

SUMMER EVENING - 1943

The tea is scalding, strong, sweet and sticky with condensed milk. I sip it gratefully and sit back on an old bus seat in the home made ground crew hut. Around me lounge the ground crew of Lancaster 'U uncle' their work completed; in the late evening ~~grumpy~~^{grumpy} and tired, they are waiting for the arrival of the aircrew bus at our disposal and for the Bedford 30 cwt. truck with their late tea meal.

I have been with them for the last half hour checking the mechanical order of the aircraft upon which they have been toiling. Seven of us aircrew will be entrusting our lives to the great aircraft that now waits quietly at its dispersal, bomb doors gaping wide, red warning streamers fluttering from the pitot and static instrument vents, those from the jury locking struts on the undercarriage lie limp and oily.

Turret panels and windscreens have been carefully polished to remove any specks or grease marks which could prove fatally distracting to the gunners during the coming darkness.

I have climbed over the top surfaces to check the security of panels and fuel tank fillers; the contents have been verified - bowser operators have filled some 30 aircraft this afternoon - and bowser crews are only human - the correct amount of fuel is in the correct tanks. The oil tanks filler caps have been opened up and their slippery contents confirmed - oil under pressure which can be vented over the cowlings could give the impression of imminent disaster. Coolant in the header tanks has been replenished and a defective thermostat has been changed - Sgt. _____ confirms that he personally checked this after our morning air test, and everything is now satisfactory. An oil smear from airscrew on No.1 engine has been wiped away and the matt black of its surface gleams wetly.

I finish my tea, put the mug on the tray with the others, and wipe my hands clean of the oily grime my inspection had produced on them.

I unbutton the brown cow-gown and hang it on a hook behind the door of the hut. My PT shoes are rolled into a brown parcel and dumped in a wooden tool box I have acquired from official sources quite unofficially. With my flying boots pulled on and the roll-necked long white woollen aircrew sweater under the battledress blouse I am ready for the arrival of the crew who have been collecting their flying kit, my parachute pack and Sidcot flying overalls from the flying kit stores.

We have been together during the late afternoon for briefing on the target and have dispersed to our respective Sections for more detailed information concerning the specific duties for each crew member. Together again, with all the other crews, we have eaten the traditional meal of bacon, sausage, eggs and chips, bread and real butter - cups of hot tea. The atmosphere has been like an end of term party - a last burst of uninhibited skylarking. Looking round the mess we wonder idly how many empty tables there will be in the morning.

Cynical souls have made bargains with the waitresses that 'Fred can have my breakfast' - or 'I am to have Charlie's eggs and bacon'. The waitresses smile and agree - they know that these agreements are never taken up - mostly it is bravado rather than greed - even though eggs and bacon are in short supply!

Now my preparations as the engineer are complete, the rest of the crew will be here soon. I look at my watch - we have plenty of time before take-off. The evening is warm, in the hut two noisy bluebottles circle round each other, pausing only to sip at spots of spilled tea, beside me two ground crew doze on what was once a settee.

Outside, a grinding of gears announces the arrival of a Fordson crew coach; six encumbered figures clamber out. The WAAF driver pokes her head out of the window and shouts "Good luck boys - don't be late back". "All right Lil - behave yourself while we're away." The back doors slam and hands wave at the windows as the coach grumbles away along the perimeter track to Z Zebra to deposit "Granfer" Lee and his crew. Granfer, his crew and ourselves are the only remaining

crews of the dozen who arrived here three months ago. They sleep in the next Nissen hut to us and we have naturally joined with them at the mess bar, at the dart board and at the briefing room.

"Well, how has Dick's conducted tour gone," asks the Navigator - a routine joke at which no one now laughs - I repeat the same stale reply - "A damn sight safer than yours!" - again no one laughs!

The ground crew cluster around the air crew to confirm various queries - the gun harmonisation - the drift sight - the compass card - all minor points which happened on the previous trip and which have received attention. The bomb aimer and I duck under the open bomb-doors - he checks that the bombs and bomb sequence chart are correct; we both confirm that the bomb fuse links are safely in place and that the bomb cradles are holding each bomb firmly against the release hook. Denys, the bomb aimer jumps up and swings from one of the green painted 1000 lb. bombs "just to show his confidence" he always says.

"One of these days he'll end up flat on his back holding one of those bloody things" remarks the tail gunner. - "If he does he'll put it back by himself", calls one of the ground crew who has spent hours winching the bombs into place. We all laugh.

The bombs on each of the seventeen stations in the bomb bay are clustered safely - each bomb with a fuse link and safety pin in position. The ground crew have chalked their own messages on the bombs : "From Aunt Agatha and Tibby" - "from all in Tennyson St. Oldham" - "Catch this, butterfingers" - Best respects from the Vicar of St.Lukes" - the "The Robinson family, bombed out 1/10/40" and "Remember Coventry". There are other messages, some brutally frank, others just obscene. The bomb aimer and Sgt.Armourer, both go methodically along the rows of suspended bombs removing the ground safety pins which have ensured that the bombs will not explode if inadvertently dropped. The aircraft and her load of bombs are now ready and waiting for us, her flight crew. The hours of work on the aircraft are now over, the ground crew can sit back and relax after many hours.

The Sgt. Armourer removes his bicycle from against the aircraft wheel - wishes us a good trip and pedals slowly round to the next dispersal to the next aircraft, his bag of safety pins clanking in time with his pedals.

Bob - the pilot, looks at his watch - "O.K. chaps, we ought to be getting ready". Each member of the crew is attended by a small knot of helpers, who tuck us into our flying gear and then clad in cumbersome protective clothing, the mae-west flotation jackets, the parachute harness, bulky parachute pack, and dangling helmet oxygen mask and leads we stand around, smoking or chewing - just waiting.

Nobody talks, we aircrew adopt an air of studied casualness or engage ourselves on some activity which is taking place on the far side of the airfield. The ground crew lie around on the grass very mindful of the possibility that this dispersal pan may remain empty when the aircraft return - and will remain so until a new aircraft and a fresh crew arrive to replace us - they have an affinity with us and with the metallic monster they serve. The 20 odd yellow bombs carefully painted on Uncle's nose under the cockpit window, testify to their loyalty to their aircraft. And yet, our relationship, aircraft, ground staff, aircrew can be sundered, abruptly or quietly, without comment - even without significance to the life of the airfield on which they toil. Our successors would be welcomed with warmth, enthusiasm and the same respect that we received. They do not talk about our predecessors to us - they will not talk of us to our successors. So we live, just from dawn to the next dawn - they live and we live, each day as it comes: until when it does not - we vanish, "as a dream dies at break of day". And so it will continue.

The aircraft servicing form is brought out of the hut by Sgt. _____, Bob and I study it; Bob initials the various columns as I confirm the technical data recorded. This large *unquin* monster is now our responsibility - already one ground crew member is removing the red flags and easing the chocks from before the wheels. Around the tail a group of ground crew is debating with both gunners and the

Wireless Operator the merits of some regional beer. The conversation sounds somewhat forced and artificial - rather like a third-rate play. The mid-gunner detaches himself from the group and announces to the world that "he is for a nervous pee".

- "Not on that tail wheel," I yell, - "we have enough corrosion problems without your contribution". He moves off - a disgruntled figure in his large flying suit. A few moments later from the other side of the aircraft tail a furious female voice stridently adds, "and you can keep away from my van - I have to wash it down". The gunner eventually reappears - he looks uncomfortable - "Blasted women - shouldn't be around here - Ruddy leg is wet now". "Oh well," says the Navigator, "Biology will out!".

The small Standard van starts up and moves off - it is the ground crew ration truck, and as the driver passes us she is laughing at the discomfited gunner who shakes his fist at her.

A small Hillman staff car speeds along the perimeter track and turns down into our dispersal. A white head of Wg.Cdr.Carter's bull terrier sticks out of the passenger window, a pink tongue licking any hand that pats that square flat head. The Wg.Commander is not flying tonight, but he is taking the opportunity of wishing each crew well. We chat informally for a few moments and then with a nod and wave he roars away to the next aircraft to repeat his good wishes. We saunter back to the aircraft - each trying to appear nonchalant and unperturbed.

The sun is setting and the last flaming rays paint the cloud-streaked sky with a blaze of pink and gold. Around us etched against the evening sky the dark shapes of aircraft come to life - propellers jerking round and disintegrating into blurs of wreathing smoke and flickering shadow.

We climb aboard in strict order - the gunners who will need to be secured into their turrets - Navigator and Wireless operator with their bags of maps, charts and paraphernalia of their profession. The bomb-aimer crawls right up into the nose with his satchel; the pilot settles himself into his seat,

and myself - I check the doors and escape hatches, the ladders are stowed, the pigeon in his tin coop pokes out an inquisitive head - the rations are stowed safely on the rest bed. I ease myself past the Navigator and Wireless operator who are settling in and spreading their equipment into the workbench drawers and cubby holes. At my own position I check that the ground/flight switch is on GROUND - "Mickey Mouse O.K." - "O.K." says the bomb aimer. As the bomb doors are open it is possible to jettison the bomb load unless certain switches are correctly positioned - we have checked that they are correct. - The engines can now be started safely. I look at Bob - he is wriggling and jerking himself in his seat harness straps - I adjust one over his shoulders. - He nods - "Start up when you like".

I glance over the instruments - all are reading correctly; select No.1 tanks - press the ammeter test buttons - the booster pumps are satisfactory. Open the engine shut-off cocks - check pitch and throttle levers are correct for starting. I look out of the open window at the ground crew man sitting on the starter trolley. "Contact No.2 Engine" (No.2 and 3 engines drive the aircraft electrical generators) - "Contact No.2", he yells and extends an upturned thumb towards a pair of service boots and overalled legs I can see standing in the inboard engine nacelle. I press the starter button for No.2 engine, the starter grinds and the propeller slowly rotates, hesitates and jerks as the engine coughs blue smoke and a short stab of flame from the exhaust; I flick on the main ignition switches and the sharp unmistakable bark of a Merlin responds. I check the oil pressure gauge engine speed - both reading. I ease the throttle open until the engine is spinning over at 1200 revs. per minute - the propeller blades can just be seen. I select bomb-doors closed: the ground crew indicate that the doors are shut. I select flaps closed and the flap position indicator shows flaps closed, the under-carriage lights shine green The hydraulic pressurising valve operates with a loud metallic clump.

I lean out of the window, extend three fingers, the figure seated on the trolley waves, I press No.3 starter button. When No.1 and 4 engines have been started, the gunners rotate their turrets, swing the guns up and down, and announce that they are satisfactory. I watch as a pair of boots emerges from each inboard nacelle - followed by an overalled body each clutching the red-jury strut which prevents the undercarriage from closing should undercarriage UP be selected whilst we are still on the ground. Both struts are carried to the front of the aircraft and I wave acknowledgment. The radiator shutters are open and I look to the Pilot - we are ready to move - he nods and I wave the chocks away; two figures fling themselves onto the chock ropes and haul them away. I look now at the brake pressure gauge, throttle the engines right back. We are on our own, free to move. The aircraft is rocking gently on its fat tyres - grass around dispersal rippling like water. I pull on my helmet and plug in the intercom. The Pilot and Wireless operator are gazing at control tower for a green code light signal to permit us to move - so far control has not acknowledged our flashed 'U' but they must be busy, for aircraft are flashing their identification letters from all over the airfield; and our procession around the perimeter must be orderly. Meanwhile I open the main oxygen supply valves, check the ground/flight switch is now on flight - check that all generators are charging. Fuel tank cocks and cross balance cocks are selected. The vacuum pump pressure which drives the gyro instruments is working well - the artificial horizon bars are now level. "How about the gyro-compass Navigator" - O.K. - "we've been running 4 mins." I switch from Spin to Run.

I lift out my log and record time of start, fuel, tanks, pressures, temperatures and the checks that I have carried out.

"O.K. skipper, we've got our green," says the W/operator. "All aboard, any more for the Skylark" replies the bomb aimer. The crackling and popping of the two outer engines increases to a roar, a hiss of air as the brakes are released, the creaking movement and flexing of the undercarriage legs indicate our weight. The ground crew stand and watch, some with arms

folded - some with their backs to our slipstream - we lumber heavily along the short dispersal path and turn left onto the main perimeter track - ahead of us Z Zebra is blowing eddies of dust back to us - we follow the blue lights flush with the perimeter track - other ground crew standing on empty dispersals wave to us - we wave back. There is a brief flickering of morse from Z Zebra and Syd, the W/Op, translates - "Granfer sends his love and says Bobtail owes him 10 fags". "Hell-as-like," says Bobtail, who has not seen the morse flashing, "I stood him a pint at lunchtime. I'll sort him out when we get back".

"Remember the Prodigal son didn't dot his old man one" says the midgunner. "But neither did he scrounge his fags". The niceties of the theology do not develop and the conversation languishes. We wait in a long line, engines ticking over, the instrument panel dancing in rhythm with the staccato barking of the exhaust stubs.

Suddenly a black shape hurtles down the runway and disappears from view - C Charlie from B Flight. A few moments later another shape screams past and is gone and another and another. After what seems an eternity of waiting we are ready to line up - "O.K. oxygen masks on" - I clip on my mask dangling at my face, turn on the oxygen to the 10,000 ft. setting and wait for the gas to puff into my face. Tank boosters 'on'. Flaps selected to 15°. Aircraft Z, in front, has now lined up on the runway - his propellers dissolve into shimmering discs - he moves slowly forward, his tail rises high in the air, slipstream ripples the damp on the runway and his tail light disappears behind the rise in the runway. Presently a dark blur rises in view and banks over to port - he has gone - Good luck Granfer!

Bob and I are busy with our cockpit litany of pre-take off checks. Flaps are selected, radiator shutters closed, windows shut and locked - flying controls exercised and autopilot clutch selected. - One last look at all the instrument dials and switches. Bob hands over the check list and I clip it to my log board. We tug at our straps and nod to one another. "Pilot to crew - lining up for take-off".

The crackle of our exhausts increases into a roar and dies away as a burst of engine power moves us into position. A green light flashes 'U' from the control caravan. "Hold at 0 for 5", I say cryptically. Bob nods - Throttles are pushed open - engine boost pressure rises from -4 to 0. We pause and the engine power stabilises into a steady beat - soot is burned off the spark plugs and the engine supercharger drains cleared of residual accumulated fuel, emitted as a plume of black exhaust smoke -. We both mentally count up to 5 - brakes are released, a hiss of air - the aircraft oleo legs stretch a little - we move forward and Bob juggles the throttles to hold the aircraft straight on the runway - I take the throttles and move them slowly to the gate - through the gate at +14 lbs. of supercharger boost - the aircraft is racing forward - 50, 60, 70 - my eyes flick over the instruments, my ears attuned for any hesitation in the roar of power - "engines O.K.", I state - a quick glance outside - the undercarriage oleo legs are stretching and lengthening - the main wheels still running along the runway, beating rhythmically over the rubber joints in the concrete with an increasing tempo - I glance at Bob - he is still holding the control column forward - the aircraft will be held to the ground until the last possible second - the airspeed indicator shows that we have reached a minimum 3 engine speed - Even if an engine fails now we could still control the aircraft. The beat of tyres ceases - 7, 8, 9, 10 we count, brakes on, wheels up, - a hiss of air, a metallic clang from the hydraulic valves. I move the undercarriage selector - two red lights flash on my indicator panel, the aircraft pitches slightly and Bob operates the trim wheel. I watch the wheels move slowly and relentlessly into the nacelle - the doors close, the red lights go out - Power is reset - flap is selected in the aircraft trimmed for climb. I look out, the horizon is at an angle and we are turning slowly towards a red flashing ground beacon - our trip will start as we cross the beacon - "Navigator to Pilot" - we are all formal now - it obviates confusion as between crew members - "Course 092 magnetic". We have crossed our first hazard - we are in the air with a bomb load - so far we are safe.

Now it will be routine work until we approach Holland. Tension eases - now we are committed - apprehension has passed. Pumps, cocks, switches, instruments - settings adjusted - log sheets completed. Now we can look into the deepening gloom on the earth - up here the light is pure and clear. Far above, streaks of cirrus cloud are drawn across the deepening blue of the eastern horizon. Around us specks merge and separate - each heading in the same direction - aircraft all heading out with us - all keeping clear while we can see each other - in front and behind, specks - like rooks returning home at eventide.

The light is turning from purple to inky blue - the mottled green and brown patchwork of fields merging into a grey blue blur far below. Instruments glow with a soft green fluorescence and I run my eye over them and again record their readings into my log sheet. Engine power settings and fuel consumptions are re-checked and plotted for the last time before leaving the coast. Oxygen flow is finally adjusted and confirmed in a monosyllabic litany with each crew member. Already the details of the aircraft are becoming lost in the gathering darkness, soon the engines and wings will be just a dark blur outside the cockpit window illuminated only by the violet glow of the exhaust flame. I peer slowly and carefully over the aircraft for a final look at the aircraft surfaces, for leakage, loose cowlings - and a long stare at the erratic bursts of incandescent sparks whirling away beneath the wing - no! the gunners are not concerned about them.

The aircraft is flying satisfactorily - now far far below, the dark rim of the coast shows through the ground haze. A click - Navigator to Pilot - ETA coast 4 minutes. Then - ah! the departure point beacons spring to light - 3 search lights - their beams intersecting at 15,000 - we should fly through this as a fixed navigation point. Bomb aimer and navigator confer with each other - a drift sight is taken and confirmed by the bomb aimer's bomb sight. - A new course is given as we pass over the searchlight cone - six pairs of eyes staring into the darkness for other friendly shapes which nevertheless could prove a lethal hazard. The town of Mablethorpe slides away beneath us - a wing dips and we swing slowly to a new heading -

a series of shudders pass through the aircraft as we cross the disturbed air flow of another aircraft. The specks have disappeared - we are on our own in the darkness.

The gyro-compass needle ticks round to the new heading hesitates and ticks back a few degrees as the aircraft straightens up. When it is stationary Bob checks the magnetic compass heading, resets the bezel and confirms with the deviation card that both compasses agree. He nods with satisfaction, and winks at me reassuringly above the snout of his oxygen mask.

We head out over sea glinting like hammered pewter. Now!, check for chinks of light from the navigator's lights - the curtain is adjusted and tucked in until we are certain that no light shows from the navigator's compartment. Anyone want the "can" - last chance to relieve ourselves - no one does! Each crew member now has his own specific checks to carry out. Bomb aimer re-checks the bomb selection and sets the turret guns to fire. The W/Op. fits the 'colours of the day' cartridge into the VERY pistol above his head; tunes into Base and records any last minute instructions which he pushes into the navigator's hand. The guns are all cocked and set to fire. Another litany of checks between myself and each crew member and finally, "Engineer to Pilot - aircraft satisfactory". Now there is only time - hanging motionless in space - the glint of light on a moving perspex - the steady roar of engines. - The slow heaving and dipping, the arcing of stars over the canopy - the rhythmic puffing of oxygen in the mask. I settle more firmly on my seat, gaze at the dull red of the engine exhausts and the lilac banner of flame and wait. Bob looks across at me and we nod and wink reassuringly at each other. Bob eases his mask on his face then points with his gloved finger at No.3 engine speed indicator which has developed a 100 rev. speed waver - he cocks a quizzical eyebrow: a quick look at the stationary stroboscopic shadow of the propellers and a steady even roar of all four engines - I shake my head and hold finger and thumb in a letter O - everything is satisfactory, the instrument is defective - or, just sticking perhaps. I yawn. "Navigator to skipper, 12 minutes to Dutch coast." I stand, flip my seat into the stowed position,

ease my parachute straps and check over the fuel contents gauges. "Tanks to be changed in 20 minutes. Navigator please advise time."

Now for my own party piece! - I look at Bob and he nods - "Engineer to crew - we are going up the steps".

Height is always an advantage - if we could be 500 or 1000 ft. above the remainder of the bomber stream, that was so much more in our favour - to achieve that was my secret and closely guarded by the crew - we don't want everyone else up with us - no one should share our advantage - I switch the engine superchargers from M to S. Each engine thumps into the high gear and a tattered banner of exhaust sparks streams back over the aircraft. I check the increase in power and nod to the Pilot. Bob braces against the control column - right - the flap lever goes down and back as 10° of flap is selected. The sudden increase in lift kicks the aircraft up 200 to 300 ft. with a jolt that flexes my knees. Select flaps 'IN' again, speed built up - again 10° and a jolt upwards. Eventually the aircraft wallows up and slowly sinks back - we have reached our ceiling - an additional 1250 ft., very satisfactory - "O.K., on top of the stairs". - Now the party could start, - no other aircraft can be seen at our altitude.

Right - "crew search positions" - 6 pairs of eyes swing round to particular quarters of the sky and stare into the dark. From now on gunners in their turrets can command instant obedience - "let's have a look underneath" - O.K., rolling starboard", followed by a sweeping roll enabling the sky *and earth* beneath us to be surveyed - then over to the other wing - nothing beneath - no one in Europe, it seems, is waiting for us off the coast of Holland. We are now almost on the coast - already ahead of us small lights wink on the ground to be followed later by an identical number of sparks in the air - strings of coloured lights emerge from the haze and degenerate into whirling corkscrews far below us.- Light flak - energetic but ineffectual. I note with a sort of professional detachment; dark splotches in the sea slide beneath us - the outer islands of Holland, and then "Should be a sky marker anytime now", - and so there is!

Dead ahead a burst of light—and a green candelabra bursts dripping and sparkling with light hanging in space. The pathfinder has given the bomber stream a turning or location point. Bomb aimer and Navigator cluck with satisfaction! -

My stomach tightens - out there in the darkness enemy fighter aircraft will be converging around the chandelier, like moths round a candle - I look at Bob, he is gripping the control column and—swinging the aircraft in a steady corkscrew, rolling, dipping, up, round, down - "keep looking crew". - Acknowledge from everyone except mid gunner - he will be engaged in being quietly and privately sick - he has his own paper bag - but by common consent we never mention it - we all have our own private reactions. My jaws ache with the involuntary clenching of teeth! - He must hate it even more - alone, cold, naked in a bubble of plastic, and vulnerable. Bundled in a cumbersome electrically heated suit, cramped and crouching for hours on end - the widest and most fearsome viewpoint of us all. - His parachute pack stowed away in the darkness of the fuselage rip-cord downwards so that he can't grab it in error, assailed by the fumes of hydraulic oil and the Elsan toilet. His is a lonely and monotonous vigil.

Bobtail, tucked into his turret beneath a notice^{stolen} from an LMS coach stating 'Passengers are warned not to put their heads out of the windows'. Indignation, even Wigan indignation availed him nothing - the notice stays. - He can see nothing of us but the two elliptical rudders - a sense of detachment - his own private war - the world spread out at his feet, his only connection, the impersonal voices in his earphones until, on the plod back across the English countryside, one or other members of the crew will bang on his turret doors and pass a flask of coffee in to him - usually at this time the mid gunner would light a surreptitious cigarette and - when finished flick the glowing butt end through the gun ports where it would be carried aft by the slipstream to bounce off the plastic hood of Bobtail's turret and cascade into a fiery tail of a myriad sparks. This never fails to produce a reaction from a weary Bobtail and a cackle of hysterical laughter from the mid-gunner.

But now, life is very serious - 5 short seconds of inattention and we could be cremated in a funeral pyre that would take 30 seconds to erupt in the fields of Europe below us. - We know the penalty, we have witnessed it many times - it is just as horrifying each time. - Sometimes one or two parachutes could be seen swinging in the cold air - "Well, thank God, two got out - should we ever be as lucky?"

A click - a deep breath - 'Tail to crew - a 110 below crossing starboard to port' - Watch him tail - Mid upper searches the other quarter to see if there is a companion aircraft. Bobtail aligns the fighter in his sights and waits - we wait, very still - the temptation to duck, to weave, to do something is almost irresistible. My jaws ache even more. Instinctively I have moved away from my stowed seat and the perspex blister on the aircraft window: - on a previous trip, we had been attacked by a fighter and that portion of the cockpit canopy had dissolved in a shower of perspex and perforated metal. Silly of me even to imagine the same spot being ripped apart by cannon shells on this occasion too! My stomach tightens and a mouthful of acid fills the back of my throat. The closeness of my body to the armour plated back plate - designed to protect the pilot - affords some sense of relief. I try to imagine where the cannon shells will explode through the cockpit floor beneath my feet and transfer my weight from one foot to another. What is the other aircraft doing. When he commits himself to an attack, we shall wheel abruptly in a tight climbing or diving turn so that the gunners can fire but the enemy aircraft will be on the outside of the turn and cannot bring his guns to bear on us. If he has seen us, we are then both poised like fencers, each opponent waiting for a move from the other. The crew are braced for instant action like sprinters waiting for GO, without the 'STEADY GET SET' from the starter. I can feel sweat trickling down my face and around my oxygen mask. We remain still as waxworks, - a tableau suspended in space. I can't even swallow; the acid in my mouth tastes vile. I can't even see; where is he - I'm sure I shall be sick.

Then - "I don't think he's seen us" - "He's moving away out to port". The sense of relief is almost physical - thank goodness for our additional height. "Did you see any features", asks mid-gunner - it is important to repeat back anything, anything that may be a clue to enemy change of technique, equipment, tactics - crumbs of information given by crews who saw and survived help to build a picture of enemy capabilities. - "Hell of a lot of aerals on his nose and a J I think on the starboard wing".

"If he was that close you could have made his eyes water"; says the Bomb aimer. - The reply is a grunt - Bobtail is again combing the sky.

If the 110 was close, it was too far away for Bobtail to be certain of blowing him out of the sky with one burst. He was more heavily armed than we and could outpace us too! Heroic gestures are not required of bomber crews - especially in this war and none of us is interested in posthumous glory. Bomb aimer's comment is understood as an expression of nervous relief and not of admonishment. I suddenly realise that I have been holding my breath and wishing that they would not talk so loudly - stupid of me!

My muscles relax a little - how by bracing them I could prevent pieces of shrapnel perforating my skin, only my subconscious mind could rationalise. I blink the sweat out of my eyes. Bob wipes his brow with the back of his hand.

Nav. to Engineer - 'tank change time' - I reselect the booster pumps, operate the appropriate tank selector cocks - watch for the red low pressure warning light - all is well. Tank selection, contents, time, remaining fuel, endurance. All are recorded - "Engineer to Nav. Endurance 6 hours 30 mins - call me in 2 hours". - I look at Bob - we nod - all is well. Winking bursts of flak and probing fingers of searchlights well over to starboard - Oh that will be - the diversion town some 120 miles south of track. - But a North Ruhr town means that we are now over Germany. The opposition can be expected to become more accurate and spiteful.

I fish a piece of chewing gum from the pocket of my sidcot, ease my oxygen mask and pop the gum into my mouth. Already my nose and chin are sore from the chafing of the mask; chewing will ease the ache in my jaw. I look at my watch - with luck $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours should see us home. - Eyes outside again - forward - down - right - left - up - left - right - out over the wing tip. Back - forward, at least I do have other things to do besides the eternal peering into the darkness hoping to see - and fearing I might! My vest is clammy and cold to my back. The gunners cannot stretch or relax.

A solitary mauve searchlight flicks on - ahead and to port - 4 or 5 blue white jump into existence and join it in an erratic cone - a small battery - a bunch of red and orange splashes - about our height. A sudden red orange flash blossoms below the nose - the aircraft judders and fills with a sharp acrid smoke - instinctively we swing into and across the searchlight beams which are moving towards us - we thus double their prediction error. Heads duck down to avoid being dazzled by the glare. Three more flashes out on the starboard wing tip, the cockpit is alight with a blue glow from the receding searchlight beams, we swing round again onto our original heading but height and speed have changed. Suddenly the lights go out - why? We look at each other - using our precious height we increase speed - the engines increase from a roar to a rapid oscillating scream as I push pitch and throttle levers to the gate. More jolting - we cross the airflow of another heavy aircraft - still nothing; suddenly the searchlights come alive again. "Well behind us now" reports tail. We ease off the power and I watch the airspeed needle creep slowly back to our cruising speed - and re-set the pitch levers until the "whoom-whoom" of the propellers settles to a long drawn roar, the staccato note from the exhausts muting into a steady unruffled beat. My eyes check all over the surfaces for signs of damage but see none; Wireless operator and mid-gunner look along the trailing edge of the wing surfaces for signs of fuel leakage - a white film or mist - we all sniff to establish that there is no raw fuel inside the aircraft - all appears well. More searchlights ahead again - lots of flak bursts, winking fierce

little red eyes in the darkness - "Flak dead ahead," says the bomb aimer. "How are we for time, Navigator," says Bob - Ninety four seconds in hand - We can afford to weave without losing our place in the bombing order. This time the wing points straight towards the ground, the nose tracks around the horizon - then I hold the window grip as my feet come away from the floor - the other wing is now pointing to the horizon - which has moved right up the windscreen. Abruptly the horizon slides down to a corner of my windscreen and knees buckle as my feet hit the cockpit floor.

"Damn and blast" - my ruddy compasses - "sorry Nav. but I don't want us predicted" - The compasses can always be retrieved on the way home when the immediate danger will have passed. Among the flicker of sparks on our port side, one continues, develops into a yellow lamp and grows - it becomes a streak, changes to red; suddenly it becomes two streaks changing to orange and steepens into a vertical path twisting about itself. Then just above the cloud there is a flash of multi-coloured light which leaves a greasy looking ball of brown smoke staining the cloud - some flickering fingers of flame drip earthwards. "Someone's bought it," says mid upper in a flat expressionless voice. Time and position are noted by the Navigator - "Any parachutes?" - "Don't be bloody silly - looked as if a wing came adrift". - Such is the epitaph of another aircraft and crew - they are not mentioned again. Ground defences are voraciously clamouring after yet another victim for their *moloch*.

Another course change - we are swinging through 80°. for a run to the target - according to the Intelligence and Planning staffs - the enemy fighter control should now be massing their night fighter force over a town some 150 miles to the east of our target. The Mosquito force should be dropping "spoof" marker flares, bombs, incendiaries above the town to convince the enemy that we shall be attacking that particular target.

The town which is our target is still hidden deep in the haze as yet far below and in front of us. More flares drop, hanging in the sky, smoking and sparkling.

Directly in front of us the earth is lit by flashes and a streak of white scintillating sparks, some of which turn to red and orange. Obviously an aircraft in trouble has jettisoned his load of bombs. Probably some fields are now on fire - so far as that aircraft is concerned the raid has not been successful - the bomber was diverted from its target and all the efforts put into preparing it have also been wasted. The guns in the front turret dip and the turret ceases to move, "Can't see if they managed to do any damage down there," - the turret resumes its restless moving. A click - "Navigator to bomb aimer, better get your target maps out, Target Indicators will be going down soon".

The navigator is anxious that the bomb aimer is in position and can identify the aiming point - if such is possible. The wireless operator has returned his set to the frequency selected by the Master Bomber - he in a Mosquito aircraft only a few hundred feet above the target ^{and} will pass any instructions to us if the target indicator flares have not been placed accurately enough by the Pathfinder force. Tension is again building up - the climax of the mission is approaching - we do not want to ruin the work put in by the staffs back at base. The target area is a factory centre on the north of the town - no one wants to waste the bombing effort now.

The front turret ceases to swing from side to side and remains stationary with its twin browning guns pointing upwards. The bulk of the bomb-aimer eases itself out of the turret and flops down on the bomber's couch. A series of clicks and heavy breathing noises indicate that he has reconnected his oxygen and intercomm lead. - He forages around in his satchel, produces the target map and a marked up copy of the navigators map showing the track to and from the target. I squat down and see him settle himself into the perspex bowl which forms the characteristic chin of the Lancaster - he waves his hand over his head - to indicate that he needs no assistance from me.

I stand up by the pilot - now I have an extra part of the sky to scan - the bomb aimer will have his attention on the ground, far below. - No lights, no flak - it seems too good to be true, it is eerie - uncanny. Bob senses it too.

- Pilot to Nav. - " Am heading course 175 - will you recheck"
 - a few seconds - then " course and track O.K. - You have 4
 minutes to target."

Four minutes - no lights or opposition - have the defences been fooled or are they saving something special for us. I peer downwards into the darkness - nothing shows - no glimmer of light, no burst of gunfire. The air raid warnings will have sounded some time ago and the citizens huddled in their shelters and bunkers will be listening to the increasing rumble of the bomber stream. Do they wonder, as we do, what has happened to their defence system - they with consternation - us, with apprehension. Ahead a cascade of red sparkling candelabra bursts into view slightly starboard of our track. Navigator was right again - we shall swing round the skymarker and all head on the same course for the target - the same course, all bombing on the same target marker. In about 30 minutes of bombing the raid will be over, some 800 or 900 aircraft will have dropped a carpet of incendiary and high explosive over the town which has been selected for the devastation of tonight's raid. Now the opposition is becoming active, small groups of flak are bursting in the air, streams of multi-coloured light flak arc upwards in patterns of slow moving dots. Several solitary searchlight beams probe the sky, some stationary, others moving in jerks apparently at random. It looks innocuous enough to be a firework display; but we know the crews on the ground ahead of us must be sweating and toiling with a sense of sick apprehension that we know so well up here among the stars. The battle is about to be joined.

- Engineer to crew - "I am going back to the "trizeall"
 I have to check that the photo flash flares leave the aircraft satisfactorily - they have the explosive power of a 250 lb. bomb and are detonated by a barometric switch - a hang-up with a flash swinging in space could be disastrous when we come down to a lower altitude. The flash produces sufficient light to enable the camera to photograph the bomb fall.

I unclip my oxygen pipe - reconnect it to a portable bottle. "O.K. now I'm coming back." Navigator switches off his lamps - moves the curtain across - grabs my parachute pack

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~~and~~ pass to him and hands it to the radio operator, who in his shirt sleeves is standing with his head in the astro-dome searching the sky that I have abandoned.

I give a long last look at the aircraft instruments, thumbs up to the pilot - who replies "have a good holiday". I unplug my intercom, wriggle past the Navigator - climb over the main spar and grab my parachute from the wireless operator.. The wooden door closes behind me to shut out the draught and I fumble for my life line, grab and hang on. The life line is my own idea - a simple piece of washing line secured along the centre-length of the aircraft. On a previous trip we had been attacked by a fighter, but as my intercom was not connected I was unaware of what was happening; inside the fuselage I had no opportunity of establishing either my position or the cause of the violent manoeuvres. I was thus rolled around the aircraft with my oxygen mask torn off - the portable bottle lost and my parachute pack caught on a projection inside the unpenetrable blackness of the hull. - That experience so unnerved me that I had installed my own modification to enable me to pull myself along the fuselage like a young swimmer who uses the swimming bath rail to help him along. A tiny green spot of fluorescence locates the oxygen plug - I shut off the portable bottle, clip it to my harness and plug in to the main system. I reconnect the intercom. plug and tell the crew that I am in position. The drumming of blood in my ears slows down and I wipe the sweat off my face with my gloved hand. The aircraft is now so cold that any portion of skin touching the aircraft surface will stick - I am therefore wearing woollen fingerless mittens, silk flying gloves and sturdy leather gauntlets which will enable me to grip, push, pull, manipulate without the danger of being frozen to the equipment. I feel over the flashes nestling in their oblique flare chutes - through the dimness I can make out the bulk of the mid-gunner's turret - I slap his leg as it rotates slowly past my face. The noise of the slipstream is frightful here, screaming and battering the side of the 'plane demanding to enter through unseen chinks and probing with icy fingers at my eyes and cheeks. I recheck that my parachute is correctly stowed and

squat down behind the step of the bomb-bay. I must look along the rows of bombs all visible through the perspex window and satisfy myself that they have all left the aircraft - we are beginning our bombing run - the most dangerous part of the trip - steady and level - just the opportunity the night fighter wants. The bomb doors swing open and at last I can see clearly - Already the streaks of burning incendiaries, the dull red glow of fires - the silent splash of heavy explosive combine to illuminate the underside of the 'plane, I can see clearly the bombing instruction panel rivetted to the inside of the bomb door. The aircraft heaves and wheels slightly, acres of fire unroll before me - the bright splashes of photo flashes illuminate the rolling clouds of smoke and away I can see briefly the shapes of other bombers as they crawl over this glowing carpet. A series of thumps, and the bombs drop away one after the other seeming to keep level with us until they merge into the smoky darkness below, the silver incendiary bombs fluttering like minnows in a stream. - The aircraft pitches down and then the gravity loading presses me to the floor - the added 'G' load will free any bombs that may have been released but 'hang-up' - all the bomb racks are empty and the giant doors close shutting out the glowing backdrop. ^{flashes} I kneel up and run my hand along the flare chute - they have all gone - more cautiously I pull on all the fuse link wires - they too come up the chutes each carrying a dangling fuse pin - At least our photo flashes are no hazard to us.

The aircraft is rolling and pitching violently now - I sit and brace myself - we weave our way out of the target area.

It seems an age before the pilot calls me forward - clip on the oxygen hose, retrieve my parachute pack - unplug my intercom and grasping the life line haul myself forward in the roaring darkness.

The draught door is open - the wireless operator is again invisible from the waist up. The neon tubes on the radio are glowing - an open bag of boiled sweets is secured to his operating log by an elastic band - well that is kind.

I help myself to a couple and squeeze past the Navigator. We wriggle again in the confined space and he jerks the curtain across as I clip my chute into its stowage. Oxygen and intercom reconnected I breathe deeply and run my eye over the gauges - we have lost some height but the wander of No.3 speed gauge has ceased. I retune the engines to eliminate the slow hunt of the out-of-synchronous beat. All appears normal and I gesture to Bob, sitting crouched over the control column. In front of me the front turret is slowly moving again; behind, the sky is an ominous red glow. "Still see the fires" says Bobtail - Hells teeth - how far ~~are~~ we away - must have an enormous head wind - but no, we are but 35 miles from the target and ^{shall} still see the glow in the sky at 75 miles. I wonder briefly what the citizens will be doing - the hundreds of unexploded delay-action 500 lb. and 1000 lb. bombs will prevent much hope of effective action for about 36 hours. Did the crews who bombed Coventry and London have qualms as they returned - it is so impersonal - we can neither hear nor see what is happening on the ground - our foe is in the air - like us peering into the darkness, looking and looking.

Flak and searchlights seem much less - but they always do on the way home - probably we deceive ourselves - but there it is. Many crews must have perished with this illusion and relaxed as they began the long slog homeward.

We are beginning the pull up from a roll, when both gunners call "Climb Starboard - go!" An incredible clatter of machinery, a stink of cordite and lights flashing. Flame from the gun muzzles seems incredibly long.

"Dive Port - GO" - says Bobtail - once again I float in space - hand on throttles and scrabbling for a hold on the aircraft - the enemy pilot had seen us at the same time as the gunners had seen him - he has banked to pursue our course but has chosen the wrong course - his shooting is wild and as he skids round to correct his turn, he is overtaking us and presenting his belly to both gunners. Six dotted streaks of tracer converge on him and small eruptions of flame speckle his surface as he flies through the gunners' fire. I peer into the darkness from whence he had come - was he alone? -

or is there a twin-engine control aircraft vectoring him on to us. The single engined machine has flipped over onto his back and disappeared vertically downwards. What damage he had sustained we do not know - but we agree - that is the gunners were sure that he had not seen us until the last moment, and then misread our manoeuvre. A single engine fighter at night is unusual - but if he was being directed on to us by airborne radar, that could explain his method of attack and the celerity with which he broke off combat. This brief interlude jolts us out of any complacency - I reset the throttles and switch off the boost pumps.

The navigator's rather schoolmasterish tone states that "if we had finished larking about" we were 12 miles south of track. Steer 278⁰ for 6 minutes and I'll check again. 'On course' says Bob in a conciliatory tone - he and I look at each other and shake our heads. Navigators shut away from the outside world are immune from the sudden perils that we other crew members face.

Ahead the cumulus clouds range in irregular ranks, their tops tinted with silver from a moon which peeps fitfully around each minaret, and lightens the dark vaults and caverns between the towers. The earth below is bathed in a mist through which the gleam of a river shows from time to time.

So far the trip has been uneventful - soon we should be crossing the coast. I re-check the instruments and resume my searching of the sky - my eyelids are prickling with weariness - my mouth is dry from the oxygen which puffs into my face with soothing precision, the indicator winking at me comfortingly - oh! if all trips were as uneventful - Bob, hunched in his seat rolls the aircraft, his eyes looking far ahead for the coast. No one speaks except to acknowledge a routine call. I unwrap another piece of chewing gum and pop it into my mouth.

Ahead and to port of us a group of flashes reflect in the cloud - Flak - "about 20 miles away - west of track" says the bomb aimer and his turret swings across to enable him to locate the source. There is now, as we watch, a furious activity on the ground, two - no, three groups of batteries are in action - the underside of the clouds are suddenly

illuminated by a searchlight group which cannot penetrate the thick cloud. Bob and I look at one another - this is unusual - "Are we on track". - "Oh yes!" says Nav. We settle tightly and glumly to force our way forward. Already wisps of cloud flick over the wing - the engines disappear and reappear as we become enveloped in their clammy embrace. We are now half blinded - we cannot see shell bursts, we cannot see the gun flashes - but their prediction equipment can locate us. - My stomach tightens up again - my scalp itches - above us, in brief glimpses, the cloud tops tower above, below all around is a void. Just to starboard a group of 4 red splashes followed by a single splotch - "Christopher, I heard that," says a sepulchral voice - the mid-gunner always drops his voice when he is scared. The wing drops steeply as we swing into the bursts - as we do so 3 more, 2 more and 2 more just ahead of our nose - that was good shooting. The cloud becomes suddenly dazzlingly bright - "Hell fire", says someone - it could be true - as we swing back the engines roaring at full power - there is a flash outside and below my window and several "spangs" as pieces of metal punch holes in the skin. - "They are getting too bloody good" - mutters a voice. I flip back my seat and brace my legs. More red flashes and the horizon vanishes - then an orange flash, a scream cut short, grinding of metal followed by a whoomph! and a gale of wind.

The curtain flaps madly - a misty smell of oil and a steady roar of something.

"Keep going on your heading - we'll hang on" - Bob is too busy to acknowledge - the flashes appear and disappear - nothing from the front turret, the guns are pointing to the sky and the turret stays half swivelled. Another flash and stink of cordite followed by a heavy clunk and a sound like tearing cloth. Before I can identify the cause a terrible vibration - everything becomes blurred and a screaming wow-ow-ow-ow deafens all else. No.3 engine is shaking like a terrier with a rat - white mist is pouring from the cowling joints. I jab the feathering button and the noise dies away as the propeller slows and stops - white mist continues to pour from the engine and I have just time to notice a jagged hole in one propeller blade.

Other things need my immediate attention. Alternately floating in space and pressed to my knees I help the navigator to secure the flapping blackout curtain. The aircraft is dark - thank goodness the searchlights have vanished - we dare not stop our gyrations - the splodges of light are fewer, they are mostly behind us. Bobtail's voice - "I'm sure we have passed the coast" - "I can see the moon and the sea." - "We ain't going in either of those directions" says the W/Op. We smile to ourselves - we are not - but only just not!!

Now to tidy up - still nothing from the bomb aimer - I crawl forward - everything is sticky and slippery. It is oil, oil over everything. Even in the dark the cause is obvious, a turret recuperator line has been severed and oil has been pumped into the compartment to be turned into spray by the wind entering a long rip in the skin. I crawl up to the bomb aimers legs in the turret and pat one of them - there is no response. That's bad - I feel upwards in the darkness and discover a glove and a hand - I squeeze the hand - it squeezes back and I feel a sense of relief so great I nearly vomit. Dead hands don't squeeze!

More exploration and the dangling end of the bomb aimer's intercom lead is in my hand. I plug it in and ask if he is alright: a very faint voice replies, "I can't move and I can't breathe in", - can't breathe - at this altitude. He can breathe out but not in? - what in heavens name sort of wound has he got? A quick consultation with Pilot and Navigator - he must be got out of his turret and put on the rest bed. - W/Op to find a diversion airfield and ask for medical help - ought he to have morphine - I grab a first aid pack and stuff it into my sidcot pocket.

I can't move him - flat on my back, arms stretched up to the turret winding handle I move the turret to its central position and lock it. Now, arms stretched up, grasp the parachute straps and tug and tug - the sweat runs into my eyes - my arms ache - my head throbs. Fuel!! - what is the tankage and fuel contents. Damnation I should have checked - I wriggle backwards - slipping and sliding on the oil - a sudden

pain in my hand - there ripped open by a jagged piece of the aircraft skin. - Oh well it will wait. I flop down before the panel - check the fuel contents - we appear to have lost about 100 gal. from one of the starboard tanks. I reselect tanks - we have enough fuel - I feel dirty and weary - back again - more oil - more darkness - more shrieking icy wind. Feel upwards for the parachute straps - Grief! they feel tight - I slide my hands around the inert body - surely he has not inflated his flotation jacket!! - he doesn't answer. Frantically I force my arm between his body and the turret - there up against his chest - the rubber tube for inflating the jacket by mouth - I pull it down and unscrew the nipple - the jacket deflates and the straps become easier. The bomb aimer falls on top of me as I pull him out - he is free - he can breathe again - He had inadvertently operated the compressed gas bottle while he was in the turret - the bottle had discharged - inflated his flotation jacket and trapped him in his turret, the pressure had expanded against the straps and prevented his breathing - he could neither breathe nor move and felt sure that he had been mortally wounded and was slowly dying. I leave him lying on his bombing pad.

Now what other damage have we sustained. I replace the shell dressing and morphia syringe back into their stowage and commence my survey.

- All control surfaces work - good! Three engines satisfactorily roaring - I reset the power and we begin our descent across the north sea. The cockpit windows are opaque with oil - one panel has vanished and the slipstream is howling in through the gap. - There are rips in the skin of the wings and a tattered streamer of fabric flutters from the elevator.

I am worried about the engine nacelle for No.3 engine, there is a great gash in front of the engine bulkhead and several smaller gashes along the undercarriage doors. I must check that the main tyre has not been damaged - and I must check to see the hydraulic accumulator pressure is satisfactory. If the hydraulic circuit has been damaged and the tyre suspect, then our adventures are not yet over. I must then plan and advise - now what else?

I advise Bob of the circumstances - and he says in a flat voice, "Found anything else?". "Nothing serious in the cockpit," I say - "I must go and check aft". - Bob points to his blind flying panel : - where the instruments should be there is a twisted shapeless hole - broken glass and the entrails of instruments - another hole in the cockpit window by his shoulder indicates the exit point of the shell fragment - By sheer good fortune the airspeed indicator is still working, although it needs to be held to stop it vibrating if it is to be read.

- Use the Nav's indicator for landing, I say, he can read out the speeds - we will have enough to do as it is.

We are slowly sinking earthwards as I make my way aft. The W/Op. points to another hole in the side of the aircraft - so what! - it's not big - he shakes his head and points to a note he has scribbled for the navigator. "I.F.F. U/S" - The cryptic initials indicate that our identification radio has been damaged by flak and is not working. British defences cannot identify ^{us} as an R.A.F. machine and will be free to fire at us in anger. I pause and point to the Very signal pistol - if we are fired at we can fire off the colours of the day to identify ourselves. The W/Op nods but without a great deal of confidence. Both Army and R.N. are inclined to shoot first and ask later.

The aft section of the aircraft appears to be sound - there are about 2 dozen small holes in the skin - all whistling shrilly, but no apparent serious damage. I press the jagged metal in the floor with my boot - I must warn Bobtail and the mid-gunner to be careful when coming forward, those jagged edges are razor sharp.

We are approaching the flat English coast line at about 6000 feet - the air has warmed up - any ice will have melted. With some trepidation we open the bomb doors - Bobtail peering into the darkness to see if any of our incendiary bombs had been frozen into the carriers and were now free. - No! all bombs have been dropped during our bombing run. Bomb doors closed - Well the hydraulic circuit still seems O.K.

"Try the undercarriage and flaps," says Bob - "then we can have a coffee".

Praise be! both work - but I must check that tyre - its too dark to see anything at the moment.

The coast is coming up and one or two fingers of searchlights are moving querulously back and forth. "Colours of the day ready" says the W/Op as he passes up our coffee flasks.

At last, I can unclip my oxygen mask, sit back on my seat and pour out my coffee. I do the same for Bob and we both sit sipping gratefully - the smell and taste is nectar. As the first faint streaks of dawn lighten the horizon we assess what we are to do. W/Op has already sent a cryptic coded message to base informing them that we are damaged but unhurt - They have acknowledged.

The coast is no longer grey - but brown, fringed with long ribbons of foam, a brown and green patchwork quilt of farms spreads out below. On each side, dots in the sky all heading the same way, gather as a ragged flock of rooks return to their roosting copse. We lower the wheels again and look at the slowly rotating tyre - the white creep-marks stand out clearly as the wheel slowly rotates in the slipstream. The hydraulic system is satisfactory, the wheel looks alright but we cannot decide if it is deflated or might burst as we land on it.

Bob decides that as we only have 3 engines we must land the first time - we have insufficient power to go round again with safety. The crew must take up crash positions and lower the exit ladders - We will leave the hatches in position but the W/Op. will remain plugged in to the intercomm system to receive last second information before we touch down. Bob and I will remain alone in the cockpit.

The famous "Boston stump" has slid by below and now as we approach the fields and wolds of Lincolnshire the crew foregather in the rest position - they look weary and red-eyed - there is none of the usual talking - Mid-gunner opts to stay in his turret as look-out as Bobtail has had an

electrical failure in one leg of his suit and his leg is still numb with cold.

We call Base and inform that HOSTIL U-uncle seeks permission to join circuit on three engines.

Priority landing - join circuit at 1500 - other aircraft to hold. We state our fears of the tyre and that we are in crash positions. As the wheels go down on the downwind leg I can see toy vehicles racing along the airfield to position themselves in wait for us. The undercarriage lights change from red to green. Flap is eased out - speed and power are set. On the cross wind leg we hold height and speed - we have only one chance. Crew are in position and braced - O.K. here goes - Full flap pitches the nose down - the runway is rising to meet us - 10 kts in hand from Navigator's chanting - The runway drops slightly as the control is eased gently back - black skid marks flash beneath us - I cut power to a snapping and crackling of exhausts - Bob lifts one wing to put the sound wheel down first. A grunt and screech - a slight shudder - we have done it - the wheels are running a steady beat then - BANG - Bam, Bam, Bam, Bam of flapping rubber - a creaking of metal - Bob puts the control hard over to lift the wing - the runway swings over to the left as the aircraft leans against me - Cut!! - already I have slammed the shut-off levers closed and snapped off engine ignition switches. The metallic groaning ceases - the undercarriage has held - we clamber out into the fresh air to the clink and ting of cooling metal. Everyone out? - I return and check all switches off - cocks closed hydraulic pressure relieved - then I too climb down the ladder - we are surrounded by fire tenders, ambulances, assorted trucks and, it seems, dozens of people.

The runway in use is being changed and already the duty caravan is being towed at some speed to a new site on the other runway.

The medical officer is obviously disappointed at no real casualties - my hand will need stitching he declares - and are you sure there are no more wounded.

The firefighter crew are divesting one of their number of his asbestos suit - "Sorry we couldn't oblige", says Bobtail - his first and only joke of the trip. They will stand by the aircraft as it reeks of raw fuel.

We all wander around the aircraft surveying the damage and then climb into a coach for debriefing - the medical officer marches me to his small ambulance brushing aside the engineering crew with a peremptory "You can see him later". Already jacks are being positioned to lift the damaged wheel - we are not required now.

A small cavalcade of vehicles winds its way past the control tower to the briefing room. While I am borne away dirty, oily, tired and feeling slightly fraudulent to be greeted by an eager team of medical staff concealing as best they could their disappointment that I was not really wounded. Their greatest comfort was to inform me that my eggs and bacon was being saved until the hand had been stitched.

"It's not serious - only a superficial cut - you'll soon forget it," I am assured by the Medical Officer - certainly I shall forget it - shan't I? - 40 years on shall I recall just what it was like - or in the mists of time will it be just another faint echo of what life was all about. I wonder. At the moment, bacon and eggs - a hot bath and sleep mean more than speculation about the future.

EPILOGUE

Finally, on September 5/6th 1943 we, too, "failed to return" from an operation to Mannheim.

We had taken S for Sugar ^(E 5757) as 'U' uncle ^{JN 863} had been shot up by 6 Bf log's and was badly damaged.

Sugar was an old (by operation standards) aircraft and had no regular ground crew - most of her flying was on cross-country flights with newly arrived crews.

~~The~~ ^{DNE} engines on her last flight had overheated and ~~are~~ ^{had} burst into flames before we bombed. The second engine failed as we left the target. With only two engines at full power we could neither maintain height nor speed.

The third engine eventually caught fire and set one of the fuel tanks on fire. Burning fuel flooded into the belly of the aircraft and melted the fuselage floor. A Junkers 88 night fighter then attacked from starboard quarter - no members of the crew can recall if we were hit in this attack.

The crew abandoned the aircraft at 18,000 ft; the aircraft hit the ground and exploded in a corner of a forested area in the Ardennes.

Six members of the crew escaped individually, the seventh (Navigator) was captured by the Gestapo when crossing the Pyrenees. He was tortured, losing a lung and all ribs cracked or broken, before being put into a POW Camp.

The members of the crew did not meet again as a crew until 30th August, 1981, at the Elsham Wolds reunion at their old airfield. The Navigator did not attend as he is too frail to travel.

The crew are as follows:-

Bob - the skipper has Parkinsons disease

Bill - upper gunner - asthma and bronchitis

Bobtail - heart trouble

Syd - Fit, but has nervous depressions

Denys - Bomb aimer - Fit but suffers from stomach ulcers.

Self - Diabetes.

Granfer Lee and his crew survived us for about a fortnight; they were all killed, their names are recorded in the Book of Remembrance in Lincoln Cathedral. The greatest loss suffered by 103 Sqdn on one raid was 13 aircraft out of 20. All A Flight and 3 B Flight failing to return from a ~~raid~~ raid on Berlin.

of the twelve crews which started operations together - in June 1943, only nine other crew members survived, so far as can be ascertained. - i.e., a survival rate of 19% ---