

Death of a Bomber Pilot

Sadly his wife Norma recently telephoned me to say that her husband Leslie Weaver, a Lancaster pilot and one of Sir Arthur Harris's forgotten bomber boys, had died in hospital last Friday 17th November allegedly suffering from pneumonia, although she disputes this. She is certain that he died through improper hospital care on account of his age.

Norma said he did not want to talk about his part in the war but was pleased to receive my article concerning his RAF career and especially my comments concerning the raid on Dresden. She asked for another copy of this article entitled "Leslie Weaver a Lancaster Bomber Pilot" as she was unable to find Leslie's copy and did not have access to a computer. Having complied with her request I searched the web for further information sending e-mails to Bomber Command and to the Royal Canadian Air Force, without success. Apparently Wing Commander Leslie Weaver's contribution to the eventual outcome of the war had already been forgotten by them, but not by me!

I met Leslie during a weekend jazz break and enjoyed listening to his time in the RAF and for the privilege of being in the company of one of Sir Arthur Harris's forgotten bomber boys.



Leslie photographed during John Petter's Jazz Festival at Bracklesham Bay September 2009, aged 86.

I was aware that he left the RAF at the end of the war as a Pilot Officer and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, retiring 17 years later in 1962 as Wing Commander. Most of our brief time together was spent discussing his wartime experiences.

Following receipt of my article he promised to send me notes on his Canadian career, but never got round to it. I promised Norma that I would attempt to expand on our conversations and try to fill in some missing details as a tribute to both him and Bomber Command and this is the result.

Leslie's death was reported in last Thursday's edition, of the Newbury Weekly News dated 22nd Nov 2012 and now copied from the Web as follows.

"A Second World War pilot from Newbury, who made the headlines two years ago when he returned to the cockpit in a Tiger Moth, has died.

Leslie Weaver of Newtown Road, who was one of Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris's Bomber Command crew, lost his battle with leukemia on Friday, aged 89. Leslie carried out around 20 bombing missions in an Avro Lancaster under heavy fire over Germany during his service in the Second World War.

After the war Leslie, formerly of 619 Squadron Bomber Command, joined the Canadian RAF as a pilot trainer and retired as a Wing Commander. Unbelievably, 65 years later he returned to the cockpit, flying over West Berkshire at the controls of a de

Havilland Tiger Moth biplane aircraft at the age of 87.

Mr Weaver's widow, Norma, aged 78, paid tribute to her husband, who leaves behind six children, two step-children as well as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Norma said "He had a wonderful life and great sense of humour with a passion for the Bomber Command. He battles his illness like he battled in the war. He was a fighter from day one. I loved him to bits. He was a great man."

MP for Newbury, Richard Benyon also paid tribute to Mr Weaver, who earlier this year unveiled a new war memorial in London. Mr Benyon said: "He never lost that indomitable spirit that helped him through the intensity of those flights and he was a noble voice for a fitting tribute to be paid for those who made such a sacrifice. It was wonderful that, despite his failing health, he made it to the unveiling by the Queen this summer, of the memorial to his comrades who did not return. You never had a dull conversation with Leslie. He would challenge you and had a sharp wit but he had a humanity that perhaps you only get if you have been through what he and so many young men experienced seventy years ago. He was part of the lifeblood of Newbury. He will be long remembered and much missed." In his spare time Mr Weaver was also a member of St Nicolas Church, Newbury, Bomber Command Association's Thames Valley branch, Newbury Conservative Club and Newbury Probus Club.



Wing Commander Leslie Weaver at the Bomber Command Memorial, June 24th 2012

James Williams, reporter



De Havilland Tiger Moth, Picture by AJM

Norma was very unhappy with the reception of the veterans, especially those in wheelchairs. Leslie, together with some aircrew from the Commonwealth, was placed right at the back of the proceedings and could hardly see what was going on. She felt that

once again they were being ignored in favour of the celebrities present. Despite the efforts made to attend the memorial many of the veterans wondered if their presence was truly appreciated.

When I met Leslie, at Bracklesham Bay in September 2009, he was already in a wheelchair. I was informed by his wife Norma that he had been a Lancaster Bomber Pilot during the war and I just had to find out more! Norma, who had been his nurse prior to the death of his wife, married him eleven years ago. She said he seldom talked about the war but felt betrayed at the way they were now considered as murderers, while in fact they were simply obeying orders as commanded by their officers. Leslie blamed Churchill because Harris, head of Bomber Command, took his orders directly from him.

After our initial meeting Norma said he had enjoyed talking with me as I understood and could relate to that period in his history. I learnt that he had taken part in the notorious Dresden raid in February 1945 and sought his first hand version of events, the subject of an article now available on the Greenwich University's "Memories of War" website. Norma said she couldn't find my original copy but knew Leslie had been pleased at receiving it. Apparently his children could add little to his flying career and so Norma asked if I could add any further information. It was my original intention to discover more about his extensive Canadian career but to no avail, instead I sought more information on his RAF career with the help from Norma and his flying log book.

Leslie was very bitter about the way Bomber Command had subsequently been treated by our politicians and historians following the Dresden raid, although to Leslie and his colleagues this was just another raid on Germany. When they took off at night it was with the certain knowledge that one in four would not be returning. Leslie argued that if the authorities thought these bombing raids unnecessary why send these brave lads to an almost certain death? It was not their boss, Sir Arthur Harris who obeyed orders from Winston Churchill.

A German historian has written: "Dresden was not simply a cultural centre, there were factories there manufacturing weapons and equipment for the Nazi war effort. To produce an atom bomb a supply of heavy water is needed. Their main source had already been destroyed in Norway and there is sufficient evidence that the Germans were producing heavy water in the centre of Dresden, under the impression that because of the large civilian population it would not be bombed. Dresden was also an important rail base for the Germans to send troops to the war front".

I have recently read that Hitler had probably postponed his April 30th suicide hoping that he would have an atom bomb ready, however the raid on Dresden helped to convince him this was not going to happen. We will never know if this was true, but if it was suspected that Dresden contained such an important war target then it was right to be attacked. Only historians can now argue that with Germany's surrender only weeks away we should not have bombed the city, they forget we were still at war.

Leslie's most recent memory is being called a war monger and being spat upon by some British youngsters whilst attending a long awaited memorial to Sir Arthur Harris.

Leslie recalled that flying at night in the freezing cold for anything up to twelve hours while being continually shot at and seeing your colleagues going down on fire was not very pleasant. They were told what to do and tried to do it to the best of their ability. He could only hope that one day their efforts would be recognised and appreciated.

While the Battle of Britain was being fought with modern aircraft, our Hurricane and Spitfire, the major contribution made by Bomber Command who was attacking the German ports and invasion barges, in obsolete aircraft, is mostly forgotten. However in so doing they made a vital contribution to Hitler's decision in calling off the invasion.

During the Battle of Britain Bomber Command lost more aircrew than Fighter Command a fact that is seldom acknowledged. It should not be forgotten that the

continued bombing of the “V” weapon sites saved us from far greater casualties than would have otherwise experienced. The last word on the effectiveness of our bombing should go to Hitler’s armaments minister, Albert Speer. He described our bombing offensive as “the greatest lost battle on the German side, a second front pinning down thousands of soldiers and requiring defensive guns and ammunition which could not be used elsewhere.

Like Leslie I too can only hope that one day the considerable efforts of Bomber Command will be recognised as an essential contribution in helping to shorten the war, suffering an extremely high casualty rate of 55,573 killed out of a total of 125,000 aircrew (a 44.4% death rate), with a further 8,403 wounded and 9,838 becoming prisoners of war.

Norma said she knew very little about Leslie’s wartime experiences, it was something he didn’t seem to want to talk about except when he was with others, able to share a similar experience. She said she was pleased to see us chatting away and to see a sparkle returning to his eyes. Helping me with information from his log book she saw that he was listed as above average with commendation and provided me with the various locations of his Squadron.

Leslie told me he joined 619 Squadron at the age of 19 at RAF Woodhall Spa in April 1943 and had flown in a variety of aircraft including Tiger Moths, Masters, Oxfords, Wellingtons and finally Lancasters. He was selected for bombers and had been fortunate in keeping the same crew throughout twenty operational flights, with little damage to his aircraft.

He told me of an incident while “passing out” on an Airspeed Oxford in front of his commanding officer. All went well until coming in to land when all his instruments failed and he was unable to lower his undercarriage. He tried to alert the tower but found his radio didn’t work. After several circuits attempting to define the problem he came in with a wheels-up landing. He approached his commanding officer and explained what had happened and asked if he could take another test. He was told there was no need and passed with an above average rating!



Airspeed Oxford, picture by AJM

Despite his illness and incapacity he was very alert and seemed happy to relive his memories, but alas the weekend came to a conclusion all too soon leaving me certain he had many more interesting stories to tell. Perhaps the Web could provide me with some more information, starting with RAF Woodhall Spa and 619 Squadron.

Research has shown me that 619 Squadron was formed at RAF Woodhall Spa from elements of 97 Squadron and was equipped with Oxfords and Lancasters as part of No.5 Group. The station opened in 1941 as a satellite station for Coningsby being first used by No 106 Squadron flying Hampdens, having been diverted from Coningsby due to

maintenance work.

In February 25th 1941 97 Squadron was reformed at RAF Waddington to be equipped with the Whitley, then the Manchester and finally the Lancaster. The Squadron and its Lancasters moved to Woodhall Spa in March 1942 and flew its maiden mission from Woodhall Spa on March 20th continuing until mid-April 1943 when it transferred to No. 8 Group to develop pathfinder techniques. 619 Squadron was formed around this time from elements of 97 Squadron.

619 Squadron's first mission was flown from RAF Woodhall Spa during the night of 11th June 1943, when 12 Lancasters were sent to bomb targets in Düsseldorf and its last bombing mission was flown on the 25th April 1945, when 6 Lancasters bombed the SS barracks at Berchtesgaden. The Squadron was subsequently based at RAF Coningsby, then Dunholme Lodge, Strubby, and finally Skellingthorpe.

619 Squadron's final operational mission was flown a day later, when two Lancasters laid mines in the Oslo Fjord near Horten. After that mission the squadron ferried ex-prisoners of war back to the United Kingdom from Belgium (Operation Exodus) and was disbanded at RAF Skellingthorpe on the 18th July 1945.

Members of 619 Squadron were awarded 1 DSO, 76 DFCs and 37 DFM's and mentioned 10 times in dispatches.

If I understood correctly Leslie joined the Royal Canadian Air force while at RAF Skellingthorpe. Perhaps further research might explain the connection.

RAF Coningsby opened on the 4th Nov 1940 as a 5 Group bomber airfield. The first resident Squadron being 106 arriving in Feb 1941. Operations commenced on March 1940 when four Hampden bombers attacked Cologne. The Squadron was joined in April 1940 by 97 Squadron equipped with Manchester bombers. For this period the main tasks for Coningsby's squadrons were mining and bombing operations.

Aircraft from Coningsby flew in the 1,000 Bomber Raid in May 1942. Shortly afterwards, between September 1942 and August 1943, RAF Coningsby was effectively closed while hard runways were laid. The famous 617 Dambusters Squadron moved in for a short period between August 1943 and January 1944 before departing just up the road to RAF Woodall Spar.

619 Squadron moved from RAF Woodhall Spa to RAF Coningsby on the 9th January 1944 before moving to Dunholme Lodge on the 17th April 1944.

Dunholme Lodge was located in the parishes of Welton and Dunholme on the north-west side of the A46 3.5 miles outside Lincoln, the name being taken from a large country house a mile from the village that was requisitioned for RAF accommodation.

The grass airfield was first used by the Royal Air Force during 1941 and 1942 for use by Handley Page Hampden aircraft from nearby RAF Scampton, and was officially opened as an RAF Station in September 1942 as part of RAF Bomber Command with the building of three hard runways.

Dunholme Lodge re-opened in May 1943 as part of No.5 Group and became the home for No.44 Squadron Lancasters, to be joined by 619 Squadron on the 17th April 1944 until the 28th September when the Squadron departed to RAF Strubby and No 44 to RAF Spilsbury.

In November 1944 flying operations ceased due the proximity of other stations. At the end of the war 120 Lancasters had been lost on operations from Dunholme Lodge.

RAF Strubby was the most easterly of Lincolnshire's airfields but was already surplus to Bomber Command requirements when it opened in April 1944. It was therefore initially used by Coastal Command which deployed No 144 and No 404 Royal Canadian Air Force squadrons operating Bristol Beaufighters on enemy shipping missions.

RAF Strubby Strike Wing dispersed and the Station was occupied by 619 Squadron from RAF Dunholme Lodge before moving to Skellingthorpe on the 30th June 1945.

Of the many bomber airfields that ringed the city of Lincoln, the nearest was Skellingthorpe (known as Skelly by its RAF personnel) being only two miles south-west of the outskirts, its original purpose being the need to provide a satellite airfield for Waddington. 61 Squadron joined in November 1943 for operational training.

There were then 30 to 36 Lancasters regularly based at Skellingthorpe but, as airspace in the Lincoln area was becoming heavily congested, to lessen the risk of collisions and ease control, No 61 was moved to Coningsby at the beginning of February 1944.

Leslie said that temporary accommodation towards the end of the war left a lot to be desired and I found this confirming comment on the web:

“Flying Officer Laurie Pearse, from No 61 Squadron, flew Lancaster QR –N from Skellingthorpe in 1944 and his wireless operator, Sergeant Bill Perry, remember the airfield very well! “It was an airfield sited two miles from Lincoln centre, very basic and freezing cold in the winter. The aircrew slept in Nissen huts each containing two crews with a smelly coke burning stove having a metal pipe going through the roof. Fuel was in very short supply and we had to scrounge it from all over the place, sometimes paying the ground crew to get some for us, usually from the fuel dump, they never let us down. The huts were bitterly cold and in the morning when we got up we had to walk forty yards to the freezing wash house before breakfast, with greatcoats over our pyjamas trying to keep warm. Skellingthorpe was often foggy and after a busy night dodging flak and night fighters we frequently had to divert to another airfield, generally after being diverted we would stay in the sergeant’s mess overnight. Beds were seldom available, if you could find an armchair you were lucky otherwise you had to sit for the rest of the night in an ordinary hard chair and still be expected to fly next day. A haze sometimes formed about 100 feet high completely obscuring the ground, although you couldn’t see it standing on the airfield, it was most peculiar. Sometimes when the haze was high we landed when two ground staff were standing between the head of the runway firing white Very lights, the pilot had to aim between them to get down. When you eventually broke through the haze you could see the ground but it was very scary. On several occasions when we were about to land the controller informed us that German night fighters were in the circuit. Even when you were home you could never relax, it wasn’t easy”.

Extract from the “Bomber Boys” by Mel Rolfe

619 Squadron was disbanded on the 18th July 1945. A total of 208 bombers failed to return or were lost in UK crashes during the operations flown from Skellingthorpe, 15 Hampdens, six Manchesters and 187 Lancasters.

During the short time I was with Leslie I found he had led a very interesting life after his Squadron was disbanded, he was then a Pilot Officer and subsequently finished his career as a Wing Commander after joining the Royal Canadian Air Force.

He promised to send me some notes, but it was not to be, unfortunately I have not been able to find out anything further about his subsequent career. Leslie was still very bitter with the way Bomber Command had been treated after the war, but at least he now had a very sympathetic listener.

Leslie talked about the lack of development of both our fighters and bombers during the build up to war. Unlike Fighter Command who commenced the war with aircraft capable of matching the Luftwaffe, Bomber Command had to make do with aircraft that were virtually unfit for service. At the beginning of the war our light and medium bombers, the Fairey Battle and Bristol Blenheim soon proved no match for the German fighters and our heavy bombers, the Handley Page Hampden, Armstrong Whitley and Vickers Wellington fared little better.

A total of 226 Hampdens were in service with eight squadrons at the start of the Second World War. Despite its speed and agility in operational use the Hampden proved

no match for the Luftwaffe fighters. Consequently its career as a day bomber was very brief. Of the 714 Hampdens built almost half were lost on operations, taking with them 1,077 crew killed and another 739 missing. German flak accounted for 108 with one the victim of a German barrage balloon. 263 Hampdens crashed because of "a variety of causes," and 214 others were classed as "missing." Luftwaffe pilots claimed 128 Hampdens, shooting down 92 at night.

Guy Gibson spent most of his first two years of his RAF service flying Hampdens and his book *Enemy Coast Ahead* gives a strong flavour of the trials and tribulations of taking these inferior aircraft into action.

No. 49 Squadron received the first Hampdens in September 1938. By the end of 1938 both 49 and 83 Squadron at RAF Scampton had re-equipped with the equally ill fated Avro Manchester heavy bomber. The Avro Manchester was a twin engined bomber powered by new Rolls Royce Vulture engines. The aircraft was a failure due to its underdeveloped, underpowered and unreliable engines, but was the forerunner to the famous Avro Lancaster, one of the most successful bombers of the war.



Handley Page Hampden pictures by AJM

During two months in service some 120 sorties were flown with the twin engined Manchester and seven aircraft lost before replacing it with the Lancaster, a similar airframe but now powered by four reliable Rolls Royce Merlins. Nevertheless, the only Victoria Cross gained by a Manchester crewman went to a No 50 Squadron pilot flying from Skellingthorpe.

On the night of May 30th 1942, during the famous 1,000 bomber raid on Cologne, Flying Officer Leslie Manser's aircraft was repeatedly damaged by anti-aircraft fire. Despite a critical situation, Manser was determined to bring the Manchester and crew home but having regained friendly airspace the aircraft became untenable. After having given his crew time to parachute to safety, Manser gave his life in the crash, which followed.

While our Bomber Boys had to fly in virtually obsolete aircraft our engineers had the means to match the Germans, but only with the support of our government, which was not forthcoming. As a result our aircrew had to fly in aircraft incapable of defence against the standard German Messerschmitt BF 109E fighter, which had a speed of 358 mph, a 20mm cannon and four 0.3 machine guns. It first flew September 1935.

At the beginning of the war our bomber force consisted of:-

The Hampden which had a crew of 4 and a maximum speed of 265 mph at 15,500 feet and a range of 1,095 miles. Its armament consisted of four 0.303 machine guns and a 4,000 pound bomb load. It first flew on the 21st June 1936.

The Whitley had a crew of 5 and a maximum speed of 230 mph at 16,400 feet with a range of 1,430 miles. Its armament consisted of five 0.303 machine guns and a 7,000 pound bomb load. It first flew on the 17th March 1936.

The Wellington had a crew of 6 and a maximum speed of 235 mph at 15,500 feet with a range of 2,250 miles. Its armament consisted of six 0.303 machine guns and a 4,500 pound bomb load. It first flew on the 17th June 1936.

The Fairey Battle had a crew of 3 and a maximum speed of 257 mph at 15,000 feet with a range of 2,550 miles. Its armament consisted of two 0.303 machine guns and a 1,500 pound bomb load. It first flew on the 10th March 1936.

The Bristol Blenheim had a crew of 3 and a maximum speed of 266 mph at 11,800 feet with a range of 1,460 miles. Its armament consisted of two 0.303 machine guns and a 1,200 pound bomb load. It first flew on the 17th June 1936.

On the 14th May 1940, in a desperate attempt to stop German forces crossing the Meuse, the Advanced Air Striking Force launched an "all-out" attack by all available bombers against the German bridgehead and pontoon bridges at Sedan. The light bombers were attacked by swarms of opposing fighters and were devastated. Out of a strike force of 63 Battles and eight Bristol Blenheims, 40 (including 35 Battles) were lost.

On the 15th June 1940, the last remaining aircraft of the Advanced Air Striking Force were evacuated to Britain. In just six weeks almost 200 Battles had been lost, with 99 lost between the 10th and 16th May. The RAF realizing that the Fairy Battle was inadequate and had no place in modern combat quickly withdrew it from further active service.

The Bristol Blenheim was already considered obsolete in both armament and speed at the beginning of the war; nevertheless it was pressed into service and, like the Battle suffered many avoidable casualties before eventually being withdrawn from active service.

Both aircraft began their careers in 1936 when our government should have been aware of the performance of the opposition, namely the Messerschmitt BF 109E fighter which had been flying a year earlier.

However things could have been very different if only our government had listened to our aircraft designers, Geoffrey de Havilland for instance. Along with others he thought the Air Ministry's specifications for a range of bombers would only produce inferior aircraft and they were proven correct. Before the war de Havilland had proposed a radically different aircraft which if supported would have saved many aircrew lives and altered the course of the war. This aircraft was produced as a private venture, later to be called the Mosquito.

The de Havilland Mosquito started life in late 1938 as an outline design for a mixed role aircraft that could fly so fast and high that no armament was needed. It would be based on non- strategic materials including wood which had proved so successful in its earlier civilian designs, such as the de Havilland Comet Racer and Albatross airliner.



De Havilland DH 88 Comet Racer, picture by AJM



De Havilland DH 91 Albatross, picture by AJM

The Comet Racer was built of plywood covered in fabric and achieved a maximum

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speed of 255 mph on two 223 hp engines. It first flew in September 1934. The Albatross was also of wood construction and achieving a maximum speed of 225 mph on four engines, rated at only 525 hp each. It first flew on the 20th May 1937.

In the meantime our government realizing the threat of the modern German fighter aircraft played catch up with increased production of the Hurricane and Spitfire at the expense of modernizing our bombers.

With little government support the Mosquito eventually flew on the 25th November 1940, later to become acknowledged as one of the most versatile aircraft in the War, ending with the lowest loss rate of any aircraft in Bomber Command. The Mosquito had a crew of 2 and a maximum speed approaching 400mph. Armed with four 20mm cannon and with a range of 1,900 miles it could deliver a 4,000 bomb load all the way to Berlin for a fraction of the cost in lives and fuel when compared to the contemporary B-17 or Lancaster.

It is interesting to compare its performance with the American Flying Fortress. The Boeing B17 Flying Fortress had a crew of 10 and a maximum speed of 267 mph with a range of 2, 900 miles at a cruise speed of 182 mph. Its armament consisted of ten half inch machine guns and a long range bomb load of 4,000 pounds. It first flew on the 28th July 1935.



De Havilland DH 98 Mosquito Pictures by AJM

The point I wish to make with the above comparisons is that if only our government had listened to our aircraft industry we would not have had to sacrifice so many lives in sending them out in under armed and under performance aircraft.

The Avro Lancaster was the most successful of our four engined heavy bombers, the others being the Short Stirling and Handley Page Halifax.



Handley Page Halifax, picture by AJM



Short Stirling, picture by AJM

The Avro Lancaster had a crew of 7 and a maximum speed of 287 mph at 13,000 feet,

a cruise speed of 200 mph with a maximum range of 2,530 miles. Its armament consisted

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of eight 0.303 machine guns and a 14,000 pound bomb load, although capable of 22,000 pounds at a reduced range. It first flew on the 19th January 1941.



The Avro Lancaster pictures by AJM

My first recollection of the forthcoming war was at RAF Biggin Hill in an event held to celebrate Empire Air Day. This was on the 20th May 1938 and was the last display I visited before the war. Even at this very early age (12) I was well aware that the Germans had a modern air force and a very formidable new fighter, the Messerschmitt BF 109, knowledge I gleaned from reading aviation magazines.

At the show we were treated to air displays by the squadron's Gloster Gauntlets, Gladiators and other biplane aircraft. As I recall most of the show consisted of ancient biplanes, fighters and bombers, however we did have a fly past by our latest monoplane fighter, the Hawker Hurricane. On the ground we were allowed to see a closely guarded Hurricane and Spitfire. The Spitfire shown was evidently the first production model.

Also featured were the latest additions to the RAF, a Wellington, Blenheim, Lysander and a Defiant two seat fighter. I remember leaving the show being very impressed with the new Hurricane and Spitfire, but also concerned that the squadron's main aircraft was still the biplane Gladiator, which I felt certain would be no match for the latest Messerschmitt!

I was also aware that apart from the Wellington we had no bombers to compare to the Germans and my instinct proved correct with the subsequent losses of so many pilots in substandard aircraft, such as the Fairey Battle, Hampden, Blenheim and even the latest Wellington on daylight raids.

The efforts of our bomber boys during the Battle of Britain has been largely unrecognised for the major contribution made in attacking invasion barges, enemy air bases, fuel supplies and aircraft factories, to prevent an invasion. Unlike our fighter pilots these raids were made in obsolete aircraft and armament with little chance of survival.

While the superb efforts of our fighter boys has been recognised, the contribution made by our young pilots in the bomber force largely forgotten, yet more RAF bomber crews than fighter pilots had been killed during the Battle of Britain.

Rest assured Norma that I will continue to remind everybody of the debt they owe to the forgotten 55,573 men of the RAF's Bomber Command who died in the Second World War so that we could live and enjoy our freedom.