

Voices of War Life Story

Herbert 'Bert' Turner
1922- 2019

WWII, Army, Herbert Turner, 1922, Main

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Name: Herbert Turner

Other names/aliases: Bert

Date of birth: 12.09.1922

Place of birth: London, UK

Nationality: British

Date of death: 04.08.2019

Place of death: Stoke on Trent

Burial and memorials:

Service No:

Unit(s): 90 Squadron, Bomber Command , 196 Squadron, RAF

Rank: Flight Engineer, Warrant Officer

Medals and awards: Caterpillar Club

Education: [St Stephen's, Paddington](#)

Clubs and affiliations: [Arnhem 1944 Fellowship](#)

[Cartwright and Edwards](#), Stoke on Trent



Life Story

Bert was originally from London and his first home was 99 Ledbury Road, Paddington. He was the second youngest of 6 children. His father had served in the First World War in the airforce, the RFC as it was then and his 3 uncles also had military careers. He was born into the post-war years but Bert did not recall being hungry, only spending his early years running around the London parks. He went to school at St Stephens, Paddington. An air cadet during his early teenage years, Bert Turner, 95, survived the Blitz before volunteering for the RAF as a 17-year-old and training as a flight engineer.

Military Career

Serving on Stirling bombers, Bert was involved in more than 30 missions into hostile territory during the Second World War as he and fellow airmen transported troops, equipment and food to British forces. His missions included D-Day, Operation Dragoon, Operation Market Garden. In-between these operations, he made many sorties carrying SAS and Polish SOE into Europe.

Special Operations Executive (SOE):

RAF crews often assisted with dropping of supply cannisters for the SOE, particularly into France, as well as transporting agents. Bert recalled that this was one of his primary duties from around March 1944. Initially he was based at Tarrant Rushton in Dorset, and then moved to RAF Keevil in Wiltshire after the US air-force moved out.



“I did about four bombing runs, but mainly I supplied the SOE, towed gliders, and dropped para-troops. You started action when you got in the aeroplane in England. We were briefed for whatever we were going to do. You got in the aeroplane, took off and then you were in action. It didn’t stop until you landed again. A lot of it was very boring. Some of it was very hectic. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it’s the best way of explaining it, honestly.”

On one occasion, after they saw the fires that indicated the location of a drop zone and reduced height, they were spotted by Germans on the ground. They quickly banked away and Bert went to check the bomb bay. Realising that they still had all 3 cannisters that would require dropping by hand, the crew decided to return:

So anyhow, skipper goes and we go around and just as Leo said, ‘Drop them,’ dropped a, Jerry hit us and he put the starboard outer out of action, damaged the starboard inner and peppered us a bit. None of us were touched. Fair enough. We came out but the skipper shouted for me and I went up and he turned around and said, ‘The starboard outer won’t feather.’...I said, ‘Oh.’ So I said, ‘Get Pete out of his turret,’ because the torque on the prop on the starboard outer could possibly take the rear tail up. The fin and rudder. So we got Pete out of his turret and just as we got Pete out the props flew off somewhere over France and we flew back”

D-Day:

Like most of the men, Bert was in the dark about the details of the forthcoming invasion, even if they had an idea that something big was being planned. He talks about his surprise when they woke up to find the planes had been prepared:



“We woke up one morning and went out to an aircraft and they’d painted the white stripes for the invasion. That ...all came as such a surprise that nobody knew anything about it until it was done. But the mechs were standing on the wings painting these blooming white stripes with brooms. Then D-Day came up. We were ready to go on the 5th. But no. We were ready to go on the 4th and it was cancelled. And then they gave the order that we were going on the 5th and we took the paratroops over”

Bert took 20 paratroopers over to France that morning, and remembers that the successful drop was one of the most peaceful journeys he ever made.

Below: Stirlings of 196 Squadron at Keevil, preparing to emplane paratroopers for the Normandy invasion (dated 5th June 1944, *Wikipedia Commons*)



Operation Market Garden

The following history includes comments from interviews with Bert where he described events.

Day 1 - Sunday 17th September

On the Sunday they left the airfield in Wiltshire for the first day of the operation. Almost exactly the same as D-Day, it was pretty uneventful. *“Nothing exciting happened as we flew over to Arnhem and disposed of our glider, which seemed to get down ok, and came home.”* However, they had the element of surprise and this was of course to change over the next few days.

Day 3 – Tuesday 19th September

Tuesday was far more difficult and this time they met a far more organised German force: *“On Tuesday we went again, just doing a supply trip, just containers. We got to the TRV which was about 50 miles outside of Arnhem and then did a straight run in at about 4,000 ft - no messing. However the German forces had woken up and were waiting for us - and it got hot and we’re jockeying through the lot of it [gun fire].*

The plane landed safely with no injuries to the crew, but 50 plus holes on it. However, there was time to do repairs as Tuesday was supposed to be their last flight. It was also Bert’s 30th mission

Day 4 - Weds 20th September

It was becoming more difficult to get in by air with a combination of poor weather conditions and better German preparations. Supply drops were not getting to the men, as messages to change the DZ (as it was



in German hands) had not got through. The men on the ground tried to signal the RAF pilots, but they had orders to ignore any such signal. Consequently, it was a disaster - ten of the 164 aircraft involved were shot down around Arnhem, and only 13% of supplies actually reached British hands.

Having carried out their allotted missions, *“On Wednesday we were given the day off. We were finished, six months rest.”* But their rest was not to last. Instead, a call came which would see them encounter their most treacherous flight, leaving Bert stranded and other members of the bomber dead.

Day 5 - Thurs 21st September

Bert was at home when the call came: *“...we went down to the flights and the Skipper came along to us he'd been promoted from Warrant officer to Pilot Officer. he'd got his commission, he'd also been awarded the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) on Wednesday. We couldn't take our own plane as it was still damaged from the flight before, so we got out to the other aircraft we were supposed to be flying. We tried for about ten minutes but could not get the rev's and boost we needed from one of the engines. We decided to scrap that and go into the spare, B-Baker, so we got over to that but we were about 20 minutes late behind the rest of the Squadron.”*

They had to make up the time as they were slightly behind. *“The Germans hammered us, we dropped the supplies but whether they got to where they were supposed to go I don't know.”*

From Berts account demonstrates that the planes were still struggling to



drop supplies and the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous.

“We got through but then the navigator ‘Ginger’ put out a call to Brussels saying we wouldn’t make it home. Just as he said that six German fighters decided we were their ‘meat’ and shot us down.” Bert and the other men needed to bail out – a daunting process as they had received next to no parachute training at all. *“I remember him asking ‘will my chute open’ to which I replied ‘Well it’s got two chances. A few minutes later was when the skipper gave the order to abandon the aircraft. Fortunately his chute did open’* and they landed in a field. At some point during the events, Bert hurt his ankle, which was to cause him problems later on.

One of the clearest memories Bert said he didn’t remember much after being hit, only shaking hands with his navigator as the plane went down. There wasn’t long as they were only at around 4,000 feet. He did recall the sound of the German fire as it hit the aircraft.

“I can tell you what it’s like being hit by those shells, I was in a caravan in a forest in Holland, a few years ago, and there was a storm and the fir cones and acorns were coming off and hitting the roof of the caravan, it sounded like that”.

After that they were quickly rescued by Dutch locals who fed and watered them: *“A bloke came tearing towards us, who at first we thought was a German soldier wearing field grey, thankfully it was an old washed boiler suit worn by a Dutchman, who took us inside and fed us egg and bacon. We were eventually picked up by the Royal Horse Artillery who took us back to their base and we spent the night there. We were put in*



a lorry the next day and taken back to Brussels, however on the way an Army Police Patrol stopped us and told us we'd have to get out as the Germans had cut the road off.



They took the lorry off us. Now I've often wondered if they were in fact German soldiers - it was so peculiar. We wondered around Holland a bit and were eventually picked up by the Yanks. We had a night in Brussels and the next day flew back home."

Bert earned his [caterpillar pin](#) (above) for bailing out of the plane on the Arnhem mission. It was only after returning home that Bert learned his Skipper had been killed while parachuting out of the plane. He was also promoted to Warrent Officer after his last trip, and viewed his military service as the high point of his life.

On return to England, Bert traveled via to London. Having passed close to his fathers house he decided to drop in a surprise. In actual fact his father was more shocked to see him in the kitchen as they had received a telegram a few days previously infomring them that Bery was "*Missing, presumed dead*". Her return home didn't get any better – he tried to get a train from Paddington when he encounteres some Miliraty Polcie who took pity on his disheveled state (he was still in his kit, ripped ad torn up) and gave hime a bed for the night before sending him back on the train. He was going to visit his new wife. She had also received the same telegram and so believed herself to be widowed after just one week of marriage. When he arrived, apparently her first words were "*you stink!*" so he went up to the billet to wash up as any self-respecting husband would. Bert and his wife were then given



some survivors leave together and went to Stoke on Trent . During the train journey he aggravated his ankle wound sustained at Arnhem and spent time in the sick bay again.

VE Day

Bert was at RAF Beccles in Suffolk when the news came in that the war in Europe was over. Bert remembered that for some of the men it was relief mixed with disappointment as they were hoping to go to the Far East and continue to fight. He was also not happy as the men were confined to camp. “It’s a sore point with me because in my opinion, all the skivers got to party in the streets and the blokes that did the job were confined to their camps.”

Post War

After the war ended, Bert tried several careers, and initially went to work on the buses as a conductor, but it was not for him and he tried several others including mining but then started work at Cartwright and Edwards on a pot bank, where he stayed working on the kilns for 35 years.

Bert would regularly attend the reunions in Normandy and Arnhem, and always visited the [Jonkerbos Cemetery](#) to pay his respects to his Skipper and tail gunner who were killed during that fateful last mission.

“Don’t make out I’m hero, because I’m not. The heroes are dead.”

In an interview with the Telegraph during the 75th Arnhem commemorations, Bert described how painful it was, coming back to remember his old mates:



“but I’ve still got to do it. I know this is said so many times, but it’s quite true. We were more than brothers. You lived together, ate, slept and everything else together. And you died together. How much closer can you get?”

After his mother died, Bert didn’t go back to London and his family dispersed. Bery spent the rest of his life in Stoke on Trent, and he passed away there aged 97.



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Sources

The majority of images are taken by Penny Guides/Voices of War. Some are taken from open source news sources and are attributed where appropriate, below.

Interview quotes were taken from International Bomber Command Centre Digital Archive, interview with Bert Turner, accessed here:

<https://ibccdigitalarchive.lincoln.ac.uk/omeka/collections/document/9340>

Additional photos and quotes from:

Interview with Bert Turner - Stoke Sentinel

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/history/market-garden-arnhem-ww2-raf-3331268>

Arnhem 75 Interviews - The Telegraph

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/21/battle-arnhem-anniversaryprince-wales-watches-mass-parachute/>

