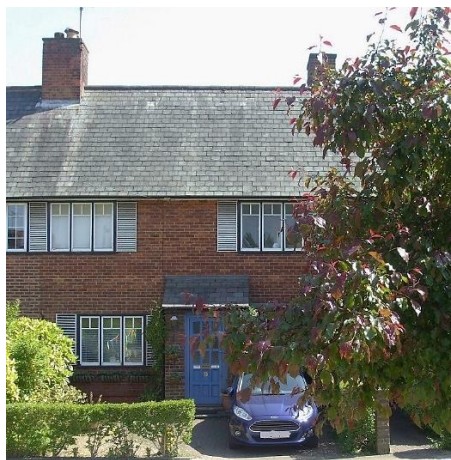
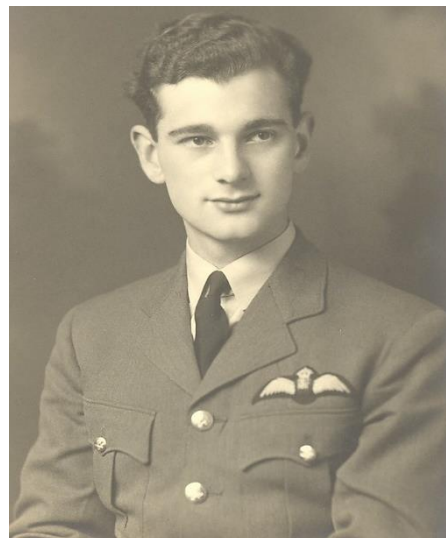


Jack Ball, DFC – a Roe Green Village WW2 hero

Arthur John (“Jack”) Ball was born at 9 Goldsmith Lane, Roe Green Village, Kingsbury, in the autumn of 1922.

Jack Ball, DFC, in early 1945 >

[Photo from the International Bomber Command Centre website]



< 9 Goldsmith Lane in 2018.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

Jack’s father, James Ball, had left his job on a country estate in Wiltshire during the First World War, to come and work at the Aircraft Manufacturing Company (“Airco”) in Kingsbury. Roe Green Village was built for Airco workers, and James probably rented No.9 for himself, his wife and his three older children in 1919.

Jack’s memories of growing up in the Village were happy ones: *‘It was a delightful place to be raised. In those days, no neighbours owned a car, the front gardens, grassed and unfenced, were a communal play area and we were surrounded by safe, open country.’* Even though the Airco factory closed before Jack was born, his father kept a reminder of it, using a surplus aircraft wing as the roof for their chicken shed in the back garden.



An aerial view of Roe Green Village in 1920 >

[Photo: Brent Archives]

With four growing children, and a former Airco worker as a lodger, Jack’s parents bought a larger house at 16 Goldsmith Lane in 1925. As well as playing on the grassy areas in the Village, Jack spent plenty of time looking up at the sky. There were lots of planes to see, from the De Havilland factory and London Aeroplane Club at Stag Lane Aerodrome, just half a mile to the north, and from Hendon Aerodrome a mile to the east. The mock “dog fights” of pilots practicing for the annual RAF Pageant at Hendon made a particular impression. Even as a boy, Jack knew that he wanted to be a pilot when he grew up.



Jack probably went to Kenton Lane Junior Mixed and Infants (now Kingsbury Green) School, changing to Roe Green Juniors when that opened in 1932, initially with classes in the hall above the Willesden Co-op shop in Stag Lane. He then went to Kingsbury County (now Kingsbury High) School in Princes Avenue.

< Kingsbury County School in 1932.

[Photo: Brent Archives]

Jack left school in 1938, aged 16. He had wanted to continue his education, but his family needed him to be earning, as his father was in poor health. He got a job as a “junior” with an insurance company in Mayfair, on a salary of five guineas (£5.25) a month. The office did not open until 9.30am, but to save money he used to buy a “workman’s return” underground ticket from Kingsbury for nine pence (3.75p), which meant that he had to be at Green Park by 8am!

When war broke out the following year, Jack was still too young for military service. He was able to join the Local Defence Volunteers when they were set up in May 1940, training with the Kingsbury unit when he got home from work, and even taking part in Home Guard patrols. But he was determined to join the RAF, and went to Edgware on his 18th birthday to volunteer. He was accepted, and after a medical at RAF Uxbridge, travelled in November 1940 to Blackpool (billeted in a seafront hotel) for his six-week basic training, on pay of 14/- (70p) a week.

Jack’s initial role in the RAF was ground defence, first on guard duty at the RAF Kenley fighter airfield, then manning an A.A. gun near Redhill. In April 1941, he was selected as an aircrew cadet, doing his initial training in Aberystwyth (another seafront hotel). He finally got into an aeroplane, a Miles Magister two-seat trainer, during a six-week course at an Elementary Flying School near Derby in June 1941, flying solo after just seven hours training.



An RAF Miles Magister training aircraft, 1940 >
[Photo from the internet]

Because of the large number of aircrew needing to be trained, the Government had set up the Empire Air Training Scheme, where the air forces of other Commonwealth countries would help to provide much of the training for the RAF. After a long and dangerous convoy crossing of the Atlantic (via Iceland), and a four day train journey, September 1941 saw Jack at a Flight Training School in the wilds of Manitoba, Canada. He spent three months learning to fly and to navigate Avro Ansons, graduating as a pilot, with the rank of Sergeant, in December.

His first posting kept him in Canada, still flying Avro Anson aircraft at an Air Navigation School, Mount Hope, near Hamilton, Ontario. His job was to pilot two three-hour flights a day for trainee navigators, often in snow or other bad weather. On one occasion in May 1942, he had to make a forced landing, at night on an unlit airfield, during a thunderstorm.



On one occasion in May 1942, he had to make a forced landing, at night on an unlit airfield, during a thunderstorm.

< An Avro Anson (Mk1) in Canada.
[Photo from the internet]

During his time at Mount Hope, Jack managed to take some leave with colleagues, to celebrate his 20th birthday in New York, meeting celebrities like Gracie Fields while there. In April 1943, with over 1,100 hours twin-engine flight time, he was promoted to Flight Sergeant, and sent to the Moncton transit camp, New Brunswick, ready for a posting back to England. Unfortunately, he was taken ill during an epidemic there, and spent several months with various complications before he was fully recovered. He finally came home on the “Queen Elizabeth”, along with 17,000 American troops, destined for the planned invasion of Europe the following year.

He spent the next winter piloting Airspeed Oxford planes at Kidlington, on an advanced course to get him used to wartime flying conditions in England (with the “blackout” at night). Promoted to Warrant Officer at the end of the course, he moved on to an Operational Training Unit in Staffordshire in April 1944. His first task was to put together a crew who would fly bomber aircraft with him, choosing Gordon, an 18 year-old navigator, Peter (also 18) as wireless operator along with his fellow Australian Mike (a 36 year-old former mining engineer) as bomb aimer, and two gunners, Bob and Pat, who had returned from training together in South Africa.

They had 80 hours flying time together in Wellington bombers, half of it night-flying, learning the skills and tactics necessary for missions over enemy territory. Their final flight on this posting saw Jack and his crew dropping leaflets over Holland in June 1944, spreading news about the Allies’ D-Day landings.



A Vickers Wellington twin-engine bomber >
[Photo from the internet]

The next step in their operational training took them to a Heavy Conversion Unit near Doncaster, where the extra crewman they needed, a Scots flight engineer (automatically known as “Jock”) joined them. They learned to handle 4-engined Halifax bombers, before a final three days practice in the planes they would actually be flying, at the Lancaster Finishing School near Gainsborough.



Jack was now a Pilot Officer, assigned to Bomber Command’s No.1 Group, and got his first choice posting to 625 Squadron at Kelstern, near Louth, in Lincolnshire. His first mission was as “No.2” with an experienced senior pilot, bombing a Luftwaffe airfield to soften up the German defences, the day before the Allied airborne assault on Arnhem in September 1944 (“Operation Market Garden”). The first mission with his own crew was also over Holland, a daylight bombing raid on a storage depot for V1 “doodlebug” flying bombs.

< The badge of 625 Squadron.
[Image from the internet]

On 14 October, Jack and his Squadron took part in the twin day/night “thousand bomber” raids on the Thyssen steel works at Duisburg in the Ruhr, which hoped to persuade the Nazis that it was hopeless to continue the war. Jack’s Lancaster was hit by flak in the daylight attack, putting one of its starboard engines out of action, but he made it back to Kelstern, where his ground crew replaced it with a new Rolls Royce “Merlin” in record time, for the second mission that night.

WW2 Avro Lancaster bombers flying in formation >
[Photo from the internet]

“Flak” (German anti-aircraft shells) were only one of the hazards for bomber aircrews. There were sometimes collisions between aircraft in the crowded skies at night, and the Lancaster taking off ahead of Jack on the Thyssen (“Operation



Hurricane”) raid suffered engine failure, and crashed with its 9 ton bomb load exploding. On night missions, there were also German night-fighter aircraft to contend with. Jack never saw one, as they always attacked from below and behind, so he relied on Bob, his rear-gunner, to see them manoeuvring into position, and warn him in time to take evasive action.

Many of Jack’s missions over the next two months were against German refineries, and other oil-related targets, as an oil shortage was limiting the Nazi war effort. One of his close friends was killed during a raid on Bochum in November, and debris from an exploding plane ahead of him shattered Jack’s cockpit canopy during a bombing run a fortnight later. While flying over Holland on another mission in December, Jack saw a glare rising rapidly from the ground, then a vapour trail as a V2 rocket flew past his plane, on its way to land destruction on England.

Fog and snow stopped their flights for a week before Christmas 1944, but Jack and his crew were up early on Boxing Day. A major German counter-attack through the Ardennes region of Belgium (“the Battle of the Bulge”) was threatening to split the Allied advance. The Americans had been forced to retreat from St. Vith, an important road and railway junction town, so the RAF was sent to bomb the SS Panzer Division there. Clear daylight and snow on the ground made the Lancasters’ targets easy to spot, and the German advance was halted in its tracks.

1945 began with raids deep into Germany, often in poor weather, with ice forming on the plane’s windows. Jack’s last flight on his crew’s “tour” of 30+ missions was to bomb an oil



processing plant at Zeitz. When they got back safely, they had their photo taken in front of their plane, and Jack took his air and ground crews for dinner at a pub in Louth.

< **Jack Ball and his crew (Gordon Foot, Peter McGill, Pat O’Malley, Mike O’Connor and “Jock” Mackintosh – with gunner Bob Job missing) in front of their Lancaster.** [Photo from the International Bomber Command Centre website]

The crew was disbanded, and went on leave. Jack had applied to join Transport Command as his next posting, but he was sent back to Canada to train on American-built bombers, first B25 Mitchell aircraft, then the giant long-range B24 Liberators. While in British Columbia in April 1945, Jack learned that he had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross medal.

The citation for Jack’s DFC award >
[From the International Bomber Command Centre website]

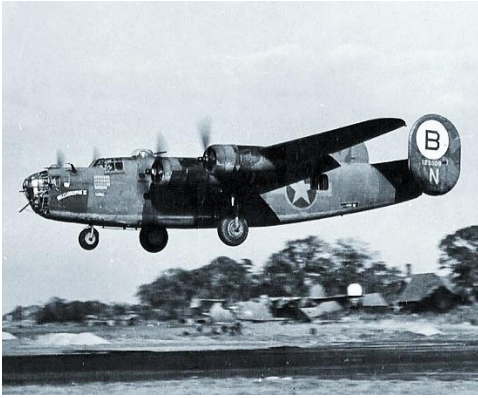
Award promulgated in the London Gazette dated 13th April 1945

Distinguished Flying Cross

Flying Officer Arthur John BALL, 179079, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, No 625 Squadron

Flying Officer Ball is the Captain and Pilot of a Lancaster aircraft and has almost completed a very successful first tour of operations consisting of 32 sorties comprising 175 operational flying hours. He has attacked many targets in Germany and the occupied countries including Dortmund (2), Dusseldorf, Gelsenkirchen, Cologne (5), and Essen (2), and has pressed home each attack in spite of severe weather on several occasions and heavy opposition of flak. This officer has consistently set a very high standard and has always carried out his tasks in a most determined manner, and his cheerfulness and fearlessness on all occasions have been very noticeable throughout his tour. He is a fine leader, skilful pilot and has shown commendable courage and devotion to duty. He has always set a fine example to his crew and by his gallant leadership has completed a most successful tour of operations.

Jack celebrated VE Day in Vancouver in May, but war was still raging in the Far East, and that was where he was told he would be serving next. However, just as Jack had finished his training on B24’s, Japan surrendered after atom bombs were dropped on it in August 1945.



The war had ended, his posting to the Far East was cancelled, and he came back across the Atlantic on the S.S. Nieu Amsterdam, ready to start a new peacetime role in the RAF's Transport Command.

< **A Consolidated B24 Liberator long-range bomber.**

[Photo from the internet]

After more training, Jack did find himself flying to the Far East in 1946, with 511 Squadron. As there were still large British forces in the Middle East and Asia, he made regular

service trips from Lyneham in Wiltshire, taking mail, freight and passengers to and from Cairo, Delhi and Singapore, usually flying two legs of the long journey before an overnight stop-over. Most of these flights were in Avro York planes, derived from the Lancaster bomber.

An RAF Transport Command Avro York >

[Photo from the internet]



In the summer of 1947, Jack was taken ill in Malta with appendicitis, while flying back from Egypt. After a period of recuperation, he had to undergo a medical before he could return to flying, and he was classed "unfit" because of poor eyesight. This hadn't prevented him from flying since 1941 (when he had "passed" his eye test by memorising the four sight "test cards" beforehand!), but he was discharged from the RAF in November 1947, having reached the rank of Flight Lieutenant.



< **Jack Ball (during his time in Transport Command?)**

[From a photo on the International Bomber Command Centre website]

Arthur J. Ball ("Jack") appears on the 1948 Voters' List, living with his parents, James and Emily, at 16 Goldsmith Lane in Roe Green Village. I do not know anything further about him after that, apart from that he wrote down his wartime memories in 2006, and that he was still alive (though unable to attend, through ill health) when the Bomber Command Memorial was unveiled in June 2012.

16 Goldsmith Lane, in 2018 >

[Photo by Philip Grant]



Is "hero" too strong a word for Jack Ball's achievements during his seven years in the RAF? Thousands of other airman won the DFC during the Second World War, but to have experienced so many dangers, and to have faced them with such calm courage as he did, while still only 22 years old, surely deserves our admiration.

Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, June 2018.

Most of the information in this article is taken from "A Seven Year Scratch – Memories of a World War II Pilot", by Arthur John "Jack" Ball, DFC, International Bomber Command Centre website at: www.internationalbcc.co.uk .