

The man who 'started' D-Day

With a name like Bowen-Bravery, one RAF Flying Officer was destined to find his courage put to the test. *Tomy Durrant reports*

THE NEW Year will usher in the start of a series of events marking the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Landings and the start of the liberation of Europe. Sadly, the man who 'started' D-Day died a few weeks short of reaching 2014's historical milestone. He was Kenyon Bowen-Bravery, DFC, CdtG, who, as a Flying Officer, dropped the opening salvo of the landings. He was 21 years old.

Fig Off Bowen-Bravery captained the first aircraft over France – Lancaster Bad Penny II – which, at 23:34 on June 5, dropped 14 1000lb bombs on the heavy gun battery at Crisbecq, on the Normandy coast.

The payload was the first to fall in support of the airborne and amphibious assault which was about to commence. Their action was captured in an artist's impression published in many national newspapers and magazines at the time.

Some years later Bowen-Bravery and his crew received the Croix de Guerre from the French government. He was also awarded the DFC, in September 1944.

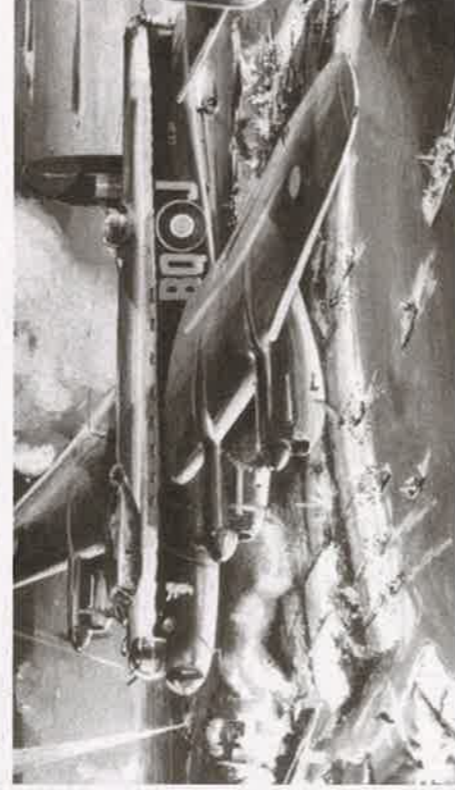
Bowen-Bravery and his crew, veterans of more than 20 bombing operations, flew LL811 from 550 Squadron, RAF North Killingholme. They had no idea they were starting the assault on Fortress Europe and setting in train the RAF's largest ever operation.

Later he was to recall that night "was being 'unbelievable'. He said: "Even though it was quite cloudy we could see the sky was full of planes. We realised the enormous scale of the invasion only later that day."

On the raid 1012 aircraft – 551 Lancasters, 412 Halifaxes, 49 Mosquitos – followed Bad Penny II. A plaque hangs in 550 Squadron's church, St Denys in North Killingholme, commemorating the crew's historic role.

Kenyon Bowen-Bravery was born in Cardiff on December 19, 1922, and educated at Barry County Grammar School. His career as a newspaper reporter was cut short when he joined the RAF in September 1941 and trained as a pilot at the RAF College Cranwell.

After converting to heavy bombers he joined No 550



ALWAYS CAME BACK: An artist's impression of Bad Penny II over the Normandy coast

Squadron, arriving in December 1943, just as the Battle of Berlin opened. It was a period during which Bomber Command suffered some of its heaviest casualties, but Bowen-Bravery survived a number of visits to the German capital, many in his Lancaster J for Jig, which he rechristened Bad Penny II as bad pennies always come back.

It was on one of these raids that he added an empty beer bottle to his bombload – it was his way of marking his recent 21st birthday. In the spring of 1944 Bomber Command turned its attention to bombing transportation targets and supply dumps in France in preparation for the forthcoming Allied landings in Normandy.

On the night of May 3-4, Bowen-Bravery took off to attack the large military arms dump and base at Mailly-le-Camp. Although the target was well marked by Mosquito Pathfinders, radio problems left the 364 Lancasters on the raid without instructions from the Master Bomber.

As the bombers circled, German night fighters arrived and took a heavy toll on the force. The target was eventually bombed with great accuracy, but 42 Lancasters failed to return. After D-Day, Bowen-Bravery attacked other targets in France and, on June 23, bombed the marshalling yards at Sauntes. It was his 30th and final operation. He received his DFC shortly afterwards.

Bowen-Bravery then flew with Transport Command before joining No 31 Squadron in India, flying Dakotas. He trained Indian Air

procedures in the aircraft, often with the crew blindfolded so they could operate if all internal lighting was lost or the aircraft filled with smoke.

This paid off one night when their Lancaster was hit by anti-aircraft fire and, despite injured crew and a badly damaged aircraft, they returned safely. All Bowen-Bravery's crew survived the war, bar one who swapped leave dates and changed to another aircraft. He died over Germany.

After leaving the RAF in early 1948 he worked in the marketing division of household products manufacturer Proctor & Gamble before working in television in 1956. For seven years he developed the commercial aspects of ABC Television before becoming a director at Thomson Television International.

He travelled the world helping to establish television networks in Canada, India and Kenya, among many other countries. A keen photographer, he had a great love of nature and music.

Bowen-Bravery's wife, Mary, whom he married in 1949, survives him with their two daughters.



AFTER THE WAR: Bowen-Bravery as a Flight Lieutenant in London in the mid 1940s

BELOW: Bowen-Bravery at the controls of J for Jig (Black Penny II) at RAF North Killingholme

