

WJN(Jack)CHALKLIN

Account of his service in the 1914 war as told to HCBowen 8 Aug 1983

[In square brackets is current comment by HCB 1988].

WJNC was an unattached Officer of HM Customs and Excise based on Swansea. The Recruiting Office was in the same building. His Collector [Head of C & E for SW Wales] suggested that the Navy might take him as a signaller. He actually volunteered, in 1917 at the age of 25, for the Royal Flying Corps. He was accepted as a 'Flying Cadet' and after 6 months' training in various places, passed out as a 2 Lieut Observer. He was posted to France in what was now the RAF. His rank was still an army one, however, though he says that the Major commanding his 215 Squadron was known as 'squadron leader'. He flew in Handley Page bombers and was shot down on his second operational sortie. (The first was abortive.) The young (?) Canadian 2 Lieut pilot ordered 'drop the bombs' before they got to their target. [In retrospect, this rather ambivalent statement refers, I think, to the first sortie]. The next time they reached their target, a railway junction somewhere near Metz. Shortly after turning for home they realised they had been hit by machine-gun fire. The pilot decided to land. It was probably good moonlight. WJNC's present memory is that he went down some steps in the aircraft to the bomb bay, a rack capable of holding sixteen 10wt bombs in rows of four, and saw that one had not been dropped. A 'broomhandle' was to hand. He used it to knock the bomb free. It fell, exploded, and blew the aircraft upwards. (WJNC now has doubts about this part of his story. Did he dream about the broomhandle episode? He says that shock put all memory of these events from his mind for a long time after and it was only in ensuing years that this memory came back. [But the diary records were clearly written very close to the event so the only point really at issue is whether he pushed out a bomb. I think it conceivable that shock or genuine uncertainty as to whether such a traumatic thing could have happened may have kept this particularly frightening bit out of the written record but it now has to remain a point of uncertainty. I personally believe it did happen.] They then landed in a ploughed field and walked away. Passing an outlying fort of Metz they were challenged and captured. [This leaves out any mention of hiding in woods which they surely did from the diary accounts.] They were treated well. The Germans guessed that he [WJNC] came from 97 Squadron (also Handley Pages, to which his friend Haydn Davies had been posted.) [Presumably he had not told them about 215]. They were sent to Karlsruhe and then to a camp near Ingolstadt where he became 'accountant' for his room, making weekly states of monies spent in the canteen. On one occasion he insisted that the Germans had short-changed themselves. They said 'no matter' but an orderly turned up with a much-appreciated bag of potatoes! After demob. WJNC deliberately put the war out of his mind.

NOTE: The crew of a HP bomber was Pilot, Observer and Rear-Gunner, this last being in a turret out of communication except by speaking-tube. In the event the Rear-Gunner had been unable to tell the Pilot that he was soaked in petrol from the punctured pipe [or tank] because his speaking tube was not working.