

Warrant Officer 1st Class, Gordon Brownhill's Service and Evasion Story

Gordon Isiah Brownhill was born in Hamilton, Ontario, 29th June 1919. Growing up he became interested in flying, watching aircraft, at a Flying Club located on Woodward Avenue in Hamilton. After listening to a radio broadcast by Sir Anthony Eden during the Spanish Civil war, he decided he needed to enlist.

He was 19 years old and working at Dominion Glass in Hamilton when he applied to the Royal Canadian Air Force. They turned him down, so, undeterred, he hitchhiked to Montreal and secured a job on a 4,000-ton freighter carrying 200 Holstein cattle that were entrusted to Gord's care. The Atlantic crossing took 14 days during which time 9 calves were born.

The ship landed in Cardiff, Wales and Gord enlisted with the Royal Air Force in Cardiff on the 2nd of June, 1939. He was sent to RAF Waddington for training, then to RAF St Athans, near Cardiff, for Fitter #1 and then Flight Engineer training. From there to No. 1660 HCU (Heavy Conversion Unit) at RAF Swinderby for conversion to Manchesters and eventually Lancaster 1s. He was posted to No. 207 Squadron RAF 11th December 1942 to commence Operations.

Gord, and his crew, had completed 16 bombing missions before that fateful night of March 9th, 1943 without ever being attacked by night fighters, although they had been hit by Flak. On March 9th their aircraft had developed an anti-freeze leak in the starboard inner engine, so they took the reserve aircraft EM X. This resulted in a delayed start, further exacerbated by navigational errors that when they finally reached the target, Munich, the city was already on fire, EM X dropped its bomb load and headed for home. They had cleared Karlsruhe-Mannheim on the return leg when they were intercepted by a Focke-Wulf Fw 190. They evaded that aircraft but failed to notice a Junkers Ju 88 piloted by *Oberfeldwebel Reinhard Kollack of – 7. Staffel of Nachtjagdgeschwader 4 7./NJG 4*) which attacked from above.

Gord Brownhill had just left his Flight Engineer's seat to the right of the pilot, and was standing at his control panel, when the tracers came through the canopy, passed behind the Pilot and across where he had previously been sitting hitting the starboard wing and setting it on fire. The fighters attacked more than once. They tried to activate the fire extinguishers without success. Then they tried to suck out the flames by diving the aircraft. This didn't work either. The Pilot, Flight Sergeant Ivor Wood, gave the order to bail out. Gord noticed the Bomb Aimer was kneeling beside, but not opening, the escape hatch, so Gord

went down and opened the hatch and realized that Sergeant Warren was already dead. Gord went back up to the flight deck to see if he could help the Pilot who told him to get out, he was right behind him. The Wireless Operator, Warrant Officer (2nd Class) William Lishman, and the Navigator, Sergeant R. Brown, were the first to evacuate the aircraft, Gord followed. He saw the aircraft, engulfed in flames then complete a reciprocal turn back to Germany. The Pilot stayed at the controls and together with the Rear Gunner, Sergeant George Mortimore (20 years old), Mid Upper Gunner, Sergeant George Margetson (19) and the Bomb Aimer, Sergeant Richard Warren, died in the ensuing crash. (In the Evasion report it is stated that the Bomb Aimer and both Gunners were killed at their posts).

After three days hiding in the swamps near the Berry au Bac Canal, he met with a young boy (presumably Marc Hamel) who was connected with the Resistance, his father (Pierre Hamel) was a lock keeper. He stayed with them for a month.

{Marc Hamel writes: "On 10 March 1943, at about 0330 in the morning, a British Avro Lancaster B.Mk1 bomber, EM-X W4172, of 207 Sqn, was shot down on its return from a mission over Munich and crashed near Tangon in the Ardennes I was the first to arrive at the crash site; my 17th birthday was on 12 March, two days later. I found a huge crater, at the bottom of which 12.7mm [sic] rounds were still exploding; on the surrounding ground all that remained was shattered debris mingled with parts of the bodies of the crew. The Feldgendarmerie arrived from Rethel shortly afterwards and cleared everyone from the area}

{My father, Pierre Hamel, and I belonged to the Lorraine branch of the Resistance, and lived at Avan, a few kilometres from the crash site. Immediately after being roused from our beds by a violent explosion, we set off in that direction, taking separate paths in order to cover as large an area as possible with the aim of picking up any allied aviator in danger. I did not see my father arrive at the crash site, and he never explained why, even after the war. He was arrested by the Germans for spying on 25 April 1944, which perhaps explains his unwillingness to speak about what he was doing at the time of the crash, and was sent to prison by the German military tribunal at Charleville in June 1944. He died in 1952."}

Gord travelled with them to Arras where they turned him over to the Underground and they went back to Lille where he met Edgar d'Hallendre and from there on to Paris where he met Eugene d'Hallendre his father, the head of the Underground.

[Eugene and Lucienne D'HALLENDRE and their son Edgar lived at 1 Impasse Bomart in La Madeleine, near Lille. Eugene D'HALLENDRE, born in 1898, railway worker at the SNCF, was arrested on July 20, 1943, on denunciation, at the same time as his wife, their son Edgar being arrested a little later. Eugene D'HALLENDRE was shot by the Germans in Bondues on December 27, 1943. Edgar D'HALLENDRE, born in 1922, appears like his mother Lucienne, born BUYSSSE in 1899, on the list of French deportees and both survived the conflict. Edgar

being interned first in France and then in Belgium until the Liberation, his mother having been interned in camps in Germany and liberated by Russian troops on May 5, 1945.]

From Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris on the evening of May 8th, Gord travelled to Bordeaux by train carrying false papers stating that he was a Traveller de Commerce for the German Government. On board Gord met British airmen, William Laws, John Whitley and Jacques Tinel of the Underground who was going to lead them over the Pyrenees Mountains. Also on board, escorted by "Madeleine" (Madeleine Bouteloupt), were two more airmen Bernard Marion and David Sibbald.

Traveling via Nantes, the train arrives in Bordeaux on the morning of the 9th. All the airmen meet in the station where, following an aerial alert exercise, they were fortunately not checked. Each having received from "Francois" (Jean-Francois Nothomb) new identity cards and a "German" Circulation Permit, all leave the station on foot individually in the direction of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. At the beginning of the afternoon, they regroup and take the train to Dax where they arrive around 4:30 p.m.

Marion, Sibbald and Brownhill set off on their bikes, escorted by Jean-Francois Nothomb, who takes them to Bayonne. They stay in an apartment in the city and are joined the next day by Whitley, Laws and Jacques TINEL who took the morning train after spending the night at the Hotel du Terminus, 81 Avenue Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Dax . Jean-Francois Nothomb, accompanied by Sibbald goes the next day to Saint Jean-de-Luz to look for an additional bicycle, so that on his return, he can redo the trip with Whitley and Marion. They are joined later that evening by Laws and Brownhill, the group then disperses in several cafes to meet again afterwards, with the exception of Sibbald. Gord recalls that in one café they were surrounded by German soldiers and were served oysters to eat. Gord did not eat Oysters!

The same evening, the group separated in pairs and walked along the main railway line south of Ciboure where they saw Sibbald and two guides, including Florentino Goikoetxea. All arrive at the Yatxu Balta farm of Joseph Laretche, near Urrugne, where they change their pants and put on espadrilles for the crossing of the Pyrenees.

Brownhill, Sibbald, Marion, Laws, and Whitley leave the farm around midnight on the night of May 11-120. The current of the Bidasoa being too strong, they are obliged to make a detour and reach Endarlaza just before dawn. They cross the Endarlaza bridge, fortunately unguarded, and find themselves in Spain. They find that Brownhill is missing and Florentino, Jacques Tinel and Jean-Francois Nothomb, who have gone looking for him, come back empty-handed. The rest of the troop follows the railway line leading to Hendaye (the Bidasoa train or Txikito Tren) and, passing through a tunnel and crossing a stream, finally arrives at the end of its escape. They seem to have followed the railroad from the mines of Arditurri to Ergoien.

Gord's recollection is that they began the traverse of the mountains it was pitch black. After a long time, they stopped to get a drink. Gord was the last to get a drink. When he finished everyone else was gone. He could not shout so he continued alone following the lights of Spain in the distance. As he exited the mountain path about 6 miles from the British Consulate in San Sebastian (where his companions had arrived). He was caught and turned over to a local Sheriff for three days and from there to prison in Barcelona. After enduring eight days in Barcelona Prison (without proper beds or toilets), he was transferred to Zaragoza Prison where he spent another seven days and then sent to Miranda Concentration Camp.

While in Miranda, Gord met a Captain from the 51st Highland Division who had been a captive there for nine months. They bribed a guard with a thousand cigarettes to get themselves onto a sick parade. Together with twenty-nine other prisoners and just two guards they boarded a train and immediately jumped out on the opposite side. The train then departed the station leaving them behind. They walked to the next station and bought tickets for Madrid.

In Madrid they contacted the British Military Attache who didn't want to have anything to do with them, except to give them some soda crackers, cheese and enough money to purchase a train ticket to the Spanish Peninsular. Their intention was to swim the short distance to Gibraltar. Then they noticed a ship in the harbour flying the Union Jack, so they stowed away and hid in one of the lifeboats until the ship set sail.

Once underway, they revealed themselves to a deck hand who couldn't speak English. He took them to the captain. He was from Lancashire. He was annoyed with them stowing away, didn't believe their story, turned the ship around and handed them over to the Military Police in Gibraltar. Gord was handed over to the Air Force Police for a couple of days who then turned him over to MI5 in the caves and was interrogated by them for three weeks. Gord was then put on board the RMS Mauretania bound for Britain. After arrival he spent three more weeks of interrogation with MI5 in London. He was offered leave but other than his girlfriend (who he eventually married in September 1944) he didn't want much leave as he didn't have anywhere to go in Britain.

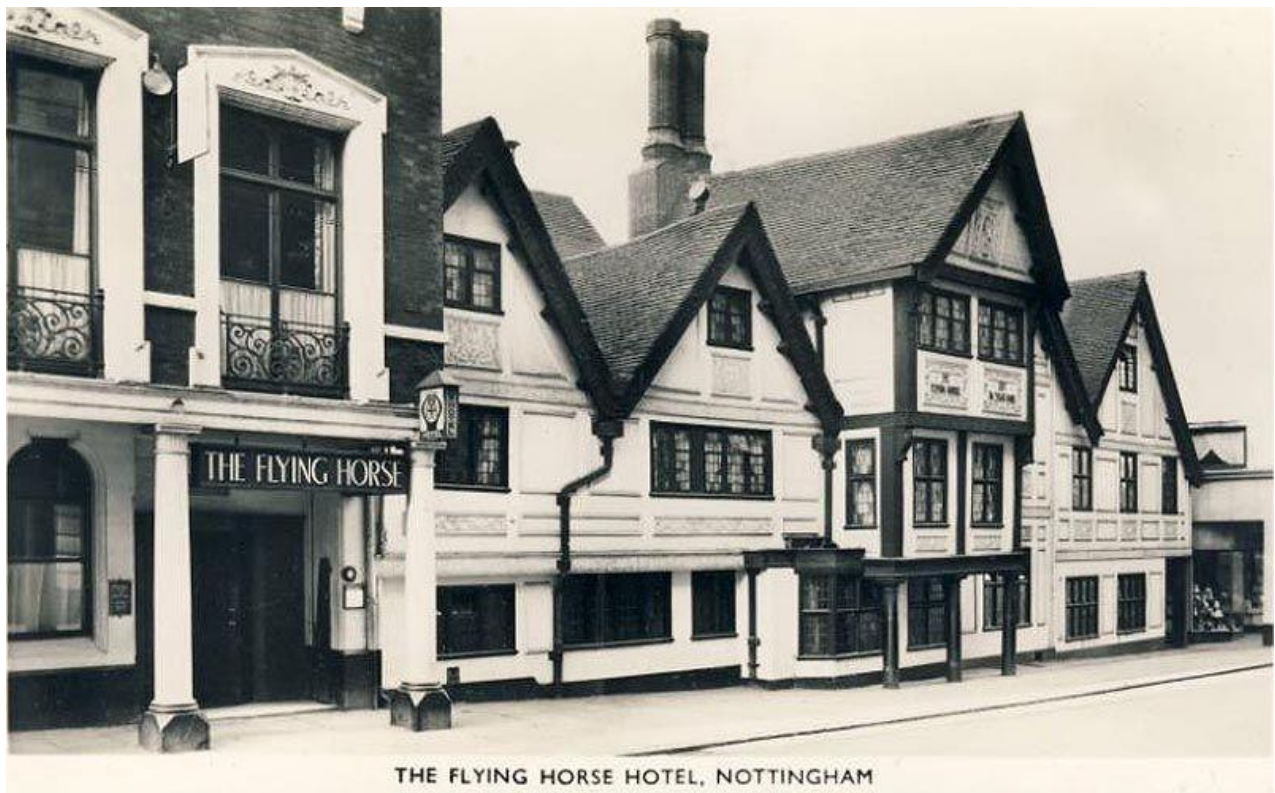
His next posting was 44 Group, ferrying Halifaxes and Stirlings to Italy and Algiers for the Polish Uprising. Then Gord was posted to County Antrim in Northern Ireland as a Flight Engineer Instructor on C-87s (Consolidated Liberator Express). While there, he finagled his way onto to a Liberator bound for Montreal (Dorval), where he put in for a transfer to the RCAF. The Commanding Officer accepted his transfer and immediately put him on two weeks' leave. He was arrested by a Squadron Leader from the RAF for being AWOL, but it came to nothing as he had already transferred to the RCAF. He had tried from 1943 on to get a transfer to the RCAF, but his Commanding Officer in Northern Ireland conveniently lost his transfer applications.

Gord began his new assignment with the RCAF and made 12 trips ferrying new Lancasters to Britain. Mostly to Prestwick, once to Stornoway and one time via Vancouver, Bermuda, the Azores and back home on one trip. Sailing back from the UK on the SS Isle de France after a delivery, to his great surprise, Gord found himself in a bunk above his Wireless Operator Warrant Officer (2nd Class) William Lishman from Manitoba. He had just got back from the prison camp.

At the end of 1945 Gord was posted to Rockcliffe prior to being discharged and the RCAF asked if he would go back to England to join a Transport Squadron based in Lyneham. He declined as at that time his wife, Dorothy, was on her way to Canada.

Gord maintained contact in the ensuing years with those from the resistance who helped him. The granddaughter came over to Canada for a visit in 2007. The two boys who were primarily responsible for saving him were both killed later in the war. One killed in Normandy trying to break through to help the Americans. The other was shot for helping some American airmen to escape. "They went and told on him," said Gord.

(Source: This story is a compilation of Gordon Brownhill's firsthand account as recorded by "Voices from the Past" at Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum and a report prepared by Phillippe Connart, Michel Dricot, Edouard Reniere and Victor Schutters of the Comete Escape Network). Special thanks to Mrs. Dorothy Brownhill for her contribution and to Andy Elmhirst for the idea.



The 'Flying Horse' was a local pub frequented by Gordon Brownhill and the crews from RAF Langar



Gordon Brownhill's favourite "watering hole" while stationed at RAF Langar, Nottinghamshire