What was it like to be an airman in World War Two?

Gordon Ford
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The RAF (Royal Air Force) played an important part in the war with Germany. In 1940, Britain was the only country left to fight Germany. Prime Minister Winston Churchill refused to give in when Germany started to attack Britain in July. The RAF helped protect Britain from German fighter aircraft. This huge air battle was called ‘The Battle of Britain’.

The Luftwaffe (German Air Force) bombed many of Britain’s towns and cities from 7 September 1940. They wanted to destroy as many factories, railways, ports and people’s homes as possible. This was known as the ‘Blitz’ which lasted until May 1941. Fighting between the two air forces carried on until the end of the war. The RAF dropped bombs on German towns and cities. At the time, this was the main type of fighting between the two countries.

Men and women joined the Royal Air Force. It was divided into different groups (squadrons). There were also pilots from New Zealand, Canada, Australia and South America. Women were not allowed to fly but they worked in the RAF control centres.

Gordon Ford was a wireless operator in New Zealand Squadron 75. It was the first Commonwealth squadron. Their motto was ‘Ake Ake Kia Kaha’ which means ‘forever and ever be strong’. Squadron 75 was a bomber unit within RAF Bomber Command. Airmen flying for the squadron were expected to live for only six weeks. The squadron carried out bombing missions over Germany and Italy in the early years of the war. At this time they flew Wellington aeroplanes.

At the end of 1942, Squadron 75 started flying Stirling aeroplanes. The squadron took part in the Battle of the Ruhr, the bombing of Hamburg and an attack on the German V-weapon station at Peenemunde where new kinds of ballistic missile (including the V-2 rocket) were developed and tested.

By 1944, Squadron 75 began to take part in attacks against German factories, railways and bridges. They now used Lancaster aircraft because they were faster and could carry more bombs. The squadron also helped to lay mines. To help the people of Holland, they dropped food parcels to starving people in the Hague.

Gordon Ford joined the RAF when he was 18 years old and trained as a pilot. He was declared unfit for pilot duties when he broke his wrist and trained as a wireless operator instead. He was 19 years old when he flew his first mission and he always made sure he had his lucky mascot with him – a doll of a little Scotty dog called ‘Whisky’.

Gordon Ford later became a member of the Air Training Corps and the Home Guard. He was also a firewatcher during the air raids on his hometown of Sunderland.
This lesson looks at the experiences of Gordon Ford, a pilot in New Zealand Squadron 75 and how he fought for his country during the Second World War. It can be used with pupils at key stage 2 for the History National Curriculum in year 4 and could also be adapted to use with year 3 pupils.

An internet connection and speakers are required for the five short video clips that make up source 2. These could be projected to a whole class or explored individually by the pupils with computers and headphones.

The lesson could be extended to set pupils a piece of descriptive writing based on the photographs of Hamburg.

Pupils could take part in role-play or freeze-framing of Gordon Ford’s experiences.

Pupils could discuss what they think is more useful as evidence for the historian: Gordon Ford’s oral account or the written document held here at The National Archives.

The class could prepare for an interview with a local veteran to find out about their experiences during the Second World War.

### External links

**Bomber Command Museum of Canada**
([http://www.bombercommandmuseum.ca/](http://www.bombercommandmuseum.ca/))

Information about Bomber Command and the different aeroplanes used during the Second World War.

### Sources

**Source 1** provides evidence of Gordon Ford’s rank of Flight Sergeant and his duty of Wireless Officer on his flying mission to Dortmund, 3 February 1945.

**Source 2** consists of five short video clips from an interview given by Gordon Ford in June 2005, where he talked about what he remembered and felt on his bombing mission to Dortmund.

**Source 3a** shows Hamburg as a busy, industrial port, with grand buildings before it was bombed.

**Source 3b** shows Hamburg with ruined buildings and bomb damage.
Tasks

Source One: Questions

- Can you find Gordon Ford's name?
- What rank (position) was he?
- What is the date of the flight mission (job)?
- Where was he flying to?
- What kind of plane did he use?
- How many men were in his crew?
- Why do you think the squadron kept a book like this?

Source Two: Questions

Clip One:

- What happened when Gordon Ford first saw the German fighter plane?
- Why did this happen?

Clips Two and Three:

- What did Gordon Ford think had happened to him and how did he feel?
- What did he later find out about his injury?
- Why had he mistaken the coffee for blood?

Clips Four and Five:

- What happened to the pilot?
- Why were the crew so worried about this?
- How do you think Gordon Ford felt about the whole mission? Why do you think he felt this way?

Source Three: Questions

- What can you see in the picture of Hamburg before it was bombed?
- Why do you think that the Royal Air Force decided to bomb this city?
- What changes can you see in the city after it was bombed?
### Source One – Flight Mission Record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Aircraft Type &amp; Number</th>
<th>Crew</th>
<th>Duty</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Details of Sortie or Flight</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lancaster I &quot;W&quot; ME 450</td>
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<td>3.2.45</td>
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- **Date**: 3.2.45
- **Aircraft Type & Number**: Lancaster I "W" ME 450
- **Crew**: F/O WATSON, MF/S Wood, K NZ4212785F/S Dawson, R NZ421686F/S Ford, GSgt Pare, RSgt Mentiply, WSGt Belland, A
- **Time**: 16.32 21.33
- **Details of Sortie or Flight**: Bomb Load 1 x 4,000 H.C., 7 x 500 AN, 2 x 500 M.C., 4 x 250 G.P. 1 x Munro. Primary target Dortmund. Good Attack.

**Glossary:**
- **A/B**: Aircrewman Bombardier, or bomb aimer. The bomb aimer helped the navigator to guide the plane to a bombing target and release the bombs.
- **ANM**: Anti-Nero Mine. Gordon Ford was a member of different crews who dropped these on German ships near Denmark. The mines had to be dropped from 60 feet. This meant the plane had to fly low, at great risk to the crew as they could easily be shot down.
- **Capt.**: Captain
- **Dortmund**: City in Germany, south of the River Ruhr
- **F/Eng.**: Flight Engineer
- **F/O**: Flying Officer
- **F/S**: Flight Sergeant
- **Mu/Gnr.**: Mid-Under Gunner
- **Munro**: Type of bomb used for dropping leaflets (used by USA)
- **Nav.**: Navigator. The Navigator worked out the route to fly.
- **Primary**: Main
- **R/Gnr.**: Rear Gunner
- **Sortie**: Flight, mission, job
- **WO/AIR**: Wireless operator for the plane
Source Two: Transcripts

Clip One:
As I say, I had such a fright when I realised it was the first German fighter [plane] that I had seen. I couldn’t speak! You know when they say your fear gets you? That’s what happened.

Clip Two:
Well, during this first dive, this evasive action [trying to avoid being hit], I felt something hit my leg and I thought, ‘Oh, I’ve been hit! Never mind, carry on you know, stiff upper lip’, and I put my hand down and I could feel the blood going down my [boots], we used to wear big flying boots up to there and I could feel the blood going down, I could feel the bits of shrapnel [metal] as well. I thought, ‘Oh dear!, and of course, I could feel the pain as well.

Clip Three:
And of course, when I did eventually come out of that corkscrew [a dive made by the plane] and I had a look to see what happened and I’m sort of lying there half-dead. We carried coffee flasks as big as that [shows size], bigger than you ever see in civilian life [when not in the forces] and this coffee flask had sort of disentangled itself from where it was strapped in, with the force of G, the pull of gravity, and it had been flying about all over the place and of course it hit me on the leg and had burst! It might have been beforehand. It hit me on the leg. The blood I had felt was the coffee!

Clip Four:
Somebody said, ‘Well, are you alright Skip?’ [to the Pilot] And he said, ‘I don’t think so, I think I’ve been hit.’ ‘Oh my God!’ we thought. ‘Now then’, he said, ‘Stand-by to abandon aircraft.’

Clip Five:
He [the pilot] managed to fly us back and I always feel he should have had some sort of commendation [award] because he was worth it, believe me. He saved his crew, number one, he saved the plane, he saved himself!
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Source Three (a) – Hamburg
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