

## **IN MEMORY OF JOHN CARY WOODCOCK (1919 - 1940)**

### **HIS LETTERS AND DIARY - the life of an RAF Observer airman 1939 and 1940**



John's letters of 1939 and 1940 and additional writing give us some insight into John himself and into the world of this particular young Royal Air Force recruit to World War II. He joined up in 1939 and later served as an Observer, RAF No. 580991. Letter writing was a prime means of communication with family and friends and fortunately John was a willing letter writer. John was as willing to write to them as they were keen to receive letters from him, although often he had little time to do so. He wrote home mainly to his mother but also to his siblings - his sister, Mary Cattle (the transcriber's mother) and his brothers, Raymond and William. His father, Spencer, had died in 1938. The text of his letters is not necessarily always here in full, and this piece is designed to reveal and record what was going on with him and around him, and what some of his thoughts were during this time. These letters are passing through the hands of the transcriber on their way to Mark Woodcock, John's great nephew, and Raymond's grandson, for safekeeping. Additional letters written after he disappeared on his Blenheim bomber's mission to bomb Lorient, France in November 1940 are included.

In addition, the 1940 diary of Harry Cattle (John's brother-in-law, the transcriber's father) reveals some of John's activities and so elements of this are included here where appropriate.

#### **At John's Christening held on 26 December 1919, the Daily Prayer read:**

"Almighty and Everloving GOD  
Defend me, Thy servant, with Thy  
Heavenly Grace, that I may continue  
Thine for ever; and daily increase in Thy  
Holy Spirit more and more, until I come unto  
Thine Everlasting Kingdom through our  
Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Thine for ever, Thine for ever  
Armed with Faith, and strong in Thee  
Ever fighting, fainting never,  
May we march to Victory"

#### **This transcription begins on 4 September 1939**

His mother was 52 years old.

The covering note to her was "For your 22nd [sic - flattery!] birthday. "Just a wee gift to you 'to spend on yourself' and please remember that!"

#### **In November or December 1939, John is in "100 Wing".**

He writes "To Everyone". He was receiving letters from most of his family and that pleased him. His brother William (aged 14) had written too and John enclosed some money for him as he needed some football boots. John also returned William's letter with some corrections, and he has suggestions to improve the content of William's writing. At this time John had an interest in "George's sister" who he sees about 4 or 5 times a week. He tells Raymond that "she is the nicest girl I've met so far, she is only about eighteen I think, I will send you a photo of her".

He was also arranging to send money home for his mother. Raymond had told him that his business (woollen cloth) was slow. He had also received letters from Auntie Kath (Kathleen Morgan, his mother's sister), Eric Evans, a family friend, and from Adelaide (Wooldridge), his cousin. Kath had an Xmas pudding for him (she would have made that in October or November for it to mature properly by Christmas); he had thoughts about having it sent "up" to him; he may be therefore in Shetland, but the letter was censored by tearing off his location.

### **On 1 December, 1939, John received a cake from home.**

It seems that young William may have been responsible for the decoration, for John passed on his appreciation of that in his letter of 4th December to his mother. But he did not like the icing and he assumed that it was food rationing that had caused that. He was hoping to send more money home. He continued: "I don't think I will be on leave before or near Xmas as they appear to require my services most urgently in the operations room. So as this letter should get to you safe and sound I enclose the list of money which I intend to give to you at Christmas and also for the children. To you I intend to give 30/- [shillings] Mary & Harry 25/- Raymond 15/- and William 7/6 [seven shillings and sixpence:37p]". He also did not forget his aunts and uncles, and he wanted all this to be a surprise for Xmas Day or Eve. He had no needs for himself and he wanted nothing, although his birthday was on 29th. November. "Jean gave me a marvellous little travelling clock in RAF blue... I think she should be shot don't you?" [this, being an expression of gratitude!] He received "a cold chicken from Florrie which was bad on arrival. Auntie Kath sent a large tin of toffee, and cards came from [many including Jean]". He had other letters to answer with little time to do so, and he would write to Raymond when he had some news. He continued: "As far as I can see it would pay him to have the operation as soon as possible". He sent his "love to everyone & much love to you [his mother]".

### **Now aged 20**

The gift from his sister Mary and Harry appears to have been a toilet set with shaving mirror. He wrote "An Ode to ~~Centimetre~~ Inchfoot" [sic] to "Well my Dear Humble Folk". Inchfoot was Mary & Harry's Edgware house name (related to Harry's Wood Technician job):

"I thank you for your little joke  
But from my handsome face  
I shaved my beard without a trace  
A day before you penned that rhyme  
And, ah yes I did it just in time  
I think of you both morn & night  
It is a very fanciful comb  
And although I regard it as my very own  
My brothers rush in where angels fear to tread  
And use my blooming comb instead  
The nail brush is beyond my words  
But the family now rush to wash like herds  
Well my poor dear folk of inches feet  
When next are we going to meet  
For I'll tell you what a shock I got  
When I look in the mirror, I thought, "Is it me or not".  
My nose and tass had increased in size  
The reason why I could not surmise  
So I thought I have another try  
And focused the magic mirror on my eye  
And oh boy, oh boy did I get a shock  
When that enormous eye began to mock.  
So in despair I turned the mirror round  
To see if the price could there be found  
And woe is me I realise now  
That the mirror magnified and how!  
John C Woodcock".

### **Two RAF Christmas cards**

From "Jonathan" [he often used this name] in "240 squadron" in the archive are to his "Darling Mother" and one to his sister "Dearest Mary and Harry".

**Harry Cattle's diary of 1940 recorded:**

**15 February, 1940**

"John arrived home today on leave. He left Shetlands on Feb 1st to fly to Calshot, intending to start his leave from there, but owing to bad weather, came down at Oban, & stayed a day or two marooned there. Then onto Holyhead where there is a seaplane base. Owing to fog there, the pilot reached the sea before he expected & they crashed into it, completely wrecking the plane, but none of the crew was injured, mercifully. They were rescued by the coastguards who had seen that they were in difficulties. The plane hit the water at 80-90mph & tore a large hole in the fuselage, thro' which the water poured, so they had to jump for their lives. Their baggage lay waterlogged for three days, which did not improve it. He seems to think nothing of the mishap, & is quite unperturbed."

**16 February 1940:**

"To Ealing. A merry evening, John, Ray and I go for a drink, after we return, a heavy shower of snow falls."

**22 February:**

"John treated us to a theatre tonight, the opera 'La Boheme' at Sadlers Wells, most enjoyable indeed"

**24 February:**

"To 34 to lunch [John's family address: 34, Hastings Road, Ealing], quite a party in the evening, Eric Davy brought Auntie Mu up [Muriel, his mother's sister]. Very pleasant do, more or less in honour of John's return."

**28 February:**

"Merry evening at 34, John's last night of his leave, a lot of beer going, Ethel & Ian there, & as I said before, we got very merry & home very late, not in bed till 1.30am."

**29 February:**

"John goes back today"

**16 March:**

"...John is home [his] for the weekend, & after a pleasant evening, he brought us home, and stayed the night."

**17 March:**

"Up fairly early today, ..... as John wants to get away."

**John wrote from the Sergeants Mess, [*he has been promoted!*] RAF Station Calshot, Southampton.**

There is a reference to **18 March [1940]** on which date "I may get the chance of going on an advanced observers course" at St Athens; the Squadron Leader was supporting him. He had just missed going on an "astro nav" course. He was looking forward to going home this weekend. St Athens was "quite near to Eric at Cardiff";

**Letter dated 9th April 1940 to "My Dear Mother & children,"**

"Well at the moment I am sailing along through the skies on my way north [from Calshot]. I can still see the Isle of Wight and everything looks absolutely super." He says he meant to phone but the "line was full up or something" and he hoped to ring when he landed.

"All this happened so suddenly. A signal came from the wing commander in the Shetlands saying we had to fly up on the next available boat & and as it was leaving the day after you can imagine I had to rush & get things ready". John said he couldn't make it to see his mother before leaving..."but still I suppose the time will pass quickly & I'll soon be back again on leave." He asked about the allotment [for which he seems to be responsible] at home and a new extension to it. John also enquired about some Brevets which Raymond was getting for him. He goes on to say that "the boat I am having is almost ready for the air & its going to pick me up when its ready, with Porteous as captain. John goes on to ask after Raymond's health:

"I hope he is OK once again but tell him to behave himself & go most carefully & keep the garden going & I'm sorry I cannot help with the chickens now. Are the seeds through yet? if not why not?! Ah, looking from (oh dear lots of rushing to the opposite window, three Spitfires just flashed past.) to continue:- looking from the window I can see Lyme Regis below blossoming in the sunshine of springtime".... "We are staying at Inver G. tonight"... "I'll write you from the Frozen North as soon as possible". "Cheers with love to all Your loving son Jonathan". "PS .... Hope this letter does not seem too disjointed.? like yours?"

**John made attempts at various times to write a diary - with some success:**

**"April 9 1940**

*Left Calshot after 12 hours notice for duty in the Shetlands. After 7 <sup>1/2</sup> hours flight arrived at Invergordon." John went to see the Chapmans only to discover "the sad news that George was missing." He left Mrs Chapman hoping that George was interned in Norway.*

**"April 10 1940**

*Before leaving for the Shetlands I called to see the Chapmans hoping to hear good news of George. To my bitter disappointment I learned he had been killed early the following morning in a crash at Swaffham whilst flying a Blenheim." On landing I learned Norway had been invaded & that our patrols were gradually becoming increasingly dangerous. Already one Sunderland had been attacked & brought down two of the attackers but was badly shot up. Another had failed to return, what happened to it remains to be seen.*

**"April 11 1940**

*As my aircraft is not yet up here, the wing commander wished myself and [name] to start work in operations room until our respective boats arrived "[John flew in Sunderland flying boats at this time]. Dick did a recco [reconnoitre] of Bergen, saw 3 enemy aircraft but made no contact and returned safely."*

**A letter dated 11th April, 1940 is addressed to Mary and Harry.**

He has been moved at short notice and the address given is "RAF Station Shetlands". He refers to twins, whose godfather he should be, and says that they "will have to wait ages if they want him..". He continues: "Please let me know the moment I have the pleasure of being an uncle (or aunt)? [sic]...I will then feel most proud; but not so proud as you will be, I bet." This was a reference to the [transcriber of these letters], Robert, whose birth was on 17 April. He closed with "Now, au revoir, - I'll be thinking of you With love from Jonathan". He sent this letter together with one to his mother [next following].

**A letter to "Dear Mother and Children dated 11 April from Shetlands**

"Well, once again I am here, but this time there's still more excitement brewing than before. At the moment I am in the ops room again until my aircraft turns up then I will begin flying again which will be soon I hope. What do you think of Germany just walking through Denmark & trying to do the same in Norway, I think he is beginning to bite of [sic] more than he can chew." He told of his visit to the Chapmans in Invergordon and how devastated is Mrs Chapman. Dickie and he had been talking about just this possibility and "dash me if it did not happen". He repeats his sorrow at not getting in contact before his departure. He tried to reassure her: "I'm hoping to home again in about 2 to 3 months at the most if all goes well, that certainly seems to be looking ahead too far, since I've only just arrived." "You might tell me how all the flowers are getting along in the garden & also the vegetables which Ray and I carefully sowed." John asked after Raymond's health and hoped that he was "fit and most blooming". He said that he had written to Jim about his Riley [car] but recognising that this would have to "wait for a bit whilst 'I do my time'" and he aimed to fix it up the next time he was on the mainland. John asked for his washing to be sent up as "it leaves me short at the moment." He closes: "Cheerio give my love to everyone, Your loving son Jonathan."

**John's diary continues:**

**"April 12 1940**

*Another Sunderland went out today to contact enemy merchant vessels suspected of troop carrying, failed to contact but got severely shot up & had one petrol tank holed from shore batteries but returned to base safely with no injuries. One of our Londons [flying boat] made effective but uneventful recco of enemy territory.*

**"April 13 1940**

*Earnie went on a special convoy trip of 9-10 troop ships of 20,000 tons each conveying troops to Norway, presumably Narvik. Charles took over from him at 1400 and caused a great deal of anxiety for us when as dusk quickly began to fall he had not yet returned we had heard nothing from him. At 09.30 we had the searchlights on & began to wonder -- at 9.45 to our joy we saw his navigation lights & in the darkness with the aid of the searchlight he made a superb landing. We heard of the super piece of work completed by the navy of recapturing Narvik & destroying 7 destroyers and so opening up the door for the troop convoy.*

APRIL 14 1940

*One Sunderland taking 6 officers to a rendezvous in Norway. Bill sent on a special recon to ascertain enemy strength in the Norwegian Fjords. Returned after dark and made a nice landing.*

"APRIL 15<sup>th</sup> 1940

*Charles took off to do a recon of Norway but had the misfortune to make a very ropey take[off] & when at a height of 30 feet the aircraft dropped like a stone on to the exceedingly rough sea & consequently made it a complete wreck. It was fortunately able to taxi back to the moorings the only casualty was the observer who had a lump taken out of the bridge of his nose. Earnie took off in his place, but had to return due to the fact the visibility was too good and the cloud was nil. Expecting some [?Whirls?] to land at [?Sunibugh?] tonight after a raid on some of the ports occupied by the Germans. Weather very poor visibility no other activity.*

"APRIL 16<sup>th</sup> 1940

*Earnie received sudden orders to take off & locate 3 of our destroyers damaged in the fight at Narvik. He found them, one was a complete wreck the other two were just slightly damaged. Dick and Bill also went out & Bill sighted a Dornier 'flying pencil' & just managed to escape into the clouds & he also bombed an oil patch and a marker buoy which he thought was a periscope. We are now preparing to leave the ship & move to the shore station & we have hopes of doing so by tomorrow night.*

"APRIL 17<sup>th</sup> 1940

*Dick away at 3.30 in the morning and Earnie relieved him at 10.00. Meanwhile we vacate the ship & move to shore. Nothing but thick mud and slime everywhere. So far there is no efficient washing facilities ready or electric light on so it looks as though we shall have to go dirty for a bit. The [Mamela?] Is expected to be leaving any day now that she is empty and will be refitted & ready for a new job but I am sure we shall be darned sorry to see her go, it was at least dry & clean aboard. Fortunately we have fires in & we use peat for fuel.*

"APRIL 18<sup>th</sup> 1940

*Dick & Earnie again both of them away at 0400 but they both returned with nothing exciting to report. During the day we had 5 air raid warnings each time except the last we failed to see the cause of the scare. But the 5th time the anti aircraft [plied?] fire & the fighters started after him & diving on it 3 times raked it from stem to stern & used up all its ammunition but not before the aircraft was disabled & crashed in the sea. The HSL left at 2100hrs to rescue a crew of an aircraft which had the misfortune to crash in the north sea & all but one were rescued.*

**Post Office Telegram**

John sent a telegram to Mary and Harry from Lerwick upon the birth of their son, Robert:

"Cattle 232 Edgware Burry [sic] Lane Edgware London = Congratulations jolly good show = Uncle Jonathan"

**Letter to Mary & Harry [Cattle] 19 April, 1940**

"I was absolutely overjoyed when I got Mothers telegram, & and now everyone here calls me uncle & spend their lives asking how the nephew is.

"What does it feel like to have a family of your own, I should imagine you must feel most swollen headed both of you. Who does 'it' look like, I suppose everyone says first, in that light it looks like you Mary & from this side its just like you Harry. Well I hope I shall soon see 'it', I hope [sic]. Don't forget I want to be at the Christening if that can be arranged when I am home next.

"Don't tell anyone but according to Lord Haw Haw [an English traitor in Germany] we should be razed to the ground up here as he blames the Norway business on to our base. There must be quite a few of our troops out there too. Well I must not talk about the war.

"Oh yes you might write & tell me what 'it' would like for a Christening present and I will see what can be collected.

"Now I must close as I have two more letters to write & this is going via plane to Calshot.

"So lots of love to you both & 'it' Cheerio Your loving brother Jonathan"

**Letter to Mother Raymond & William 19 April, 1940**

"I have just received Raymond's letter ticking me off & yesterday I received a letter from Mother which came via Calshot". John explained that they should have had a letter posted at Calshot. He did not send a letter previously because he had intended to phone but each time there was no phone or the line was down. It seems that the family, at least Raymond, thought that John was not writing home enough. Earnie Wright had taken this

particular letter with him to Calshot for posting. "I have heard today that we should not be very long up here as another squadron is expected any time now & directly they come we go. We have now all moved ashore & by Jove is it muddy, we had to move in a hurry as the ship is needed elsewhere."

"I say its super news about Mary and I'm jolly pleased its a boy. I feel most proud to be an ~~father~~ -uncle- I mean- [sic]

He was sorry to have missed a friend, Jim Bryning "still I see him soon I hope.

"Are the seeds through yet, try and get the chickens on the move as soon as you can...."

He tells them that he is keeping a diary which might interest them when he returns. And he had received the Brevets which he was pleased with - "I'll settle with you later if thats OK.

"I hope you won't be mad but one loses track of time up here & we terrifically busy but I shall endeavour to keep up a constant stream of letters.

"Did I tell you I was just putting in for 14 days leave when I was sent off [his move from Calshot] without as much as a few hours to spare.

"See you soon. Lots of Love Jonathan"

### **John's diary continues:**

#### "APRIL 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>

*Both days were the same as those previous. Same patrols, no exciting reports. One or two air raid warnings & fighter aircraft took off to intercept but no enemy sighted.*

*The weather seems to be improving far less rainfall & the mud is drying up under a keen wind & life is beginning to be a bit more pleasant. Earnie left for Calshot in the damaged aircraft & landed safely the other end and much to our relief.*

#### "APRIL 21<sup>st</sup>

*Same patrols with the exception of one Sunderland escorting SS Highlander from Aberdeen & another to escort the liners back from Norway empty. The whole convoy is calling & is sheltering in Sullon Voe so we should have a grand view of all the liners which helped the troops to get to Norway. Went for a super walk in the evening & saw some of the 14000 troops' ships on our return.*

#### "APRIL 22<sup>nd</sup>

*Still maintaining dawn & dusk patrols the day started pretty well the same as those before until 11.00 when enemy aircraft were sighted off Lerwick, 11.10 they passed directly overhead then the guns opened up and they sheered off to the north started to return but once again they turned away. But at 11.30 one of the gladiators patrolling swooped low and a French destroyer failing to recognise him opened up and he managed to escape with a piece of shrapnel just behind the cockpit. After that things quietened down to normal routine. Tonight Bill is doing an all night patrol helping to keep an eye open for any subs on the surface who happen to be charging up batteries.*

#### "APRIL 23<sup>rd</sup>

*Nothing exciting today, just one or two air raid alarms, which came to nothing. The usual day patrols & one night patrol in the moonlight.*

#### "APRIL 24

*5 hours after the moonlight patrol had returned the boat [flying boat] was required for another special patrol over a convoy. As the usual crew were not in fit state to fly again, we quickly got a spare crew together. The Wing Commander as captain, a 2nd pilot[,] a flight serjeant fitter, myself & 3 leading aircraftsmen. We returned just as dusk was falling, once again nothing of excitement.*

#### "APRIL 25

*The same thing happened today & the same spare crew once again had to jump to & go on another convoy. Our squadron leader took the place of the Wing Commander. The weather was absolutely terrible, the visibility dropped to about 500 to 1000yds. & we were just able to make the landfall on our return visibility having dropped to nil. Never the less we landed safely at half past eight.*

#### "APRIL 26

*The fighters have been up practically all day, and at the time of writing I can hear one now overhead. The weather is still bad & only one of our aircraft is out at the moment, so if Jerry does come I do not particularly envy him.*

"APRIL 27 & 28

*Extremely bad weather conditions very few patrols & no new developments.*

"APRIL 29

*Army officer from Norway states that two battalions of our troops were completely wiped out. Blenheim fighter force-landed on our football pitch today from Norway. Came back on one engine having had the other shot away. No further activity to date.*

**"The Epistle to the Cattles" 11 June, 1940**

*Firstly, John wrote some calculations of flight times on the front of this communication:*

*[sic] 0530 . 1305                      7.38      landed Holyhead*

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*1420 . 1545                      1.30*

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*I am posting this today 14/6 many days late.*

*I have heard that I may get leave soon*

"My Dear Mary & Harry

To tell you the honest truth, dear me that's daft saying the honest truth, because if its honest its bound to be the truth & if its the truth it must be honest, but to continue. To tell you the truth I'm so bored at the moment that I had to write to someone & you are the unfortunate ones.

"I am duty pilot today & have been since 9 this morning & I still will be until 9 tomorrow morning, although I'm duty pilot I still feel just like an observer, its amazing. I am sitting on a chair, most ordinary you say, well you're wrong, the chair is on a table & it just comes on the same level as the window sill upon which my feet are resting protruding at least a foot into mid air about 50 feet above terra firma. The reason for the 50 feet is that I am in a large sort of conservatory on top of the tallest building so that I can see everything & keep everyone under control. In fact the view of the WAAFs in the bathing pool is the one thing that keeps me awake. The sun is shining like something or other & all the WAAFs in the pool are lovely.

"To continue this base epistle to the Cattles about 5 hours have elapsed since the above statements & all is dark outside but well, & I am anxiously awaiting a Stranraer which is doing some night flying to land; then I may get some sleep.

"I saw John Morgan [probable brother-in-law of Auntie Kath Morgan] once & have not been able to see him since but hope to do so tomorrow. I'll show him those photos of Robert.

"He has a smashing little church [JM, a vicar] Its damn nice lots of grass & trees & things all round it. Amazing views too.

"I am still wondering when I'll see the beautiful offspring of yours soon I hope; but I doubt it wouldn't mind betting that I am sent to the Mediterranean or somewhere like that, still it will be a change & we'll see some of the 'ruins Italy is noted for'.

"I have heard that Raymond is not looking too well I hope that he manages to pick up & gain some more weight, otherwise he will go right back. How are Ethel Ian [Grant, family friends] Jessie & Jock [Ethel's sister] if you see them just convey my regards to them. I met a major just like Jock the other day, a mechanic chappie he was very charming despite the fact he was Scotch..

"At the moment dozens of Dutch blocks [blokes? His Lorient pilot was Dutch] are passing below my greenhouse & what a confounded din, its all double dutch to me anyway.

"I wonder when the war will end I am getting fed up with it.

"Well I must close now otherwise if I carry on much longer I will drop off to sleep. So Au revoir see you soon  
Your loving brother Jonathan"

**Harry Cattle's diary records:**

**19 June 1940:**

"John came up on leave (14 days) unexpectedly. Came over to see us in the evening, met Dad and me at the station"

**27th June:**

“John has been recalled from leave...He bought a car today an old Morris Oxford, but had to cancel it due to the recall”

**1 July:**

“Have heard today that John is now stationed near Oxford for intensive bombing & gunnery course”

**7th July:**

“At Ealing [John’s home] John [there] for the day, he hitch hiked from Oxford but went back by train about 7.30”

**16 July:**

“... John ... coming home on 48hrs. Leave. He had to make a parachute jump from 2,000ft to save his life yesterday, as the plane was about to catch fire. Actually the pilot managed to land it, whereupon it burst into flames & threw the pilot clear, knocking him about considerably, so John was lucky he sustained no injury, & once he had jumped, quite enjoyed the 1½ minutes descent. He had an anxious time on landing, as he was suspected of being a Nazi in disguise, but cleared that up all right. He has bought a car, the counterpart of my Hillman (Maggie)

**Undated letter to his mother from:**

**No 12<sup>E</sup> R.F.T.S [RAF Flying Training School] Prestwick Aerodrome Prestwick Nr Ayr**

“Just a short note to let you know that I arrived safely at Prestwick in the early hours of the morning at 8-o’clock.

“When I got to the Aerodrome I got to the entrance hall and noticed that everything seemed in dead silence. I got upstairs to the cubicles & found all the curtains drawn across and still dead silence, I pulled aside the curtains & found that in every cubicle everyone was asleep. I wondered if my watch had suddenly gone wrong or that they had all overslept. Anyway to cut a long story short they had all been night flying & did not get to bed until 2 to 3 in the morning.

“I flew down to Liverpool this afternoon & we did jolly well the weather here is fine with a nice fresh breeze blowing.

“I found two very nice letters waiting for me from Florrie & Jean. The one Florrie sent I enclose & I thought you would like to see it.”

He closed sending his love “to Aunties Kath & Mu [Muriel, both sisters of Gracie] & ‘Pain in the neck’ [Kath’s husband, Billy, who suffered neck pain as a result of 1st. World War service] and you might tell him I will write to him as soon as I can.

“The spots have all gone and the throat is getting better”

Signed “John”.

**An undated letter sent to his mother from ‘up here’ and referring to ‘July’ and Prestwick.** It is apparently missing the first and any previous pages. Uxbridge is a date reference link

“The weather has been pretty bad up here & so we have not been doing much flying & we might not manage the long flight.

“I have won a Mason Pearson hair brush in a tennis tournament at the Prestwick Club. 1st prize for mixed doubles.

“I have plenty of snaps to show you when I see you when I get to Uxbridge.

“We have a sports day here on July 12 & a dance afterwards. To which I am taking Dorothy a very nice girl from the tennis club. I am in the tug of war team & putting the shot.

He sent his “love to Mary Ray & William Harry & Bill etc etc., from Your Everloving Son Johnnie”



**Undated letter to “Dear Sister & Brother” [refers to Mary & Harry]. There is reference to being in Uxbridge on 22 July. From Prestwick Aerodrome**

“How are you both, did I thank you for the very snappy & unique card I received from you when I passed the exam it was jolly good.

“Mother tells me Raymond is not feeling so good I suppose he is just tired after all the strain & worry of everything, but he has certainly turned up trumps hasn’t he & carried on perfectly as a son in [sic] heir should.

“Did I tell you we were having another 9 weeks exam, anyway we have had it & we are now waiting to hear the results. I think we shall all be OK.

“How is your garden, I suppose everything is looking very nice as real Cattle-Woodcock garden should. I shall be at Uxbridge on July 22nd. & you should see a good bit of me as we finish at 6-0, & we do not have to be in until 2-0 in the morning & I also get 5 days off for August bank holiday.”

John wrote that he had written to his mother and would not have much time in the near future for writing because he would be working hard for his final exam.

“How are you both getting along without poor old Maggie has she be [sic] killed yet by reckless driving & no attention, it must be a good excuse for you not visiting people.

“There is a smashing little cafe up here called the Kettle drum where we go sometimes & they sell all antique work such as brass lamps which I am sure you be [sic] very fond of; convex mirrors & ordinary mirror set in brass & they are all really fine. I have not enquired the price yet. I expect it to be high.

“I bought myself a watch the other day from one of the fellows here. He has a share in a jewellery shop & gets us stuff reduced the watch cost me 19/6 [equals 97 (new) pence] it is a £3.30 Benson & is jolly fine. The one the Stevens gave me kept on packing up & stopping when I was in the air so I thought it would pay me.

“I have twice done 50mls in 5 mins with my Ingersoll & it is most annoying, still its nice to know we move fast.

“Well old dears I will say goodbye & I will write no more to you until I see you. You might send me a cake. I feel hungry.

“Cheerio With love from Johnnie.”

**Letter to “My Dear Aunt & Uncle”, address to Mr & Mrs WH Morgan [Uncle Billy & Auntie Kath] at Tillington, 60 Tankerton Road, Tankerton, Whitstable - 9 July, 1940 from R.A.F. Station, Shetlands**

“Oh boy, thanks a lot for the super cake which has just arrived & all the chaps swooped on me like so many gannets & now the cake is all but a small cut up portion of what it was ten minutes ago.

“I am writing this letter straight away, as I did not like the very subtle remark about my great lack of writing letters. Well I am hoping this will be the last letter I shall write to you from here as I am expecting to leave here shortly & get some leave.

“It’s jolly good news to hear that the old pain in the neck belonging to my dear old uncle is now much better & he should soon be free of all Pains in the neck. Of course he cannot help being one?

“I’m pleased that you thought our garden was looking OK, it should keep Raymond busy & no doubt it will do him the world of good. I’m also pleased that you like the new nephew, I’m just waiting to see the addition to the Cattle’s [sic] & pass my opinion on him and find out whom he looks like.

“At the moment the ‘gannets’ are having a terrific argument about how many ships the Germans have lost and by jove are they getting heated.

“Well the argument has at last died down & they still don’t know how many ships the Nazis have lost.

“This time when I’m home I might condescend to come & see you for a couple of days, if you will have me of course.

“I expect Mary will be pleased to have Lucy & Cary [Mary’s cousin and daughter, Carey] there to help her with the youngster,. Doesn’t it seem strange to think that Mother is a grandmother, I still cannot imagine it.

“Now I do believe that I have exhausted all my powers of writing & there is no news I can give to you. So I must close hoping you will be satisfied with the letter short as it is.

“Once again I thank you for the cake & I hope to see you all soon.

“Tell uncle to behave himself & forget his pain in the neck & tell him not to make sarcastic comments about my moustache. So Cheerio With love Jonathan”

**Letter dated “Sunday 1939+1”. [Likely to have been 28 July 1940]**

“Dear All

Excuse the haste but I have just returned to Benson, & am able to take the day off on Wednesday the 31st that means I come home Tuesday evening & return Wednesday night. But the whole point of this letter is to ask if you can manage some coupons in case I need them, & I am sure I will so I sincerely hope you can make it

“I also will be home on the 8th of August. Now I’ll close & post this

“See you soon - I hope- All my love Jonathan”

### **Undated letter to his “Darling Mama” from Sgt. Mess RAF Benson, Oxford**

“I hope you got my card which I sent off as soon as I could, which was better late than never.

“We are down here with a bunch of fellows & 3 officers just off their courses, with just 50 hours each & we are being taught how to navigate. The squadron leader here was most shaken when we commenced to shoot a line about the hours we had done & now they treat us with great respect & we go to sleep in all the lectures. Its just too silly.

“We are being trained for low flying tactics ground straffing & snap photos etc. etc. By the way all the chaps are New Zealanders with us.

“We should be here about six weeks & then we go elsewhere but where I know not, & I don’t think any body else does either. There is quite a chance of commissions compulsory now, for observers as the pilot is now just being taught to fly & the day seems to be coming when all navigators will be captains of land craft!! & if I’m told to take one I will take it as there far too many sergeants these days when air gunner wireless obs are made serjeants & what an ignorant crowd they are too.

“I wrote to John Morgan to say I had left on [sic] a card showing a delightful picture of Oxford from the air.”

“I hope to be home on Sunday for a wee while probably arrive about 11.00 or something like that If I can, but don’t count on it. I hope to hitch hike its too easy, just while I was down here I had the wizard idea of having the Fiat off of Raymond so I could get home weekends quickly, I could pay him the monthly instalments on the car for the hire see what he says, it would probably just mean a month without it for him [sic] . I will still not buy a car as I still may go abroad somewhere, who knows.”

“Well I will sign off now All my love Jonathan”

### **Harry Cattle’s diary**

**2 August:**

“... [at home] found John with his mother and brother William, most unexpected, he has 48hrs leave on being posted to a Blenheim Squadron at Thorney Island, near Portsmouth”. [59th Squadron]

**Sometime during this period** John had perceived an opportunity to fly in land based aircraft and he wrote that he intended to take that opportunity. [letter not to hand]

### **Letter 10 August, 1940 addressed to -**

**“Dearest Mother & Raymond & William”**

“Thanks for the letter I received on Thursday, a most prompt reply I must say. At the moment I am writing this with the utmost difficulty. The reason being that I share a bunk with Wright - the chap you met- & he has just become the proud possessor of a small “Maestro” wireless set & it has drawn the rest of the gang into our room, sprawled all over the beds & chairs.

“So pleased to know that [’Bill’? Court?] arrived safely, will you please tell him that if he lets me know directly his leave begins I will pop over & see him. The snag is though, I cannot definitely say when I can make it as we often have to standby in the evenings, actually I have been out to Portsmouth twice since I have been here the rest of the time I have been either flying or on standby. There is some talk of us having another move so next leave home I may have to leave the car behind, at Harry’s preferably - so he can make a nice job of it?

“Just fancy Tim [*Arthur P ‘Tim’ Wooldridge, husband of Adelaide (John’s cousin)*] being accepted as a pilot, wonders never cease. I would be pleased if you let Adelaide know my address, if she really wants to write to me.

“I sincerely hope Ethel and you come to a suitable agreement about the rooms, it would be quite a help, but it is a great pity that you have to go upstairs each time, but beggars cannot be choosers, I suppose.

“Well the hens are still doing their stuff which is good to know, make them keep it up. I’m sure Raymond is still having the time of his life fussing about them like an old hen himself.

“Now there is nothing much I can tell you about.” He closes the letter.

Two Postscripts:

1. “Did you see in the papers about the Guernsey raid - well that was us, but not me, - look out for another one - All aircraft returned safely! (both times)
2. “You might tell the garage chappie that I shall be home sometime this month - I hope - & I expect the axle to be ready. Also about the Austin he has for sale I do not think the fellow here wants it. & did I settle my garage I cannot remember.”

**Letter to Dear All" 20 August, 1940**

"Well I have come to Penrhos [NW Wales] for a week so I will not be home on the 25th. I am hoping to get home soon after I return from here.

"I had the back axle fixed but unfortunately the crown wheel has been chipped may not last long one never knows how long it will last also the ball race wearing, positions of the effected [sic] parts are shown in the diagram.

"Now I'll close, excuse haste. All my love Jonathan"

"PS "Show Harry the diagram & ask him how much it will cost"

**Letter to "Dear Civilians" dated 21 August, 1940 from "Same Place"**

"No doubt you have seen Bill by now & I presume he has given you all the news about my doings. - I took my cylinder head off the darn car this week & took some of the coke off the pistons & head, but when I came to start it, blow me down the engine just made no response, & apparently some dirt must have got under the valves & they remain slightly open all the time hence too much petrol comes in, but I am getting that fixed.

"At the moment I believe I shall be home for four days from the 8th -11th (8-9 .10.11.) 4 whole days.

"Raymond Newall has just sung a very charming rendering of 'Tommy had'. It was jolly good.

"I hope that none of the bombs have been worrying you. My suggestion is that it is definitely best to take cover when the anti aircraft is bursting as bits & pieces fly everywhere. Also the blast of the bombs is terrific.

He closes: "Received the towel etc. etc. OK. Will be writing again soon All my love Jonathan"

"PS I have just applied for a new driving license & it is addressed to 34 please keep it till I come."

**Harry Cattle's diary matches the content so that this letter must be of 1st. September 1940. And Harry's diary continues to record some of John's movements afterwards (as below).****So, John's undated "Sunday night" letter to his mother was 1 September.**

There were many Blenheim planes based at Thorney Island that were lost in August and September. The letter looks hurried and with regret at not visiting her, or being able to get in touch by phone. He refers to operational difficulty with crews missing. He may have been going through a rough time. He concludes with: "I'll get someone to post this":

"I am sorry to disappoint [sic] you with the lack of my presence but I have been trying to get in touch with you by phone but the exchange told me there was an 'indefinite delay'?"

"Actually my day has been put off 'till the 5th as some of the crews are missing & I get leave on the 10th -17th. [Harry Cattle records John returning on 17th September after 7 days leave]

"But if I am released one evening I shall go up to London & return here by 8 o'clock in the morning so

Raymond can have the car. So expect me any evening about 9 o'clock but do not count on it. But here's hoping

"I shall continue to try to phone you but I am probably flying at 20.00

"I'll get someone to post this. Love to all Jonathan.

[PS] "See you soon. Tell him to fix the gearbox please"

**There follows what seems to be the last letter in the archives from John.****Letter "To Mother & All the little ones" dated "Monday the second day of September in the year nineteen hundred and forty"**

"Well all being well I shall see you on Thursday at roughly about 2-30 or sooner I hope.

"Dear Raymond I am really so sorry but I can assure you your wee Fiat is still in excellent condition & running very well on aviation oil & the water supply is being carefully watched but up to date it has not been cleaned at all, but I hope to see to that as soon as I am able.

"By the way you might watch the oil on my car I have been putting 1/- quart heavy stuff in & it goes down well also if honourable brother maketh time I would be most surprised to find the white paint touched up all round the mudguards etc. etc.

"Once again I must apologise for not being able to come to see you on Sunday. But forgiveness is gratefully accepted. I hope you told Jean & conveyed my regrets.

"We took off last night on a raid but had just made a circuit of the 'drome when we discovered the gunners turret was U/S [unserviceable] so we landed & never went.

"Well now I shall close. All my love to you all Cheerio Jonathan"

**Harry Cattle's diary continues to record some of John's movements afterwards, as follows:****5 September, 1940**

John, Raymond & William came over this evening. John has 24hrs leave, & Ray is lending us the Fiat till Monday morning. They only stayed a few minutes, as we had to go and rescue Ray who had run out of petrol at Hendon.

**9 September**

Took the Fiat to [work] today, Ray is picking it up.

**13 September**

“Raymond called [to Harry’s workplace in London] and took me home where John his mother and William had already arrived. John stopped the night, & we had some heavy AA [anti-aircraft] fire for him to listen to when the sirens went about 8.30pm.”

**14 September:**

“John took me to [work] this morning, arrived there to find we had come through a raid. Many streets closed in West End [of London] owing to damage or time bombs.”

**17 September:**

“John went back today after his seven days leave, we learn afterwards that he was over bombing Cherbourg this evening.”

**19 September:**

John is up again for a day, to pick up a car for one of his chaps.

**21 September:**

“John has been transferred to Hendon aerodrome, so expect we shall see him sometimes.

**22 September:**..Did a bit more to our [air raid] shelter, & got it ready in time for John to help me get it into the hall, when he came along to see us for a while”

**26 September:**

“John came over and stopped the night. Some bombs dropped near at hand, & shook the house & blew the black-out out in the cloakroom. John, asleep upstairs, counted five to fall.”

**29 October:**

“John is up on seven days leave, & well earned, he has done a lot of flying recently, bombing Brest & L’orient[sic] & other places, beside the usual reco [reconnaissance] work.”

**22 November (Friday):**

John is up for 24 hrs, he was out when I phoned Raymond [at their home] this evening.

**25 November Black Monday.**

News today from the Air Ministry. John is reported missing. We are all terribly shocked, it hardly seems possible. Can only hope he has baled out & landed safely, or that they made a forced landing, but how & where we do not know, & god knows how long it will be before we find out. We hope and pray & wait. He is 21 next month [*in fact, 29 November*], and would have had seven days leave, & we had been discussing what to give him, & the arrangements for a party he said he would give. This anticipation has put an edge upon our sorrow, but our hopes grow as the day passes, for he has been a lucky boy, & perhaps his luck has held out. This occurred on the night of Saturday/Sunday.”

John’s date of birth was 29 November, 1919. He had begun to contemplate what presents would be welcome for his 21st birthday on 29 November 1940. He started a list:

"21st Birthday Me"

~~for~~ 21st Birthday Me

DRESSING CASE. (Zip-fastener)

Pyjama Case ( — " — )

decent pipe  Something different

Writing Case ( — " — )

Give your

own

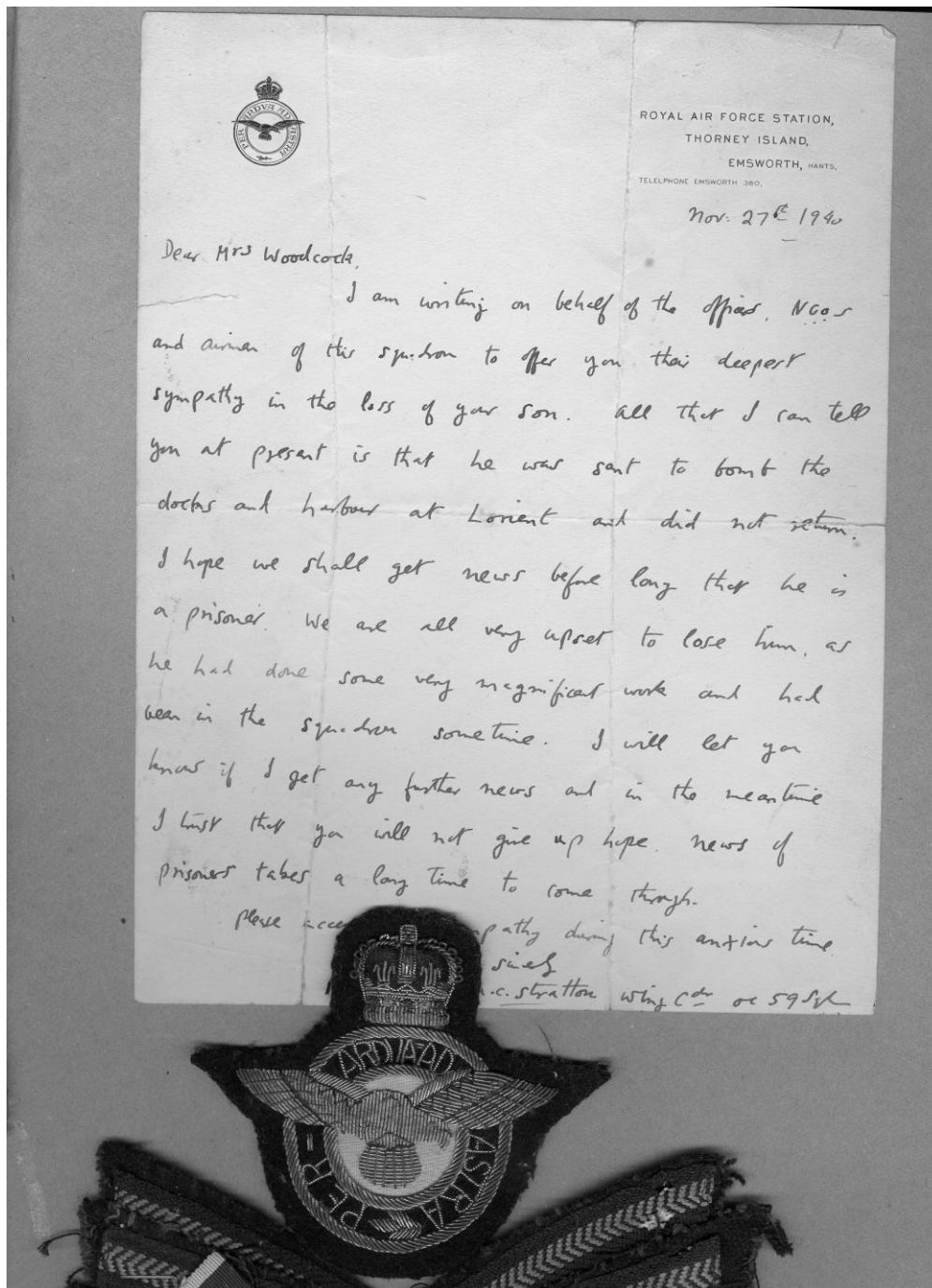
but.

Sadly, John did not quite live long enough to receive such gifts. He died in action on a bombing raid on Lorient on 23 November, 1940 - just 6 days short of his 21st birthday

## POST MORTEM

Letters were written following the raid seeking information as to the possible outcome of events by John's mother, Gracie, by Raymond and by RAF correspondents.

**From Wing Commander Stratton, 27th November:**



Shown here with John's insignia

**From G.T. Wood, an RAF colleague (who also did not survive the war) postmarked  
6 December:**

"Friday, [6 December]

"Dear Mr Woodcock,

I have only just returned from an extension of leave and learned of John's failure to return from his raid on Lorient. I sincerely hope that he will now be nothing more than a prisoner of war.

"I have however made some inquiries as to where he may have been forced down. There appears to have been a patrol of fighters escorting a German convoy on the French coast and he may have been forced down by these. My reason for saying this is that another observer who was using the same tracks as John was, also ran into these fighters but managed to escape into cloud and he reported the presence of the convoy. If this was the case the crew may have been picked up by the convoy.

"The position of the convoy was just off the coast near Ushant which you will find near Brest.

"You will however realise that all I have told you is nothing more than theory and I would like to suggest that you do not place too much faith in these theories as I am sure you will realise that it would be fatal to do so.

"I would now like to express on behalf of the other observers and for that matter all the air crews, for he was well liked by everyone here in the mess, our sincerest sympathies.

"As you know he has been in other jams and he has always managed to get himself out of them & I myself do really believe that he is now safe and well somewhere in Germany. For as you may say his luck 'was always in when he needed it most.

"In conclusion let me tell you that anything I have done or can do to help you has been and will be a privilage [sic.] and if there is anymore I can do to assist you, please do not hesitate to ask me.

"P/O Van Blockland [Blokland] was as you supposed the pilot. If you do hear any news concerning John we should be very grateful if you would let us know.

"Yours very sincerely, *GT Wood*

**Letter to Gracie Woodcock from Mrs Joan Van Blokland 27th December 1940**

"Dear Mrs Woodcock

"I have wanted to write to you for some time & tell you how I sympathise with you in our mutual loss.

"My husband was the pilot of the plane in which your son was reported missing. It is a terrible time for us both, but believe me my husband was a very steady and [?] person and I am quite sure that if there was a possibility of making a safe landing somewhere he would make it. He had a lot of experience and I personally will not give up hope. I think it very unlikely that we should hear any news for at least two months, but I thought that should either of us hear anything we might let the other know, as news might come though separately.

"I am terribly unhappy as I've no doubt you are as this is the first time my husband & I have lived apart, but the only thing we can do is hope.

"May I conclude by wishing you the very best of luck in the new year & the very best of news.

"Yours sincerely, Joan Beelearts van Blokland"

**From G.T. Wood, a further letter 3rd January 1941**

"Dear Mr Woodcock.

"I received your letter a couple of days ago and I have made further enquiries from people who took part in the raid and they are pretty certain that the aircraft must have reached Lorient and was probably forced down there. If this was the case there is a very good chance that they made a forced landing in a field, and I am sure that P/O V Blockland was more than capable of making the landing in such circumstances.

"The names were as you will have seen by now have been in the list as missing but I can think of at least four people in our course who were missing three or four months before they were announced prisoners[sic].

"About the photograph, I saw the chap who is supposed to be getting them done and as soon as we get hold of some I will send them along.

"That is, I think all I can tell you just now but if anything more crops up I will let you know; also we in 59 Sqdn would be very pleased to hear any news you may receive regarding John.

"Wishing you a speedy and happy ending to all your troubles in 1941.

"Yours sincerely, G.T. Wood"

"PS The name of the W/O A.G. [Air Gunner] is Carvill [Carvil]."

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**Nothing further was ever learned of John's demise.**

**His name is remembered at the Runnymede memorial for airmen of no known grave.**

**And John and his 59th Squadron are remembered on the website:**

**[http://number59squadron.com/1939\\_phoney\\_war.html](http://number59squadron.com/1939_phoney_war.html)**

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*Transcription produced in 2016 by John's nephew, Robert Cattle*

**Some of the photographs from John's albums**



Photograph in August, 1940:  
John Woodcock with the transcriber, Robert Cattle



A 'London' flying boat



John thought to be in Lerwick



John, the latest recruit in 1939  
at his sister's house in Edgware



Possibly P/O Beelarts Van Blokland  
(John's pilot). [From Number 59 Squadron Website]



A watercolour by John in 1938



From the Daily Telegraph Monday, 25 November 1940 reporting John's final raid – this newspaper was delivered to house "34 H" –Hasting Road (John's home)

34 H

# Telegraph 4

A.M.

Printed in LONDON and MANCHESTER ONE PENNY



This is the Gin  
Ask for it by name  
**Gordon's**  
Stands Supreme

## 12 HOURS IN THE SEA



...survivor of a ship  
...and sank in less  
...wreckage for eight  
...he was seen by the  
...son, who found a  
...t. In a letter of  
...Whitehead remarks:  
...oes through all the  
...ou in the vicinity."

### U.S. CREDITS FOR BRITAIN

#### LORD LOTHIAN TO SEE PRESIDENT

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT  
WASHINGTON, Sunday.  
President Roosevelt returned  
to Washington from his Hyde  
Park home to-day.

It is understood that he will  
have an important talk with the  
Marquess of Lothian, the British  
Ambassador, probably in the  
early part of the week.

This, it is expected, will open  
up the question of American  
credits to Britain.

It was with startling directness  
that Lord Lothian, as soon as he  
had arrived from London, con-  
fronted the American public with  
the fact that Britain is nearing the  
end of her dollar resources.

He also said that a decision to  
repeal the cash-and-carry provi-  
sions of the Neutrality Act would  
have to be made in the immediate  
future.

Lord Lothian was talking to the  
reporters who crowded round him  
immediately he alighted from the  
Transatlantic Clipper at La  
Guardia airport, New York.

When asked if his statement re-  
garding the urgency of Britain's  
financial position meant that she  
would ask for an American loan,  
he indicated that he was simply  
placing the facts before the people  
so that they could make their own

## BIG R.A.F. ATTACK ON INVASION PORTS

### 28 FIRES IN BERLIN: TURIN ARSENAL BOMBED

Following destructive raids by the Bomber  
Command on Berlin, Turin, and other Axis objec-  
tives on Saturday night, the R.A.F. last night  
carried out the biggest attack they have ever made  
on the French invasion ports.

The region of Boulogne and Calais, Brest  
and Lorient, where it is believed that Nazi  
troop-carrying ships were being concen-  
trated in preparation for another attempt at  
invasion, were subjected last night and  
during the week-end to terrific bombing.

Watchers on the Kent coast said that the  
rumble of the bomb explosions last night made the  
air on the English side  
of the Channel quiver.  
The detonations could  
be distinctly heard  
across the 22 miles of  
sea, suggesting that  
bombs of heavy calibre  
were being used.

Parachute flares were first  
seen descending soon after  
nightfall. Anti-aircraft fire  
was intense.

The Germans now have an  
immense concentration of  
searchlights in the Boulogne and  
Calais region.

These formed groping pyramids  
of light but judging from their  
uncertain movements they had  
little success in picking up our  
raiders.

#### Last Night's Raids

### BIG ATTACK ON WESTERN TOWN

#### LONDON HAS QUIET NIGHT AGAIN

DAILY TELEGRAPH REPORTER  
While London was compara-  
tively quiet last night with two  
Alerts and two Raiders Passed  
signals before midnight, a big  
air raid was being made on a  
western town which was still in  
progress early this morning after  
several hours.

First, a single plane arrived and  
dropped flares. This was followed  
by wave after wave of raiders  
until shortly before midnight.

Damage was considerable and  
there was a number of casualties.

Anti-aircraft guns maintained  
almost continuous fire. Planes  
were occasionally caught in the  
searchlights and subjected to very  
severe treatment.

#### TWO RAIDERS DOWN

Two night raiders are believed  
to have been brought down in the  
provinces, one in a south-western  
district and one off the Isle of  
Wight.

The first London alert was one  
of the shortest the capital had ex-  
perienced since regular raids  
began. The next was followed by  
a fairly heavy barrage against

### ELLED BY RAIDER

#### SPONDENT

YORK, Sunday.  
ain at work in the  
e which attacked  
armed merchant  
antic on Nov. 5.  
announced to-night  
age from the British  
30 tons, stating that  
out 500 miles north-  
e came 25 minutes

### TH OF LORD RAIGAVON

#### ARKING UP TO