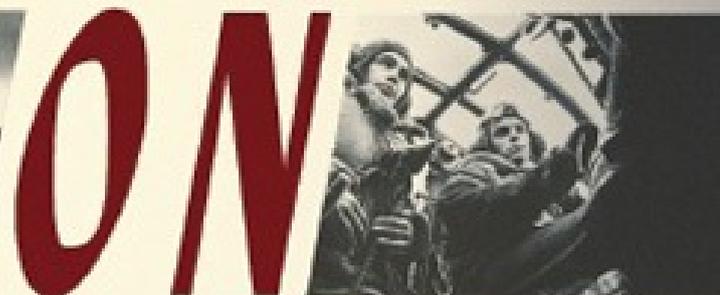




AND  
SOME FELL



ON  
STONY



GROUND

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF  
AN RAF BOMBER PILOT**

**A Fictional Memoir by LESLIE MANN**

*With an Introduction by Richard Overy, author of The Bombing War*

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In Association with  
Imperial War Museums



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## About the author

**LESLIE MANN** was born in Singapore in 1914, the son of a police inspector. The family later moved to the UK, and Leslie started work as a sound engineer at Elstree Studios. He enlisted in the RAF in 1939, and married in 1940.

Ultimately stationed near Ripon, Yorkshire, he served as a Flight Sergeant rear gunner with No. 51 Squadron, RAF Dishforth, operating Armstrong Whitworth Whitley twin-engine bombers. He was shot down on a raid over Düsseldorf on the night of 19/20 June 1941, the only loss from twenty aircraft on that raid: all five crew were captured.

Unusually, Mann was repatriated to the UK in October 1943 and discharged from the RAF in 1944. He worked for Pathé News and later became a correspondent in the Korean War and a cameraman in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising. He then moved to the BBC, for whom he worked as a senior news executive until retirement. He died in 1989.

**RICHARD OVERY** is an award-winning historian best known for his remarkable books on the Second World War and the wider disasters of the twentieth century. His most recent book, *The Bombing War*, was described by Richard J. Evans in *The Guardian* as: 'Magnificent ... must now be regarded as the standard work on the bombing war ... It is probably the most important book published on the history of the second world war this century.' He is Professor of History at the University of Exeter and lives in London.

## Author's note

This story is an attempt to explain through an airman's mind his last twelve hours on a bomber station.

After the fall of France in 1940, Britain had to concentrate on fighters and defences, and Bomber Command operated as best it could, mainly for nuisance value and home propaganda. The 'leaflet raids' had stopped and bombing started in earnest. Discipline for aircrews was by no means rigid, aircraft rather outdated, and losses were high. Operations were carried out, it seemed, by trial and error, while the 'New Air Force' was being built up.

This is not a story of heroes; of men who groaned with disappointment when an 'op' was postponed or cancelled; of men who smuggled themselves out of hospital so as not to miss going with their crew on a particular raid; although, no doubt, there were men like that in the Royal Air Force.

I have tried to give a picture as I saw it.

*Leslie Mann*

*And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:*

*But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.*

Mark, 4: 5,6

# Introduction

By Richard Overy

The anti-hero of Leslie Mann's fictional representation of RAF Bomber Command's offensive against Germany finds that his first thought on landing by parachute on German soil after his aircraft has been hit by anti-aircraft fire is simply 'No more ops'. This is perhaps not the popular version of the story of the heroic bomber crew who night after night ran exceptional risks over Europe, but it reflects a profound reality. For those young men who had to go 'over the top' night after night, the strain of a prolonged tour of operations was profound. This short fictional account conveys better than a hundred dry operational reports the fear and the courage that jostled side by side in the mind of almost every bomber crewman.

It is important to emphasise that this is a fictional but not a fictitious account. The details of daily life on a bomber base and the vivid description of a bomber operation were the product of a lived experience. Leslie Mann flew as a tail gunner in Whitley medium bombers and was shot down over Germany in June 1941, just like his fictional Pilot Officer Mason. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1939, when it was still in the slow process of converting to more modern aircraft types. He ended up in Bomber Command, formed in 1936 when the RAF was restructured on functional lines, separating fighters, bombers and coastal defence aircraft. No one knew when the war broke out on 3 September 1939 what bomber crew would be expected to do. Bombing operations were confined to occasional forays against the German fleet; bomber crew found themselves flying over hostile territory dropping propaganda leaflets. Bombing enemy home front targets was prohibited.

All this changed in May 1940. As the German invasion of France and the Low Countries got under way from 10 May, the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, discussed with his cabinet the prospect of bombing German industrial and communications targets to try to slow up the German advance and to divert the German Air Force to home defence. On the night of 11/12 May, 37 bombers attacked rail and road targets in the town of Mönchengladbach. The operation included eighteen Whitleys, one of which was shot down.<sup>1</sup> On 15 May, the War Cabinet finally approved attacks on industrial targets from which civilian casualties might result and from that point on, long before the onset of the German Blitz in September 1940, RAF bombers undertook regular raids against targets they could reach in the industrial zones of northern and western Germany.<sup>2</sup> Despite optimistic expectations of both the material damage and the morale effect, the bombing achieved very little. German observers were puzzled about the purpose of it, since the attacks were wildly inaccurate, many of the bombs falling in the open countryside. At night with no electronic navigation aids, and a comprehensive blackout to combat, it proved very difficult to find even the city where the targets lay. The German air defence concluded that the British pilots had

been instructed to drop their bombs to cause maximum damage to civilians and civilian housing.

The RAF continued to bomb German targets all through the Blitz period with an increasing weight of bombs, but the operational difficulties undermined the efforts made by bomber crews to try to find and hit the targets they were ordered to bomb. In October 1940 they were instructed to hit anything that looked militarily useful if they could not find their primary target. Slowly the RAF commanders realised that with the existing technology and tactics there was no prospect of inflicting anything like decisive damage on German industry. By July 1941, shortly after Leslie Mann was shot down, the decision had been made to focus attacks on the morale of the German workforce by bombing industrial city areas. This decision was taken long before Air Marshal Arthur Harris took over the Command in February 1942, though he is still widely, and wrongly, regarded as its instigator. A few weeks later in August 1941 Churchill's chief scientific adviser, Frederick Lindemann (later Lord Cherwell), published a report produced by one of the statisticians on his staff, David Butt, which showed that over the Ruhr-Rhineland industrial region only one aircraft in ten got within five miles of the designated target. Leslie Mann would certainly have understood that this was the reality of the many missions he had flown. In a note at the start of his manuscript he observes that the operations he and his fellow crewmen undertook had only 'nuisance value'.

It is not easy to understand why RAF Bomber Command persisted so long with operations that clearly had little strategic impact and cost a high percentage of the highly-trained airmen sent on each mission. Nor is it easy to explain why it took so long to produce effective navigation aids, a better bombsight and tactics that might maximise the chances of finding and hitting at least the target area. The slow development of all these operational necessities occurred long after Leslie Mann had been shot down. His account of a bombing operation comes, unusually, from the start of the campaign when its achievements and purpose were dubious, and the cost in manpower from enemy action or, very commonly, from accidents, prodigious. He was fortunate to survive, but thousands of others died in operations which the RAF commanders knew were having little effect.

The offensive made sense at this stage principally as a political instrument. Mann himself recognised that 'home propaganda' was one of the reasons why he and others were sent night after night on long dangerous flights. The raids were widely reported in the press to give the British public the news that German cities were suffering like British cities during the Blitz.<sup>3</sup> This was the most visible way British forces could show that the fight against Germany (and Italy) had not been abandoned. Occupied Europe, it was believed, might be encouraged to resist the occupier if the captive peoples could be confident that Britain was serious about the fight. Alongside the bombs, RAF planes dropped millions of leaflets spelling out to the French or Dutch or Belgians who read them that bombing was a step nearer to liberation.<sup>4</sup> The message was also directed at the American public, since it was important to demonstrate that the war was still being fought if there were to be any prospect of winning American material support for the British Empire's war effort, or of persuading President Franklin Roosevelt to intervene actively on the British side.

It might well be argued that the death of thousands of young airmen was a high

price to pay for these political dividends, even though losses were much lower than the cost in lives endured in the first year of fighting in the First World War. Mann's fictional pilot reflects at one point on whether 'defeat [was] more bitter than death' or 'death sweeter than defeat', but he at once pushes the thoughts away. It was difficult to keep morbidity at bay in a world where the death of friends and companions was an everyday occurrence and the prospect of your own death a very real one every time you climbed into the cockpit or the gun turret. One of the things evident from this account is the variety of ways in which airmen reacted to the reality they faced, like so many prisoners on death row not knowing the order in which they are to be executed.

The core of Mann's account is a day and night in the life of a bomber pilot who has been through many missions already, seen his companions perish, and struggles with his fears and thoughts each time he has to embark on a fresh operation. On this mission, a flight to the German Rhineland city of Düsseldorf, the fictional Mason is in a particularly reflective mood. The mission was, in fact, a real one. The Air Ministry saw the Ruhr-Rhineland area as the 'civil garrison of Germany's economic citadel', which was one way of pretending that civilian targets were, in effect, military in character.<sup>5</sup> On the night of 19/20 June 1941 twenty Whitleys were sent off on the operation and one was, indeed, lost. The same night a larger group of Wellington bombers raided Cologne with little success. The Cologne authorities reported only 60 incendiary bombs and no casualties. The rest of the bombs, like those jettisoned from Mason's aircraft as it is hit by anti-aircraft fire, fell somewhere other than the target.

The force of which Mann was a part in June 1941 was very small by the standards of the German Air Force that raided Britain during the Blitz or by the standards of the large Allied force of heavy bombers available much later in the war. In June 1941 Bomber Command had a total of 533 serviceable light, medium and heavy bombers for which there were only 410 full crews available.<sup>6</sup> Most of them were twin-engine medium bombers, the majority Vickers Wellingtons. By this stage of the war there were only six operational squadrons of the Armstrong-Whitworth Whitley bombers left; these units in July 1941 had exactly 59 serviceable aircraft and 67 full crews.<sup>7</sup> Mann had been a member of a tiny cohort still flying aircraft that were by now obsolescent. The whole of the bomber force undertook 3,935 sorties in June 1941, losing 99 bombers that month, of which Mann's was one. They dropped only 3,473 tons of bombs on German targets during June, a sum that could be carried in just one raid by the end of the war. It was the peak of the bombing effort against Germany in 1941, however. By September only 2,000 tons were dropped, by December only 799.<sup>8</sup>

The details of the operation undertaken by the fictional Mason in Leslie Mann's account paint a familiar picture, common to many descriptions of bombing raids by those who took part in them. What is different about Mann's account is the time spent analysing the long period of waiting beforehand and the thoughts and anxieties that plague the pilot as he braces himself for combat. The circumstances that bomber crews faced were very different from an army unit or a ship at sea. The most striking contrast is the environment. RAF crew based in Britain found themselves caught between civilian and military life. Off duty they were still at home, among friends, perhaps with family nearby. Their recreation was shared with the local inhabitants who regarded them with mixed enthusiasm. They could find local girlfriends, even if the relationship was likely to be brief or pointless, like Mason's moment of flirtation with a pretty girl

he sees across the dance-floor. Yet even while they relaxed, hoping perhaps that the weather would worsen, the knowledge was hard to suppress that there might be a mission that night or the following night which would be their last. Mason wanted to ask the girl for a date 'but something stopped him'. There was, he reflects, an injustice in the situation in which you were both a part of daily life and yet apart from it, yearning for normality yet aware of the very abnormal world you would inhabit in a matter of hours somewhere over Germany.

The close contact with civilian life was awkward and uncomfortable and yet at the same time unavoidable, even enticing. Yet it was juxtaposed with a combat reality that was uniquely dangerous and demanding. Within minutes of leaving the local pub or the dance-hall, crew could find themselves in the lorry carrying them out to the aircraft on their stands. Within an hour they would be at 12,000 or 15,000 feet, high above the Channel or the North Sea, cold, slightly sick, anxious. Within two or three hours they would be over German territory, avoiding the searchlights, praying that the anti-aircraft fire would be inaccurate or too low, wondering if the night fighters controlled from the ground in their particular vector would home onto them or the aircraft behind, and all the time trying to navigate accurately to a blacked-out destination covered, as Düsseldorf actually was on that night of the 19/20 June, with a thick industrial haze. If they survived the raid, they would once again be back home, able if they wished to pick up where they had left off with the civilian world they had briefly abandoned.

It is difficult to decide if this situation made the airmen more anxious rather than less. The comforting cushion of a generally rural locality was in many ways so distant from the real world of combat, death or survival that it almost invariably provoked an ambiguous relationship between the civilian hosts and their temporary guests. It could also be an isolated existence. Airmen might be posted together to a base but the cohort would not survive long together. Mason mourns the loss of his close companions, as no doubt Leslie Mann found himself doing, but the loss was compounded with the problems raised by the rapid replacement of the casualties by young men for whom the 'veterans', who might have survived fifteen or twenty sorties, now seemed remote and taciturn. The newcomers worked out their own pattern of friendship and familiarity, which in turn might last little longer than the first few operations. Mann's pilot regrets that 'There was nobody he could say "Do you remember?" to', even though these were memories of only a few weeks. The effort to create new friendships while anticipating all the time their probable sudden termination grew less the longer airmen survived. The crew relationships that did develop were kept at a curious distance by the insistence that no names were to be used on board the bomber, only functions – 'Rear Gunner', 'Navigator', 'Engineer'. Mason abandons the practice in the book but it is not difficult to understand why it was used in a context where crew turnover was remorseless.

The most revealing elements in this account deal with the everyday life of young men under the strain of combat. Some of the observations are generic, some particular to the experience of the bomber crew. Most accounts of modern battle explain the willingness to fight and to continue to fight in terms of the primary group, the small units into which fighting men are usually divided. Whether a company or a platoon, or an artillery unit or a bomber crew, the small group of men depend on each other and

develop in most cases a strong sense of loyalty to their immediate circle. In air operations that sense of commitment could be extended to the crews of other aircraft in the vicinity. Reading the accounts by survivors of life in Bomber Command it is evident that little thought was given to what or who was being bombed; the aircrew had a morality that was simple – to survive if possible, to help each other if difficulties arose. For bomber crew dropping the bombs was their only purpose. The words ‘bombs gone’ offered immediate relief, while for those on the ground who were going to be hit or killed by them the crisis was only just beginning. At this point even thinking about the other aircraft behind or around them disappeared as a moral concern. ‘It was the others,’ muses Mason, ‘not them, who would be killed.’

The men in this small enclosed sphere all shared one emotion: fear. This was often difficult for them to admit to others because of the stigma conventionally attached to displays of fear. Yet the accounts by surviving bomber crewmen almost universally describe fear as a primary emotion in their combat experience. Fear before an operation, based on the rational expectation that there was a limit to the luck any single crew might have; fear while in the air that the weather, technical problems, engine failure and, finally, the enemy might bring the fragile aircraft crashing to the ground miles below. Fear is ever-present in combat situations, but it is not to be confused with cowardice. Indeed the greatest courage is required to master those fears and to undertake the mission. The RAF Neuropsychiatric Centre, set up to help airmen cope with the stress of flying, recognised that regular combat in the air, day after day, was likely to produce ‘anxiety and depressive states’. The psychiatrists also understood that declining confidence about flying did not imply cowardice but resulted in many cases from the effects of severe flying stress.<sup>9</sup>

The record of many of those who were sent to the Centre showed that flying stress was indeed severe. A number of the crew who received evaluation and treatment had already undertaken many operations without becoming a psychiatric casualty, so that cowardice was never a question. Under the constant threat of death or injury, most men were found to have a threshold beyond which it was difficult to go. It was possible to undertake the required thirty missions and survive without crossing that threshold, and the selection and training regimes were supposed to ensure that men who might crack under the strain were weeded out at an earlier stage. One patient at the Neuropsychiatric clinic had been a bus conductor in civilian life before joining the RAF, but he had been referred because of a persistent stammer and nail-chewing. The clinic concluded from their examination that the patient had a strong predisposition to psychotic behaviour and should never have been selected in the first place. Other patients were there because they had extreme experiences which would have tested the psychological robustness of the sternest personality. One pilot with 200 hours of operational flying had ditched in the North Sea, been badly shot up in a raid over Essen, had seen his navigator killed, and had finally reached his threshold. He shook uncontrollably, slept badly and confessed to wanting to cry. The psychiatrists discovered that he was an only child with a nervous mother, and once again ascribed some of his condition to a predisposition to neurotic behaviour, even though in this case the experiences alone might well have provided a sufficient explanation.<sup>10</sup>

What every airman wanted to avoid was the accusation of a ‘Lack of Moral Fibre’. This was the category used to describe those who reacted against further flying but

who neither demonstrated a predisposition to neurosis nor had been subjected to gruelling operational experiences. These few were defined as 'waverers', fully fit in mind and body but fearful of flying. About one-quarter of those sent for assessment were deemed not to be medical cases and their cases went before an executive board to decide their fate. Not all of the 8,402 RAF men (and a few women) examined for neurosis were considered LMF cases, but over the course of the war 1,029 of them were classified this way, 37 per cent of them pilots. It has been estimated that around one-third of all the psychiatric cases referred came from Bomber Command, an average of less than twenty a month, a remarkably small figure given the stresses to which the men were subjected.<sup>11</sup> The few designated LMF had to go through the indignity of being stripped of their rank and sent to do some demeaning job away from the force. This was in itself a strong incentive to try to hide any physical symptoms of anxiety or for colleagues to shield the sufferer from authority. Mann's pilot is more candid. When one crewman becomes literally paralysed by fear ('moist grey face ... horribly staring eyes ... white knuckles gripping the ledge') he is reported to the commanding officer. It was generally understood that a psychiatric casualty on board was a liability for the whole crew, which was undoubtedly the case. But they could qualify for therapy and counselling and in a small number of cases were returned to flying duties, their record unimpaired.

For airmen who stayed at the job and survived, the longer it went on, the worse it got. The odds of reaching fifteen or twenty or even thirty operations were small, but the closer to the end of a tour of duty, the more desperate the urge to survive. 'The longer you lasted,' claims Mason, 'the fewer chances you could afford to take.' A pilot might certainly learn by experience and have a better chance of survival than he did on the first few trips, but accidents, poor weather or an unlucky anti-aircraft hit could end a successful run of operations any time a pilot took to the air. This anxiety was a permanent state.

Leslie Mann's pilot is certainly not immune to fear, and it must be supposed that Mann is describing his own feelings in the many passages in the book where fear raises its head. Early on in the fictional account Mason recalls his dead pilot friend 'Ken' wondering 'if my crew are as scared as I am on ops'. Mann understood that being scared and being a coward is not the same thing. At one point, as Mason contemplates a new loud-mouthed crew member he instinctively assumes is a coward at heart, he reflects on his own feelings: 'it was difficult to decide exactly what a coward was. He, Mason, was afraid of ops. Hated them ... Couldn't really blame anybody for not liking ops anyway: nobody did, though some got a kick out of the tension and excitement before, and the relief afterwards.' The strength that airmen had to find was an inner strength that gave them, somehow or other, the courage to continue to do something that they knew rationally was dangerous, even suicidal. There is a powerful passage in Mann's account that sums up the psychological effort he and perhaps a majority of the force had to go through. When a novice crew member, grinning with embarrassment, asks what it is like to go on operations, Mason thinks to himself about the answer he would like to give:

What could you tell these first-trippers? That it was bloody awful, frightening, sickeningly so, and more often fatal? That each trip got worse? That each time you got

back you could hardly believe it? That the ground seemed so solid and firm and friendly and you were just about to feel happy when you realised that it only meant you were alive to go again, and again, and then again, until God knows when? That if you lasted long enough you became lonely because all your friends had gone? That you got into such a state that you had to suppress all your emotions, like anger, sentimentality, soft-heartedness, even gratitude and kindness, and certainly fear, because it made your lip quiver and you wanted to cry?

In the end he says none of this, and gives the novice a laconic reassurance: ‘Oh, not so bad.’

This reaction to the operations might be regarded simply as Mann’s way, long after the event, of conveying his own bitterness over what he had been expected to do, reflected upon during his years in a German prisoner-of-war camp. But there is a great deal of corroborating evidence from the accounts of other bomber crew both at the time and in memoirs or oral testimony after the war. Being asked to go ‘over the top’ not once or twice, but night after night made exceptional demands on the men who did it. They were mostly volunteers, but nothing imparted in the training schools or gleaned from the public press presentation of the air war would have prepared them for what it was actually like. Those who commanded them to do it – in this case Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, commander-in-chief Bomber Command – did not fly with them to find out for themselves (unlike American commanders of the Eighth Bomber Command who flew on missions and risked death each time). So little did Peirse perhaps appreciate what he was making Leslie Mann and others do, that on the night of 7/8 November 1941 he sent off a major raid, the largest yet mounted, with most of the aircraft destined to bomb Berlin. He knew the weather outlook was not good but ordered the operation regardless. Only 73 out of 169 bombers found the German capital but bombed with poor accuracy; fourteen houses were destroyed and nine people killed. The loss rate for the Berlin part of the raid was 12.4 per cent of the force. In total 37 bombers were lost that night in conditions of high winds, storms and icing – and all for negligible effect. The raid cost Peirse his job, but the Command lost over 180 men.

Of course at the time the precise results of the raids could not be known, though photo reconnaissance afterwards could betray how limited was the evidence of damage. Crews were always told that they were attacking an important industrial centre or target whose destruction would shorten the war. Crews had to think that despite all the terrors an operation provoked, it had some purpose. Mann remarks that airmen wanted to drop as many bombs as quickly as possible so that the war would be over sooner. They accepted that what they did must be achieving something because to believe the opposite would have made the operations not only fearful and demanding, but pointless as well. Mann understood that it was important for an airman if he survived to have a clear conscience and his pride intact, and that these feelings would come first and foremost from knowledge that he had done his best under trying circumstances to fulfil his duty, chiefly to himself but also to the aims of the Command. In a striking passage, Mann argues that these feelings have ‘nothing to do with patriotism’. ‘It is doubtful,’ he continues, ‘if anybody is ever willing to die for his country, or its king, its people, its mountains or its fields, its valleys or its beaches, its

industries or its politicians.’ At one level those fighting the war doubtless knew that there were important, if often vaguely defined war aims; but in the cauldron of combat this is not what ordinary men are likely to be thinking about. In this case getting there, dropping the bombs and surviving the trip back absorbed all their cognitive energy.

It was to be true to his conscience and his pride that Leslie Mann carried on operations despite every instinct to shy away from the risks and dangers. That conclusion comes across strongly from his account of an airman’s experience, living permanently in the shadow of death. But Mann’s pilot also thought that it would be good to find that operations might be suspended temporarily or even permanently for reasons beyond your control, such as injury or illness. One of the crew from the aircraft whose crash ended the life of his close companion ‘Ken’, was so seriously injured that he would not return to operations; ‘one of the lucky ones’ is how Mason describes him. The American Eighth Air Force statistics on personnel had a category for those men who had survived a tour of thirty operations and were returning to the United States headed ‘Happy Warriors’.<sup>12</sup> The other possibility was to become a prisoner-of-war. You ran some small risk that during the war you might be killed by the bombing of your own side, and some were.<sup>13</sup> But in general, becoming a POW ended the nightmare of operations: ‘no more ops’, as Mason realises once he has landed on German soil.

The sense of relief is evident in one of the first letters Leslie Mann sent back from imprisonment to his wife Joan, expecting their first child. Only a day after his aircraft had been hit and he had parachuted safely to earth with the rest of the crew, he was able to write home: ‘being very well treated. Plenty of food ... all the crew are well too.’<sup>14</sup> A day or so later he wrote a second letter in which his relief at the end to his ordeal is evident:

I hope by now that you have heard I am a prisoner of war. It must have worried you a bit when you heard I was missing. That was rather worrying for me. We were shot down over the Ruhr on the 20th, but all managed to bale out; and at present we are all together, and are likely to remain so. We are being treated exactly as I’ve always said and are having a very comfortable time. Please don’t worry about me, we were very lucky in getting away with it. It could have been much worse. It was bad luck for me to miss my commission by so short a time, but I am not grumbling ...<sup>15</sup>

The two letters were franked on the 30 June, so that Mann’s wife knew very quickly that he was safe and that the anxieties generated by the possibility of his death on every mission were now over.

Imprisonment for Mann was an ordeal of a different kind. His many letters reveal what most prisoners must have felt, that the tedium of life in camp was remorseless and unavoidable. On 6 February 1942 he wrote ‘all things here are the same – dates don’t mean anything’.<sup>16</sup> And indeed they did not: for most of January 1942 he wrote January 1941 at the top of his letters. Mann tried to learn German. He had a spell in hospital which he treated the way he might have done on operations, as a lucky relief from the routine of prison camp life in Stalag [Stammlager] IX-C. Mann was not unusual in his longing to be back home again and his letters throughout 1942 and 1943 return again and again to the same themes. On a card on 24 April 1942 he scribbled at

the foot: 'P.S. Wanna get home.'<sup>17</sup> It was difficult to maintain the mask of artificial good humour which the limited space and the role of the censor encouraged. In May 1943 he admitted that 'in our "dark moments", which we all get, our whole outlook gets sort of clouded over'. A few months later, in a more candid letter about the 'bestly existence' in the camp he explains that some airmen, despairing of the endless imprisonment, regretted parachuting to safety: 'I've actually heard blokes say they wished they'd stayed in their machines, and meant it ...'<sup>18</sup> He hastened to reassure his wife that he had never said that, and never would, and everything about his attitude to operations expressed in his manuscript makes that clear. He, too, was one of the lucky ones, even if he had to endure years of maddening incarceration.

Just as the airmen in the book speculate all the time about how soon the war will be over, so the prisoners-of-war hoped month after month that the war would be terminated quickly (and victoriously) so that they could return to normal life. In the late months of 1941 Mann was optimistic that the war would soon be over and he would be reunited with his family. In the spring of 1942 he bets with the camp medical officer about when the war will end in the hope, perhaps, that it will somehow make eventual release seem more real. But by 1943 there is evidence of a growing pessimism. Prisoners got little news of what was actually going on in the world outside and their German captors had no interest in telling them. The closest most of them got to the war was the noise of Bomber Command heavy bombers, which they had not flown, droning through the darkness on another operation, and from 1943 onwards the occasional sight of Eighth Air Force B-17s and B-24s gleaming in the sky high above them on daylight raids. As it turned out, Leslie Mann was lucky a second time. Deemed to be a psychiatric casualty, he was repatriated by the International Red Cross in the autumn of 1943. He did not return to Bomber Command but instead found a job with Pathé News. His fictional account of his year in Bomber Command was written, as far as we know, in the late 1940s.

*And Some Fell on Stony Ground* is an ironic title, symbolising perhaps Mann's own sense of the futility of what he and fellow crewmen in Bomber Command were being asked to do. As an account of the psychological demands of combat in exceptional circumstances it has about it a striking honesty. This is not quite the image of the bomber force manufactured by the media and much popular history, which is bland and heroic, where this account is bitter and self-effacing. The value of Leslie Mann's perspective lies in the explanation it gives of how it was possible for young men to endure this degree of combat stress and to continue flying. This is a question likely to be prompted by any study of the long bombing campaign. With the passage of time, this is a question that might be asked about the millions of men (and a large number of women) plucked from civilian life who found themselves faced with the gruelling prospect of combat in the air, at sea, on the many ground fronts and in the wartime resistance. For Leslie Mann and his generation, fighting a war did not seem as strange a demand as it would now seem in Western countries seventy years later. The experience of bombing, like the earlier experience of the trenches, is now history. As the anniversaries of these wartime experiences pile up, accounts such as this are a ready reminder of just how fortunate Europeans have been to live through three-quarters of a century of relative peace.

*Richard Overy*

AND SOME FELL ON STONY GROUND

# I

One hot sunny evening in June 1941, an airman walked slowly, rather heavily perhaps, into the pretty little village of Tackworth, turned the corner and made for the Falcon Inn.

The door was open and at the bar he ordered a beer. He asked if they had any cigarettes. The woman serving, whose smile had faded from her face as she left a group of dart-playing locals to serve him, shook her head, said 'No, sorry' and walked away. She rejoined the group, who had been quietly watching while she served him, and immediately began smiling and chatting again.

The airman's gaze followed her as he began to drink. He was thinking what a stupid, ugly, ill-mannered bitch she was.

He finished his drink quickly and walked out into the sunshine. After standing outside for a moment, he turned and started in the direction from which he had come. There was no other pub between Tackworth and the nearest town, six miles away. Might as well go back to camp. He hated the idea of spending the rest of the evening without cigarettes. It seemed to worry rather than anger him.

As he approached the half-house half-shop which also served as a post office, he thought it must be still open, because a man emerged and disappeared into a cottage next door. His hand had been clenched as though holding something.

The airman entered the shop, and asked the woman in there if she had any cigarettes.

He could see she was about to give the usual answer, but instead looked him in the face, down to his pilot's wings and back to his face. With a kindly smile she said quietly, 'I think so'.

The airman's eyes expressed his thanks far more than his answering half-smile.

It seemed strange that neither of them spoke while she was reaching below somewhere for the cigarettes and he was feeling for his money. There was plenty to talk about – the brilliant cloudless weather had been going on for weeks and the cigarette shortage much longer.

'Here you are', she said, and handed him a large packet.

'Thank you', he said, 'very much.'

He slipped the packet into his pocket and walked out of the shop.

She watched him go, still with that kindly, rather sad look. The sun was still very hot although it was seven o'clock.

He took out a cigarette, lit it, and began his walk back to camp, half a mile out of the village, glancing back at the shop as he went. The woman was still watching him, so he turned away.

As he walked he looked up at the sky, a habit of his these days. The sky was all-important to him now – in his mind always. It was so huge, so endless. It both frightened and fascinated him. The sky could kill him whenever it wanted to. It could become angry and destroy his aircraft in its wrath. It could deceive him into taking off,