

OPERATION MANNA

Sam's Last Mission



"Beyond the skies of World War 2
and into the annals of history flew
the soaring spirits of Sam and his crew"

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SAM'S LAST MISSION

Simon Howard

The successes of Bomber Command were purchased at terrible cost. Of every 100 airmen who joined Bomber Command, 45 were killed, 6 were seriously wounded, 8 became Prisoners of War, and only 41 escaped unscathed. Of the 120,000 who served, 55,573 were killed. Of those who were flying at the beginning of the war, only ten percent survived. This story is for the ones who didn't return.

Chapter 1

A bitterly cold morning, January 1942,
he laced up his shoes, grabbed his coat, then out of the door Sam flew.
Finally eighteen years of age, feeling chipper and fighting fit,
Sam hurried along to recruitment; he was champing at the bit.
Two long years he'd been waiting, ever since the first time he saw
a young man step onto his bus in uniform ready for war.
Wearing air force blue from head to toe and wings on his jacket breast,
Sam looked him up and down and thought, "I want to wear that crest!"
A tiny bit short in stature, Sam stood five foot three in his socks
but a cocky, forthright manner helped him rise above life's knocks
And life had already been tough on Sam, had made him grow up fast
when at the tender age of ten his father prematurely passed.
A clever lad, but without a dad, he left school as soon as able,
to get a job, earn a few bob, put food on the family table.
The eldest one of three siblings and mum, he loved them with all his heart
but when war broke out, Sam had no doubt, he'd be off to play his part.

"Sign me up right now," said Sam, "I want to be a fighter pilot."
"Steady on, son," said the clerk, "you'll most likely start as a private!"
"I'm not here to join the Army," said Sam, very sure about that,
"I want to be high in the sky, engaged in aerial combat!"
"If it's the RAF you're after, go and see that man over there.
He'll put you through your paces and see if you have any flair."
Sam quickly spotted his target and was over there in a flash
repeating his wishes to a chap with a handlebar moustache.
"Now look, young man," the officer said, "we only select the best,
so sit yourself down over there, have a go at our written test".
Sam was bright, knew his stuff so his answers were precise and clear.
"Spiffing show!" the officer said. "You're most welcome to volunteer."



Sam moved on to training school where his skills were put to the sword.
He passed with flying colours, so faced, the Aircrew Selection Board.
"We like you, Sam, we really do but we're worried about your height,"
remarked the Head of the Board at the end of the trial fortnight.
"Tell you what, we'll give it a go, send you off to Flying School.
If that doesn't work, never mind, there's always the aircrew pool."
Sam waved goodbye to his loved ones as the train pulled out the station.
Onward to Liverpool docks then Canada his destination.
He'd never left home before but he was off to the wild frontier.
Off to the northernmost reaches of the western hemisphere.
He performed his flying lessons in a Tiger Moth training plane.
"First class job," said his instructor, "let's try you in a Hurricane!"
But events didn't go to plan soon as Sam got in the cockpit
and his trainer sadly noted that he really wasn't a good fit.

"Your legs are too short, old chum, to control the rudder paddle.
Can't get you close enough," he said, "even if I move the saddle!"
This news was a crushing blow but Sam was a resilient soul,
"If not a fighter pilot," he thought "then I'll find another role."
The Board were quick to react, said "Sam, you're a fine aviator.
We suggest that you remuster and become a navigator.
We can train you where you are, then move you to Bomber Command.
You'll see action within the month, bombers are in high demand."



Three weeks later, fully trained, on a busy ship bound for Blighty,
Sam was laughing with Charlie Wright, known to his mates as 'Wrighty'.
"Look," said Wrighty, "stick with me when we arrive at the OTU,
I'm the best rear gunner you're gonna get, so you need me in your crew."
"Not sure about that," ribbed Sam, "the lads said your aim was poor.
In fact I was reliably told you couldn't hit a barn door!"
"Give over Sam, stop pulling my leg," said Wrighty with a shy grin,
"I just want to fly with you, Sam, when our tour's about to begin."
Two days on, two hundred men filled a hangar of metallic grey,
"Mingle and chat, simple as that, then CREW UP by the close of play!"
The roof of the dome seemed to lift as two hundred men found their voice.
All of them knew that their life would depend on the team of their choice.
Sam wandered around the sea of faces knowing what he must do.
Pick pilot first, then five other roles to make up his chosen crew;
There was a flight engineer to find and a wireless operator,
bomb aimer and two gunners, leaving Sam as the navigator.
The rear gunner was Wrighty, of course, **that** was a guaranteed seat
and Sam soon signed up the rest with a most persuasive technique.

Mac had the best seat in the house with Jimmy his flight engineer,
Robbie was the mid upper gunner whilst Wrighty took up the rear.
Joe operated the wireless, he had Sam parked alongside,
Tommy was the crew's bomb aimer upon whom each mission relied.
The crew began training together and became a close knit team.
It didn't take them very long to become a well-oiled machine.
Oozing with class and clocked by top brass, in no time they got the call.
"We like what we've seen so Squadron 15, get packed for Mildenhall!"



Chapter 2

Sam's crew arrived at the base with a sense of anticipation.
They would soon be getting a taste of active participation.
Thirty full missions were needed for the team to complete a tour.
Thirty full missions for each if they were going to outlive the war.
Week one for a rookie crew always proved to be a bit tricky.
They were grounded on the base while their pilot flew 'Second Dicky'.
(Flying with a veteran pilot had become a strict condition
for new pilots about to go on their very first bombing mission.)
So while Mac was 'Second Dicky' his crew could do nothing but wait,
then Sam heard another crew saying that their navigator was late.
"If you like," said Sam, "I'll take his place on your bombing raid tonight."
"Marvellous," their pilot said, "it would save us cancelling the flight."
"Sure," replied Sam, "I'm raring to go. What time do you need me there?"
"Come to the mess at seven, please, and by ten we'll be in the air!"
Sam got changed into his flying suit, made his way to the mess hall.
"Sorry Sam, been a change of plan, our chap turned up after all!"

Sam left the mess disappointed, shrugging his shoulders on his way but Sam was a lucky man; **that crew didn't return the next day.** Lesson learnt, Sam would wait, until his own crew received the OK. Mac was back, the team was on track, their first mission just days away. To calm their nerves they spent some nights drinking ale at The Bird in Hand. Wrighty was smitten by the girl pulling pints whose name was Peggy Brand. "Peggy," said Wrighty all of a shake, "could I take you on a date? My first mission's soon so when I get back I thought we could celebrate." Peggy blushed, then smiled and said "There's a big band on Saturday night. If you promise not to stand me up, I think that would be all right!" A broad grin spread across Wrighty's face, "I promise, I really do" and Sam said "Peggy, we'll get him back, that's a promise from his crew!"



Orders were received next morning, the crew would fly later that day. That meant eggs and bacon for breakfast, a treat before the runway. As evening fell the crew togged up and made their way to the plane. The Stirling heavy bomber waited menacingly in the rain. A NAAFI wagon pulled up, offering rock cakes and mugs of tea, "Help yourself, boys," said Kitty, "first raid, so refreshments free!" Once on board the team found their seats, Mac began testing the flaps. "Relax," he said, chomping his cake, "I'm a safe pair of hands, old chaps!" The time for action had come, the crew's first operational flight. "Behave yourselves, lads," said Sam as the Stirling took off in the night. The plane left with five others in tow, then formed a much bigger scheme when over the channel more squadrons joined to make a bomber stream. Pathfinders led to show the way toward the planes destination, dropping markers and flares all the way to help with navigation.

Next the point of no return when the bomber turned into its run.
The aircraft slowed, dropped its load, then out of the run it spun.
All the while under heavy fire; there were spotlights, fighters and flak
but the boys survived this opening raid and by morning safely back.
Their next few trips went without blips with clear skies of only one tenth
and bombs rained down on targets draining their foes industrial strength.
But these ops were very scary and each time their plane left the ground
all the crew said a silent prayer their bomber wouldn't be shot down.
They had watched in horror many times colleague's aircraft set alight,
tumbling helplessly out of the sky, lost forever in the night.
And when they returned to their bunks, tucked up securely on the base,
they'd look at empty lockers and beds, recent friends but now no trace.
Skipper Mac kept up the morale, kept insisting his hands were safe
and Sam repeated "Behave yourselves, stay focused and keep the faith!"
Keep the faith they certainly did, each had the back of the other's,
an honest crew, brave and true, they had become a band of brothers.



Through the autumn of forty three the crew continued on their tour,
carrying out operations and adding missions to their score.
Then a change came in the winter, current ops were being closed down.
15 was being converted, Lancaster's were coming to town.
The new Lancaster bomber was the pride of the Royal Air Force
and bomber command remained hopeful it could alter the war's course.
In the meantime Christmas was nearing and the crew had got time off
which involved them spending much time trying out the local beer's froth!
Wrighty's romance had blossomed, he said "Peggy, will you be my bride?"
She said "Wrighty, I think that I will; let's tie the knot at yuletide!"

The wedding was quickly arranged with a bash at The Bird in Hand.
Sam gave his speech as best man, followed by cake and then the Big Band.
Peggy and Wrighty had the first dance to Glen Miller's 'In the Mood'
and the guests all swung and swayed before feasting their eyes on the food.
Long, wavy tresses, floral print dresses, fetching wartime fashions.
The guests were fed with a handsome spread sponsored by their own rations!
A rare escape from the pressure, a special night to remember,
the party went on through Christmas until the end of December.
Then New Year arrived, frozen and bleak, the base was open anew.
Lancaster bombers stood in a row waiting to receive their crew.



Chapter 3

If you would like a full copy of [Operation Manna: Sam's Last Mission](#) please email me at natspeak@btinternet.com.

Thanks for reading 😊

Simon

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