

The Last Bombing Run

They survived the mission; would they survive the landing?

By Tom Murphy

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White was acquainted with the pilot who had mistakenly landed this British bomber at a German airfield. German soldiers got a good look at the Handley-Page; the dog's attention was elsewhere.

Drake Goodman

Tom Murphy of Las Vegas writes: *As a pilot of Britain's Independent Force 100 Squadron, my grandfather, Daryl E. White, flew a Handley-Page night bomber in World War I and kept a diary of his adventures.*

April 1917: I was with the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company in their Seattle office, working as an electric engineer salesman covering railway, generating, and transmitting equipment in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Age 28, single, and healthy, I had decided that if the United States got into the world war, I would enlist in the Army's Aviation Section. Nobody in the Pacific Northwest seems to know anything about such a section, though the Army enlistment office in the Pioneer Building in Seattle had heard something about flying: They said I should write to the Aviation Section, Signal Reserve Corps of the U.S. Army at North Island, San Diego. I did so immediately.

May 15: Received orders to appear at North Island for a physical examination—at my own expense.

June 13: Left Seattle on the steamship *Admiral Dewey*. Passed the physical and returned to Seattle to await further orders.

August 1: Enlisted as a cadet in the Aviation Section Signal Reserve Corps of the U.S. Army, starting at \$33 per month, with clothing and food furnished. School was a three-story apartment house just outside the North Island campus, where we studied aerodynamics, engines, and navigation—everything except actual flying. Then we were off to new barracks at Mitchel Field, Mineola, New York, and thence to Liverpool on the *S.S. Kroonland*, arriving in mid-November along with nine other ships in convoy. Very little time to see the sights before we entrained for the rest camp at Southampton, England.

November 24: Left for Le Havre, France. On our way to fight "The War That Will End War," we were God's gift to humanity and the world, and we just ate it up. Nothing was too good for the flyboys. Little did we know that it would be late March 1918 before any of us would get into the air. Winter was coming on and the weather was too rough for the French instructors to fly.

We were quartered in immense French stone barracks, known as Quartier de Beaumont. The buildings were cold as hell, with big rooms, small stoves, canvas cots, little heat. The only running water was outside.

December: Snow on the ground. We were all broke, there were no pay prospects, and no flying. Nothing but guard, KP, and latrine duties. We didn't exactly mutiny but we came close. As a pretty militant gang, we earned the name "Beaumont Bastards."

Late February 1918: Stationed with the 2nd Aviation Instruction Center in Tours. I took my first instructional flight in a French "warp wing" Caudron G3 with an Anzani 90-horsepower air-cooled radial engine. I soloed in three hours and continued my instruction in cross country flying and altitude. Landing on a target and other techniques were now taught by an American instructor, himself taught by the French.

Early May: With 20 hours of flying time, I started instructing others like myself, from dual to solo.

Well, we were flying, which is what we came to France to do. I spent my spare time sightseeing over the Tours area, gaining hours and experience. My promotion orders put me on active service as a First Lieutenant, Air Services, American Expeditionary Force, France. I wasted no time in donning my French-built uniform: high leather boots, Sam Browne belt, 1st lieutenant bars, flying wings, and cap. I continued routine instructing, cross-country flying, and chateau-hunting.

August: Lieutenant Spain, our detachment commander, called me and some other officers into his office. Orders had come down to find men to train for night bombing. England had the best facilities for such training at its flying fields and with British squadrons of night bombers at the front in France. From these primitive flying fields, the British had set up operations flying the biggest night bomber the Allies had: the Handley-Page Type O/400, constructed of aeroplane cloth, spruce struts made of Olympic Mountain-grown spruce, and wire to hold it together. It was powered by two 375-horsepower Rolls-Royce 12-cylinder engines, with fixed hardwood four-blade propellers. With its wings spanning 100 feet, and at more than 62 feet long, the ship was so big its wings were on hinges so they could fold back against the body to squeeze in a hangar for maintenance.

A bomb bay sat between the upper and lower wings, and a long snout stuck out in front with a seat for the observer/bombardier. We had a three-man crew: pilot, observer, and gunlayer [gunner], the latter stationed just behind the wings. The engines could run for 50 hours, after which they were pulled for complete overhaul.

Flying time was said to be eight hours, but we liked to think more of five to six hours at a so-called flying speed of 70 to 80 miles per hour, landing at 50. Volunteers were sent to Handley-Page Stonehenge flying field in Salisbury Plains for further instruction, then on to France, arriving at Independent Force 100 Squadron in mid October.

November 10, 1918: My last bomb run, one day before the armistice was signed on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Our ship was filled with 300 gallons of gasoline, one ton of bombs, and magnesium incendiaries packed 260 to a metal canister. The target was Frescaty Aerodrome at Metz, France, then in German hands.

Handley-Page pilots had a saying about the O/400: "It takes an hour to get to 6500 feet, our ceiling, with a ton of bombs" in describing a "typical night bombing show."

4:30 p.m.: We departed in smooth air, heading north. When we neared the target, all the aerodrome lights were still burning. They heard us coming and quickly doused the lights, then lit the blue-white searchlights. Our target, the airfield and hangars, was still some distance ahead. The ship was too much aeroplane cloth, wooden struts, and wire to make any hard moves or quick turns—nothing we could do but fly straight. Couldn't put it in much of a dive because it would start to tremble, as if to tell me to keep on a level keel or it might shake itself to pieces.

The searchlights were bright enough to read the morning newspaper—if we had one—and the anti-air guns kept up their work. We could hear the swoosh and saw the flash of near-misses. We kept on going, dropped our eggs, and came through on the other side of the field.

7:30 p.m.: Now all clear, we turned 180 degrees for home. My observer told me some of our canisters of bombs hadn't let go. By this time fog covered the ground. I was not quite lost, but I didn't know where in hell I was either.

We flew a compass course and timed our flight until we should have been over the Stonehenge field. I couldn't see the ground. The field heard us coming and placed gasoline flares on the ground to indicate a landing strip wide enough to land on in the night fog.

It was hard to accurately judge ground level; I hit hard, bounced fairly high, and came down. These ships had a bad reputation of winding up on their nose with pilot or observer or both crushed in the wreck. As we bounced, I kept yelling to my observer, "Jump! Jump! Jump!" I ended up standing with both feet on my seat, bending over with my hands on the steering wheel as far back as possible to keep the tail down. It worked. Burst left tire, swung around to the left, and stopped. Total damage: Scraped left wing tip and busted left tire.

The bump and bounce jarred the remaining incendiary magnesium loose, which left a streak of white fire on the ground under the gunlayer. He was out of his cockpit and across the field like a jackrabbit.

Nobody hurt, and the war was over. Terrific binge most of the following day and into the night.

White returned home to Seattle in April 1919. During World War II, he flew as copilot, ferrying B-25s; they were fine airplanes, he said, but for sheer joy, "give me an old Handley-Page." He died in 1976, in part due to injuries from a car crash.