

# Ringling Home

*a seasonal ghost story*

by Rob Davis (*Wellington, All Saints*)

The tall church tower on the Norfolk coastline loomed out of the thick low mist. Jack summoned the last of his strength and hauled back on the control wheel, whispered endearments to the aircraft and in response, the mortally wounded Lancaster clawed itself a few feet higher.

Just one of the engines was delivering anything resembling useful power, and it spat a long streak of sparks from its exhausts. A second engine had burned itself out shortly after crossing the Dutch coast and the other two, which were only pretending to be working, groaned in agony. There was a definite rumble as the bomber's belly scraped over the stonework at the top of the tower and then the aeroplane simply gave up its struggle with gravity. Jack used what little rudder control remained to angle the aircraft towards what appeared to be open inland fields, forcing himself to relax against the straps of the pilot's seat as the great black Lancaster smacked its belly into the ground at about 120 mph.

The bomber decelerated surprisingly slowly, throwing up great waves of mud, grass and water, which cascaded over the front turret, cockpit windscreens and the leading edges of the wings. Jack realised that by pure chance he had selected soft, waterlogged ground. In the seconds that the aircraft was sliding to a stop he had time to pull the throttle levers back to idle; and snatching away the pin release of his seat harness, reach forward to the flight-engineer's panel and flip off the magnetos. There was a good, solid bump as the aircraft struck a mound and then it came to rest with the nose section slightly elevated. Shallow water slowly covered the wings, smothering the hot engines with sharp hissing sounds, but there was no fire and the fuselage was sinking no deeper.

Nowadays it's called shock, but in 1943 it was called negative panic. A minute or so passed before Jack's brain came back into play and he remembered that the navigator, too badly wounded to bale out with the other five crew, had been strapped to the rest bunk in the hope that the aircraft could be brought down safely. Jack clambered around the pilot's controls and headed aft over the hindrance of the main spar. He found the navigator, having been given a couple of morphine hypodermics from the first aid kit, was still unconscious but breathing reliably and with no further apparent loss of blood.

"Stan, old chap, you just stay here and hang on, old boy. I'm going to get help and then we'll have you fixed up in a trice." He squeezed the man's shoulder and headed aft to the entrance door which, jammed shut by flak damage, had been hacked off by the crew before they baled out over Occupied Holland. Cautiously lowering himself into the water, he found that it was no more than couple of feet deep; but once outside the aircraft he had no idea which way to go. The blackout was intense and like many bomber operations, his had taken place at a time of a new moon.

"Help!"

Jack shouted repeatedly but secured no response; and thinking that any way was as good as any other, started wading directly away from the aircraft. For high summer the water was cold, and progress was slow. Every few minutes he shouted for help, without result.

But then, tickling its way through the mist, came the sound of church bells.

"An invasion, now?"

Ringling of church bells had been stopped almost immediately after the war had begun, because it was reckoned that in the event of an invasion, church bells would give the most useful warning signal, repeated across country and reaching those who didn't have a wireless set.

Jack remembered that the order had been rescinded just a few months before, and the gladsome sound of a peal had once again been heard across the land. It was true that many a ringer was in uniform and away from home, but some towers managed to scrape together a band and as a ringer himself Jack had been looking forward to pulling a rope as and when his flying duties allowed.

Now that the bells were speaking individually, his ringer's mind said, "Ha, they're not that good at ringing up in peal."

As if new recruits on the parade ground, the jumbled-up bell tones gradually slowed and marshalled themselves into rounds and the three bells at the back of the ring of eight began to sound clearly over the waterlogged meadow. As Jack altered his course towards the sound, the ringers stood and the slight wind snatched away the tenor's last voice.

Which way to go?

"Start ringing again, damn it!"

He knew his strength was fading, and that the only hope for his wounded crew-mate was to head for the bells, where there was sure to be someone who could help. His brain began to fuzzi, and he pictured the ringers standing in their circle, ready to begin again, squeezing his eyes shut to preserve the mental picture.

What was it Old Les used to say when he wanted the ringers to stop talking, pay attention and get ready to start?

"Catch Hold!"

That was it. He pictured hands reaching for sallies, tail ends tucked into palms, and all eyes on the treble.

"Look to – treble's going – she's gone!"

Immediately across the fields came the sound of the bells.

"Hold the handstroke up!"

The treble stopped chipping the tenor at backstroke and began ringing accurate, open rounds. Jack mustered his strength and began half-wading, half-walking towards the sound.

"Go, Bristol Surprise Major!"

The treble broke into Treble Bob as the other bells began to work. Jack's brain started to grey, and suddenly finding the situation uproariously funny, he howled with laughter, tears streaking his cheeks as his legs went on autopilot and carried him further towards the growing tones of the bells. As the treble's shrill voice completed its final 3-4 dodge down at the first lead end, he roared at the top of his voice:-

"BOB!"

And then, in disbelief at the absurdity of it all:-

“Old Les always loved the 5-6-7-8 roll ups!”

*THIS WAY TO HOME*, boomed the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and Tenor.

Crawling over an embankment at the edge of the water meadows, he could see the shape of a church peeking through the mist.

“BOB!” he gleefully shouted again at the second lead end, and then “Les that’s for you, you old soak!” For Old Les loved a post-practice pint as much as pulling a sally. More 5-6-7-8 roll ups cascaded over the ground.

His mind separated into two distinct operations; one half directing his legs across the now dry grass meadow towards the shape of the church; and the other half, following the bells through the method. This latter part of his consciousness detected a hesitation in the steady rhythm, and he shouted “BOB” again, revelling in the sound:-

*COME HOME RIGHT NOW*, boomed the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and Tenor.

Now there was just the churchyard wall between him and safety. He found the lych-gate and staggered through, strength fading, collapsing within reach of the old stone walls as the treble began its final descent back to lead.

“BOB!”, Jack shouted, and then in complete triumph, “That’s all.” The bells fell into neat rounds.

*WE’RE GLAD YOU’RE BACK*, boomed the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and Tenor.

After a few seconds, and without any command from him, the bells stood, not one needing an extra pull. The resultant silence crawled over the churchyard, elbowing away any lingering echoes.

A figure in dark clothes caught Jack as his strength gave out, and lowered him to the grass. He looked up to see a weather-beaten face, round and cheerful.

“That’s all,” Jack said, laughed again, and as a semblance of consciousness returned, gabbled out the story of his crashed aeroplane and wounded crewmate, before lapsing into unconsciousness.

Later the next morning he awoke in a hospital bed, tired and bruised but otherwise unhurt, being told by the nurses that his navigator had been successfully rescued, had responded well to surgery and treatment, and was expected to recover. Shortly afterwards the man who had summoned help appeared, to see how he was getting on.

“If it hadn’t been for the bells,” Jack muttered, “I wouldn’t have made it. Please thank the ringers for me. I’d like to ring there myself when I feel up to it.”

“Bells?” queried the visitor. “Ther’m b’ain’t no bells in that there tower. Fact is, lad, t’whole tower burned down, oh, ‘t be knockin’ on fifty year ago now, like. I know that, as me Dad were a ringer.”

Jack could only stare at him in disbelief. “But the bells – I heard the ringers - they guided me to the church!”

The old man chuckled. “Bells? Bells? You’m bin hearin’ things.”