Excerpts from Diane Alington's background material, edited by Alaine Alington

HF 450 October 5, 1944

Lough Erne was known to all the aircrew and seamen whose duties took them to the North Atlantic, because the powerful Lough Erne beacon provided range and bearing information to ships and aircraft throughout the region. Beacons like this are radio versions of a lighthouse.[1] The Lough Erne beacon was the navigational touchstone for convoys arriving from North America, and for all other seagoing and airborne traffic in the region, including the mighty Sunderland flying boats and the Wellington Mk. XIV bombers based at RAF Limavady after September 1943.

Equipment problems plagued the war effort, and recalcitrant challenges confronted the Coastal Command aircrews. In 1944, they were given top-of-the-line L/L Wellingtons equipped with ASV Mark III radar and a powerful ─ and highly regarded ─ 9-inch radio direction-finding (**RDF**) loop antenna[2] (also known as the radio compass). However, some of these aircraft had inexplicable problems in obtaining reliable bearings from the Lock Erne beacon. Tragically, an overlooked design flaw caused a short circuit in the Wellingtons' RDFs after some hours of operation, but this fact was unknown on the stormy night of October 5, 1944. Although this problem had been repeatedly reported, no other aircraft had similar problems, presumably as they had functional antennae, and these reports fell on deaf ears.

That night, Squadron Leader Alington and his crew of five followed orders to patrol in search of a Japanese submarine that had ─ allegedly ─ been sighted off the west coast of Scotland. Geoffrey recalled six decades later that the weather on October 5, 1944 was the worst he had experienced in seven years of flying – before, during, and after the war. That means that he may have been flying in storm-force winds — howling winds of 55-63 MPH — that would have produced waves as high as 50 feet in the dark waters only

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_compass. Accessed 4-5-06.

[2] The radio direction finder, or **RDF**, was the first system of radio navigation. This is a device for finding the direction to a radio source — or a radio beacon, like the **Lough Erne beacon**. Due to radio's ability to travel very long distances "over the horizon", it makes a particularly good navigation system for ships and aircraft that might be flying at distance from land. RDFs work by pointing a directional antenna in "various directions" and then listening for the direction in which the signal from a known station comes through most strongly. The signal is typically a simple AM broadcast of a morse code series of letters, which the RDF can tune in to see if the beacon is "on the air". This sort of system was widely used in the 1930s and 1940s. In the Wellington, the RDF antenna loops were housed atop the cockpit. In more recent times the task of finding the signal has been automated in the **automatic direction finder**, or **ADF**. Most modern detectors can also tune in any commercial radio stations, which is particularly useful due to their high power and location near major cities. RDF was once the primary form of aircraft navigation, and strings of beacons were used to form "airways" from airport to airport. In the 1950s these systems were generally being replaced by the VOR system. Today all such systems are being generally removed in favour of the much more accurate and user-friendly GPS system. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_compass. Accessed 4-5-06.)

The British **GEE** system was developed during World War II for use by RAF Bombing Command. It is described in the Appendix on Bombing Command.

700 feet below them. The weather was so terrible that night that the U-boat sighting was improbable. ─ in high seas, surely a sensible U-boats captain would have stayed well below the surface.

The flawed antenna and the weather were to contribute to the most painful, and possibly most heroic, night of Geoff's war, when his airmanship over the North Atlantic saved five lives. The sixth crew member, Flying Officer Stan Gaudin, the Canadian co-pilot, died that night. In over 2500 hours of flying between 1938 and 1945, he was the only crewmember under Geoff's command who lost his life. The corrosive events of that tragic night eroded Geoff's confidence, and Stan Gaudin's death haunted him for the rest of his life.

This traumatic event coincided with the end of Geoff's second operational tour, the beginning of a new German U-boat campaign, and the final phase of the submarine war. [3] Winter was setting in, making visibility poor, and by October 1944, U-boat crews had become skilled in the use of the schnorkel. Consequently, Coastal Command crews now had very little chance of sighting a target. Soon U-boats began torpedoing both warships and merchant vessels with impunity, almost within sight of air and naval bases.

No crew should have been sent out in such a gale ─ and with so little justification. Geoffrey, with characteristic understatement, noted in his logbook, that the weather was "unfit for operations." Nevertheless, he undertook the mission ─ even though he had a more-than-valid reason to cancel at the very last minute. As he was taxiing out to the runway, the control tower radioed him with the unexpected informed him that he had exceeded the duty hours for this operational tour. The regulations had just been revised downward (from 500 to 400 hours). Despite this, he took off, choosing duty over other considerations.

After many long hours aloft in the driving rain, (Geoff's log book states the flight was from 1710 to 0410 hours on October 4 - 5, 1944) without ever sighting the suspected intruder, conditions grew so bad that the crew radioed a Mayday signal to Limavady air base, urgently requesting permission to return. Inexplicably, the request was denied.[4]

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[3] Although by this time there was little chance of making the new campaign big enough to cut off Allied supplies, the success of the schnorkel ─ and the promise of the new electro U-boats ─ encouraged German hopes of inflicting serious damage. Both Hitler and Doenitz expected great things from the new, high-speed submarines, which could remain submerged for long periods. They planned to produce 200 by year's end. (HL Thompson. *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force (Vol. II). The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–1945*. Chapter 15. Coastal Command Patrols. Historical Publications Branch, 1956, Wellington. http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2-2RAF-c15.html. Accessed 8/3/07.)

[4] Their Mayday request to return was refused by the Limavady Station Group Captain ─ the same Group Captain who had sent them out in the first place. In our interview in 1994, GCA told me that he got into "hot water" later for complaining during the Inquiry that his Group Captain on that night had behaved irresponsibly -- first in sending them out in such weather conditions and second in ignoring their May Day.

Eventually, rain had saturated the radio, so the crew could no longer communicate with Limavady. Six men were now trapped in an aircraft with no radio and an unreliable compass. Geoffrey stepped in to apply his navigational skills. By dead reckoning navigation, he hoped to direct the aircraft to a location where the crew could safely bail out and, just as important, where the men would stand a good chance of rescue. (Dead reckoning is the process of estimating one's current position based upon a previously determined position, or fix, and advancing that position based upon known speed, elapsed time, and course, without stellar observation.) Dead reckoning is highly challenging. In the early years of the war, bombers that relied on dead reckoning navigation often missed entire cities.

Geoffrey guided the Wellington on a southerly course, toward Galway Bay, on the west coast of neutral Eire (later the Irish Republic). A too-northerly course would take them to the lonely reaches of Scotland's rugged west coast, where there would be little or no chance of rescue ─ even if they were able to bail out of the aircraft without being dashed to death on the jagged rocks.

After finding a protected beach, one by one his men bailed out. Last to leave were Stan, followed shortly thereafter by Geoffrey. Geoffrey and four crew members survived with only minor injuries. The Australian WAG (wireless/gunner) broke his ankle.[5] But Stan Gaudin, the heroic Canadian co-pilot, died when his parachute failed to open.[6]

What was he thinking, I foolishly asked my father, as he rushed through the black air, plummeting a thousand feet towards the rocky shore beneath? I had not considered that there was no time to think. He likely fell at 120 feet per second, which meant that the entire passage, from aircraft to land, may have lasted less than 8 seconds. "I felt relief," he admitted, "to be out of the aircraft." Much, I suppose, as one would feel to escape from a burning building, no matter what else lay in store.

By coincidence, this was Geoffrey's last operational flight. Although he did not fly operationally again, he remained with the Air Force for three more years before being decommissioned due to his non-British nationality (he was a New Zealander).

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[5] The four WAGS took turns operating the radar (which was too intense to do for more than 45 minutes at a time), radio, and turret gun.

[6] Coastal Command veteran Denis Watt, also a Wellington pilot, almost lost his aircraft on November 5, 1943 after a series of events that are reminiscent of Geoff's nightmare on October 5, 1944. Flying over the Mediterranean, Watt's radar and radio malfunctioned; the engines failed; and their emergency distress (Mayday) calls went unanswered. Watt was luckier than Geoff, however. The crew restarted the engines after finding a way to hand pump fuel to them, and they landed safely on a beach in French North Africa. (Denis R. Watt. RAF Coastal Command, over the seas. September 18, 2005. *BBC -World War 2 – People's War*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/03 /a5796903.shtml. Accessed 8/7/07)

Sequel: Because of the loss of life, an inquiry was conducted. The findings were equivocal. Because of the navigational problems -- and despite my father's heroic, flawless, and distinguished six-year record -- some members of the panel were inclined to find some "pilot error." He was prepared to seek a court martial to clear his name when the mechanical problem with the compass loop was finally identified. His name was cleared — and he was eventually promoted to Wing Commander at the station of his choice.

The tragic incident which cost a man his life and cost Geoffrey a lifetime of regret, also may have cost Geoffrey a decoration. His CO told him confidentially that he had been in line for a DSO (Distinguished Service Order). This decoration recognizes outstanding leadership, skill, and courageous example, rather than one particular courageous action.

On April 2, 2006, through extraordinary serendipity, I discovered online the sorrowful letter my father wrote, 62 years before, to Stan Gaudin's mother. This letter may have brought some comfort to the young hero's grieving family, for they saved the letter for decades. Eventually his mother gave a copy of the letter "from Squadron Leader Geoffrey Alington to Mrs. Gaudin 23 Oct. 1944" to the McMaster University Alumni Association, for its Roll of Honor Biography. [7] The online *Biography* quotes the letter as follows:

> ***Returning from our Patrol we were unable to get to our base [because of] weather conditions, and radio aids were of no use either at that time. I decided that we would have to abandon the aircraft, so found a town on the coast & prepared the crew for the jump. Stan prepared me with my kit and helped the other boys also, opening the escape hatch beside me on the floor. [W]hen I told him to go first, he quietly stepped forward and told me he would stay with me and help the others out first over [a] narrow strip [of land] .. [A]s [the jump] had taken more time than I had anticipated I turned back along the shore line for another run. As I was going to turn the aircraft back onto its course again I had engine trouble, so told Stan to leave, which he did … The [engine] trouble was slight actually so I got everything under control again, settled the aircraft and left it myself. [After] landing I realized that Stan was probably in the water. ....*** (***Stan's) gallant act of self-sacrifice cost [him] his life.***

The *Biography* goes on, "Unlike the other crewmembers, and as his distressed captain discovered a few hours later, Stan had subsequently drowned. Had he left the aircraft earlier with his crewmates, as urged, he may well have survived along with them."

Stanley Gaudin is buried in the Drumachose (Christ Church) Church of Ireland Churchyard, Limavady, County Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

I was recently stunned to discover that Hugh Alington's[8] death, in 1941, may have been related to the same flawed Wellington RDF compass. In letters home written immediately

[7] http://www.mcmaster.ca/ua/alumni/honourRoll/gaudin.htm Accessed 4-2-06

[8] Hugh and Gilbert, were Geoff's older brothers.

before his doomed flight to Malta,[9] Hugh expressed concern that he was unable to check out his compass adequately prior to take-off because his navigator had been delayed and did not arrive on the base until the last minute. When Hugh's aircraft was shot down by six German fighters, he was late — and, inexplicably, off-course. It is difficult to imagine why he would have been off-course if his compass had been operational. In our interview in October 1994, Geoffrey provided information about a very strange -- even uncanny -- coincidence. Hugh's Wellington was shot down without any prior notice at all. He never even sent a signal — the plane simply disappeared. Subsequently -- and here is the coincidence -- the pilot who shot down the Hugh's plane was captured and made prisoner-of-war. Hugh's identical twin Gilbert learned about this when he himself was flying in the Malta area. The German pilot described the incident, and commented on how curious it was that the plane did not respond in any way. He said "it seemed as if the gunner was asleep." (Geoffrey thought maybe he was….) In another coincidence (learned during the 10/94 interview), Gilbert's plane was also attacked in the skies over Malta, but he returned fire and shot down the attacking aircraft.

[9] One RAF veteran recalled that in September 1942, the enemy occupied the whole of the Southern Mediterranean to El Alamein in Egypt, with the exception of Malta. Consequently, Malta was a constant target and attacked day and night by enemy aircraft. (Ossie Evans. My RAF Life - Chapter 3. January 15, 2004. http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/ww 2peopleswar /stories/60/a2204560.shtml.) Accessed 8/2/07.) I do not know if Malta was already such a target in March 1941, when Hugh was killed.