ADDRESS BY PAUL HARRIS

Tonight I have the honour of addressing this distinguished gathering about a long-lost Wellington which survived a long-forgotten air battle in which we were defeated -- but not dishonoured. The details of this battle are all in the prologue to "Bomber Command" by Max Hastings. This battle was called "**The Battle of Heligoland Bight**", and the Wellington I flew that day is now the only one left in the world that has flown in battle and survived. It is of course, old "R for Robert".

I am here tonight not through any merit of my own, but because I happened to fly this Wellington on the 18th December 1939. Our chairman, with the help of the Ministry of Defence, tracked me down. In the course of my address I'll mention various people, some of whom are here to-night, and I'll ask them to stand up so that you can see and admire them.

We have a particularly interesting guest to-night, Oberst Wolfgang Falck, whom we encountered on our return flight from Wilhelmshaven on that day and shot down in flames in his Me.110. But I'm happy to say that he survived. We knocked out both his engines, put him on fire, yet, I'm delighted to tell you, he managed to glide down, with his ammunition exploding, and by a superb feat of airmanship managed to perch down on the airfield at Wangerooge, the most easterly of the Friesian Islands. Stand up, Wolf, so that all can see you. Thank you. We both learned to fly in the early thirties: he at the top secret Luftwaffe training base at Lipetsk in Russia, and I at No. 2 Flying Training School, Digby, after which I served for several years in the Middle East.

Well done, Wolf, our enemy of yesteryear -- but our friend to-day. I am delighted that you survived, and it is good to have you and Gisela here to-night. There is a brotherhood of the air, even between enemies, to which I'll return later.

At the outbreak of war I was a flight commander in No. 149 Squadron in No. 3 Group, based at Mildenhall. This Group had recently converted from night-flying Handley-Page Harrows to Wellingtons for daylight operations. This demanded formation flying of the highest order. For various reasons this was not generally achieved in No. 3 Group -- with fatal results. I will explain why.

Incredible as it may seem now, some of our squadron commanders did not fly Wellingtons at all. I had one who was, mercifully for us all, posted, to be replaced by Wing Commander Richard Kelleted. These old-stagers were brave men who had done well in the 1914-18 war, but were too old or set in their ways to convert to the Wellington. They seemed incapable of coping with modern aircraft so they left the leading to flight commanders who were themselves inexperienced in formation flying because they were basically individualistic night-bomber pilots. Formation flying was second nature to me after five years in the Middle East, where it was taken seriously and practised continually. This background stood me in good stead in training my pilots. In fact it saved us. I was lucky to have had it. Close formation can be unnerving until one gets used to it.

Kellett arrived just in time. One of the RAF's most brilliant pilots, he held the world's long-distance record leading three Wellesleys from Egypt to Australia. He was one of a small handful of young senior officers in the Group capable of leading a formation. He led brilliantly on the Wilhelmshaven raid. We survived because of him, and the two squadrons that failed to formate on him suffered inevitable and grievous losses. Their survivors accused Kellett of flying too fast so that they could not keep up. This totally untrue accusation was repeated in the RAF official history of the war, and must be refuted. The truth is that the leaders of the two squadrons, 9 and 37, had never flown with Kellett before, as I had, had their own ideas, different from ours, and so failed to maintain formation with us. But they were not totally to blame; the fault lay also with the old non-flying staff officers of higher command at H.Q. 3 Group and Bomber Command.

The task of a formation leader, whether of a flight, squadron, wing or group, was to hold it together. He knows that some stations in the formation are more difficult to hold than others, so the leader must initiate no manoeuvre which cannot be followed by everybody. Large formations are not easily manoeuvred: the leader has to be good, as Kellett was.

FLt Lt (now Wg Cdr) Peter Grant, whom I had never met before our briefing the night before at HQ 3 Group, flew "stepped-up" on me as I had instructed him after the briefing. He had not I believe flown in this position before. I asked him to maintain a difficult station which other squadrons did not even attempt. He was to fly "stepped-up" so as not to mask my guns. It was a difficult position yet he formated brilliantly, clinging to me like a limpet: stand up, Peter, and let everybody see you. Had you failed we would not have survived. Well done, and thank you. Peter has come all the way from Toronto to be with us. In fact we have three Canadians here to-night; the others are my dear daughter Janine and her husband Donald, from the wild west city of Calgary.

The heavy losses in the other two squadrons ("Cheese" Lemon, the only survivor of 37 Squadron, came through by accidentally lowering his flaps instead of opening his bomb-doors) were due to old men on the air staffs who organized no practice in large formation flying. Our defeat that day lay not at our door but at that of men obsessed with the strange theory that bombers, even without the necessary formation flying practice or fighter cover, could defeat fighters which were faster, better armed and more manoeuvrable. Our .303 ball ammunition was inferior to the German cannon firing explosive shells. And to throw together squadrons which had never flown together before was a certain recipe for disaster. I had flown with Kellett before, so we were at one. That saved us. The other squadrons had never flown with him, or with each other, and were nearly wiped out. I'll say no more on this matter, except that I let Group HQ know that I was not prepared to go on any more ill-prepared operations, and named the small handful of officers who were capable of leading. Properly trained we'd have knocked hell out of Wolf and his friends, but we were not trained. However, the Luftwaffe would have altered their tactics and got us in the end. No I'll leave this painful subject.

Now I'd like to tell you about our crews: the men, boys really, who did the flying and fighting. The oldest in my crew was Sgt (now Wg Cdr) Bunny Austin, navigator and mid-under turret gunner. He is here to-night: stand up, Bunny. He was the oldest at 24 years. Then we had ACI Jimmy Mullineaux, rear-gunner, very young and keen. The rear-gunner got most of the shooting, so he had to be good. Then AC2 Watson, a Scotsman from Glasgow, W/T operator and gunner, and AC 2 Doxsey, front-gunner, who was also very young, the baby of the crew. I was an ancient 33 years old!

My second pilot was another Scotsman, Sandy Innes, whose sister, Sylvia, is here to-night: stand up, Sylvia. Thank you. I'm delighted to see you here; you had a gallant brother who, had he survived, would have made air rank. He was at the astrodome doing fire control, the necessity of which I'll explain. He did this magnificently, his cool, calm and very clear voice keeping us all informed of enemy activity. Gunners can look in only one direction at a time, and need to be told of the most dangerous and imminent attacks in case they were looking the wrong way. Sandy's voice came through, cool and collected, and I knew what was happening, though I could see nothing. When the rear-gunner ran out of ammunition (1,000 rounds per gun) Sandy carried him short belts of 300 rounds so that Jimmy could fire one gun as he re-loaded the other. He was superb, as were all my crew; I was proud of them. They were all very young, Austin at 24 being the oldest. Doxsey looked about 16. They all knew what to do, so my task as captain was an easy one. They fought as a team. They had received practice in air fighting with a fighter squadron at Debden, commanded by a South African friend of mine, so we were familiar with fighter tactics and practised in deflection shooting.

There was one attack which I saw: a Me.110 suddenly appeared in front of me doing a complicated attack on Kellett. All our front-gunners let fly, and he went down burning but got home to base. Poor Doxsey got a bullet in his foot, and Watson replaced him in his front turret.

Now, having told you about my crew, I'll turn back to Wilhelmshaven, and the "Phoney" War. Our timid War Cabinet told us that no civilian was to be killed. So, although there were a battleship and a cruiser in dock Kellett could not attack them because they were too close to land and civilians might have been killed. I know you are all thinking: why did he not copy Nelson's blind eye? I will tell you, but you will scarcely believe me.

There were various ways of losing a place in a squadron: illness, attacking a non-military or non-naval target, or possibly hurting a civilian - lest the enemy retaliated. Let me tell you what happened to a friend of mine, S/Ldr Glencross of 214 Squadron, who on a sweep in the Heligoland Bight with three Wellingtons was shot at by a minesweeper. So he attacked it, but mercifully missed. He was taken off flying because it was a requisitioned trawler, not a naval vessel; he was put in an operations room, a severe punishment. That was one way of losing one's place in a squadron. We suffered under half-hearted political masters. I believe the Luftwaffe had similar orders, but was not so reckless as we were. The enemy ships were there -- we might have

sunk them; my mouth waters at the thought. I found four armed merchantmen that were firing at us with anti-aircraft guns, so I ordered Sandy Innes to bomb them, but cloud obscured the results so I don't know if we hit them or not.

Shortly after the raid the C-in-C, Air Chief Marshal Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, visited 149 Squadron, and interviewed various people in Kellett's small office, which was bursting and ablaze with gold-braided staff officers from command and group, the AOC, the station commander and others. The C-in-C questioned various people, and star-turn Jimmy Mullineaux was wheeled in. After the C-in-C had chatted to him a while, Jimmy, courteous and disciplined to the last, said "Please, sir, may I faint?" and did so, falling back into the arms of Sandy, who caught him just in time. He was brave as a lion, but this galaxy of air officers and gold braid was too much for him: more frightening than the enemy! I was proud of him.

Later in the war, as an NCO with another crew, he was shot down, and as a PoW he lived for 14 days in a Luftwaffe sergeants' mess and was well treated. Finally his hosts said "Sorry, old boy, but we can't keep you any longer: your escort has arrived". Well done the Luftwaffe. Whilst a PoW he mastered German, matriculated and escaped three times, but was always recaptured. He had courage and a good brain, and his commission came through while he was a prisoner. In the end he came home desperately ill, but slowly recovered and made his mark in business, one of the finest men I've known, and the most modest. His daughter, Margaret, is here: stand up Margaret so we can see you, daughter of a gallant officer.

I must include in this address a mention of my dear Kit, the ideal airman's wife: cool, calm, collected and fearless, a product of the Royal Navy. On my return to Mildenhall she was waiting for me in the bar of the "Bird in Hand", a pub almost on the aerodrome near the officers' mess, with two pints on the bar. As we drank we heard Lord Haw-Haw announce that "33 Wellingtons set out from Mildenhall and 33 failed to return". We laughed, for the details of the disaster were then unknown to us. He was, in fact, half right: only half of us got home. I lost only on a very young crew captained by Michael Briden, recently married. Holed in his port wing, he came down not far from our coast short of petrol. They were not rescued. Those whom the gods love die young.

I am also glad to say that my son Tim, born in 1941, is here with his charming wife, Rosalind.

Many of our PoWs showed magnanimous Christian forgiveness. Group Captain Harry Day, chained to the floor in Sachsenhausen and tortured, was forgiving, and after the war went to the funeral of one of his camp commandants and laid a wreath.

And then there is the delightful story of Bader's tin legs dropped by us on a German airfield by arrangement with the Germans.

There was a camaraderie of the air which shone like a beacon in all the horrors of that war. And so it was in the Western Desert where the Eighth Army and the Afrika Korps fought clean and respected each other.

Now let me finish with a romantic story. Wolf here had a friend, another Luftwaffe fighter pilot; I have his photo wearing the Iron Cross. Major Assi Hahn had an English girl-friend who lived in Folkestone. He used to fly over Folkestone raiding us. So he filled a box with sweets and chocolates, tied cushions round the box and dropped it over Folkestone, addressed to this goddess. There's chivalry for you. Of course, he received no reply -- but it would be nice to know if she received this parcel 45 years ago. From this photograph she was a real smasher. Hahn is dead now, but I know that his old friend Wolf here would like to meet her, to know if the chocolates were delivered. She must be about 65 years old now. We do not know her name, but if she reads this we'd like to hear from her.

Thank you all for listening so patiently. It is a great honour to be here to-night. If there is time for questions I'll try to answer them. Indeed, you may like to ask Wolf some questions, and get his side of the battle, having heard plenty from one of our side.

Finally, may I, on behalf of us all, thank our chairman, and his hard-working team, for organizing the whole operation. Well done, sir, and thank you for raising an old friend from the deep.