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L For Lily

A play about brave men who fought
in the skies of 1943

by Steve Harper



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Glossary of abbreviations

Snook	Cheap and unpopular South African sea fish used in World War Two recipes. N.B. Unsold cans of fish at the end of the war were relabelled as cat food.
Opps Room	Operational Room where air battles were planned and monitored.
NAFFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institution.
KCs	Kilo cycles (Hertz). The frequency of the carrier wave used for radio communication. Measured in thousands of cycles per second.
Happy Valley	The heavily defended Ruhr Valley.
M.O.	Medical Officer.
Fag	Cigarette.
180 on the nose	When the nose of the aircraft is in line with the runway.
Cookie	A large 1,000lb bomb.
ETA	Estimated Time of Arrival.
WAAF	Woman's Auxiliary Air Force.
Brylcreem boys	Slang term for male Air Force members.
W.O.	Warrant Officer.
Gong	Medal.
Gee	A radar system that worked by calculating the time delay between two radio signals.

Ground display	Radar that displayed ground contours.
Harmonic	Frequency that is a complex multiple of the original.
Flack	Shrapnel.
Feather Props	Alter the angle of the propellers to offer less wind resistance.
Salvo	Dropping bombs in succession.
Yolk	Aircraft steering column.

L for Lily was presented at the Princess Theatre, Hunstanton, on Friday, 10th July 2015. The cast was as follows:

Nose gunner	ERIC	TOM SAUNDERS
Captain	SKIP	RICHARD ABEL
Flight engineer	NORMAN	ROBERT HORNETT
Navigator	ARTHUR	WILLEM HARRISON BARRACLOUGH
Radio operator	JOE	STEVE HARPER
Mid upper gunner	TAFF	TOM TREE
Rear gunner	TONY	JEMIMA CUMMINGS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1983 I worked for British Telecom as one of their cable testers. My job was to measure the parameters of copper cable either constructed by our own staff or purchased from one of the contract firms that supplied us. I had studied electrical transmission at college for five years and was considered one of the leading authorities – it was repetitive, methodical and lucrative work. But suddenly in 1983 everything changed. All my years of accumulating knowledge on sending signals with electricity became obsolete, the world of fibre optics and digital transmission had arrived when BT installed the first fibre optic cable from Barrington into Cambridge.

Apart from the staff at our research centre-fibre optic transmission was a black art, understood by very few and practised by fewer. I became a national expert very quickly. This is not a boast you understand, but more a confession. I knew very little, but that was more than everybody else, and in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is truly king!

I had written technical publications before so it was no great surprise when my boss decided that I should be the one to write a report on the new technology. Writing technical stuff is like being a member of a small exclusive club, you can use phrases like Iterative Impedance, resistivity and shot noise with confidence. Your audience is small, but they tend to be appreciative.

I am now retired, and on reflection there have been only a few life-changing moments in my existence, this however was one of them. A total accident really based on my line manager's sense of humour! I accepted my brief to explain the complexities of light transmission for our "In-house" magazine, and was packing up to get back to my own office when my manager, bless him, added one last caveat. I want, he said, a report that your wife would read, enjoy and understand. Aghhhhhhh.

I love my wife more than I could ever explain, but writing a technical report for somebody who doesn't know an ohm from a megahertz...tricky!

Well I did it. And surprisingly I enjoyed it. Lots of phrases such as, "You think a Usain Bolt is fast; but that's just peanuts compared to lasers turning on and off five hundred million times a second". Yes, OK, it's not big, and it's not clever, but it was my first bit of freestyle writing, and it was a success, and I loved it, and my wife read it. OK, there's nothing that wonderful woman wouldn't do for me.

A few years later I retired, and joined an amateur dramatics society. In 2005 they held a competition to write a pantomime. I wrote *The Curse of Coconut Island*, a pirate extravaganza. It won because nobody else submitted an entry. It had three acts and twenty seven scenes. I got better.

L for Lily came about because of my dad. He joined the RAF In 1939 and was the navigator on many bombing missions. It occurred to me that at 19 years old his life would have been like most young men's, but with the horror of war to contend with. Living in a small Norfolk town by day, but climbing into a petrol engine aeroplane packed with explosive and high octane fuel at night. When I was 19 my life revolved around girls, motorbikes, girls, cinema, rock and roll, and girls... well thinking about them. So I tried to write something of what I imagined my dad's life in his war years might have been.

The play is set on board "Lily" a Lancaster heavy bomber. The scenery when we presented it at the 2015 Hunstanton drama festival (and won first prize), was minimalistic. A forward facing chair for the nose gunner, two chairs raised on a small dais for the pilot and engineer, two chairs at a small table for the navigator and radio operator, a bar stool for the mid-upper gunner and a backward facing chair for the tail-end Charley. We used a lot of sound effects for the attacks, the engine noises and the crash, but for the guns we made the cast make "Dagga-dagga-dagga" noises. It could have been silly, but it wasn't.

There isn't a great deal of movement in the play, it relies more on the interaction between the crew. For the fighter attack everybody moved in unison, rolling and lurching in their respective chairs. For the death scene we had a single spot illuminating the rear gunner's position. Joe crawls past the pilot and engineer and lays slightly forward of the nose gunner for his bombing run. For the final crash we used a strobe to allow the cast to be tossed about like rag dolls, after the noise of a huge explosion and the brightest flash of light we could achieve.

I hope you enjoy presenting "L for Lily", and that you spare a thought for the real heroes of bomber command who fought for us in World War Two.

Steve Harper
2016

*For my dad, Squadron Leader A.J. Harper DFC. Navigator and
Bomb Aimer on the Lancaster "G" for George that flew in
635 Pathfinder squadron.*

CHARACTERS

N.B Only volunteers were selected for flight crews, between 1939 and 1945; over 23,000 died. Their motto is "Per ardua ad astra"... Through adversity to the stars.

SKIP Pilot Flight Lt

The captain. The only officer in the crew, a flight lieutenant since 1939. He joined the RAF in 1936 and has flown thirty missions in Sterlings and Wellingtons as the co-pilot. When his last squadron was re-deployed he found himself posted to Bexwell and given command of Lily, a brand new Lancaster bomber. He is the "old man" of the crew, and cannot believe how young the rest of the crew seem to be. The father figure, he maintains discipline but allows for a certain amount of youthful exuberance to keep morale up. He has flown ten missions with this crew, and has molded them into a capable fighting unit. His navigator Peter was recently married and requested a move to stay with his WAAF wife. Skip has selected Arthur as his replacement.

ERIC Nose Gunner Sgt

Eric is a true cockney who comes from London's East End. His father is a docker and still can't believe Eric joined the RAF rather than follow him into the docks. Eric wanted the independence and a chance to fight for his country (although he would never admit to that). He is very self sufficient, and always the wheeler dealer (not always on the right side of the law). Can be a little short-tempered and used to settling most disputes with his fists; now however the RAF has given him self-discipline. After a brush with the magistrate that could have seen him being sent to Borstal, he volunteered for the RAF. A win-win situation that kept the magistrate happy, got Eric off with a warning and gave the RAF a first-class gunner.

NORMAN Flight Engineer Sgt

Norman comes from Scunthorpe where his father runs a small garage. Always interested in mechanics he was doing evening classes at technical college when the war broke out. He volunteered straight away and was snapped up by the RAF to be trained as a flight engineer. Although he quite likes the WAAFs on the camp, his real passion is motorbikes. He is secretly extremely pleased that Skip selected him to train as the co-pilot, and has dreams where he heroically brings the plane in on one engine to the admiration of the group captain and the entire ground crew... Be careful what you wish for Norman.

JOE Radio Engineer Sgt DFC

Joe worked for the BBC as a technician before the war. He also volunteered in 1939 and because of his background was trained by the Royal Core of Signals as a radio specialist. He requested a transfer to the RAF because of his interest in Radar (a new and secret method of seeing with radio waves). This makes him one of the more senior members of the crew. He gets on well with everybody and tends to look after the younger members. Joe is also on his second tour of duty having completed twenty-five missions in Wellingtons (bombers not boots), where he won the DFC. The group captain has recommended him for officer training.

ARTHUR Navigator Sgt

The new boy. He was originally going to university but desperately wanted to do "his bit". As soon as he was old enough he volunteered and much to his mother's consternation joined the RAF. Always a studious mathematician he was a natural for navigation and got 92% in his passing out exam. He was immediately selected as a replacement for Lily's departing navigator and sent to Norfolk. Tonight will be his first real mission... Good luck Arthur. Although a competent navigator he is still very wet behind the ears when it comes to any other aspect of life as aircrew. He desperately wants to be accepted by the existing crew and to do well in his new job, but secretly is very frightened. (Just like everybody else.) He recently took Barbara, the cinema usherette out, and has saved his orange for her. (Again good luck with that.)

TAFF Mid Upper Gunner Sgt

Merion Gwynth Williams is from the valleys of Wales. He is universally known as "Taff". He was suppose to go down the pits like the rest of his brothers. However, always a bit of a rebel, he volunteered for the RAF after a night drinking barley wine with Jones the milk. Considered by outsiders to be the clown of the crew, there is a side to Taff they do not see, a mature and caring man who not only keeps morale up, but also keeps a weather eye open for the others. You wouldn't want to fly without Taff at his guns... you really wouldn't.

TONY Tail Gunner Sgt

Tony is the quiet and sensitive member of the crew. His “movie star” good looks bring him a lot of attention from the WAFFS on the camp, and a lot of envious ribbing from the other men. He keeps himself to himself, but visits a mysterious friend over near Bedford a lot. He does not talk about this. He is a popular member of the crew and does an excellent job as the “tail-end Charley”. He sometimes joins the others on the sergeants’ mess drinking nights, but usually declines invites to attending local dances. An impending court marshall weighs heavily on him. No-one else, even the skipper, knows of this.

Other plays by Steve Harper
published by Samuel French Ltd

Lions and Donkeys
The Stubbs

*The set comprises six chairs, a table and a stool arranged to make the seating on a Lancaster bomber. Two raised seats side by side for the pilot and engineer, **SKIP** and **NORMAN**. A chair facing forward for the nose gunner, **ERIC**. A small desk with two seats for the navigator and radio operator, **ARTHUR** and **JOE**. A bar stool for the mid-upper gunner **TAFF**, and a single chair facing backwards for the “tail-end Charley” **TONY**.*

Lights up.

SKIP stands on stage watching **NORMAN** who is banging parts of the set checking “Lily” is airworthy. The crew enters through the audience, **ARTHUR** is wearing a parachute. There is general banter as they make their way to the Lancaster.

NORMAN (*indicating port inner engine*) There you are Skip, I asked the ground crew to change the gasket on the oil cooler and the leak has gone.

SKIP Jolly good Norman, (*noticing others*) Ah, there they are. Good grief is that young Arthur actually wearing his parachute to walk across the airfield?

NORMAN Hasn’t taken it off since the briefing. He’s new Skip, we all have to learn.

SKIP Yes I suppose you’re right.

JOE Did you have the snook pie? It wasn’t that bad tonight.

ERIC No mate, they had cod and chips down at the Crown.

ARTHUR But you must have paid for that.

ERIC Put it this way, you would have had to pay me to eat snook. I don’t know what it is and I don’t want to. Three and six for a nice bit of cod and a couple of pints of wallop seems a lot better to me.

They reach the plane.

SKIP Right everybody on board please. Time and the Groupie wait for no man. Arthur we don't usually wear our parachutes all the time. Give it to the armourers, and they will stow it away for you.

ARTHUR Yes sir, sorry sir.

ARTHUR removes his parachute and everyone mounts the stairs and takes their place.

TAFF I have never in all my born days known anybody as lucky as that jammy bastard.

ARTHUR Who's that Taff?

TAFF Oh yes very funny. That cockney tosser who took my last five bob, that's who. I mean my grandfather taught me to play crib. I've been playing since I was eight. But I never saw anybody get round a board like he does.

NORMAN This wouldn't be our exalted nose gunner the cockney all England Crib Champion, would it Taff?

TAFF Aye bloody Eric. Five bob. I was going to go to the pictures with that. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is on next week at the Majestic. I've got a date.

ERIC Well look on the bright side my old mucker. If you did manage to persuade a WAAF to go out with you, I'll win my other bet, and I'll bloody pay for you to get in.

TAFF Oh thanks mate. *(Pause)* Here hang on, what other bet?

JOE He's only winding you up. Anyway I'm going to go and see that, they reckon it's a cracking film. So who are you going to take then Taff?

TAFF Oh, well now, she's the business. Her name's Doris, and she works in the Opps Room. I was chatting her up in the NAAFI the other night. *(Conspiratorial)* Well I gazed into her eyes, and Doris my love I said, you could make a man very happy. And she said...

ALL BAAAAAAA.

General laughter.

TAFF Oh yes very funny. (*Passing ARTHUR's desk*) Oh that's nice Arthur. Silver isn't it?

ARTHUR Yes my propelling pencil. My mum and dad bought it for me. I do my calculations with it.

TAFF (*picking it up*) Worth a bob or two I should think.

ARTHUR Well...

JOE Hands off Taff, he isn't selling.

TAFF (*handing it back*) No, no, just saying it's nice though.

SKIP All right, all right, settle down please chaps. Radio check please.

All take seats.

JOE Aye Skip, you're patched through to the tower when you're ready. We're on 16.4 KCs for this op.

SKIP Thank you Joe... Bexwell Tower this is L for Lily, radio check on 16.4 KCs; how do you read me over? (*Pause*) Thank you Tower, we are green to go, repeat green to go, over. (*Pause*)

Roger that Tower, will wait for your signal. Over and out.

ARTHUR Do you think they will stand us down Skip?

SKIP Don't think so Arthur, the weather was clear over the target last Met report we got. We're up after O for Orange, keep an eye out for them Norman.

NORMAN Yes Skip.

ARTHUR But they might have technical reasons.

JOE Don't worry Arthur, this isn't too bad a run, we've done worse.

ERIC Yes bloody Happy Valley. Thank your lucky stars you were still training the last time we went there. It was rough so I reckon it's just tickety boo if we're not going there tonight.

TONY We lost U for Uncle and the Battleaxe in the flack.

NORMAN E for Echo went down in the channel on the way home.

TAFF And Z Zebra, got shot to hell by Junkers. Hard to see those buggers sometimes.

TONY You polish your Perspex like I told you Eric?

ERIC Well I got one of the ground crew to. Vinegar and brown paper, sounds like a bleedin nursery rhyme don't it?

TONY Yes but it works. No oil splashes or marks that you might think are fighters.

NORMAN Well if Tony recommends some sort of cleaning drill, I for one am for it. But I don't care if any of you fire at oil dribbles, just so long as you have enough ammo left to shoot at the real thing.

SKIP Amen to that. Keep it tight tonight chaps. This is our eleventh mission and I want to get back to my bacon and eggs in the mess tomorrow.

NORMAN Getting a wave from the ground crew Skip.

SKIP Starting engines.

***SKIP** opens a window and points at starboard inner engine, then rotates his finger. All members of the crew shake a little as the engine starts. Same procedure for the next three engines with the vibration increasing with each one.*

TAFF (*raising his voice*) Arthur's kept his orange skip.

*Shaking and volume may now be reduced once **SKIP** closes the window.*

SKIP That will get your charts sticky Arthur.

ARTHUR I wont eat it on the flight Skip.

TAFF No, he's saving it for a girl when he gets back.

SKIP That's very generous of you Arthur, but flight crew get fresh fruit for a reason. It improves your night vision, or so the M.O. says. You eat it, and get your girl a choc ice.

ARTHUR (*embarrassed*) Yes Skip.

ERIC I don't know about an orange, but I'm dying for a fag.

TONY Oh, well you just go ahead and light up. I'm sure the explosives, high octane fuel, phosphorus and magnesium we're all crammed in with will be fine.

ERIC Yea, I know, I'm just saying I'm dying for a fag.

TONY Trouble is we don't want to die with you.

ARTHUR I've got some barley sugars if that will help Eric.

ERIC Oh thanks mate.

They crawl towards one another, and ERIC takes a sweet.

JOE Here mind my can Arthur.

ARTHUR What?

JOE My can, don't lose it.

ARTHUR What are you doing with an old tin can?

TAFF O give me strength.

ARTHUR What?

SKIP We all bring a can with us Arthur to take a leak in. You should know that.

ARTHUR Yes Skip, sorry Skip.

NORMAN You pee on my electrics, and you'll become part of the circuit.

TAFF Then that orange you saved won't do you any good at all.

JOE You share my can Arthur, OK?

TONY What did you do on your training flights Arthur?

ARTHUR Well, I just didn't want to go.

ERIC Yea right, only a couple of six-hour flights, you must have a bladder like a bull elephant mate.

TONY A full bladder and wind can cripple you at high altitude Arthur. Don't eat beans before a flight and always empty your bladder.

ARTHUR Right.

SKIP OK, lets just drop it shall we? There's a lot to pick up they didn't cover in training Arthur, but don't worry about it now. Oh hello, looks like we're moving.

TONY Not before time.

NORMAN O Orange is going Skip.

SKIP Right. Line me up Eric.

ERIC OK Skip... Right... Right... Left a touch Skip. Good.

SKIP How's that?

ERIC Spot on Skip, 180 on the nose.

SKIP Bexwell Tower this is L for Lily, we are set for take off... *(pause)*
...Thank you Tower, keep a light in the window for us.

Right gentlemen, third star to the left and straight on till morning.

All begin to shake again, as SKIP executes the take-off. Then stop as ERIC leads the singing to LILI MARLEEN. All crew lean back as the Lancaster takes off.

ERIC *(sings)*

ALL *(except ARTHUR)*

ALL sway to the rhythm of the song and sing the first two verses of LILI MARLEEN, in German.

TAFF You wasn't singing Arthur!

ARTHUR I don't speak German.

TAFF Terfuel ve only haf un Englander in ze crew.

ERIC Ve vil drop him out mit der cookie for Churchill. Und das vil teach him to be vun of ze master race, Ja.

JOE Zeig Heil.

SKIP All right, all right. Settle down chaps. First rendezvous point over Cromer please Arthur.

ARTHUR Yes Skip *(pause)* steer thirty-seven degrees magnetic. ETA fouteen minutes.

SKIP Thank you Arthur, perhaps we'll keep you along for the ride after all. Wheels up Norman?

NORMAN Check Skip wheels retracted.

ARTHUR Why were you singing in German?

TONY It can be a long old night if we don't have a bit of fun Arthur.
You'll pick it up.

NORMAN So who was the lucky lady last night then Tony?

JOE Nobody on the camp I'll bet.

TAFF Yea, why don't you ever take one of the WAAFS out? I mean we've all tried it on with that Shirley; and been shot down. But come on Tony you're our secret weapon. I mean anybody who looks like a bleedin' movie star ought to take full advantage.

ERIC You're giving us Brylcreem boys a bad name Tony.

SKIP I think a fellow's got the right to choose his own lady friends Eric.

ERIC Well yea, but if you had his looks wouldn't you Skip?

SKIP I'm a married man. My philandering days are behind me.

NORMAN Only because you're ancient Skip.

JOE I think the pilot still has the right to order a crewman to bail without his chute Skip.

SKIP Thank you Joe I'll take that under consideration.

TONY Permission to test guns Skip.

SKIP Yes, everybody short bursts please. And Taff...?

TAFF Yes Skip.

SKIP Try not to shoot down one of ours.

TAFF O bloody hell Skip that was months ago.

ARTHUR What happened?

NORMAN About two months ago we had a Hurricane escort on a raid to Cologne.

JOE And when Taff tested his guns he got a bit close to a squadron leader in one of them.

TONY Shaved a bit off his tail.

ERIC He was a bit pissed off.

JOE I had to change the valves in my radio after he'd finished casting aspersions on Taff's parentage!

SKIP Yes well we won't let it happen again. I told you Taff either don't fire, or make a proper job of it so I don't have to do the paperwork.

TAFF Okey dokey Skip.

Pause.

SKIP The guns gentlemen.

TONY Aye Skip.

All three gunners make ah-ah-ah noises for two seconds.

Pause.

ARTHUR So do you have a young lady Tony?

TONY Nobody special Arthur, I just prefer not to get entangled with local girls, that can make it a bit messy.

TAFF I'd like to get a bit messy with that Shirley.

SKIP Yes thank you Taff, could we change the record please?

NORMAN Yes, so let me tell you about how I'm getting on with my little baby.

ERIC Our little baby Norman.

NORMAN Well yes, I suppose.

ERIC No suppose about it, I paid you the princely sum of six pounds so that I could have a ride on her when I needed to.

ARTHUR I say!

JOE No it's not what you think Arthur. Well go on Norman, tell Arthur about her.

NORMAN She's the most beautiful thing I've ever got my hands on. Some night it's just a pleasure to strip her down and grease her up.

ARTHUR I'm sorry I just don't like that sort of smut.

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