

FOREWORD

Ron Needle is relaxing in the neat living room of his sheltered-housing flat near Birmingham, part of a complex owned by the Bournville Village Trust, and founded in 1900 by the world-famous chocolate-making Cadbury family. Sitting in the automated easy chair bought for him by a military charity that cares for veterans who have lost limbs, he can gaze through his windows at well-manicured lawns and flower beds filled with purple petunias. The bright summer sun is streaming in but the ongoing heatwave is ‘a bit much’ for him. ‘Still,’ he says, ‘there are always worse things that can happen!’ He tells me he is the luckiest man alive, grateful for every day of his life.¹

Ninety-three-year-old Ron is a veteran of Royal Air Force Bomber Command, where he served as a rear gunner on the Lancaster bomber. He is the only Second World War veteran residing in the home, which he loves. He likes to get involved in the many activities on offer; the crafts, coffee mornings and more. A widower, living alone, Ron enjoys the company.

He is surrounded by memorabilia from his time in the RAF; books about Bomber Command and his beloved Lancaster crowd the shelves. A large wooden carving of St Evre church in the small village of Méligny-le-Grand in north-east France has pride of place on the wall behind him. Beneath it, on the floor, sits a framed print entitled *The Eternal Salute*, depicting a war-time Lancaster surging through a turbulent, overcast sky. In the

corner of the picture, above the clouds, five aircrew gaze into the distance.

It is not a specific aircraft, or five particular young men, but a simple tribute to the thousands of Lancasters downed during the Second World War and the many members of Bomber Command who gave their lives. A tribute to the many friends and colleagues Ron lost in battle. The print cost him £100 – a significant sum for the war pensioner. But he won't be hanging it here; he is taking it to Méigny-le-Grand in a few weeks. He has some difficulty walking or standing for extended periods these days, but age and weary bones will not prevent him from making this journey. It has a very personal significance for Ron. It harks back to a time when his life hung in the balance.

The other residents and staff in his home regularly ask him what he did in the war. He answers their questions politely but keeps much of the detail to himself. Many of those memories, though seventy-three years old, are still raw and distressing. More importantly, Ron doesn't want to seem to be boasting about his role in the conflict.

I have experienced this reluctance to talk freely with almost every veteran I have interviewed; they have to be pressed, to be cajoled to open up. As part of the military family, albeit a somewhat younger member, I understand their caution. While I could never compare my own experiences as a young RAF Tornado navigator over a mere seven weeks during the first Gulf War in 1991 with Ron's countless sorties in the skies above Germany in the 1940s, I can certainly relate to the fear, exhilaration and desperation of battle, having been shot down over Iraq in January 1991, then captured, tortured and paraded on television screens around the world.

My personal war had been relatively short but deeply unpleasant. In the aftermath, I attended a number of military functions and began to meet some of my forebears who had flown the early bombers into the heart of German-occupied Europe during the darkest days of the Second World War. I noticed immediately that they were more comfortable sharing their experiences of combat over a beer

with someone who could really understand its complex and often confusing cocktail of fear and excitement. They were more guarded with those outside the military family, who they worried might think they were ‘shooting a line’ or exaggerating their involvement in a conflict that defined a generation and changed the shape of the modern world. The refrain I continue to hear most often is, ‘I didn’t do anything extraordinary. There were no heroics. I just did the same job everyone else was doing.’

On one level, Ron Needle’s reluctance to go into detail is entirely understandable; he *was* doing the same as all the other young men and women who stood in the way of the existential threat posed by Nazi Germany. However, both individually and collectively, they *were* a truly exceptional generation.



Ron Needle during training as a rear gunner

Excited chatter fills the aviation halls at the RAF Museum in Hendon, north London, as parties of young schoolchildren skip

around the iconic exhibits. Ron Needle and I are less vocal, but still delighted to be at the heart of this incredible display. We have come to visit one of the few surviving Lancaster bombers so we can share his memories of the giant aircraft. His legs are weak now, so I push his wheelchair slowly past some of the other items tracking the history of flight from the Wright brothers' first foray in 1903 to the jet-powered air force of today. As the kids dash from hall to hall, we meander, revelling in our shared enjoyment of time spent in the skies.

We pause at the wood and canvas 'string bags' of the First World War and wonder how anyone could have had the courage to take these flimsy machines beyond the runway, let alone into battle. I show Ron the Tornado I spent much of my RAF career flying; he gasps when I tell him it was capable of around 600 miles per hour. Sitting beneath the wing is a WE177 tactical nuclear bomb, the type of weapon I spent so much time preparing to use against our Cold War enemies.

It is sobering for us to reflect that a handful of WE177s could have caused exponentially more devastation than the astonishing thousand-bomber raids Ron's Bomber Command colleagues embarked upon during the Second World War. One display is playing Winston Churchill's famous 'never in the field of human conflict' tribute to the incredible bravery and sacrifice of 'The Few' during the Battle of Britain. Ron remembers listening with his family to those speeches as a schoolboy: 'We were always inspired by Churchill's broadcasts, though I didn't really understand how I would become involved in the war myself.'

Finally, there she is, in a cavernous hangar, dwarfing all other exhibits. *S-Sugar* towers above us, by far the biggest beast in Hendon's jungle. Although now confined to the ground, she is the world's oldest surviving Lancaster bomber, flying her first operation into the heart of Nazi Germany in the summer of 1942. Her final mission² in May 1945 was collecting liberated prisoners of war, many of whom had survived being shot down flying her kith and kin into battle.³ Bomber Command took the fight to the enemy

when no one else could, and the statistics are as impressive as the aircraft herself.

The four mighty Merlin engines mounted along the 102ft wingspan gave her a top speed of around 280mph and a range of some 2,500 miles. With a 69ft-long fuselage, the aircraft was essentially built around a 33ft bomb bay designed to carry a 14,500lb payload. In later years some Lancasters would be converted to deliver the massive 22,000lb 'Grand Slam' earthquake bomb; the largest conventional weapon dropped during the Second World War.

At the height of the conflict, over a million men and women were employed producing the aircraft and its myriad parts at hundreds of factories on two continents. More service personnel were involved in flying and maintaining the Lancaster than any other British aircraft in history.⁴ Sir Arthur Harris, the no-nonsense chief of Bomber Command, called it his 'shining sword'; 'the greatest single factor in winning the war against Germany'.⁵

The average age of the seven-man crew was a mere twenty-two. Of 7,377 Lancasters built during the war, over half (3,736) were lost to enemy action and in training accidents. *S-Sugar* and Ron Needle are among the lucky survivors. With 137 ops under her belt, *S-Sugar* is one of only twenty Lancasters to have completed over one hundred wartime missions.⁶ A neat tapestry of falling bombs depicting her incredible tally of ops is painted on the fuselage under the cockpit. Beneath the bombs is inscribed Germany's Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring's arrogant boast, 'No enemy plane will fly over the Reich territory.'

Göring had been very wrong.

The RAF's bomber squadrons carried out offensive operations from the first day of the war until the last, more than five and a half years later. They flew nearly 390,000 sorties and dropped around 1 million tons of explosive on enemy targets. Over 10,000 aircraft were lost.⁷

The human cost is also breathtaking. Of the 125,000 men who served in Bomber Command, 55,573 were killed and another 8,400 wounded.⁸ Some 10,000 survived being shot down, only to become

prisoners of war. In simple, brutal terms, if you flew in Bomber Command, you had no more than a 40 per cent chance of surviving the war unscathed, at least physically. The mental toll was largely unrecorded and unrecognised.

At the time, of course, young men like Ron Needle had no idea, indeed no information, about these casualty rates or the odds against survival. Sipping tea in a quiet café a few yards from his beloved Lancaster, Ron says, ‘When I look back now, of course I had no sense of the risks I would face or the deaths I would see. You just didn’t think about those things.’ He throws his head back and laughs. ‘Good God, if I’d thought about it, I’d never have joined up!’

I suspect that even if he had understood the meagre chances of survival, it would have made no difference. Ron and his young comrades *wanted* to be part of the war; were *desperate* not to miss out on the action. Along with almost every single veteran I have spoken to, Ron felt it was his duty to join up, to be *seen* to be part of the fight for survival. ‘The future was unimaginable. I was young and the future simply didn’t concern me! I just wanted to be part of the war; to take the fight back to Germany. I suppose I knew people were dying but I didn’t think of death or the reality of killing anyone myself. I just knew I had to join up and do my bit.’

One of the groups of visiting schoolchildren gathers beneath the Lancaster a few yards from where we are sitting. These five- and six-year-olds in their neat grey pullovers and pink ties are not as tall as the wheel of the undercarriage. They listen to one of the museum staff explaining what the aircraft did and who flew it. Ron listens quietly too. When the guide points out where the rear gunner sat and how it must have been a lonely job, I gently interrupt to tell them that the old man in the wheelchair is one such veteran. The children, and their teachers, stare at Ron in amazement, perhaps wondering how this diminutive figure could have achieved and experienced so much.

The teachers thank him for their freedom. The children give him a round of applause, which attracts other museum visitors. Asked if he might say a few words, Ron struggles out of his wheelchair.

Leaning heavily on his walking stick, he looks into the eager faces of the children and is suddenly overcome with emotion. Eyes glistening, he finds it impossible to speak.

Feeling somewhat guilty that I have initiated the encounter, I step in to explain a little about what life was like for the men who flew the Lancaster. As I tell our audience how many of Ron's friends and colleagues died, my own voice cracks with emotion. The children's eyes, already wide as saucers, widen further when Ron manages to say a few words about what it was like to sit in the rear turret, how cold it was, how dangerous it could be. Eventually, one of the teachers steps forward to take his hand. Turning to her class, she says, 'Children, what do we say to this gentleman and his friends for what they did for all of us during the war?'

'Thank you!' they yell in unison.

I look over to Ron and tears are running down his face.

It is time to move on, and as we continue our own tour of the Lancaster, Ron murmurs, 'Oh, those innocent children! Thank heavens they can have no concept about what we all really went through back then.'

What he 'really went through' is the story I am eager to hear, and some of his memories surface as I wheel him around the bomber. Staring at the narrow door on the side of the fuselage where he and his friends had clambered aboard all those years before, it is clear Ron feels a real affinity with the aircraft.

'Seeing the Lanc up close again brings back so many memories,' he tells me. 'I have always had a fond feeling for her; she took me to war and looked after me in the worst of times. You can see how strong and powerful she looks. Her strength undoubtedly saved my life. The Lanc is the reason I am still alive today, the reason I have a family; my own children and grandchildren.'

Gazing up at the rear turret, a Perspex bubble the size of an oil drum where he spent so many hours over enemy territory, his tired eyes brighten and he sits up in the wheelchair, reaching forward.

'This was my office; how on earth did I fit in there! I spent so much time in this tiny space, on my own, separated from the rest

of the crew, isolated apart from their voices on the intercom. There were so many deaths back then, each one was a father, brother or son to someone. I always try to look on the positives in life. My philosophy has always been simple: whatever will be, will be. But there is also real sadness at the loss of my friends. The camaraderie was so important during the war; we lived together, flew together, drank together and sometimes died together. Being so close to the Lanc again really takes me back to happier times . . . and sad times too.

‘You know, John, I really miss my old crewmates; even after all these years. I still say a prayer and raise a glass of whisky to them every night. Every single night without fail.’ Ron stares into the distance, pain etched on his face. ‘I’m tired of being on my own and I’m looking forward to seeing my mates again.’

His eyes mist over and his head dips. ‘It’s as though it all happened yesterday. I can still see it unfolding in front of my eyes, as if it were only five minutes ago . . .’

*John Nichol, Hertfordshire
Spring 2020*