

Flight Lieutenant Leonard Robert Say DFC DFM Air Gunner 61 Squadron

During WW2 6,463 Distinguished Flying Medals (DFM) were awarded (with 56 Bars), 852 of those were awarded to Air Gunner/Wireless Operators who were members of aircrew of the Royal Air Force. Just over 21,000 Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC) including bars, were also awarded to the RAF. Both of these awards were given for an act, or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty performed whilst flying in active operations against the enemy. The fact that you gained just one decoration or medal was an honour, and usually meant you had also completed a 'tour' of 30 operations or shown exceptional gallantry whilst in combat on a particular operation. To gain both of these awards, along with two 'tours' meant you were courageous and performed well above the average, both as an officer, and also whilst serving in the ranks.

Leonard Robert Say was an Air Gunner/Wireless Operator in the RAFVR who was attached to 61 Squadron for two 'tours' who justly fitted the above criteria. According to the well researched book, 'The Distinguished Flying Medal Register' by Ian Tavender 61 Squadron were awarded just 150 DFM's in all during WW2.

Born on the 19th September 1920 in the small village of Bleadon near Weston Super Mare, Somerset, his parents were Robert and Emma (nee Lang). After leaving the local school Leonard didn't follow his father by working as a farm hand, instead he went to work as a pipe fitter. By May 1940 the second world war had been raging for eight months and the German *Blitzkrieg* had swept through the low countries of Europe, threatening the UK. Leonard answered the call to join up by enlisting into the Royal Air Force as a member of aircrew, to train as an air gunner/wireless operator, and was given the enlisted number 1154059.

At the completion of his training he was sent to 61 Squadron in June 1941, a bomber squadron flying Handley Page Hampden aircraft based at RAF Hemswell. His first 'op' was on the 26th June as rear gunner with Flying Officer Gascoyne-Cecil's crew flying Hampden AD 762, along with 46 other aircraft on a sortie to bomb **Kiel**. Only slight damage was caused with one Hampden lost. Nazi HQ at **Aachen** on the 9/10th July was the next target, along with 82 aircraft. (1 Hampden 1 Whitley lost on the raid). The raid was a success with the central area heavily bombed, with 1700 houses destroyed.

Gascoyne -Cecil ran into a cone of searchlights over the area, and was attacked by an enemy aircraft with a fixed headlamp (possibly a Me110 also fitted with a form of radar). Violent evasion action was taken by the Hampden pilot, with Sergeant Say returning fire, whilst the wireless operator Sgt Beck, was wounded in his left hand from the flak, but managed to continue at his station.

In the following month the squadron moved to RAF North Luffenham and Sgt Say undertook his third mission, this time to bomb **Frankfurt** successfully on the night of 21/22nd July, in Hampden AE200 along with 70 other aircraft and with no losses sustained. The night of 24/25th July, and the crew were bombing **Kiel** in Hampden AE122, not very successfully, only a couple of bombs reaching their target.

The night of 30/31st July and 116 aircraft bombed **Cologne**, Sgt Say was flying with a different pilot, (Sgt Donovan) flying Hampden AE235.

Karlsruhe Railway Workshops with 16 other aircraft on the 6th August was the next target.

An attack was made by Gascoyne-Cecil flying Hampden AE289 at 6,000 feet, where he noticed bursts and fire on the target. Whilst crossing the Dutch coast on their flight home, they encountered a severe electrical storm, damaging the wireless equipment and knocking Sgt Say unconscious in his rear turret.

**This incident was to feature in part of the recommendation made for the later award of the Distinguished Flying Medal to Sergeant Say in September 1942.

Another attack was made on **Kiel** on the night of 8/9th August by Gascoyne-Cecil and his crew in Hampden AE289, this time with 53 other aircraft to bomb the U Boat pens, the flak was so intense it reminded crews of the 1914/18 war, the bombing attack accounted for the loss of 3 aircraft, the raid was not a success.

On the 11/12th August an attack was made on the railway yards at **Krefield** by Gascoyne Cecil flying Hampden AE 289 along with 28 other aircraft, not a success due to clouds, only one aircraft claiming hits. Two nights later the crew were again flying in Hampden AE289 on an attack to **Brunswick** when 81 Hampdens dropped bombs on the railway yards located there, one Hampden lost. On the night of 16/17 August an attack was made on **Dusseldorf** when 52 Hampdens along with 6 Manchester's dropped bombs on the railway yards, 5 aircraft were lost, but the raid was successful, again the crew flew Hampden AE289. An attack was made on **Cologne** on 18/19th August when 62 aircraft tried to bomb the city, but the majority of bombs dropped on decoy fires, flak was heavy, accounting for 6 aircraft (10%). On the 1/2nd September a further attack was made against **Cologne**, this time with 99 aircraft taking part, 6 further Hampdens were detailed to suppress the searchlights which proved helpful, only 2 aircraft were lost this time, and bombing was accurate. The original target was intended to be Berlin, but as the weather was deteriorating at the base, Cologne was substituted. A special operation was mounted on the 3/4th September by 140 aircraft from No's 1-3-4-5 Groups to seek out and bomb the German Battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* at **Brest**. 53 aircraft, (mainly from 3 group) managed to drop their bombs on the estimated positions through the smoke screen put up by the warships. Sgt Say was in Hampden AE 352 with F/O Gascoyne Cecil. Three nights later a successful attack was made on **Berlin** by 61 Squadron, P/O Gascoyne Cecil and his crew were again in AE 352, and it is noted in the Squadron ORB's that this crew '*attacked a target of military importance in Germany*', but no location was given. On the night of 11/12th September a successful attack was made by 61 Squadron on the Heinkel Factory at **Rostock**, with buildings flung in the air and flames reaching over 500 feet in height. Gascoyne Cecil and his crew were flying in Hampden AE308, and shown in the ORB's as bombing the dock area of Rostock, around Warnemunde, and taking photographs. On the 17/18th September the crew experienced a different type of operation in Hampden AE308 along with 13 other Hampdens, known as '*Gardening*'.

A term used for dropping air to sea parachute mines (known as *vegetables*) in enemy coastal shipping lanes, and river estuaries. Usually up to 6 mines were dropped ('sown'), fitted with either magnetic or acoustic activators.

Areas where these mines were dropped also had code words with vegetable/tree and plant names. On this operation the crew dropped mines in the area of the **Heligoland Approaches** (known as *Rosemary and Eglentine*).

During October/November 1941, 61 Squadron began re-training and equipping with Avro Manchester aircraft, the aircrew now being increased to seven from the four found in Hampden's. By December the squadron was fully operational, and on

the night of 7/8th December F/O Gascoyne -Cecil and his newly increased crew flying in Manchester L7472, along with 18 other aircraft, were tasked with bombing the docks at **Boulogne**. This was carried out at 6000 feet, encountering heavy flak over the target area, where one Manchester was lost. Sgt Say is shown as a second wireless operator/air gunner to Sgt Beck on the crew list.

His next operation was in the New Year, on the 27/28th February 1942 an attack on **Kiel** flying Manchester R5832, with 67 other aircraft, with no losses. Flying Officer Gascoyne-Cecil tried to break through the cloud at 6,000 feet, but was unable to do so, and decided to jettison his bombs over the sea instead. No other bombs landed on the town either.

Other aircraft were so wide of the mark with their bombs that city authorities later recorded only hearing engine noises. On their return route home the Manchester iced up, fusing the trailing aerial on the wireless set. Leonard Say had now been promoted to Flight Sergeant and shown as 1st Air Gunner on the crew list, with Gascoyne -Cecil promoted to Flight Lieutenant.

After a three night rest Bomber Command dispatched 235 aircraft in three waves to bomb (using 4000lb 'Cookie's') the Renault Factory located in the South Westerly suburbs of **Paris** at Billancourt, on the 3 March. The plan was to use flares combined with very low level bombing to make sure all the bombs reached their intended target.

Flt Lt Gascoyne -Cecil flew in on a level flight at 4000 feet on a clear moon lit night, his bombs seen to score hits on the target, along with many others from the accompanying bombers. Whilst returning on a southerly course over Paris their Manchester L7458 was attacked by a Me110 night fighter on their port quarter.

Sgt Beck was observing from the astrodome at this time, and continued giving directions to the pilot with Flt Sgt Say (shown as Wireless Operator /Air Gunner) in the rear turret, who then instructed the pilot to turn to port in order that he could get a clear field of fire.

The Me110 closed in at high speed and opened fire on them at approximately 100 yards with cannon and machine guns using tracer. Flt Sgt Say held his fire until the attacking aircraft closed to approximately 200 feet and then gave it a short burst from his four Browning machine guns. The enemy aircraft broke away in a steep dive along the starboard quarter and was not seen again. Luckily, their Manchester aircraft was not hit by enemy fire, probably due to the pilot and rear gunner working well together.

The Renault works and adjacent factories of Farman and Salmson were engaged on war production for the Germans (18,000 lorries a year), and were hit by 300 bombs causing over a 100 fires.

The Daily Telegraph reported the attack as a great success, quoting an eye witness account of Captain Fontaine (Dept of the Vichy Vice - Premier), "The planes flew so low in the moonlight, that from a fifth floor flat across the river from the attack, it looked as though they were going to crash into the roof, their machines tossed about by the explosions of their own bombs"

This attack was a milestone for Bomber Command at the time, the 235 strong force was the largest number sent to a single target with a record 470 tonnage of bombs dropped, causing 40% damage to the factory. It was hailed as a great success.

The Krupps works at **Essen** was the next target this crew attacked on the 8th March flying Manchester L7458, along with 210 other aircraft in a five hour round

trip, Flight Sergeant Say taking up a position as Mid Upper gunner. Bombs were dropped from 11,000 feet with accurate heavy flak bursting around them, 8 aircraft were lost, but unfortunately the factory was not hit.

Another attack was made on **Essen** two days later in the same Manchester, this time only 187 aircraft were sent to bomb from 9,000 feet, the bomber crews were subjected to more accurate and heavy flak, as a result only 2 buildings were destroyed, with 3 aircraft not returning.

On the night of 28th March a large attack was made on **Lubeck** with 234 aircraft taking part (12 lost), Flt Lt Gascoyne Cecil flying Manchester L7475. The bomber force made the attack in three waves at low level, some crews dropping down to 2,000 feet or less, to drop a total of 400 tons of bombs (two thirds incendiary) on to the half timbered buildings, causing a mini firestorm. Over 60% of the buildings in Lubeck were destroyed, with over 300 civilians killed. The city was not raided again. The campaign against **Essen** continued on the night of 6th April 1942 when 157 aircraft attacked the city again (5 aircraft lost). Severe storms and icing were encountered by the bomber force with complete cloud cover over the target area, resulting in only slight damage. This was the last operation Flight Sergeant Say and his fellow crew members would make in a Manchester (L7464).

Leonard Say and his crew during April attended a short conversion course to fly the new four engined heavy bomber that 5 Group were beginning to be re equipped with, the Lancaster II.

At the beginning of May the squadron moved from the satellite station RAF Woolfox Lodge to RAF Syerston in Nottinghamshire, which had three concrete runways laid for these heavy bombers. 'Ops' began again on the 5th, but Leonard Say didn't fly on another 'op' until the 22nd May 1942 to the Baltic port of **Swinemunde**, in North West Poland, with 30 other aircraft. He was with another new crew, his pilot being Flying Officer LB Gunter (awarded DFC 27.10.42) flying Lancaster R 5562. On their way to the target they were picked up by searchlights and an enemy fighter, which they managed to evade and dropped their mines on a second run in. On returning to base their port undercarriage collapsed.

Again, for Flight Sergeant Say another new crew on 30/31 May 1942, when his pilot this time was Flight Lieutenant PR Casement in Lancaster R5613, to attack **Cologne** in a '*Thousand Bomber Raid*' dropping 1,455 tons of bombs on the city (two thirds being incendiaries) over 3000 buildings were destroyed with 496 deaths of civilians.

RAF casualties were high, with a record 41 aircraft lost. Flight Lieutenant Casement would be Flight Sergeant Say regular pilot for the next nine 'ops', (Casement would be awarded the DFC on 24th October 1941 and a Bar on the 1st September 1942) On the 1st June the crew were flying in Lancaster R5613 when they attacked **Essen** in another '*Thousand Bomber Raid*', but this was not a success. Two further 'ops' were then carried out with the crew, the first with Lancaster R5562 and 5 other aircraft who were engaged on dropping mines off the Danish coast at **Kronborg** on the 3rd July, the second 'op' was to bomb **Wilhelmshaven** five days later, along with 284 aircraft (5 aircraft lost) This trip was flying in Lancaster R5613. Most of the bombs fell in open countryside. Shortly after some of the squadron's Lancaster's were loaned to Coastal Command in order to help cope with the increasing U boat menace which was having success with convoys in the Atlantic. Flight Sergeant

Say old skipper Flt Lt Casement was flying R5724 QR-F for 'Freddie' when it became the first Bomber Command Aircraft to help sink one of these U -Boats.

Flt Sgt Say by then, had been posted to 1660 Conversion Unit at RAF Swinderby Lincolnshire on the 23rd July acting as an instructor. This flight was formed by his former pilot, Gascoyne Cecil who had meanwhile been promoted to Squadron Leader, and would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on the 26th May 1942.

The intention was to instruct new crews and fill the wastage of 61 Squadron. It was not uncommon for these units (and OTU's) to be assembled for diversionary flights over the North Sea and onwards, dropping 'window' (silver foil) to distract and mislead the German fighter radar controllers, causing them to misallocate resources, thus drawing them away from the main bomber force. These were sometimes referred to as the 'Sweepstake Division'.

Flight Sergeant Say remained instructing at 1660 CU until the 26th February 1943. Meanwhile, on the 22nd September 1942 his name appeared in the London Gazette showing he had been recommended for the award of the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) having taken part in 33 sorties with 191.20 flying hours:-

Flight Sergeant Say has taken part in bombing operations against the majority of the main targets in Germany and occupied territory including Berlin, Kiel, Essen, Rostock, Bremen, Wilhelmshaven and the Renault Works, Paris. He acted as Air Gunner in two crews - the Captains being Flight Lieutenant Gascoyne - Cecil DFC and Flight Lieutenant Casement DFC, both of whom have achieved consistently successful results. By his example both in the air and on the ground, Flight Sergeant Say has gone far to maintain a high standard of morale and efficiency throughout all Air Gunners on the squadron. He is held in high esteem by Captains of aircraft and Air Gunners alike. On one occasion, whilst returning from an attack on Karlsruhe, the aircraft was struck by lightning or static electricity, the wireless set took fire and Flight Sergeant Say became temporarily stunned.

Despite the fact that the aircraft became temporarily out of control and almost turned on its back, Flight Sergeant Say rendered valuable assistance to the Wireless Operator in extinguishing the fire.

The Operational Record Books for 61 Squadron show that Flight Sergeant Say was posted back to 61 Squadron with effect from the 26th February 1943. Two days later he was back on 'ops' again as a rear gunner, now re-united with Squadron Leader GAV Gascoyne Cecil DFC, but with different crew members.

Leonard Say carried out the following operations with this new crew:-

On the 28th February 1943 in Lancaster ED718 a Bombing Attack on the U Boat pens at **St Nazaire**, when 437 attacked and 5 aircraft were lost, 60% of the town was destroyed.

On the 1st March **Berlin** was attacked by 302 aircraft over 100 square miles when major damage was caused, 17 aircraft lost (5.6%).

On the 5th March **Essen** was attacked by 442 aircraft for 40 minutes, 14 aircraft were lost (3.2%) 160 acres of the city was totally destroyed.

On the 9th March **Munich** was attacked by 264 aircraft, 8 aircraft lost (3.0%) the BMW factory (making aero engines) was destroyed, the local flak units fired 14,234 rounds at the attacking bombers.

On the 12th March **Essen** was attacked by 457 aircraft, 23 lost (5.0%) the centre of the bombing was aimed at the Krupps factory, with over 30% of it destroyed.

On the 22nd March in Lancaster W4934 **St Nazaire** was attacked by 357 other aircraft, 1 Lancaster lost during the concentrated bombing of the port.

Back in Lancaster ED 718 on the 26th March, **Duisberg** was attacked by 455 aircraft when 6 aircraft were lost (1.3%), one of the few failures of an attack on a Ruhr target, only 15 houses destroyed with scattered bombing, the *Oboe* marking was lacking.

On the 3rd April 348 aircraft attacked **Essen**, with 23 aircraft lost (6.0%) there was widespread damage caused with 635 buildings destroyed.

On the 16th April **Pilsen** was raided by 327 aircraft, with 36 aircraft lost (11.0%) the Skoda armaments factory was the main target, which was missed, but the local asylum was hit instead.

Duisberg was attacked on the 12th May, when 572 aircraft bombed the city, with 34 aircraft lost (5.9%) this was the 4th raid on the city which was very successful, 1596 buildings were destroyed.

On the 13th May **Pilsen** was the target and Flight Sergeant Say flew with the Commanding Officer of 61 Squadron, W/C Penman DFC AFC as his pilot (and would make another five 'ops' with him before the end of the year), 168 aircraft were involved in the attack and 9 were lost, this was a further attack on the Skoda Factory - again a failure, most bombs fell in open country.

Lancaster ED 718 was used on the 25th May in an attack to bomb **Dusseldorf** - Group Captain Odbert was on board as an observer, (sadly he was killed on the 18th July 1943 whilst observing a gunnery demonstration in a Wellington aircraft of 1485 Flight). In the attack on Dusseldorf 759 aircraft took part, 27 were lost (3.6%) a failure due to cloud and decoy markers/fires.

Krefield was attacked on the 21st June when 705 aircraft attacked and 44 aircraft were lost (6.2% due to night fighters) a very successful attack with 47% of the city burnt out, 5,517 houses destroyed 72,000 lost their homes. Leonard Say is now shown in the ORB's as a Warrant Officer.

Just over a week later, on the 29th June, Warrant Officer Say was commissioned in the RAFVR and promoted to a Pilot Officer and given a new number - 149101. He returned to 61 Squadron as an officer Air Gunner, no doubt with the approval and arrangement by W/C Penman DFC AFC. On the 11th June 1943, Squadron Leader Gascoyne-Cecil was awarded a Bar to his DFC.

On the 3rd July 1943 W/C Penman flew Lancaster ED718 on a bombing attack to **Cologne** with 653 other aircraft, 30 were lost (on this raid (4.6%))

Pilot W/C Penman DFC AFC signed a Combat Report from P/O Say for this trip:-
'Lancaster ED718 was outward bound engaged on operations to Cologne on the night of 3/4th July 1943 when a single engined enemy aircraft carrying no lights was seen to attack a Pathfinder aircraft and shoot it down from astern. This was at position 50 degrees 40 minutes North and 05 degrees 43 minutes East at 0054hrs

at a height of 21,000 feet. No searchlights or any other unusual phenomena were operating during the attack on the PFF a/c. Lancaster ED718 started to 'corkscrew' and the rear gunner fired 250 rounds at the attacking enemy aircraft, but no results were observed as the E/A turned away after attacking the PFF a/c and was lost to view'

**Pathfinder aircraft from 9 and 97 Squadrons each lost a Lancaster, and 35 Squadron lost a Halifax on this 'op'. Probably caused by a new fighter technique used by the Luftwaffe named *Wilde Sau* (Wild Boar) where fighters attacked aircraft from below that were illuminated by searchlights/fires etc. The night fighters (usually Me110's) would fire from under their target with two upward firing 20mm auto cannons nicknamed '*Schrage Musik*' (Oblique Music)

The 7th August would see Penman's crew flying to **Milan** along with 196 other Lancasters to bomb Genoa, Milan and Turin 2 aircraft were lost

Three days later the crew were back on a mission to Germany in order to bomb **Nurnberg** when 653 aircraft attacked the city, 16 aircraft were lost(2.5%) large fires broke out in the Wohrd district and serious property damage was caused.

Another attack on **Milan** on the 12th August when a larger force of 504 aircraft attacked the Alfa Romeo factory, the main railway station. Bomb damage destroyed La Scala Opera House. Only 3 aircraft were lost.

Air Chief Marshal '*Bomber*' Harris had been slowly building up his heavy bomber fleet since February 1942 when he took over Bomber Command. He was now ready to unleash this force on Germany's capital city, in force. The first phase of *The Battle of Berlin* took place on the night of 23/24 August 1943 and ended 7 months later on 31st March 1944.

Wing Commander Penman flying Lancaster ED718 made the attack on **Berlin** on the 24th along with 727 aircraft when they attacked the city, 56 aircraft were lost (7.9%)the greatest loss of bombers so far on one raid. Most of the bombing fell outside of the city, but many civilians were killed due to them not using air raid shelters, thinking it another false alarm. Flak was reported to be heavy with many night fighters in the area.

Another new crew and pilot for Leonard Say on the 3rd September, was Squadron Leader Benjamin (who was awarded a DFC on the 10th September 1943 and a Bar on the 18th January 1944) flying Lancaster JB 317, in company with 316 Lancaster's to attack **Berlin** again, 22 of them were lost on this mission (7.0%). Most bombs fell outside the city but many factories were still hit.

*Criminals in Berlin city prison were offered the opportunity to help the army bomb disposal squads with any unexploded bombs, for a remission of sentence, 7 'criminals' died this night in doing that actual job.

This was the last operational mission that Pilot Officer Say flew with 61 Squadron, having survived 48 missions over enemy territory, mainly in the Ruhr, known as '*Happy Valley*' by aircrews. The squadron had carried out more raids than any other squadron using the Lancaster, and achieved the second highest total of bombing raids in Bomber Command's heavy squadrons (6,082 sorties with 156 losses).

On the 15th September 1943 Leonard Say was posted out to act as an instructor with No 16 Operational Training Unit (night bombing training) at RAF Upper Heyford Oxfordshire.

On the 19th October 1943 Leonard Say name appeared again in the London Gazette announcing the award of a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC):-

Since the award of the Distinguished Flying Medal this officer has completed many operational missions as an Air Gunner. On one occasion his turret became unserviceable immediately on leaving base and had to be operated manually throughout a long and arduous flight. Pilot Officer say has frequently displayed a fine fighting spirit when his aircraft has been attacked by enemy night fighters. He has always shown high courage and devotion to duty.

Pilot Officer Say did not stay long at No 16 OTU with the instructional staff, as on the 8th January 1944 he was posted to HQ Bomber Command, which probably coincided with his promotion to Flying Officer on the 29th December 1943.

He was further promoted to Flight Lieutenant with effect from 29th June 1945 and with seniority on 29th December 1946, still serving post war.

On April 8th 1946 at the Register Office at Mansfield Notts, Flight Lieutenant Leonard Say married Edith Crocker (nee Clifton) a 29 year old widow, then living at 83 Abbott Road, Mansfield. His address was given as 2 Herb Cottages, Bleadon Weston Super Mare, Devon.

Presumably his health deteriorated from then onwards, because a notice appeared in the London Gazette dated 4th May 1948 announcing the relinquishment of his commission on account of unfitness for Air Force service, with effect from the 23rd April 1948.

On the 2nd October 1948, his wife Edith gave birth to a son Raymond Robert, the birth certificate giving the occupation of Leonard as Company Cashier.

Leonard Robert Say DFC DFM died on the 24th October 1978 at 16 Wadham Street, Weston Super Mare, his occupation given as Off Licence Manager, his son Raymond shown as living at 2 Herb Cottages Bleadon, near Weston Super Mare.

** Leonard Robert Say WW2 medal entitlement is:-

The Distinguished Flying Cross,
The Distinguished Flying Medal,
The 1939/45 Star (Bar - *Bomber Command*)
The Air Crew Europe Star (Bar - *France and Germany*)
The Defence Medal
The 1939/45 War Medal.

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