

Born 23.4.13 - only 68!

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13 Dec 81

Dear Paul,

Thankyou for an interesting letter: it is indeed very special to hear from a survivor from the Heligoland Bight battles! It is several years ago since I wrote to Richard Kellert in Majorca and he replied saying he had little or no recollection of those operations - and you have confirmed this.

I believe the Wellington attacks of December '39 to be among the bravest exploits in the annals of our Service - and deplore the scant notice accorded them. When Kellert led his formation into the Bight on 18th December he well knew that Griffiths had been cut to pieces only four days earlier - losing 30% of his force - and every Officer and man in his three formations was aware of the possible and almost-certain outcome. I note you were leading No 2 formation, consisting of two sections of three, and were fortunate in losing only one - Flt Bridon, flying on your left. Hue-Williams leading No 4 formation was mixing together with Flt Lemon, Thompson, Wimbley, Lewis and Sgt. Ruse. There were other casualties both in Kellert's formation and the 9 Sqn group - a sad day. So many

9957m.

x No. "cheer  
Lemon 80  
home.

brave young men. Your assessment of those in command and control at Staff level is accurate: the remarks - likening it to the charge of the Light Brigade (John Baldwin) following the attack of 14th Dec is about right whilst 'Cromwell's [Cromwells] and the 'Shoulder to Shoulder' stuff attributed to Bottomley is pitiful. Kellie's 'patrol' of the Schilling Roads on 18th ought never to have been sanctioned: blind ignorance and a total inability to assess the facts lay behind it. This state of affairs flourished right up to the time when <sup>Arthur</sup> Harris took over: and I quote the Berlin operation of 7th November 1941 as an example. - Wellingtons again - disastrous weather conditions and short of petrol! This cost Pearce his job: I have studied the correspondence between Air Ministry and C-in-C Bomber following that fiasco and it doesn't make pretty reading. In keeping with accepted practice Pearce was made C-in-C India! <sup>x</sup> The official history - S.B.O. - dealt leniently with Pearce though the co-author (Dr. Frankland) would, I think, come out more forcefully: he was a Navigator in Bomber Command and knew the hazards intimately: Someone cooled him off when his draft manuscript was read.

x really piece of work. Still Archibald's wife

6.7.54  
"Dinner"  
Bennett

I could go on at length, dilating on the professionalism (or lack of it) of the commanders who took us into the last struggle. I was lucky - escaping the early phase, and joining Gibson as a Flight Commander in ~~the~~ October 42. Later in the P.F.F. I had Bennett - a most competent airman. Yet, he too, faltered with the old men (always saving Roddie Carr, Avn, who was one of our few backers) who did not send him their best crews and resented his appointment. Bennett was compelled, in numerous instances, to take pressed men and tyros - yet he made them into efficient crews. Finally, I wonder how many crews we lost from causes other than enemy action? Causes related to poor leadership at the top. We shall never know. Of this I am convinced - that Bomber Command achieved its greatness as the most effective strategic weapon through the guts and loyalty of its Sqn and Flight Commanders - where true leadership was exercised.

I gave up the work on the Belisland Bright Operations: it was too demanding - in time and cost: information is sparse and days spent at the Public Record Office I cannot afford in terms of funding the programme. Anything, I may know is fully available to you and your

friends, though it can't amount to much.

I have immense respect for Richard Kellie. I have never spoken with him or indeed clapped eyes on him yet everything I ever heard is good - a modest and very courteous Officer.

These days I don't go to London any more and I have recently resigned from the Club after many years of membership: thus, I meet nobody, or very rarely, do I bump into an old member type. Norfolk - I live on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk - is foreign territory - I love Essex - but it has its points. People are fewer on the ground and the roads carry less traffic. I recommend it to those seeking to get away from it all!

It has  
packed up  
Pity. It  
is only  
68.

With Kindest Regards,

and Best Wishes for Christmas.

John Starbe.

If I have addressed you incorrectly - decorations etc, I apologise - I have no list - tho' I note you have been at some pains to establish my own identity and would wish to extend a similar courtesy:)