

## **FOG! - A Day In My Father's War**

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### **Synopsis:**

'The only plane flying in Britain, an RAF training flight crewed by 'sprogs', the term used to belittle trainees still wet behind the ears, is cut off from the ground by heavy fog until the entire country unites to bring them home.'

### **Short Story:**

At RAF training squadron 57 at Padgate, Warrington, halfway between Liverpool and Manchester, the weather was wet and cold on September 14, 1944. A twin engine Anson training aircraft was fully fueled and readied for takeoff by the ground crew. Three young air crewmen boarded the plane for a cross country flight that was to be the final test of their various skills at this stage of their training. No instructor would be on board. The exercise involved a four hour flight that would take them on a five leg, clockwise, circumnavigation of Britain. South east 120 miles to the coast, a sharp turn westward for a 180 mile cross country flight over England to Wales, then another 150 mile leg north over the Irish sea to the south coast of Scotland. The two last legs would take them 100 miles back to the east coast over Sunderland and then the final turn for home 115 miles away to the south west. The early afternoon start was designed to have them back at the starting point just before sunset so that a day light descent could be safely made to the aerodrome.

Pilot Arthur Cantor, had exactly 206 flying hours after 47 weeks of pilot training. If he indeed performed satisfactorily on this flight, he would have 28 more weeks of pilot training on bombers before engaging in combat.

Navigator, Ben S Hall, had returned to England from an earlier posting as a storesman with the RAF in South Africa to undertake his own 47 intensive weeks of training in air navigation, bombing operation skills and aerial observation. At 26 he was a bit older than most. His father had died when he was very young and when his mother remarried he found himself in a dreadful English boarding school by 10 years of age. The camaraderie of the RAF was the closest thing to family he had yet found. His next posting, upon graduating, would be directly to a bombing group.

The third crewman was Pierre LaRue, the wireless operator. A bilingual Frenchman, Pierre had fled to England as the Nazis advanced and had subsequently joined the RAF to fight against his countries oppressors. After completing 28 weeks of training he, like the navigator, was eager to join an operational crew once this final training flight was behind him.

The Anson was equipped with a wireless set that worked with Morse code signals. Inside the aircraft the crew could communicate with each other through headsets connected to the intercom. Pilot Cantor went through his preflight checks and fired up each of the engines.

"Hello Ben, all set back there?"

"Yes skipper, all charts present, watch, pencils, calculators, parachute, and tea flask accounted for. Meteorological data added in to my flight calculations. The Life raft is in the engine nacelle, sea flares and life preservers on board. All ready here."

"Thank you Navigator.

Pierre, Pilot here. How are things aft?"

“Is looking good here, Skipper. The wireless is glowing nicely, the aerial winch is secured. All fire extinguishers checked. Mon Cherie, Antoinette has made some cookies. I will give you some later, if you don’t shake us up too badly.”

“Oh, right you are, old chap. Three cheers for the lovely Antoinette. I have full fuel tanks showing right and left, cylinder head temperatures are within range, mags have checked out, both engines are responding to the throttles, oil pressure is good. I’ll just taxi up to the line to show them we’re ready and see if we can get a green light.”

A green light from the control tower indicated that the Anson could take off. Pilot Arthur Cantor opened the throttles slightly and steered the plane onto the tarmac using the small tail wheel. He opened the throttles and first the tail wheel then the main undercarriage lifted off. It was half past three, or 15:30 hours.

“Skipper, Navigator here, first heading is 112 degrees.”

“Thank you Navigator. 112 degrees.”

A few minutes into the flight, fog began to build rapidly over the British Isles. Soon the entire landscape as far as could be seen was obscured. Above the fog, the sun shone periodically through the high clouds. Visibility was a good 15 miles, but beneath the aircraft, nothing could be seen but puffy white cloud tops. The Anson could not land in such conditions as the runway, not that one could even be found, would be invisible. Nor could the pilot see to judge the distance to the ground during the descent so as to avoid obstacles like hills, power lines, church steeples etc.

“Navigator, Pilot.”

“Hello, Skipper.”

“I hope you have a better idea where we are than I do, Ben. I can’t see a thing down there.”

“We just have to trust the information on winds aloft from the Met office is correct and fly on with dead reckoning until something becomes visible. I’ll keep us on track, Skipper.”

“Ok, Ben I appreciate your cheerfulness. Wireless, Pilot. Pierre, can you let the ground know our situation and see if they have any advice.”

“Will do, Skipper, standby.” After some minutes of tapping his Morse key and writing the reply with his pencil, Pierre called the pilot.”Skipper, Wireless Pierre. I have instructions from Padgate Control, Arthur.”

“Go ahead with your signal, Pierre.”

“Be advised that all other flights in the country have been scrubbed due to the weather. You are the only flight aloft this afternoon. No fear of Huns flying in this weather either. Proceed on your

flight plan as initially conceived. If an aero drome becomes available anywhere in Britain to execute a landing, you will be directed there. In the meantime, throttle back to extend your flying time as long as possible. If you are still flying after dark we will cook up another plan to get you home. Good luck gentlemen. Trust your training. You have been given the best. Advise immediately if you can positively identify your position vis a vis the ground.”

Pierre ended his reading and Arthur snorted into the intercom. “Ha! I thought it was a bit lonely up here. Hello Pierre, let them know all received and understood.”

“Oui, Skipper.”

“Navigator, Skipper here. Take note, I am reducing our flying speed from our present 160 mph to 100 mph in ten seconds.”

“Ok, Skipper, reducing speed to 100 miles per hour. I’ll recalculate our time to the turn.”

“Righteo, Navigator, thank you.”

“Skipper, prepare for course change in 2 minutes.”

“Alright, Ben. Just like blind man’s bloody buff up here. I don’t mind telling you that I’d be a lot happier if we could find a hole in these clouds and get back onto the deck. Keep your eyes open.”

It was 1944, a year before the war ended and Britain was pushing the fighting further into Germany, but there were still plenty of hazards thrown skyward by the Nazis.

Aircrew were all volunteers and it was quite extraordinary that so many joined up when chances of not making it out alive neared the 50% mark. Getting shot down by anti-aircraft guns or cut up by exploding flak were distinct possibilities, but so was simply getting lost and running out of fuel, having a mechanical breakdown or a life-threatening injury. Add in capture as a Prisoner of War, or POW, and the risk to aircrew rose to sixty percent. No wonder the training of airmen was so important. The long apprenticeship also meant that each recruit was extremely valuable and the more that could be delivered home to fly again, the better.

The Avro Anson was a very proficient aircraft when it was introduced in 1933, but by 1939 it had been eclipsed by faster, more advanced aircraft for front-line war operations. It was however, well suited for support purposes as a coastal observation aircraft and especially as a trainer. Thousands of Ansons were mass-produced in Britain and Canada. It was a reliable craft and well-liked by the men who flew in them.

The plane droned on past tea time. There was no appreciable change in the ground conditions. Navigator Ben Hall had applied the known wind speeds to his calculations of their position. Typically, observations of the ground were used to prove the plotted track over the Earth’s surface was true. In this case there was nothing to go by except the position of the sun which was just ahead of the plane and a bit off to starboard.

As the plane bore on through the clouds and the minutes turned to hours each crewman sat with his thoughts which increasingly turned negative.

“Pierre, Skipper here. Any new signals? I could use some good news. It looks like this bloody ground fog is going to have us up here with no chance of landing before dark and then where will we be?”

“Nothing new, Arthur. Did your training include any special prayers, Skipper?”

“Now that would have been a damn good idea, Pierre, under the circumstances. If we make it down, remind me to bring it up with the Padre.”

The Navigator figured they were on their second leg en route Barmouth Wales from The Wash on the east coast of England. “Pilot, Navigator.”

“Go ahead Ben.”

“Estimating our next turn to the north in 3 minutes from now. There are coastal mountains in Wales that should show through the fog. Keep an eye out for one of them.”

“I do see a peak ahead and a bit to Port.”

“That’s helpful skipper, but we can’t tell which mountain it is so we could be north or south of our objective. We do know that we are close to the Irish Sea so prepare for a course change.”

“Right Ben, when you’re ready.”

“Steer 004 degrees in 10 seconds. .... ok 004.”

“Thank you, Navigator, turning to zero zero four degrees.  
Pierre, have you polished off all those cookies yourself? I could use something to prop up my head. It’s bloody well the stuff of dreams up here...all this wool.”

“Sure, Skipper, coming forward. It’s not a good time to sleep with Pierre on board.”

Despite the brave banter the tension was rising in the Anson. The Navigator knew how easy it was to drift before a wind that was not quite what the Met predicted. Even a slight mathematical or timing error could put them miles off course, and with sea all around, a ditching into cold water without being able to report a position was not to be considered too long lest the thought fester. Perhaps if they had to abandon the aircraft before it ran out of fuel they could point the plane out to sea where it would eventually crash harmlessly, and bale out with parachutes while still over the land. This thought was only slightly less chilling, but Ben found that a plan, no matter how risky, is a source of great solace. He really wanted to find a landmark that was unmistakable. He pored over his charts studying the coastline.

“Hello lads, we are in for a glorious sunset over Ireland that is just for us this evening.”

“Sure Skipper, us and maybe God sitting on his cloud above this mess.”

“Did you say mess, Pierre? You’ve put me in mind of a nice pint in the mess when we climb down through this fluff.”

“Listen Skipper, Navigator. I’ve just been studying these charts here looking for a possible landmark. With the sun setting, the lighthouses will start to show their lights.”

“By Jove, Navigator, that’s brilliant. Carry on Ben.”

“Well, in 13 minutes at 19:32 we should be abeam St Bees head and they have a light well up on the headlands. It could be dark enough by then. Maybe we’ll see something.”

“Hey Ben, wireless Pierre here, precisely what are we looking for?”

“If we are on course, St Bees should be 10 miles away on our Starboard side. The chart lists it as ‘FL(2) W20s’. That means it will be a double white flash every 20 seconds.”

“When you find us that light, Ben, I, Pierre LaRue will personally set you up with a Napoleon Brandy and my favourite escargot when we get back. But I warn you, if we grow old and die up here then I will have to kill you.”

With a degree of confidence he did not feel, the Navigator said, “I predict brandy is in my future Pierre, I can feel it.”

The intercom was silent as each crew member contemplated his future.

“St Bees in two minutes.”

All eyes strained as the seconds ticked by. The Navigator at his small table behind the pilot peered out his rectangular window. Just as he saw two pulses of light open up in a horizontal cone through the top surface of the fog, the pilot’s voice broke into his headset.

“Hello, Hello Navigator. Well done old chap, there is St Bees, exactly as predicted! Pierre, you can stop sharpening your bloody bayonet now. Get on that signals box, if you please, and let them know we have confirmed our position due west of St Bees at current time of 19:32.”

“Will do Skipper, and my most sincere apologies for doubting you, mon ami, Monsieur Navigator. After four hours in this pea soup your pencil is still very sharp.”

“Thank you, Pierre, my mother always said I was a lucky bastard. Now skipper, don’t think we can just fly into that lighthouse, I suspect the stonework is a bit more durable than our fabric covered plywood.”

“You reckon, Ben?”

Control received the news with a good measure of pride. This was a training flight after all and only a few short months earlier the crewmen were green as grass. Now they were in a known position, despite the fog. This was a crew they wanted back safely on the ground. Now that the sun was long gone it was time to bring into play a massive operation to bring home the tiny bird all alone in the fog and darkness.

Telephones had been ringing all afternoon at the civil defence searchlight installations in the British Isles. Normally the searchlights were used to detect enemy aircraft at night. Sensitive listening devices were used to hear the sound of aircraft. Then the searchlights were powered up by a mobile 15 kilowatt generator that fed electricity to two pencil sized carbon rods encased in copper. The rods, when shorted together then pulled apart a half inch, produced a light much like a welder. A thick parabolic mirror set behind the arc allowed the light to be directed anywhere in the sky.

Once a searchlight found an enemy aircraft, other searchlights could also lock on and this 'coning' made it difficult for the plane to escape into darkness and allowed the gunners to determine the rough altitude of the plane by triangulating the angles of the searchlights. This gave them a much better chance to actually hit the plane or to place flak in its path at the right altitude to do damage.

This evening the anti aircraft gunners were enjoying a well deserved night off due to the pervasive fog, but searchlight operators, many of them women from the Auxiliary Territorial Services, had been called away from pubs and families to play their part in the return of the Avro Anson and it's three hapless crewmen.

Watches had been synchronized between all searchlight locations. At precisely twenty hundred hours, Greenwich Mean Time on September 14, 1944, every searchlight in the British Isles suddenly turned on and their lights were directed straight upwards. Their beams cut through the fog and the civil defence men and women caused the projections to wave about slightly.

From the Anson, the sight was dramatic. Moments before, the world below was dark and formless. England was in wartime blackout conditions, so no cities cast a glow. Suddenly the entire island erupted with hundreds of light beams which danced about the sky. Every 30 seconds, all the beams dropped on cue to point to the airfield specially prepared to accept the Anson. The searchlight beams in Scotland pointed south east towards Yorkshire. All the beams in Wales pointed east towards the same spot. Those in the south of England were dropped towards the north exactly where Yorkshire lay. After 30 seconds the beams all rose in unison to wobble about before falling once again to mark the way home.

In the Anson the mood was jubilant. A sense of belonging like no other brought a lump to the navigator's throat and a tear to his eye. Every beam of light was a gift to the weary travellers that said, "go there, go there!"

"That is one beautiful sight, Skipper."

“Aye, gentlemen, it seems someone is looking out for us. What do you say we follow those beams and see where they lead? I still don’t know how we are going to actually land in fog, rain, and darkness though.

“Skipper, wireless Pierre here. We have received instructions to follow the beams to Melbourne field in Yorkshire. We are to report our expected arrival time.”

“Let them know we appreciate their efforts, Pierre, and we will advise when Ben gets a plotting done.”

“We have 130 miles to go, skipper.”

“Ben, note that I am increasing our speed to 160 mph as there is no need to keep stooging along preserving fuel.”

“Ok, Arthur and Pierre, our time of arrival is now estimated at 20:46 hours.”

The Anson flew through the fog towards the place in Yorkshire pinpointed by the searchlights.

“Skipper, Navigator, 15 minutes out.”

“Ok, Ben. Give them a ring on the ground will you, Pierre. Let’s get this bird back on it’s wheels. Keep your eyes open for anything that looks like we can land on it. Stow your flasks and loose items in case it gets a bit rough.”

“Oui, Skipper.”

Pilot Arthur Cantor began to laboriously lower the undercarriage which required 142 revolutions of the crank handle beside his seat. Flaps were raised on the wings to improve lift at slow speed.

“Skipper, Wireless Pierre, trailing antenna is winched in and secured. We are now wireless, so to speak.”

“Roger that, Pierre..... By Jove, I can see a glow up ahead. They’ve started a ruddy great bonfire! I am going to take it as a given that this surprise is for us.”

Cantor pulled back further on the throttles and settled towards what gradually took shape as a long flaming rectangle on the ground. Along each side of the runway, gasoline burned in great licking flames that carved a hole through the fog.

The Navigator keyed his intercom button, “Good God, skipper, that is the most awesome sight I have ever seen. Can you land between all that?”

“It looks like Hell, Ben, but it is the most heavenly thing I’ve seen all day, down we go.”

The Anson descended towards the heart of the conflagration until flames on both sides leapt higher than the cabin. The heat could be felt through the windows. The main wheels bounced once, twice, then settled onto the deck. Cantor chopped both throttles and the tail wheel dropped onto the runway. As they came to a stop the flames died away around them. Cheers of relief bounced around inside the aircraft.

A Land Rover appeared and the Anson taxied behind it. On a signal from the Land Rover, Arthur cut the engines and silence returned. The crew unbuckled and stiffly walked onto the apron of the aerodrome where an officer awaited. He stuck out his hand. "Well done, lads. Nice to have you with us. I am Captain Firth. Ground crew will take care of your bird. Now follow me to the mess where we can get you sorted. You'll stay with us tonight because not a single one of our crack pilots stationed here fancies flying you home in this soup."

Cantor introduced himself and his crew. "I've never seen anything like that fiery welcome, but it was a beautiful thing, Captain."

"You three should count yourselves lucky as that little show has cost the Air Ministry fifty five thousand gallons of burnt petrol. We call it 'FIDO' or Fog Intensive Dispersal Operation. We have a system of pipes laid alongside either side of the runway through which gasoline can be pumped onto the ground. It's ignited by a poor Private on a bicycle with a torch in his hand. The heat burns off the fog around the strip. We couldn't let you know over the radio what we had planned in case Jerry was listening. FIDO is too valuable to advertise."

"And the searchlights, Captain! One minute we were all alone, and next the whole country lit up."

"Don't ever think that you aren't valuable to Mister Churchill, lads. Now let's get you settled."

Phones rang at each searchlight location.

"Operation successful with one Anson and three crew now on the ground. Now go and join your mates for a warming dram."

Epilogue:

FIDO was set up at only 15 English aerodromes in England and was said to be responsible for saving 10,000 lives since 1943 by allowing aircraft returning from European war operations to land back in Britain in adverse weather.

Pilot Arthur Cantor eventually took command of a Wellington bomber and was shot down over Dresden. He died along with his crew.

Wireless, Pierre La Rue, was later deployed to a reconnaissance aircraft over the North Sea and was severely burned when his plane was forced down into the sea. Doctors credited the salty water with reducing the extent of his burns to only half his body.

The Navigator in that Anson was my Dad. He told me the story 42 years after the war ended. Ben Hall went on to navigate more than 25 bombing runs over Germany in a Halifax named G for



George. He and the rest of the crew were shot down near Pokau by a German JU 88 night fighter during a raid on Chemnitz on St Valentines Day 1945. He was the only survivor of his seven man bomber crew and finished the war as a German POW.

My father died in 2009 at 91 years. He was a lucky bastard.