

## **From Coastal Command to Captivity The Memoir of a Second World War Airman**

### **Introduction**

By Allan Hunter

In the grey pre-dawn light of 25 July 1941 six Bristol Beaufort Is of 217 Squadron warmed up on the airfield at RAF St. Eval in Cornwall. At 5:30 am, weighed down with bulky landmines that stuck out beyond their bomb doors, they rumbled down the runway one by one and clambered into the sky. The crews scanned the horizon with some anxiety. It promised to be a clear day and they needed cloud cover for what they had ahead of them. They were due to rendezvous with torpedo-carrying Beauforts from 22 Squadron - their orders to find and attack the battleship Scharnhorst, surely one of the most dangerous ships on the sea at that time. She was a foe they had faced before. Two nights earlier 217 Squadron Beauforts had bombed her at La Pallice. Now the Scharnhorst, escorted by six destroyers, was somewhere in the Bay of Biscay, making a dash for the safety of Brest harbour with its guns and its repair facilities.

The weather quickly worsened, providing the much-wished-for cover from enemy aircraft, but in the cloud and patchy mist the force became separated and only one of the Beauforts was able to find the target. Spotting a large wake in the sea below, them they flew along it, hoping to catch their quarry unawares. In fact the cloud was so thick that it wasn't until they were directly above it that the Beaufort crew saw the huge vessel. There was no time to drop the mine. They had to go round again. It was whilst attempting a second run that the lone Beaufort ran out of cloud cover and immediately encountered a storm of flak. Within seconds the aircraft was hit several times. Moments later it struck the waves as it crash-landed, broke up and began to sink. Sergeant 'Pip' Appleby, the W/Op (Wireless Operator), was killed and the pilot, Squadron Leader Les Collings, was wounded. My father, Pilot Officer Jim Hunter, who was the navigator, and the A/G (Air Gunner), Sergeant Ted Taylor, both suffered minor injuries.

The survivors were picked up by a German ship, and so began their nearly four years in Kriegsgefangenschaft, as prisoners of war, or 'kriegies' as they became known.

The small Rowney watercolour book in which Jim recorded his pictures of PoW life, and which are reproduced here, sat on various shelves for over 40 years before he thought of doing anything with it. It travelled with him from prison camp to prison camp, across Germany on the forced marches away from the Russian front, then from one posting to the next throughout his career in the peacetime RAF, and when he retired at age 55 it was installed in his study. There it sat next to his Flying Log Book. Into this he had carefully pasted three small slips of paper. They were the meticulously recorded details of being shot down. He had kept these pages safe from prying German eyes throughout his captivity, just in case he ever had to explain to an RAF Board of Enquiry what had happened to the aircraft. At the top of the page he wrote, "Total time on last 'Op' 3yrs. 09 mths. 15 days 07 hrs. 27 m."

About ten years ago, in response to enquiries from the family, he began to write down his wartime experiences. To these he added many photographs taken at the time, as well as press cuttings and other pieces of memorabilia, and his PoW paintings.

Jim chose to organize the material in the form of a direct narrative, almost entirely without what novelists call 'backstory' - the personal details that make up so much of life. He starts it on the day before he was shot down, using the timeline to show an average day in a Coastal Command squadron in wartime, as the airmen come together and prepare for an attack. For him the story was about the events, and what they show, not specifically about him or the minutiae of his world. He often writes about the things he and others did, or shared, and as a result this is much less a memoir of personal impressions than of shared experiences.

While this allows him to impart a huge amount of information in a compressed form it also means that certain things are left unsaid. Some of them are too important to be omitted. My purpose in writing this introduction is to fill in some of the things that were not written, but

which he told me or which came from reliable sources. In this way I will attempt to provide a wider context that will help the reader understand some of the references.

The first and most obvious thing that Jim leaves out are details of his family, his background and how he joined the RAF. These matter because they shed light on an unusual aspect of the memoir - that when men enlisted in 1939 and 1940 to serve their country they did so fully aware that this was a class-based society in which certain prejudices still counted. Jim was not of the class from which officers normally came. He was the oldest of the three children of William and Florence Hunter. William had been a horse trainer for the Marquess of Bute but had lost everything when a fire on board ship destroyed his stock of horses. By the time Jim was born, in 1920, William was employed as a mine surface worker at Machen, in Wales. Times were hard and the family lived with Florence's parents for several years. Then they moved to Surrey and in the 1930s managed to get a council house in Coulsdon, near Croydon. At about this time Jim won a scholarship to Caterham School, a public school well beyond the family's means.

One event that stands out from this time is that Jim invited his school friends to a birthday tea (he was probably 13), and his mother worked hard to provide delicious treats. Although his neighbourhood friends arrived promptly and in great good humour, not a single one of his school friends appeared. The boys at Caterham School were, for the most part, from wealthy homes, and in those class-conscious days their parents might not have allowed them into a council estate. If Jim was shy about writing his memoirs it may have been because he had learned early on that others would, and could, judge harshly because of prejudice.

After leaving Caterham he became a bond bearer in the City of London and later he was promoted to be a very junior clerk in Barclay's bank. For many like him this was to be the first step towards a successful career in banking and he enjoyed the work. But rumours of war were everywhere and Jim felt he would be needed.

When war seemed imminent Jim cycled over to present himself at his local RAF recruiting station. They took his name and address and sent him home. He turned up every Saturday for the next few weeks, just to remind them of his existence, until, one day, they seemed to take him seriously. They gave him a medical examination, measured him for a uniform and told him to await orders. Several weeks later these arrived and he was off to begin training.

As aircrew under training he was the lowest form of life in the RAF, and every long-serving corporal seemed to want to impress that on the new recruits. "They had us saluting them all the time because they knew that we'd very soon be aircrew, and then they'd be saluting us," he said. Discipline at this point seems to have been arbitrary and harsh. Walking across the airfield one day Jim managed unknowingly to break some boundary rule. This earned him a month of extra duties, including scrubbing toilets. Each day's scrubbing made him aware of two things. The first was that his mother had earned the bulk of the family income by scrubbing floors and cleaning houses, and the second was that he was going to do everything he possibly could to make sure he became an officer.

The camp itself was barren and cheerless. Single-storied buildings of dull red brick with corrugated roofs, or wooden sheds on concrete blocks, seemed to make up the bulk of the freezing cold accommodation. Food in the mess hall was basic. A favourite joke at mealtimes was to sprinkle pepper on one's food, and by the dexterous use of gentle blowing and the howling draft that ran through the place whenever the door opened, one could get most of the pepper to drift on to one's neighbour's plate. We may smile at the schoolboy humour, but it's worth remembering that when people play with food it's usually because it's inedible to begin with. And that was surely the case because around this time Jim volunteered for extra kitchen duty so that he could have better chance of eating properly. He was particularly proud of his custard, made in ten-gallon batches.

He does not mention basic training in his memoir, although he preserved some photographs of his class. He did sufficiently well because he went on to operational training. Originally he put himself down to be a pilot, but in those anxious months of 1940 there were still too few aircraft, and like many others he was asked to choose a second option with the chance of being a pilot when more aircraft became available. He chose to train as an Observer. At that time an Observer's wing was highly prestigious, as the Observer had to be able to operate the guns, the radio, arm and aim the bombs, navigate and act as the second pilot if need be. In fact he had to be able to do everything. Jim mentions that he spent a number of his off-duty hours in the 'Link' trainer gaining the rudiments of piloting skills.

In the dark days following Dunkirk it seemed there might be little chance to do any of this. At one point Jim's entire class was briefed that in the event of an invasion they were to take off in Tiger Moth biplanes and drop hand grenades on the advancing Germans. Desperate measures indeed, and hardly likely to be effective. In some ways the plan tells us only too clearly about an RAF command structure that was more anxious to be seen to be doing something, no matter how dangerous, than to be doing nothing. Ordinary airmen were expected to pay the price.

These days were not without other dangers. Bombing practice was undertaken by using the obsolete Fairey Battle. The Battle was a large single-engined monoplane that had suffered disastrous losses in France, and had promptly been withdrawn from front-line service. The bravery of the fliers was never in doubt, but the effectiveness of the aircraft was. It had one main disadvantage as a trainer: it wasn't a true bomber and had no space for a bomb aimer. In order to overcome this difficulty some of these aircraft had been hastily modified by having a hole cut in the underside of the fuselage so that a bombsight could be placed in a position suitable for aiming the 25lb practice bombs slung under the wings. After take-off the trainee had to slide out of the gunner's seat behind the pilot and wriggle down to the bombsight. There, lying on his

stomach, squeezed under the glycol coolant tank, unable to see forward adequately, he was expected to perform miracles of accuracy.

The bombsight itself was a Mark IX, a bulky article with various protruding rods on which the vectors were set, the whole thing needing careful adjustment and a perfectly straight and level approach to the target. It cost the equivalent of a junior officer's salary for a year. Since this particular Battle had no intercom at the improvised bombardier's hatch, communication with the pilot was primitive. In order to direct the pilot on to the target the trainee was supplied with a long stick with which he was told to prod the pilot's leg. Two prods meant fly further left, one prod meant right. While the trainee was aiming and prodding with his stick, the glycol tank had an annoying habit of boiling over its header tank and dropping scalding liquid on his back and neck. This was not too bad if it fell only on the thick Sidcot flying suit. One simply felt pleasantly warm until one had to return to the observer's seat, whereupon the drafts made the liquid very cold indeed and the poor damp individual soon froze.

On one such trip the glycol tank burst and the aircraft was in immediate danger of overheating. Jim scrambled, soaked, back to his seat, while the pilot, a formidable ex-Polish airforce veteran, throttled back and looked for a place to make a forced landing while he still had some power at his command. The bombing range itself was littered with large boulders and so was not suitable for a landing. Worse still, it was at the top of some steep cliffs and was surrounded by sea. Luckily the tide was out and the pilot decided to try a wheels-up landing on a sloping shingle beach. When the plane finally came to a juddering standstill, just short of the cliffs that rose before them, both men exited as fast as they knew how, expecting at any moment that the fuel would explode. They sprinted up the beach and waited for the whoosh and the flames, which did not in fact happen.

They surveyed the scene from a safe distance. How the pilot had managed to keep the aircraft right side up was beyond them to understand. He must have judged the height perfectly and stalled the plane in such a way that it did not dig in and flip end over end. Taking a moment

or two to recover their breath, they noticed that the tide was now coming in. Soon their aircraft would be awash.

Back at base, hours later, they reported to the duty officer who took them straight in to the Commanding Officer. Jim was the first to be addressed.

"Hunter, where is your bombsight?"

"In the aircraft, Sir."

"It was signed out to you. You are responsible for that bombsight. It is very valuable."

"I expected the aircraft to burn, Sir. I thought I might be more valuable to the Air Force than the bombsight, Sir."

"Well it didn't burn, did it? So where is the bombsight?"

"The tide was coming in rapidly, Sir. Couldn't reach it."

"Poor show. Loss of valuable Air Ministry equipment. You may be facing a charge."

He then turned to the Polish pilot.

"And what do you mean by crashing your aircraft? That's a serious offence. There will be a full investigation."

The Pole looked thoroughly disgusted and growled out his reply through the thickest of Slav accents. "If you court-martial me," he announced in a threatening rumble, "I will desert." He then turned and walked out, leaving the door open.

Jim had no more patience with the Commanding Officer than the Pole had. The difference was that he was still an enlisted man and had to keep quiet, while the Pole was an officer.

No more was said about the incident. In the photographs that Jim preserved is one of his bombing and gunnery class, clad in their Sidcot suits, standing in front of a Battle, two trollies of bombs in the foreground. All fifteen are smiling. Three survived the war.

It was a proud day when Jim received his commission as an officer. From now on he would be on active duty, flying into combat. He would be with highly trained professionals, all

of them with a valuable job of work to do, and class prejudices would, he hoped, no longer apply.

His examination results were sufficiently good for him to be posted, in April 1941, to 217 Squadron, which had recently been re-equipped with the new Beaufort bomber and torpedo attack aircraft. The Beaufort was a handsome all-metal aircraft, and Coastal Command were pleased to get it, if only because it was so much more suitable than the docile but ageing Ansons they had been flying up to that point.

Since the sea is a vast featureless landscape over which to fly, and because many sorties were flown at very low level, accurate navigating was essential. Only the best navigators were sent to Coastal Command. Plotting and calculating had to be quick and accurate in an aircraft that was often buffeted by air currents, frequently at night, and usually in bad weather. There was no room for errors. Crossing the blacked-out enemy coast one had to be able to tell instantly from a line of breaking surf where one was, and that is no easy task. In addition, at this time Beauforts were used for mine-laying, and these had to be positioned in the very mouths of enemy harbours, a task of delicacy that required great courage. 217 Squadron contributed greatly to enemy shipping losses in this unglamorous way. In flight log books it is referred to as 'gardening'. Most of the squadron had not yet been trained in torpedo attacking roles, and so bombing, mine-laying and anti-submarine work were the main occupations.

Handsome though the Beaufort may have been, it was not very fast and was not well armed. Group Captain Guy Bolland, who commanded 217 immediately before Jim joined the Squadron, considered that daylight raids using Beauforts were all but suicidal and he insisted on night attacks only. Faced with the much faster Me109, the Beaufort's defensive machine guns could put up an estimated 11 ounces of .303 calibre bullets as compared with the Messerschmitt's 12 lbs of cannon and machine gun fire in the same amount of time, with the added threat of explosive cannon shells. It is worth bearing this in mind when we recall that Bolland was relieved of his command at 217 for his candid views, just before Jim arrived, and that Jim's

attack on the Scharnhorst was made during daylight hours when fighters could certainly be expected.

Naturally, Bolland's view would not have been made available to the crews at the time for fear of its effect upon morale. In support of this grim outlook we have the following quotation from Bolland's obituary, which appeared in the Daily Telegraph, 7 March 2001.

"In March 1941, when the potential menace of Scharnhorst and Gneisenau to Britain's Atlantic shipping meant that Beauforts had to attack in daylight, Bolland declared all of his squadron's aircraft unserviceable. 'There was no possible chance of any of my aircraft getting anywhere near Brest,' he later explained, 'and even if they did and were lucky enough to hit the ships the damage would have been negligible.' [...] Bolland then reported to Plymouth where he told his air marshal and an admiral that 'sending young men to their deaths on useless missions is not on.' The visit cost him his command."

Again, there is a strong sense of the High Command being desperate to be seen doing something with their forces, even if they were appallingly wasteful of human life, for what was sometimes no real return. Jim was well aware of this mood. When he writes of the proposed attacks on the battleship Bismarck he notes that the plans were doubly alarming because the crews were explicitly told they would not have sufficient fuel to return to base, even if they were lucky enough to survive the attack itself. Ditching a Beaufort in the Atlantic was hazardous enough, but in those frigid waters exposure would surely have killed anyone who got out alive in a matter of minutes. Fortunately the Bismarck was sunk before the mission could become reality.

Was Bolland right in his views? Who can say? The Bismarck was sunk because it had its rudder crippled by a Fairey Swordfish torpedo attack that killed almost all the attacking fliers. But that one lucky hit was all that was needed to allow the Royal Navy to get close enough to finish the job. In fact the antiquated Swordfish had an odd advantage: they flew so slowly that the Bismarck's guns couldn't lock on to them, as they were all geared for faster aircraft speeds

and so the gunners had to resort to guesswork. The result? An Atlantic raider was sunk, which was tactically significant, the Royal Navy's pride HMS Hood was avenged and British prestige remained intact. Yet one could argue that the real stranglehold that had to be broken was the U-Boat menace to merchant shipping, which was far more destructive. And Beauforts could be effective against U-Boats.

Bolland's views can also be questioned in the light of a Beaufort attack by 22 Squadron on 6 April 1941, a matter of days after he had been removed from 217. A force was sent to attack the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau in Brest harbour. Arriving at first light a lone Beaufort flown by Pilot Officer Kenneth Campbell flew towards the Gneisenau, releasing its torpedo before it crossed the inner mole which protected the ship. The torpedo flew over the mole and entered the water with just enough room to allow it to settle to the correct depth for its run. It struck the moored Gneisenau squarely amidships and nearly sank it. The Germans had not believed it possible to launch a torpedo successfully in such a small space and had not deployed sufficient anti-torpedo netting. Campbell and his crew almost certainly did not live long enough to see the results of their daring. The Germans gave the crew a funeral with full military honours. Even they had been surprised by the courage shown. Campbell received the V.C. posthumously.

No one could doubt that these battleships had to be challenged, and no one would deny that the cost in aircrew lost was horrendous. Yet we must consider the results of all this - that Hitler's battlefleet was never very successful. They spent much of the war scurrying from safe harbour to heavily defended anchorage, desperate to avoid the attentions of the RAF and Royal Navy. In the long run this campaign, so expensive of RAF lives, has to be seen as a victory. The battleships were rendered ineffective because, faced with the determination of RAF attacks under impossible conditions, Hitler's navy was put on the defensive and it ceased to be an effective aggressive force.

In truth, the RAF crews knew their equipment was not of the best. Stories of weaponry and equipment failures were all too prevalent. On at least one occasion Beauforts were armed with bombs of the wrong type for the targets concerned; in this case it was an earlier encounter with the Scharnhorst, in June 1940. After pressing home their attack the dismayed crews saw their bombs explode harmlessly on the armoured decks, or bounce off. Whether or not the armour piercing and semi-armour-piercing bombs that should have been available could have done much more against the thickness of steel plate involved is also in doubt. Roy Nesbit writes in detail about this in his book *Torpedo Airmen* (Kimber, London, 1983).

Jim's aircraft was originally armed with semi-armour-piercing (SAP) bombs for the attack described in this book, but was then re-equipped with a landmine. The SAP bombs could not have caused much damage to the Scharnhorst on account of the low height from which they would have to be dropped if there were to be any hope of hitting the target. This type of bomb was only effective if allowed to achieve its terminal velocity and thus have some chance of punching its way through the armour plate. On several occasions 217 Squadron was issued with landmines - codenamed 'magnums' - presumably because of the lack of suitable bombs. A landmine could be highly destructive against buildings and docks because of its lateral blast, but it suffered from two main disadvantages. The first was that it was very hard to aim, since it had no aerodynamic properties at all. It just tumbled. The second was that it had to be slung under the Beaufort with the bomb doors open. This slowed up the aircraft considerably.

Beauforts themselves were demanding aircraft to fly. Pilots had to concentrate every second and often had to use considerable physical force for hours on end to keep the plane flying in trim. The twin-engine design of the early versions was also not entirely satisfactory, and the failure of one engine on take-off or landing was usually fatal for all concerned. In fact the Taurus sleeve valve engine had one great disadvantage as far as Beaufort crews were concerned - there was no capacity for flying very far on one engine. Even with the propeller fully feathered to reduce drag the aircraft would lose altitude. This could be rectified by closing the cooling

louvres on the second engine, which is what the Pilot's Notes advised. This further reduced drag but caused the functioning engine to overheat rapidly and so was not much of a solution. Late in 1941 the new and more powerful Wasp engines overcame this problem, but that was too late for many aircrews.

When Jim writes of his pilot's actions after the Beaufort was hit he does not spell out how dangerous any airframe damage was for that type of plane. He describes one engine as out of control and the other as belching smoke. With a more tractable aircraft this would be alarming enough, but with a Beaufort it would be nearly miraculous for the plane not to cartwheel into the sea, killing all aboard. Jim does not explain this to the reader, but to those who know about the Beaufort's more unpleasant foibles I can only say that I am astonished that Les Collings was able to make such a successful crash landing. Hollywood has shown us images of World War Two aircraft suffering terrible damage and still limping home, and that is the stuff legends are made from. The Beaufort was not, by any stretch of the imagination, as stable, as forgiving, or as safe in routine operation. Jim plays down the inadequacies of the Beaufort and refers only briefly to the underpowered Taurus engines.

Even so, the Beaufort was much loved by many of the crews who risked their lives in it. Later in the war it was to be very successful against Axis shipping in the Mediterranean. Patrick Gibbs' *Torpedo Leader on Malta* (recently re-issued by Grub Street Press) describes this campaign fully. It was also manufactured in large quantities in Australia where it served in modified form (designated as the Mark VIII) throughout the Far East until the end of hostilities.

Jim took part in some sixteen attacking sorties of one sort or another. Most of these were mine-laying, with bombing runs on Brest, which was then considered the most heavily defended harbour in the world. He also records in his flying log book going on U-Boat patrols. On 26 June one was sighted and attacked; it dived and the depth charge bursts were seen to be close to the vessel, with an oil slick appearing on the surface.

Two days earlier, while on a patrol, they had spotted three enemy aircraft in the area and, using cloud cover, they manoeuvred for an attack on a lone Ju88. Since the Beaufort I had only one forward-firing machine gun mounted in the wing and a rear facing turret with two machine guns, it was not really a match for a JU88. Yet they had no doubts. A lively exchange occurred and the JU88 dived abruptly into cloud, sending back wild streams of tracer, and was not seen again.

It is my feeling that Jim chose not to write about these things in his memoirs because on the one hand he did not want to be seen as bragging, and on the other he did not want it to seem as though he was complaining about the shortcomings of the aircraft and tactics. I think it may have been because he felt this would be disloyal to the RAF, and to his comrades (few of whom survived), and might be seen as making excuses. This was the aircraft they had, and that was that. One did not complain. That would have been too much like asking for pity.

In addition I think he delayed writing for so long because there were by war's end so many people who had done things that had been more glamorous, or spectacular, that it hardly seemed right to him to talk about "his bit". Some of this reticence, I'm sure, had to do with becoming a prisoner of war. I have no doubt that many prisoners of war on both sides survived to lead perfectly happy lives for many years, and yet I cannot help but think that for most there was always likely to be a sense of having been chosen by fate to be outside the main action. Jim makes mention of this towards the end of his memoir.

These days there are many terms we could use to describe this state of mind. Survivor Syndrome, which is the sense of shame at having survived when others haven't, might be one that would apply. Brave men who have shown repeatedly that they are brave, may not, in fact, feel they have done as much as they could. For many this can only have been increased by the shock of returning home to a changed landscape - to a neighbourhood that might have been bombed flat; to seek a sweetheart whom one discovered had married someone else; to find friends and relatives who may have been long dead. In all this it's easy to see that many PoWs

must have thought no one would really be interested in their experiences. Many stories have doubtless been lost in this way.

With regard specifically to this particular operation against the Scharnhorst, there are, for example, some unanswered questions raised by Jim's memoirs which beg to be examined now. The first would be: why did Jim's aircraft attack alone? And we might also ask, why he was the only one to find the Scharnhorst that day? There are no surviving records to clarify this but Jim's own comments can be helpful. What happened to the other aircraft? The detachment from 22 Squadron did not even set out, so why were those from 217, who were to be the diversion, allowed to continue? And where did they go?

One answer may be seen in Jim's comment that Sergeant Pip Appleby, the radio operator, had always been a radio enthusiast. He had a habit of dismantling the whole set if he wasn't satisfied with its functioning. Since strict radio silence was the order of the day there was nothing wrong with this. Was there a recall signal which he missed? It's very possible that at this time the Germans were able to mimic the RAF call signs and that they issued a bogus recall signal to the attacking force. The Germans had certainly used this tactic on other occasions. 217 Squadron Station records indicate that the other aircraft returned, and 'duty performed' was written after their serial numbers, which could be consistent with a recall. The ever-zealous Pip Appleby, tinkering with his set, would have been unaware of any such message. And so they flew on through the thick cloud, alone against a battleship.

This detail is important, because the RAF had learned by mid-1941 that the best way to achieve success against enemy shipping was to attack with large quantities of aircraft whenever possible, often including a diversionary assault. This meant the attention of the enemy gunners was distracted by the sheer number of targets attacking from several directions, and the torpedoes that were launched would therefore be difficult to avoid, or 'comb', since they would all be on different tracks.

This method was perfected later in the war when the newer Beaufighter, escorting torpedo carrying Torbeaus, and often supported by Mosquitos, devastated German convoys in the North Sea. The method was simple: the Beaufighters and Mosquitos would attack the escort vessels and flak ships directly, using rockets and cannons, and 'suppress' the defensive fire. Quite naturally the flakships would fire back against their attackers and choose those targets that threatened them rather than the Torbeaus which were lining up on the cargo vessels. Often the rocket attacks against escort vessels were so fierce and so successful that the flak ships were sunk, leaving the main target all but defenceless against the torpedoes. This was the way it should have been done. In 1941 the resources did not yet exist.

In Jim's case his aircraft was the only one of this strike force to reach the target, and his Beaufort was equipped with a large landmine, which would quite possibly have been effective against the supporting destroyers. The orders, however, had specified that if the aircraft were separated they were to aim for the battleship itself. So it became necessary to drop this mine (which, as we have noted, had no aerodynamic qualities at all) accurately upon a heavily defended target, knowing that a landmine only had the ability to produce blast. If it had hit the Scharnhorst it would have made a big bang and not done much else. If it managed to drop into the sea next to the hull or just in front of the bow there was a chance of doing some damage. The fact that no one else had turned up for the attack was not material. Their orders were to find the target and attack. This they did.

From the moment they had seen the Scharnhorst's wake through the broken cloud and mist Jim and his crew knew they were committed to an attack. They also must have known that there would be no point in waiting for other aircraft to turn up, as that would have squandered any slight advantage of surprise. Luckily the cloud cover meant they had some chance of avoiding defensive fire and enemy fighters, at least for the first run in. But they all must have been fully aware that if they could see the Scharnhorst clearly enough for a good attack then she would be able to see them. They were pretty sure they wouldn't be coming back from this one.

As it happened, visibility was so poor that they were directly over the battleship before they saw her. There was no chance to release the mine - which would have overshoot badly. I suspect a lesser crew might have been tempted to dump the mine and go home. Pilot Les Collings had no doubt that his duty was to go round again.

It was during this second attempt, with the Beaufort lining up for an attacking run, that the cloud melted away entirely, revealing the Beaufort broadside on to its quarry - an easy target. The Germans had surely been fully alerted after the first pass and they could hear with some precision where the Beaufort was. Later in the war pilots would throttle back their engines and glide into the attack, achieving almost total surprise, but this was no longer possible. The element of surprise was long gone and the shooting had just started.

In an aircraft as noisy as the Beaufort the crew could not hear anti-aircraft fire. They might well have been aware of the streams of tracer, and perhaps of the muzzle flashes of the larger guns, as well as of the rocking of the plane from the shockwaves of explosions. They would also have felt the impact of the heavier shells.

Jim records nothing of his own injuries, perhaps out of deference to Pip Appleby's death and the serious wounds suffered by Les Collings. In fact he was concussed by the impact of the crash landing. One eye was knocked askew with the result that for some time it did not point in the same direction as the other eye. It wasn't until he was in captivity that he met another PoW who had been an optician in civilian life. This man taught him the eye exercises that eventually normalized his sight. Perhaps this concussion helps explain his action of dropping the Syko encoding machine over the edge of the sinking Beaufort's nose. We can choose to see it as the action of a responsible and brave flier, or, quite possibly as the mark of a brave man with minor concussion, since the Beaufort was well known to float no better than the average brick.

Fortunately his conscientiousness did not kill him. The fact that they were picked up by a German ship so quickly is unusual. Even in 1941 ships were not always in the habit of rushing to rescue downed enemy fliers. The Scharnhorst, of course, would not have stopped, and neither

would her escorts. Their job was to get out of the area as fast as possible. Either Jim was blessed with a compassionate sea captain or the Germans were sufficiently interested in gathering intelligence from their captives to make the extra effort. Were they afraid that three airmen, bobbing around in their Mae-West life jackets, might be seen by other planes and so lead them to the Scharnhorst? For whatever reason, it saved their lives.

Many years later Jim discovered that 25 July was St. James's Day, in fact his 'name day'. He always felt that the luck he had experienced that day might have been because 'his' saint had been watching out for him. Being shot down might have felt like bad luck at the time, but if he had continued operational flying with his squadron his chances of survival would have been practically zero.

Jim makes only passing mention of his escape attempts while a PoW. He certainly did dig a tunnel and it did take him to the far side of the wire, but not quite far enough. The plan was to emerge into a field of standing corn, which would have been perfect cover. Instead it came up short, directly under the sentry's path, and he found himself looking at the sharp end of a rifle. Why does he not mention this episode in greater detail? Tunnels often took weeks to dig, and involved a huge investment of effort. I asked him about this. For one thing he said he always felt that it did not really count, as he hadn't "got out of the hole". For another he said the experience of tunnelling had been most unpleasant and he'd occasionally found it claustrophobic in the extreme, especially when the roof began to collapse, as it did with some regularity.

After this attempt he felt he would be better employed using his expertise to forge documents for others. It would be a more valuable way to use his abilities and would ensure him a place on the escape list, waiting his turn to join a suitable scheme. Forging was a particular skill and in extremely short supply. It required a steady hand, expert ability in calligraphy and exceptional eyesight. It also required the ingenuity necessary to improvise anything while possessing almost nothing. Last but not least it demanded vast reserves of patience. Not many people could muster this, let alone under the difficult conditions of PoW life. Moreover, each

escaper needed several sets of papers and there was no point in getting out if one didn't have suitable, and convincing, paperwork. Jim's delight in Oliver Philpot's 'home run' is, in some measure, a vindication of his efforts behind the wire, for he had laboured long and hard on those papers, and they had done the trick.

Perhaps it's worth remembering that the forging of German documents was viewed by the Third Reich as a treasonable and criminal activity. Had he been detected the punishment would have been severe. He could, in theory, have been shot.

The determination it takes to remain reasonably cheerful and productive while in captivity for nearly four years, unbowed, bored out of one's mind for much of the time, is of a different order from courage under fire. It takes fortitude, possibly more than we can readily imagine. This is what these memoirs reflect. It emerges if the reader is prepared to notice it. For instance, in his album, amid the depictions of PoW life, are delicate studies of flowers (surely copied from magazines), nostalgic renditions of such places as Gloucester Cathedral and Chipstead golf course, and so on. Each of these is, in its own way, a reaching beyond the grim realities of captivity, a way of keeping one's spirits up. By contrast, in his pictures of the camp I would suggest that Jim was mindful that this might possibly be the only visual documentation of this aspect of the war, and so he set about recording it. On one page he noted, in neat tiny handwriting, the details of the 'foodacco' food cooperative, complete with prices and various bits of kriegie jargon. On another he wrote down the titles of the music played on their block gramophone, all of which is evidence of his desire to document PoW life and get it right.

The pictures themselves rarely have any people in them apart from figures in the distance. As the camps became more and more overcrowded I am sure the idea of seeing beyond the people to try to depict the place was one of his preoccupations. Each picture is not, therefore, about the personalities involved; it's about the place, a record of the experience which we can see vividly through the physical particularities of the buildings and the things they had to live with.

In this Jim benefited from one great piece of luck. By arrangement with the Germans and the Red Cross he was allowed to enrol in the first part of the B.Sc. course in Engineering which was offered on a postal basis. This was not just a distraction from the run of the mill boredom of captivity but something he truly enjoyed. The added bonus was that he was allowed mathematical books and a complete set of trigonometrical drawing instruments. The surviving engineering drawings of the steam engines he designed and constructed are proof of his application to the educational task in hand. But the great advantage was that he could also use these precise instruments for forging documents. Best of all, they were not contraband, and so could not be confiscated. So he worked diligently at his studies and with equal vigour at his forgeries.

Prisoners were allowed some recreational drawing equipment - otherwise these drawings could not have been done - and we have to assume that the Germans expected nefarious use to be made of some of these items. Perhaps that's one reason Jim did some of these paintings. They showed his captors that he had a reason to own the art equipment he had. I think, also, that he was practising his skills in each picture, trying out methods he could use for forgery, experimenting with colours and inks. Some inks were made in the camps - soot and sardine oil produced a good india ink substitute. Each picture was a training ground.

They made other things as well. Jim refers once or twice to the kriegie practice of brewing alcohol. Fermented prunes, given yeast and time, were a good source, but distillation was what was wanted, since the prune juice didn't taste that good and in any case the purer forms of alcohol were easier to conceal. Distillation is a tricky process. If the temperature is too high, or the liquid is left too long, one gets a fair percentage of 'wood' alcohol. This is best used as disinfectant. If swallowed it can have unpleasant side effects. Jim told me of one occasion when he woke up feeling excessively seedy and unable to see out of his left eye. The right eye would only co-operate if he wanted to look down. The upper hemisphere didn't seem to work at all. He decided to give POW alcohol a miss from that point on. Luckily he was much better the next

day, but he kept his promise to himself. This experience remained in his memory and is perhaps part of what lies behind his description of his room-mate Bob Chadwick's reaction to PoW booze - he tried to climb over the wire.

In fact Jim said that some of the best evenings he had in camp were when a bunch of like-minded people would gather and pool their resources to make a 'hellbrew' using odds and ends of chocolate, cocoa, coffee, tea and anything else that looked as though it would create a tasty brew, and they'd have a party on the strength of that. No alcohol didn't mean no fun.

Food on the whole was scarce and erratic. The International Red Cross parcels were the life-savers, but sometimes these would not arrive for weeks on end, and the German rations were sub-starvation. So food, when it appeared, was not consumed right away. Part was always saved. At Lübeck, in Oflag Xc, it was in very short supply. Tea leaves were used three times (or until "the colour ran out"), then placed on newspaper to dry in the sun ("to get some colour back in"), then used a couple more times. Finally they were dried, rolled and smoked.

Prison life was continually filled with random searches and harassments. On one occasion the whole camp was being moved and, upon arrival at Stalag Luft, all were told to strip naked for de-lousing. This, of course, gave the Germans a chance to search through every piece of kit and extract anything considered contraband. So what could the kriegies do to conceal the pick-axe head they had purloined and had so carefully carried? Fortunately there was one kriegie who had a considerable paunch (obviously he hadn't been there long). They tied the small pickaxe head tightly round his waist with string and rolled his flab over it and the string. When the guards walked along the front of the line of naked men the axe was juggled to the back, and when they walked down the back of the line, the axe was wormed to the front. It made it safely into the camp and had a productive underground life for many months.

Towards the latter part of the war sections of PoWs were moved by train from camp to camp, always in cattlegons - just like the death camp victims. Conditions were primitive - little light or air and inadequate space to lie down, with a metal drum for a toilet. There was also

the danger of being bombed and strafed by Allied aircraft. The kriegies quickly found a way to make themselves relatively comfortable. Those who could get hold of heavy nails or the pegs from railroad ties, or any available piece of iron. A rock and a wrapping of rags made a reasonable hammer that wouldn't hurt the hand. The nails were then pounded into the wooden walls of the cattle truck and the kriegies could lift each other up on to the hooks, wearing the Polish greatcoats they'd been issued, and so converting them into hanging sleeping bags. Buttoned in, one could hang from the wall and despite some discomfort around the armpits one could get some rest, dangling like a bat, until it was time for someone else's turn. Some found it agreeable to rest their feet on the floor. Others preferred to be above it all and give floor space to others.

The determined escapers would, of course, be hacking at the thick wooden floors in hopes of being able to make a good-sized hole. This took a lot of effort for the undernourished captives, and on at least one occasion an escapee got out only to slip between the wheels and the tracks and be crushed to death. Jim recalls that on that occasion, with the war obviously close to ending (according to the broadcasts received from the BBC on the illicit camp radio), the death dampened the enthusiasm for escape considerably. It was around this time that, moving past a pine forest, they watched in amazement through the tiny barred window as a V2 rocket lifted off and, trailing smoke in a long curve, headed for England. They had no idea what it was except that it was obviously not friendly. Germany might be losing but that did not mean the danger was over.

Finally, after nearly four years of captivity, Jim knew the war was nearly over when they were marched away from the advancing Russians. The prisoners walked across Germany in long straggling columns and eventually were handed over to the Allies. These marches have been written about many times, and this occasion was no different in its essentials. The PoWs often did, in fact, end up carrying the guards' rifles for them (since the guards were usually those who were too unfit to go to the front lines). The rifles were always returned without the bolts or the

firing pins, which had been disposed of. In fact Roger Simmons, who travelled with Jim, remained on friendly terms with one of the guards for years afterwards, and in 1945 began sending food parcels to him in Germany. He kept this up for several years. This was no small thing as England was not exactly the land of plenty at that time.

Eventually the columns arrived at Luneberg airfield, which was full of bomb craters, with the PoWs still carrying their kit of waterbottles (usually home made from resoldered tins), spare food and clothes. At the derelict airfield they waited until, at last, the promised Lancasters came in to land. There were some over eager folks who rushed towards the planes before they had stopped rolling, but order was eventually restored, the kriegies were persuaded to leave some of their bulkier items behind and then scrambled aboard. It was hardly a tidy exercise and men sat in the bomb bay or wherever they could. Jim squeezed himself in behind the navigator, well up front, fascinated by this, to him, new aircraft with all its sophisticated instruments. Then the pilot gave a wave to indicate he was going to take off.

Up to this moment Jim had assumed that quite a few of them would be told to get off to prevent overloading the aircraft - that was one reason he'd scrambled so far forward. Those nearest the door would be out first, he reasoned. "When the pilot waved for take-off I thought: what, with this lot on board? We'll never make it!" They did, just, and lifting off he saw, at the other side of the airfield, a Lancaster in flames. Overweight, it had failed to clear the boundary fence. All aboard were killed.

Back in England he was given a medical check and immediately put on a better diet. He weighed about 90 lbs - about average for a returning kriegie at this time, but pitiful for a six footer. Then he was sent home for an emotional reunion with his family. It was only then that he learned of his brother Donald's death at Arnhem in 1944. Homecoming cannot have been easy.

Home leave was very welcome, even with the sad news, but he was still in the RAF and before long he was required to report back for duty, for the PoWs were expected to make the

transition back to normal military life. After all, the war against the Japanese was not over. Old habits learned in captivity were hard to break, however, and four years of resisting German orders tended to be reflected in a similar reluctance to accept RAF discipline. Placed in an RAF camp, complete with barbed wire fences and a guard at the gate, many of the men simply carried out their usual escape plans and disappeared off home. It was much easier than avoiding the Germans had been. Jim took a dim view of this. He wanted to get back to flying as soon as possible and thought that desertion would not look too good on his record of service book.

Small infractions were commonplace, and often done in a spirit of fun more than anything else. On one occasion Jim was in a column of former PoWs being marched across the airfield when one of them spotted a mulberry tree in fruit. The whisper went down the ranks rapidly and, with hardly a blink of an eye, the whole column peeled off, in perfect step, in a gently curving left turn. They reached the tree and set about devouring every last berry. The officer in charge shouted and stormed, turned puce, and, in their own good time, the men fell back into ranks and marched on, the ravaged mulberry tree mute testimony to their actions. It was not that they were hungry, Jim explained, it was just that it seemed like such a waste of good fresh fruit.

Jim had many stories like this.

One last anecdote: on boat race day 1945 the crowds gathered along the Thames to watch Oxford and Cambridge battle it out for the first time in five years. Jim decided to drive up to see it in his ageing Austin 7, together with some friends who, in their cars, made up a small convoy. Along the way Jim caught sight of a group of very scruffy Italian and German PoWs hitchhiking. Without a moment's hesitation he stopped the Austin and crammed as many of them in as he could. A few minutes later the ancient tiny car, sagging low on tired springs, with Italians perched on the running boards and hanging from the rear rack, lurched back onto the road to take them all to a day out along the Thames. Jim would never have spoken about that: the story came

to light in a conversation after his death. He would have felt it was too self serving to have mentioned it.

If I choose to write about it here it's to show that this was a man who held no grudges. In later years, when he served at various RAF bases throughout Europe, he had many colleagues in other services, men who had flown against the RAF, sometimes in Luftwaffe uniforms. This did not get in the way of a good working relationship. Some even became close personal friends. After all, Jim had always liked the German people. It was Hitler and company he didn't care for.

When Jim began to write his memoirs he doubted that anyone would ever want to read them. By the time he had finished he knew he had a story that was worth repeating. He knew he had a record of men's bravery, of their comradeship and spirit, and I feel he had also discovered that these things were greater and more powerful than the atrocities of war. He knew he had somehow made sense of the time he had lived through, and found the core of goodness at the heart of it. It's my belief that writing about these events, in all their sorrow, and with their spots of laughter and joy, he was able to achieve a sense of peace about this part of his life. For writing is a way of making sense of our lives - as Jim says at the end - a way of joining the dots to try and see the whole. In this memoir he was able to bring a sense of form and order to what, at the time, must have felt like random events over which he had little or no control. And it is the arbitrariness of the PoW's experience which is surely the most stressful element. When that is added to the random nature of war itself the effects can be disorienting and frightening.

It's easy for us to say, with these events at comfortable arm's length, that the PoWs must have known that they would survive the war. At the time this was far from being a sure thing. German rations were pitiful, and but for the Red Cross many would have starved. Each day in captivity demanded an effort of will, an insistence that one would be treated properly by one's captors. The Senior British Officer arguing the Geneva Convention with the camp Commandant seems like a cliché to us now. But he was not doing this just to make trouble or to insist on preserving some point of dignity. He, and all such officers everywhere, were engaged in walking

a delicate line between insisting on their rights - including their rights to break the rules and escape - and yet not antagonizing their captors so greatly as to cause disastrous reprisals. Jim told me on several occasions that Douglas Bader, the famous legless ace, was not always very skilled at this game. The whole camp suffered dire shortages when Red Cross parcels were withheld in punishment, and sometimes no real gain was achieved. The temporary surges in camp morale that Bader inspired by his demands were, it seems, very soon ground down by plain hunger. Some people were actually relieved when Bader was sent to Colditz.

In 1944, of course, the Germans did lose patience. Americans captured at the Battle of the Bulge were machine-gunned, downed airmen were beaten and sometimes killed, and fifty of the seventy-six men recaptured after the Great Escape were shot, as Jim records. Survival, then, was not assured.

Jim died on the last day of February 2002, aged 82, after a long fight with cancer. He had remained in the RAF until age 55, loving the work, and retiring as a Wing Commander. He began writing down his experiences in about 1990, and doubtless fifty years had erased some of the memories, but many of them were so sharp, so strong, that no amount of time could erode them.