

From The Diary of Wing Comm'dr. Weiser

The American Hebrew
May 19, 1944

Wing Commander William Weiser at 25 holds a Canadian rank the equivalent of which in American usage is that of Lieutenant Colonel. Known formerly as "the boy pilot of Brooklyn", he grew up to become one of the most gifted airmen in the Canadian Air Force. When he was to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross, bestowed upon him in person by the King of England, at Buckingham Palace, he cabled his wife: "The King is going to give me a nice medal. All's well. Love, Bill." His wife, Mrs. Sophie Weiser, the recipient of the interesting and informative letters here, has been active in the Zionist Organization helping refugees. Wing Commander Weiser is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Weiser of Brooklyn, and they have another son, Hyman, in the Navy. The flyer enlisted in May, 1941, at Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a graduate of Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, and used to run away often as a boy, to fly a plane.

May 1, 1942, Aboard boat.

Somewhere on the Atlantic tonight there is a very lonely young man...your husband...sitting down...writing and thinking. We were together for so little time, my sweet. And already reality is gone and I am living on memories...living every moment of the precious past over again. This is not reality surely; this vast expanse of black water stretching on every side as far as the eye can see... hemming in us. The ocean is horrible; lonely and tormented – in ceaseless convulsion. Now the fog has surrounded us – closed us in completely and we are moving noiselessly through a black void as far removed from reality as the stars. Only the slow interminable rolling of the ship and hissing foaming water along the sides bring a sense of motion. Time is suspended. I rise, eat four meals a day, talk to people and retire... Today is different. For the first time in three days – the sun. The sea has been calm throughout. It is nice to stand on the top deck and the ship and glance out over the water as the other ships keep pace in perfect formation. The sea has a long slow swell which causes quite a pitching motion. First the nose rises high, high into the air and then slowly down until it buries itself into the spray of sometimes blue, sometime green water.

...We should be getting pretty close to England by now. The anti-aircraft is really out in force; you can't move about deck without stumbling over some kind of anti-aircraft armament. The decks literally bristle with guns. So far we haven't had any excitement of any kind. The sea has been calm all the way over and except for a few depth charges dropped at one point there has been no sign of enemy activity...

May 23, 1942

I am now on leave for seven days. I left my station on the 20th and spent one day in London just looking around. I feel quite cosmopolitan now having trod the pavements of Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, Leicester Square, the Strand and a dozen other places. I would have liked to stay in London longer but right now it is probably one of the most crowded and expensive places to stay in the world. I stayed pretty well around home base in London and got away with about 30 bob (\$6.75). Right now, I am spending six days in the country in the northwestern corner of England. The country is very beautiful; all mountains and lakes. The organization which handles the whole business has gotten us an invitation from a doctor and his family. They are really awfully nice people. England is really a beautiful country and the English in their native habitat are quite nice people. They can't be exceeded for hospitality at any rate. Before I go, one last observation. Our impressions of the English are quite overly exaggerated. The English don't speak like the English at all. They speak in a perfectly understandable fashion!

June 5, 1942

Incidentally I had my first brush with enemy aircraft the other day and learned just what it feels like to hear a bomb come screeching down at you from the sky. It isn't a nice feeling at all. But anyhow my good luck ring and

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Mogen Dovid are in full operation and all I got was a very dirty face out of it all. My kit is completely intact. Some of the boys didn't fare quite so well. I'm rather pleased with my reactions under fire. No sign of fear or excessive excitement.

July 3, 1942

Flying in England is work, damned hard work. It is raining in some part or other all the time; not a steady downpour but little individual rains from separate clouds. Flying is a series of immersions in these rains and the first few times I hit them while moving at high speed, I had the impression of having struck something solid and unyielding. The rains pound at the "glasshouse" with terrific force and rapidity almost as though it would destroy the fragile man-made machine which dares challenge its fury. It requires all one's strength and skill to maintain the aircraft on a reasonably even keel.

July 16, 1942

Had my first brush against the man with the scythe, not counting the air raids, and my lucky ring sure scared him off. Was my own fault too; showing off to some people whom I knew were watching on the ground. Ship fell into a spin from a vertical turn and I pulled out just brushing the tree tops. I learned a lesson from that one though, won't be doing any exhibition flying again unless it's for the Jerries.

July 22, 1942

I have trouble writing to you when I am not in a hurry because the combination of circumstances puts me into a reverie from which it is hard to bring myself back into the reality of putting words on paper. I find myself thinking of New York and the things we used to do. There are little incidents which come into my conscience; like the breakfast boxes at the Barbizon-Plaza and the coffee that was invariably too cold. The crowds on Pitkin Avenue on a Saturday afternoon and the taste of a pastrami sandwich and beer. Carnegie Hall and the Philharmonic playing Tchaikowsky or Brahms...

August 15, 1942

One of these days I am actually going to stay in one place long enough to get my stuff unpacked. I'm getting out of trunks and duffle bags. One consolation about hopping all over the place is that you certainly get to see the country. In one town I was at for ten days, I had beer in a pub that was built into a cave next to a castle. The Crusaders on their way to Jerusalem in 1200 A.D. stopped at this same pub to take care of their thirst – and I'll bet the beer was much better then. I've been into London twice this past week to attend the BBC Prom concerts at Albert Hall. Albert Hall is a tremendous place and the concerts are quite popular; the average audience is about 4000. The concerts start at 6:00 P.M. and are somewhat longer than what we are accustomed to. During the intermission everyone goes to one of the restaurants in the hall for beer or tea and sandwiches.

September 9, 1942

The flying is coming along fine. My crew is shaping up swell now that we are becoming more experienced and I am getting good reports both as pilot and as skipper. I am becoming well known throughout camp and getting along fine with people owing to my social activities and also because I am the only American left on the station since the other one cashed in his chips the other night. I'll probably get nabbed for funeral detail tomorrow. The boys get a good send-off anyhow; flag draped coffin, rifleman firing volleys and all the works. I've already served

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on one funeral party last week so I know what it's like. Darling I've started becoming morbid again, so we had better call it quits for now.

October 1, 1942

I think I have matured a little bit since last night and that my sense of values has become a little more practical. I spent a very hot thirty minutes last night; a half hour where the life of myself and four other men teetered on a thin edge. The Weiser luck came through and everything came out all right. I think I now know why pilots have been known to kiss the earth when they come down. At any rate I believe I have won the respect of my crew with regard to my flying ability and my ability to co-ordinate the working of each individual in the crew. Thank God I am a pilot; in an emergency I am so busy that I have no time to pay any attention to my personal feelings and sensations. It must be pure Hell to just have to sit there doing nothing and wait. Anyhow, I know now that if the time does come when I have to pack up, I'll go like a man, unafraid.

October 24, 1942

I have been through quite a lot since my last letter. As you can tell from my new return address, I am now at a squadron. On leaving my last station, I was granted eight night's leave in order to have a last fling. It reminded me of the last sumptuous meal which is given to a prisoner before he is led off to execution, but that didn't prevent me from having the nicest time I've had since I came to England.

November 9, 1942

I am very tired right now. I have been doing a lot of flying and I'm just sick; mentally and physically. I wish I could get away from here for a week. I want to sit in a living room of a private home in front of a fire in a nice comfy chair with my feet up. Not a care in the world and with my contentment made secure by the knowledge that the woman in my life is standing right next to me. All I have to do is open my eyes and I can see her. I don't even have to do that; I can just feel her presence right next to me. God! What a dream – what a feeling. I guess I shouldn't have impossible dreams like that. I'm going to sleep now; I'm very tired darling. Please keep up a steady stream of prayers.

December 11, 1942

At long last I have gotten to the stage where I am taking an active part in the argument going on. I have been out many times already and it isn't really so bad. I was a little scared at first but the feeling went away quickly. I have too much to do to pay attention to my own feelings. My crew took it very nicely as well and my navigator proved his worth and skill by bringing us home under very adverse conditions. English weather is known the world over, particularly in winter, and it certainly has lived up to its reputation.

About the only time I see the sun is when I climb up over the clouds. I'm not worked very hard. We have a few days off every week and a twelve day leave every three months. My aircraft is right off the line and the ground crew keep it in tip-top order. So taking everything into account, I consider that we have a good chance of a reunion one of these days.

January 28, 1943

Everything is coming along OK now although we are kept very busy seeing what we can do about the U-boat menace. I have been out on quite a few bombing raids lately and I am beginning to feel tired out. I am due for seven days leave within a few weeks, I hope, and I am planning on laying up in the country for a good rest. The

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raids my squadron are doing are very long ones, over ten hours, and the major problem is keeping awake. Orange juice, caffeine tablets and oxygen do the trick. I don't have any trouble keeping awake over the target however. Searchlights, flak and nightfighters really keep you on your toes. Flak look pretty coming up; like a tremendous fireworks display. Vari-colored tracers seem to drift up slowly and then they suddenly go by with express train speed. Heavy flak shells explode with a vivid orange flash and if perchance the explosion is close, the aircraft shakes and trembles like a live thing. And then the bombing run-up, when the aircraft must be flown straight and level for 45 seconds come what may. The feeling of relief when "bombs gone" comes over the inter-communication and we start to get the hell out. I wouldn't trade it for anything though. The thrill of living dangerously gets into your blood. I have a long time to go yet because after I finish this tour of "ops" I will get a "rest" and then back for another tour.

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The American Hebrew
May 26, 1944

(Continued from last week)

Sometimes when you're out about ten o'clock in the evening, the chances are that at that exact moment your husband will be in the sky, in the hell over Western Germany. I'm not good at descriptive writing. I can't tell you what it is like to fly straight and level through a barrage thrown up by a hundred heavy flak guns and hundreds of light ones while the bomb aimer says, "right, left-left, steady". Innumerable searchlights sway back and forth, looking for the tiny speck way up, a tiny speck, but potent with destruction. Seven pairs of eyes ever watching the enveloping blackness in the game of vigilance and wits which is necessary to avoid sudden death in the form of a night fighter. For every egg we're throwing the Jerries now, we're giving them back only part of what we owe them...

March 16, 1943

Before I go, I must tell you about the circumstances which caused me to be returning to my station on the night of the 13th by train. I don't tell you much about my flying because firstly, the censors don't like it and secondly because it smacks too much of "line-shooting", but this is really something. If you read your daily paper, you probably know that practically every night the RAF is out taking a smack at some part of Germany or occupied territory. Well, I've been on most of these jaunts recently and I've had a good bit of experience and close shaves, but on the night of the 12th I came closest. As your paper will tell you, the target that night was Essen, in "Happy Valley" (the Ruhr Valley). I've seen plenty of hot targets in my time; Hamburg, Bremen and Berlin are not exactly picnics, but I've never seen anything like Essen that night. After we dropped our eggs the flak boys gave us a little attention with the following results:

One engine dead, another one dying, hydraulics shot sway so that bomb doors would not close, four petrol tanks holed, electrical wiring severed, rudder control rod hanging on by a hair, aerals shot away. A piece of flak came in one side, passed under the bomb aimer's belly and out the other side. The tailgunner's right boot had a piece of flak cut a groove in the leather. We landed at the first 'drome we saw in England and the next morning I went out to survey the damage. I counted 112 holes and I'll bet that I missed some. Talk about luck! I certainly hope I don't get anymore like that. Your prayers must have been with me that night!

April 22, 1943

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Since my last letter I've packed up my kit and moved again. The reason for this last move is a deep dark military secret. I can only say that because of our previous success as a crew on bombing raids and because of the outstanding ability of my navigator, we have been selected to train for a very special job; a job which, while it entails a slightly greater degree of risk and a much greater degree of skill on the part of several members of the crew, is imperative to the success of our raids. If we can prove ourselves adept at the work, promotion and recognition should be rapid. Personally I have the greatest confidence in my crew. I only hope that I won't fail them in carrying out the increased burden which will fall upon my shoulders. The responsibility, in the final analysis of taking a quarter million dollar bomber and a crew of seven out over Germany and bringing them safely back rests on the sound judgment, common sense, and flying skill of the captain...and also Lady Luck (blessed be she!).

May 12, 1943

I HOPE you received the cable I sent last week. I didn't know for sure whether the Air force would advise you that I had been injured while on operations, but I didn't want you to worry needlessly. Here is what happened – as much as I can tell you. I was on my way back from ... and I couldn't land anywhere because a thick fog had closed in. After awhile my petrol got very low so I told the boys it looked like a blind crash landing. The boys could have baled out, but they elected to stay. The last thing I remember was one helluva big tree coming up. I came to and found myself lying alone on the ground. It was black as pitch, but I could hear the crew getting out of the kite. I couldn't get up because there was something wrong with my right leg, so I called to them and they made me comfortable. After awhile an ambulance came and took us all to a hospital. After they got me out of the tatters of my uniform and got some of the plowed field off my hide, a survey was made. They found concussion (mild), gashes on head, right hand and both legs. Six x-rays were taken of my spine because I couldn't move my right leg before somebody discovered that the only trouble was a bad sprain. Well, I've been in bed for a week now. The rest of my crew have all been discharged some three days but I haven't been allowed out of bed yet. By the way, my face is quite intact.

June 4, 1943

Yesterday I flew for the first time since my accident and it was just as though I hadn't been away. It was interesting to note that the squadron leader and wing commander were obviously worried that I had lost my nerve. They needn't have concerned themselves; my nerve and mental attitude are just the same as they ever were. So if the old Weiser luck continues to hold out, I'll be home in time and we'll see if we can battle the problems of life together!

June 24, 1943

It's funny how attached the aircrew and the ground crew become. When speaking of the kite, it's always "ours". We've been together for a long time now and we've been through four 'v's; I honestly don't think those boys sleep at night when we go out on an 'op until they know that we are safely back. They are a good bunch of boys, competent and keen because they know that in a large measure our safe return will depend on the excellence of their work. The chief engine man, Pop, is about 44, an old hardened ex-soldier of the last war. The four engines are his children, his joy in life, and he talks to them and babys them and tunes and adjusts until those engines are as near perfect as humans can get them. The rest of the ground crew are younger but the same in type, so that when "V" takes off to have a slap at the Ruhr, we know that we have a machine which will be dependable when the night fighters start looking for customers and the searchlights and flak are coming too close.

June 26, 1943

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Well, there's another trip to record in the log book. It was an interesting trip – and a tough one. I had a feeling of acute depression before take-off – for the first time in all my ops. Frankly, I had a feeling, that all would not go well; I even thought I might not come back. It was unaccountable – maybe I'm getting psychic. Anyhow I communicated my feelings to one of the station switchboard operators, a devout Catholic girl as Irish as they come. I didn't know her, but she made me wear one of those Catholic medallions around my neck. The next day one of the other operators told me that the girl had been up several times during the night and – of all things – praying for me. It kind of re-establishes one's faith in human nature when a complete stranger does that for you... I got back all right, but it was my second toughest trip – (hardest one was the first time I went to Essen). The funny part of it all was that after being fired at without respite for more than two hours and going from searchlight cone to searchlight cone, a careful examination of the aircraft failed to show so much as a scratch. The queerest part of the whole damned business was that after we got back the navigator, mid-upper gunner and engineer individually told me that they had each had exactly the same feeling. And yet everyone kept his mouth shut and carried on – a swell bunch of boys.

August 19, 1943

I have done 50 per cent more trips so far this month than I have done in any of the four preceding months.

After four days ago I landed away from the base after a trip and I slept for three hours before flying to base. I arrived at base in the afternoon just in time for briefing, for that night's operations. No wash, no shave, no nothing. Luckily I had a second pilot that night and slept most of the time. I can stand the pressure as well as the next guy, but I'm afraid it will leave permanent marks. The lines on my face are getting deeper but at least my hair isn't getting gray like some of the boys. I am really looking forward to my two weeks' leave at the beginning of Sept. I intend to get a good rest.

October 4, 1943

We've been working pretty hard lately; long trips that leave one absolutely exhausted. I don't know whether you can remember the spirit in which you write your letter, but I feel exactly the same way. "Browned off" we call it. My trips are mounting up; the end of my tour is getting into view. I don't know what the Air Force plans on doing with me if I do finish my tour. The probability is that I will have to do 6-12 months of duty as a flying instructor over here imparting my operational knowledge to green crews.

I have always been reluctant to discuss the future in this racket because all too often there isn't any. And then again, the censor strongly disapproves of people saying too much. But I see that I've been unfair; you deserve to know what the score is.

The score is this: I am not doing an ordinary tour of operations; I am not doing ordinary operations. The work I am doing is confined to a small number of crews who have shown themselves above the average and have been entrusted with the special work which determines whether or not our bombing raids shall be successful or failures. I am now fully trained in my work and because it is practically impossible for any crew to be replaced, we have to carry on beyond the normal number of operations. We do almost twice the normal American number. My crew and I are proud of the responsible work we are doing and we are not looking for "angles" to find a way of quitting before we have to... The score is this: I am terribly homesick and I miss you very much. Hang on for a while longer and if all goes well I'll be back.

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October 29, 1943

I hope you received my cable telling you of my appointment at Buckingham Palace. The King is going to pin a Distinguished Flying Cross on my flat chest. You should really be quite proud of me because in this outfit medals aren't handed out as part of one's weekly clothing ration.

October 29, 1943

My next promotion has just come through and I now find myself with the rank of Squadron Leader – this is equivalent to the rank of major in the army. One thing about operational aircrew in the RCAF; if one can manage to live long enough, there's plenty of promotion.

The crew has gone on leave today but it looks as though I won't be able to get away for more than a day or two later in the week. That's what comes of being a flight commander and having to bring a lot of crews through their teething stage and seeing to it that they have a decent chance of survival when they begin their "ops". The hard part is having to do that and operations besides. I have only a very few more left to do now though. As a matter of fact I've finished my tour and I'm doing a few extra to finish the crew off. It's the least I could do after we've been together so long and through so much.

December 22, 1943

Here is your Xmas present. Frankfurt, 20th Dec. was my last raid. I'm finished with operations now. I've done two complete tours at once so that I cannot be called back unless I wish it. I'm still in a whirl of shaking hands and receiving congratulations from all sides. It really is an occasion for the squadron because it is rather rare for a complete crew to complete two tours. After we landed on the last trip and I cut the engines, the ground crew came swarming in with bottles of beer and there was bags of hand shaking and back slapping all around. Last night I arranged a party for the aircrew-ground crew unit and I'm afraid that the circumstances, together with the alcohol, made us quite sentimental. After all we've been together for more than a year and through more than most people ever go through in a life-time and now we're splitting up.

February 19, 1944

Now that there is some possibility of my getting home some time this year I want to be in good shape – physically and financially.

Evenings have become somewhat of a problem now because I don't feel like going out to the nearest town, but what with the gym, a bit of reading, some letter writing and surprise inspections of sections under my control after personnel think I have relaxed for the day, I manage to fill in my time fairly well.