to me, 'You know, Johnson, they say you can tell a person's character from his handwriting. Yours must be pretty awful.'

For maths we had Mr Bowden, who loved telling what he considered to be jokes. One of these went: 'Why is a mouse when it spins? Because the higher the fewer.' I still don't get it, even after 70 years. Biology was Mr Goodliffe. In one of the lessons on reproduction, he recited a limerick:

*There once was a young fellow called Sarkey*
*Who had an affair with a darky.*
*The result of his sins was triplets, not twins,*
*One white, one black and one khaki.*

Of course, this is totally unacceptable nowadays, and I'm not even sure that it did any good in helping us to appreciate the importance of chromosomes.

My School Certificate results were adequate but no better. To pass your School Cert you had to pass at least seven out of the eight papers with at least one distinction. This I managed to achieve. When we met shortly after the results were known, the headmaster said to me, 'Congratulations, Johnson. How did you manage it?' I had thought of becoming a vet but I was never going to be able to pass all the required exams, so I decided to make a career in horticulture. This meant working full time in the gardens, which I thoroughly enjoyed. The head gardener also tutored us on the Royal Horticultural Society Junior Certificate, which I eventually passed. When it was time for me to leave school, I applied for and got a job as an assistant park keeper in Basingstoke. It was December 1939 when I left Lord Wandsworth Agricultural College. War had

been declared three months previously and none of us knew what lay in store, so in such uncertain times it was a huge comfort for me to have the college there in the background, always looking out for my best interests.

The college had not only helped me to find the job in Basingstoke but had also arranged my digs. In mid-December, Colonel Little wrote to the borough surveyor:

> *We are pleased for the above (G. L. Johnson) to accept the post in your Parks and Gardens on the terms stated:-*
> *Weekly wage, first year 27/6d per week [£1.35]*
> *Weekly wage, second year 30/- per week [£1.50]*
> *Minimum Term of engagement – two years*
> *… We trust that this lad will give you every satisfaction.*

On 28 December, Captain Radcliffe confirmed with a Mrs Martin that she would provide:

> *… board and lodging for one of our students, George Leonard Johnson, who is starting work at the Basingstoke Memorial Park on 1st January.*
>
> *Please confirm that you are willing to provide full board and washing for the sum of 25/- [£1.25] per week.*
>
> *You will find Johnson a very steady and well behaved boy. He was Head Prefect in this school and a Patrol Scout Leader and I am sure he will not give you any trouble.*

I remember Mrs Martin and her family very well. They were good to me at a time when I was going through another great upheaval. I wrote to Captain Radcliffe on 8 January 1940, saying:

*I arrived here last Sunday and by now I have settled into my new home. The lodgings are very good and although, as you know, I have to share a room, my roommate is a very nice fellow. He is the middle son of three living with their mother. The food is good and there is plenty of it. Everyone seems to almost go out of their way to make me feel at home and be one of the family.*

My roommate was Fred. I doubt that he was best pleased at his new sleeping arrangements but he probably wasn't given much choice. Money was tight for so many people in those days and his mother must have been pleased to have a guaranteed regular rent coming in. I had very little cash to spare but did have the college reaching out to make sure that I coped. On 10 January, Captain Radcliffe wrote to me saying:

*Your financial position seems to be as follows:-*
*Wages £1 7s 6d*
*Lodging Fees £1 5s 0d*
*Insurance 1s 0d*
*Hospital 2d*
*Pocket Money 2s 6d*
*Total £1 8s 8d*
*Leaving a balance of 1s 2d a week to be contributed by the College (in addition to the 5/- per week which we are saving for you here)*

The college was basically making sure that I could make ends meet, even including an allowance for pocket money. Captain Radcliffe also recommended an insurance company with which I should take out a policy, with the college

paying the weekly premium of 1/3d (1 shilling and 3 old pence) 'until you are earning sufficient to do this out of your own pocket'. They carried on paying it until 1945, never questioning whether I could meet the cost myself, more than fulfilling their obligation to take 'entire responsibility' for me until I was 21. Whenever I needed anything, such as a few shillings from my savings after I had been forced to take unpaid time off work when I had the flu, the college was there for me. Even when I decided to join a local cricket club in May 1940, they did their best:

> *I am hoping to join a cricket club in the near future. I was over at Long Sutton the other day and Mr Warner very generously offered to help with trousers and shirts and if necessary the subscription. I would also like a pair of cricket boots and also a cricket bat if possible. There are, of course, club bats but it would be so much better to have one so as to be sure of using the same one every time. The subscription is only 4/6d per season … I am going on holiday on June 8th and would you please forward me four pounds to cover the travelling and holiday expenses.*

For the first time Captain Radcliffe seemed to be a little peevish in his response:

> *I will send you the £4 you ask for but you are running your balance perilously low. I will remind Mr Warner about your flannels and shirts. We will provide you with some cricket boots if you will let me know what they cost. You ought to be able to get them for about 12/6d but I am afraid the College cannot give you a bat.*

They couldn't give me a bat, but they had, in fact, given me so much more. I know that I didn't truly appreciate what the college did for me at the time, perhaps because the only lifestyle with which I could compare college life was so far removed from it – the grim place that was my home. Perhaps I also took the efforts that they made on my behalf a little for granted. Certainly, it wasn't until I was older and wiser that I realised just how much Lord Wandsworth College had done for me and how good they had been to me. The military men who ran the school gave me a glimpse of life in an institution that certainly stood me in good stead when it came to serving in the RAF. Yet 'institution' seems too cold and harsh a word to describe Lord Wandsworth College and its ethos. True to their word, they cared for me and cared about me, which is something that, aside from my lovely sister Lena, I had not experienced before. They had taken a shy and nervous little boy and helped him take the first steps towards becoming an increasingly confident young man. For that I will be forever grateful.

In 2008, I returned to Lord Wandsworth College for the first time since 1940. I spent a fine day out being treated like royalty by the alumni association and being shown round the fabulous modern school. They have had to move with the times and only around 10 per cent of the pupils now have their fees paid by the foundation. Their academic record these days is truly excellent and their recreational and sports facilities are marvellous. The school has produced a clutch of England rugby internationals, including 2003 Rugby World Cup hero Jonny Wilkinson.

While I was visiting the college, I asked if anyone knew what had happened to another former student – my old best pal

Charlie Cole. School records show that Charlie had trained as a fighter pilot and been stationed in India. In January 1944 he disappeared on a mission and his body was never found. His name appears on the Singapore Memorial within Kranji Cemetery which bears the names of 24,000 casualties of the Commonwealth land and air forces who have no known grave, including airmen who died during operations over the whole of southern and eastern Asia.

Such is the way of things. Poor old Charlie's luck ran out a long way from home on the other side of the world. I, too, was to travel far afield over the coming months, but my luck was to hold good.