

A PATHFINDERS DAY.

By Jack Marshall

We have been dropped off at our dispersal area by the Waaf bus driver with our flying kit. It has been dark for some time and as we sit on the ground having our pre flight smoke, very little conversation is going on. I think we are busy with our own thoughts as to surviving the night and hoping the trip is not one of those referred to as "a shakey do". Our Flight Commander is making his rounds and calls in to us and after satisfying himself that our crew and aircraft is ready to go, moves on to the next aircraft.

At this point we climb into our flying kit and at the pre-arranged time, our Skipper instructs us to climb aboard. I make my way to my turret, climb into it and go through the routine of checking my four brownings, making sure my guns are pointing downwards, commence to cock all four and for safety, lift the cover plates. After take off, the cover plates are closed and guns re-cocked ready for action.

With engines turning, entrance ladder taken in and bulkhead door secured, the Skipper would taxi away from our dispersal area and eventually take up our position behind another aircraft, ready for take off. After receiving the green light from Ground Control, engine throttles opened wide, we are rolling down the runway.

At this juncture all our nervous systems are working overtime, we all know that if we don't get off the ground we are in deep trouble! With full fuel tanks, a load of incendiaries plus two Target Indicators and thousands of rounds of ammunition To me, this was one of the most dangerous moments of the sortie and I have to admit at this point was a very nerve wracking experience. It was always a wonderful feeling when the rumbling of those huge landing wheels stopped and we knew we were safely airborne.

Now was the time to attend to my duties and time to concentrate on my job of defence and for any eventuality. From now on it is a question of constant alertness and constant searching the night sky. At no point on these sorties are you safe from some form of opposition action. Heavy flak to me was the most dangerous and I understand that the bulk of our losses were due to this form of opposition. The light flak "pom-pom" when first sighted, was like watching a lighted train travelling slowly at first and then gathering incredible speed within a second or two, then screaming past you, very often too close for comfort. With this type of enemy fire, it was difficult to warn the Skipper in advance owing to the speed of these shells and working out their actual direction of flight. The heavy flak was totally different as

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the enemy gunners after tuning in to our speed and height, were usually a bit late with their first salvo but would close the range with each consecutive burst. These bursts of flak as they closed in sounded like a huge dog barking. If I thought the enemy had our range, I would notify the Skipper to put the aircraft into a diving turn, which was our usual manoeuvre to avoid being hit. When the flak stopped this was the time to be extra vigilant as this was night fighter time!. The damage that such aircraft as the ME110 or the JU88 can create is unbelievable.

Searchlights although harmless in themselves, are of great assistance to night fighters as a coned bomber lights up like a Christmas tree. The feeling inside our aircraft when this takes place is I would imagine, how a stalker would feel at a football match. During a flight of this nature, each member of the crew is intent on their particular duties and one does not have time to get into a nervous state but when something goes wrong ,such as a night fighter attack or definite damage by flak, that's when the heart races and blood pressure soars. Youth is a godsend for aircrew - our own crew would average 21-23 years of age.

The run up to the target, which had to be made straight and level for the last few minutes in order to allow the BombAimer to do an accurate job, was also a very nerve wracking period, this was the time when the anti aircraft gunners below could close in and our aircraft was most venerable. Enemy fighters were also a great danger during the run up to the target, as many of them would risk their own anti aircraft fire in order to score.

With Pathfinders it was our responsibility to be absolutely sure that our markers were in the right spot and as proof, we were expected to take an aerial photograph of the target. This was achieved with the aid of a "Flash Bomb" of one million candlepower. I must mention at this point, that our Mosquito aircraft, which were part of the Pathfinder organization, were the first to mark the target, which they did at very low level.

The straight and level run up to the target, which I previously mentioned, was in order to drop our load of incendiaries and our first Target Indicator. In order to drop our second marker, it was necessary to mark time over the target area prior to a pre-arranged time for dropping our last marker. This also was hard on the nervous system. The danger during this waiting period was at its zenith. The relief on getting our second marker away and then nose down for home, can only be imagined by the reader. It never ceases to amaze me that we were so lucky to survive so many of

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these excursions when other crews didn't survive even in some cases, their very first trip.

After making our bombing runs the trip home was still fraught with danger but we had the advantage of a much lighter aircraft but still no match for night fighters. It was during one of these trips that we were attacked by a ME110. The first indication, in spite of constant searching, was a very long burst directly underneath us which was our blind spot. This burst unfortunately severed many of our hydraulics and consequently was unable to operate my turret or guns. By the time I managed to get the pin out of one of my guns, which allowed me to use it as a free gun, the fighter was dead astern and following us down as we made a steep turning dive. I was subject to a strong centrifugal force which added to my predicament. I found myself staring straight into the nose of this enemy fighter - just waiting for his final burst - just waiting for the end - just hoping it would be quick! I thought my last seconds of life had arrived but it wasn't to be. The fighter just hovered there in that position for approx. 5-6 seconds - and - suddenly dived away, not to be seen again.

Many times I have asked myself the question - "What really took place on that occasion?" The only conclusion we arrived at, was that the fighter had been in a previous combat and when he came in for the kill, found that he was completely out of ammunition. The mid upper gunner also went through the same feelings as myself, he also couldn't operate his turret or guns for the same reason. Had his turret been usable, he still couldn't have used his guns as the Stirling, with it's huge tail section makes it necessary to have an electric cut-out on the mid upper turret, making it impossible to shoot his own tail.

On another occasion, I was acting as mid upper gunner, when we were attacked from the starboard quarter, also with a long burst, which fortunately just missed our rear gunner but set his parachute alight, which was housed just outside his turret in the main fuselage. Our wireless operator grabbed a fire extinguisher and managed to get the fire out without further damage. This was also carried out under difficult conditions, as our Skipper was having to take evasive action in order to lose the fighter. When all this took place and it was obvious that our rear gunner's parachute was of little use, it went through my mind 'What if we have to bale out, would a parachute take the weight of two people. Fortunately, this was never put to the test!

Touching on another episode which is still one of those "luck was in" episodes, was the occasion when after a long flight to Genoa, knowing we were getting

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dangerously low on fuel, as our aircraft touched down on our home base and the tail settled back on the ground, all four engines spluttered and then cut out.

On another occasion, on a trip to Turin, we struck severe icing conditions, the aircraft became very heavy and our Skipper was having quite a battle to hold our altitude. The crew as a whole discussed whether to carry on or return to base. As you can imagine we had a reputation to maintain, also we certainly didn't want to be the only crew to turn back. We decided to carry on, this meant due to the icing conditions, that we could not get over the Alps - so we had no alternative but to fly through them. Thanks to our wonderful navigator, we made it! The opposition over the target was to put it mildly 'very strong', we felt at the time unusually strong. Upon our return to base, the bus picked us up as usual at our dispersal area, instead of mining us back to our locker room, took us to the Control Tower, where a large group of Airforce Personnel were standing. We were asked to leave the bus and as we stepped out, the crowd began to clap. They had waited up for our return and this was the early hours of the morning.

As you can imagine, we were completely baffled by all this, until it was explained to us that we were the only crew from our Squadron who managed to reach the target and back home. Another crew managed to get there but were unfortunately shot down. Hence the reception committee over the target. I believe about eighty -two aircraft were dispatched that night - this was a small effort for Bomber Command. I feel that the 'powers that be' knew it was going to be a difficult ride, so only sent a token force.

As a point of interest, the Germans also had a balloon defence system with a height of 13,500 ft. Our average operational height was usually 15,000-16,000ft. Above 10,000 ft we would be on oxygen and stayed on this until once again reduced our altitude.

During the last few months of my flying career, I was issued with an electric suit made of leather with the usual lambswool lining. The boots, trousers, jacket and gloves were connected. Very cosy! I did not feel that it was necessary in my case - perhaps the excitement kept me warm!! The average temperature was invariably 30-35 degrees below zero. It was my habit of pouring a few drops of really hot coffee (we were issued with a coffee flask) on top of my ammunition tank, by the time I returned my flask to it's pouch, the drops would have frozen and would have to be chipped off the tank. I would then use them as a lozenge - good thirst quencher!.

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When I took part on my very last raid, which incidentally was an extra voluntary one as they had an aircraft all set to go - but no rear gunner. When asked to fill the vacancy I really had no option but to go - at least it was with my own crew. That was one trip that I really did feel extremely nervous, even uptight - it would be hard for anyone to understand the feelings I had on returning to base safely that night. The thought that never again do I have to go through the trauma of heading across France, Germany and Italy again. No more take offs, with huge loads, no more run ups to the target, no more flak, no more fighters. It was time to utter a silent prayer.

Again I ask myself -why do some of us survive so many of these dangerous experiences and others only survive a few or in some cases it can be their first trip. Part of all this I feel is a combination of crew dedication and lots of luck - especially lots of luck.

Many times my thoughts turn to my crew and in particular my Skipper Fraser Barron -who lost his life over Le Mans, France. My thoughts also turn to the many airmen who were unfortunate not to return to their home and loved ones.