

# Discovering Doug's story



Doug Williamson with his two sisters, Pat (left) and Audrey taken in 1944.

In 2012, author Vic Jay decided to write a blog about his father Bob's wartime experience as a Flight Engineer of a Lancaster bomber.

This led him on a voyage of discovery and the research involved unearthed some remarkable stories of courage and sacrifice, not least that of Edinburgh man, Doug Williamson.

Vic related the story to us: "Five years of research to discover details of my dad's war service uncovered a series of

tragedies that was scarcely believable, but there was one incident that had troubled my dad more than any other. He died never knowing what had happened to nineteen year-old Doug Williamson, the young airman from Edinburgh.

“On Wednesday, 4 April 1945, Doug and my dad, Bob Jay, both flight engineers with 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, were scheduled to take part in an operation that would take them further into enemy territory than they had been before. Their target was a synthetic oil plant near Merseburg, in eastern Germany, known as the ‘most heavily defended industrial target in Europe.’

“That evening, with the sun low over the flat Cambridgeshire landscape, Bob climbed aboard Lancaster AA-M with his stomach in knots, and positioned himself alongside pilot F/L Ian Taylor, with a crew Bob had never flown with before. As they taxied into position, Bob was surprised to see that the aircraft ahead of them was JN-D, on which he knew Doug was flight engineer.

“Doug had missed the final briefing because of a problem with his aircraft’s oil pressure, and Bob had expected them to abort the operation. He gave it no more thought as he carried out his own pre-flight checks, and watched as JN-D lifted off at 1832, just two minutes ahead of his aircraft.

“Bob was more relieved than normal to return safely, 8½ hours later, although his relief was short-lived when he heard that JN-D had been struck by flak and returned without Doug. No-one understood what the crew meant when they said that he had ‘fallen out of the aircraft’, and as Bob glanced at the aircraft later that day, blackened, charred and pock marked by flak, he decided he would avoid asking for details.

“Bob left the squadron three months later, and died in 1974 without ever learning Doug’s fate.

“Forty years after his death, Doug, by now living in New

Zealand, became a long distance friend of mine, and he told me his story. He was born in 1925, and lived at Seafield House in Roslin, near Edinburgh. He attended Craigend Park School, and then became a boarder at Clayesmore School, Dorset. A contemporary of Doug's at Clayesmore was Tony Hart, the artist and television presenter, who died in 2009.



Doug Williamson at Auckland's Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT) in 2012, just before a visit to the UK.

“When war was declared, Doug Williamson returned to Edinburgh and attended Melville College, but he couldn't wait to sign up. At sixteen he joined the Home Guard, and the following year enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve. By the age of nineteen, he was a flight engineer with 75(NZ) Squadron, where he became a passing acquaintance of my dad. Seventy years later, he told me what had happened on that fateful night.”

“When his crew had arrived at dispersal, the ground crew showed them a large circular hole cut in the belly of their aircraft. A 0.5 inch Browning machine gun had been installed as defence against fighter attacks from below, but the crew were puzzled, as they had not been allocated a mid-under gunner to operate the gun.

“They had completed thirty one operations, and this was to be

their last before becoming 'tour expired'. Doug sorted out the bundles of window, and carried out his pre-flight checks. He was concerned that the oil gauge for the starboard inner engine was indicating zero oil pressure, and was just about to shut the engine down and prepare to abort the operation, when a quick tap of the gauge saw it jump up to the correct pressure.

"JN-D lifted off with no further indication of oil pressure problems, followed quickly by AA-M, with Bob helping his pilot get the aircraft safely off the ground.

"Despite a number of incidents during previous operations, Doug was convinced he'd led a charmed life, and at no time had he been frightened. On the contrary, he found flying in a Lancaster exhilarating, and as beginning to feel *'somewhat depressed that the crew would be split up and all the excitement would soon be over'* .

"He couldn't have anticipated quite how all the excitement would end.

"As they crossed the Netherlands coast, Doug settled down on the floor by the window chute, and began tossing out bundles at prescribed intervals. He longed for the operation to be over, so that he could *'wallow in the glory of being 'tour expired'*. As he took out a bar of chocolate and removed his oxygen mask, he remembered what he believed to be an old Japanese saying, that the most dangerous point in a battle was when you relaxed and removed your helmet. Bang!

"Doug looked up and noticed small flickers of flame *'much like you see on a Christmas pudding'*.

"He felt blood running down his face, and pushed his oxygen mask back in place. Suddenly, there was a huge burst of flame that filled the front of the fuselage *'like a massive blow torch.'* He'd accidentally pulled out his intercom, and as he grabbed the plug and turned to replace it, he noticed the

escape hatch was blocked by flame.

“He turned, clambered over the main spar and collapsed, probably as a result of a lack of oxygen. He later described feeling surprisingly calm and *‘curious as to what it would be like to be dead’*. He remembered wondering how his parents would feel when they got the War Office telegram. He dragged himself along on his stomach and, thinking he’d missed the instruction to bail out, slid out through the hole in the fuselage.

“He counted to ten and pulled the ripcord. *“The next thing I remember was being suddenly awake and horrified at what I had done. There was no aircraft plunging to earth in flames. I felt as a sailor must feel, having fallen overboard and seeing his ship sailing off without him.”*

“Back in the aircraft, the crew had managed to extinguish the flames, and could scarcely believe that Doug had just disappeared. The pilot decided to abort the mission and, as he jettisoned the bomb load, he instructed his navigator to set a course for home. A quick ‘post mortem’ led them to the conclusion that a piece of flak had pierced the reservoir of de-icing fluid, and a jet of burning ethylene glycol had set fire to the bomb aimer’s parachute and clothing.

“In a state of panic, and believing they were going down, the bomb aimer then opened the escape hatch, which caused a powerful through-draft that sprayed flame and de-icing fluid all over Doug. It was not blood on his face, but warm ethylene glycol.

“When they eventually landed, they discovered another reason to be thankful. The pilot had not pressed down the bomb door lever hard enough when he jettisoned the bombs, and it had sprung back up again. The bombs had crashed through the closed doors, luckily without any of them exploding.

“After several days in the German countryside, Doug was

eventually apprehended by two farmers armed with hoes, and handed over to the authorities in Eisleben, about 40 km from Merseburg. A few days later, he was handed over to the U.S. army, the war all but over, and within a couple of days had been flown home.

“Sadly, most of the stories I discovered linked to my dad’s crew did not end so well. His pilot had two brothers, both also pilots, who were both killed, as was the brother of the bomb aimer, who was also a pilot. The twenty six year-old wife of one of the crew died a few weeks after he left New Zealand, and it would be nearly three years before he returned home to visit her grave, and the families of all the crew described how the war had a profound effect on their loved one, despite their survival.

“Like my dad, Doug was one of the lucky ones. After the war he worked in London for a few years, but the war had left him wanting to see more of the world. In 1951 he accepted a three year contract managing a tea estate in India, and shortly afterwards emigrated to Canada, arriving in Toronto in January 1955. It was here that he met his future wife Janet, also a Scottish immigrant, with whom he had two sons.

“It was in Toronto that he also met and became good friends with Lutz Dille, a former member of the German army, who coincidentally had been visiting his parents a few miles from the squadron’s target on the night that Doug bailed out. In 1972, Doug and his family decided to emigrate to New Zealand and, on October 3rd, they set sail for Wellington.

“It was in New Zealand that he finally found a job that gave him the satisfaction he had been seeking for so long, which he described as *‘the last and the best job I ever had’*. He became a tutor in the engineering department of The Technical Correspondence Institute, later to be re-named The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and retired at the age of 65 in 1990.”

The full story can be read in Vic Jay's book, The Mallon Crew.