

E-Ernest 102 Squadron Mission 5 Target WARNEMUNDE

Pilot Jack Worthing

Flight Engineer Algy Moncreif

Navigator Cecil Cardew

Bomb Aimer Gwyn Fairfax

Wireless/ Gunner Lance Bracknell

Mid Upper Gunner Henry "Parky" Lane

Tail Gunner Mitch Prism

11am 26th March 1942

Ops tonight so we went out to dispersal to run our aircraft checks. Our Flying Control Officer Squadron Leader Peter Tullo was on his way out to inspect the runway when a replacement Stirling landed and out got the pilot – a woman. SqL Tullo couldn't believe his eyes and demanded to see the real pilot. "I am the pilot" replied ATA Margaret Fairweather. He didn't believe her so climbed up into the Stirling but couldn't find any other personnel on board. "Well I'm blowed. This is a bit of a rum do and no mistake" he said, strutting off to see the CO. Quite made my day!

Weather tonight is dismal with heavy rain and some sleet. Engine run up was sluggish with a false alarm on number 3 but we finally make it into the air with a heavy fuel load – it is going to be a long haul tonight.

We make altitude and the Assembly Point 1 degree East 53 degrees North off Skegness and head out over the North Sea. Rain clears over Dogger Bank and there is a 50% cloud cover so we are able to get a good astral fix. All systems now on the top line and E for Ernest seems eager to be back in action after a night off. Can't say that I am feeling the same as I see the contrails streaming behind us glinting in the occasional moon light. Golly but it's cold.

"Check your guns everyone. I can see ice forming on wings." The ship shudders as all gunners fire off a few test bursts to warm up their guns.

As we get out further over the North Sea the cloud cover breaks up but the sea is obscured by a blanket of mist. Still cold out there and the contrails look worse than ever. I can see the others in the bomber stream up ahead of us. At least it's a crescent moon.

"On course. Texel Island bearing green nine O Skipper. Looks like they have caught some poor beggar in their lights." Looking out to starboard I can just see the bright finger of light picking out the tiny speck in the distance. Good luck chum, hope you can shake him off.

Cloud cover returns as we press on but we stop producing contrails and the ice has melted on the wings so it must be slightly warmer being close to the Dutch mainland.

Thicker cloud now 10/10ths so at least no contrails to tell Jerry where we are. Suddenly a huge shape looms up out of the darkness and I jerk the controls hard over to avoid a collision. "Strewth! What the hell was that?!"

Still thick cloud. "Skipper suggest you adjust your heading 3 degrees North to avoid the flak on Heligoland. German coast ahead." "OK will do."

"Flensburg behind us and Kiel bearing green four five Skipper. Good Astral fix now that the cloud cover has broken up a bit. On course."

The 10/10ths cloud cover returns just as we enter the target zone. No contrails but the searchlights are creating a white blanket on the clouds and if there are any nightfighters out there we will now be silhouetted against the clouds. Blinded by searchlights on the run into the target we are attacked by an Me110 F-4 in a vertical dive but he misses on his first pass and tries again from 6 o'clock high but this time we see him but are unable to score any hits but we only suffer superficial damage in return. On his third pass he tries a vertical dive again but this time we see him and our Mid Upper snaps off a short burst but without any effect. He has got his eye in this time and scores hits to our Bomb bay ruining the auto bomb release. This was followed by a cluster of walking hits Nose superficial, Front centre superficial, Bomb bay doors superficial, ventral gun no effect Tail Turret guns inoperable. His next attack is from 12 level and our Mid Upper Gunner brews up his fuel tank turning the Me into a fireball. Then just when we think that is that up pops a ruddy great Do 217 J-1 from our six o'clock low. Luckily Mitch has shifted from his now useless Tail guns to the Ventral gun position. The Dornier gets in two hits before we can open the batting and hits our port wing taking out our number 2 engine so I feather the prop but it's going to be a much longer trip than we had expected and rear centre section and Mitch cops a light wound to his left leg while manning the Ventral gun, but nothing to write home about. Either Jerry thinks he's done us in or he's got an urgent appointment elsewhere because we lose sight of him.

This is when the flak decides to join the party and we cop a dose in our port wing but it is only superficial.

The weather over the target is just as bad as when we left base and the target has already been bombed with a great deal of smoke and fire but negligible thermal turbulence. There is a very brief clear spot Gwyn shouts "BOMBS GONE!" Time to head for home albeit slowly and at last we slip away from the searchlights and the flak decides it has better things to do than bother with us.

As we slowly edge our way out of the target zone due to our feathered prop we are attacked twice. First up is a D0217 J1 from 10.30 level missing us on his first pass and coming in from 6 o'clock level for what proves to be his final pass. He scores three hits: 1st hit causes superficial damage; 2nd hits our port wing again damaging the wing root; 3rd hits our tail taking out the oxygen supply in that section but luckily Gwyn is manning the ventral gun.

The other night fighter is an Me110 F4 but he loses us in the cloud.

Back out over the Baltic Sea and 50% cloud cover with no contrails. A Ju88c6 tries his luck from 10.30 low approaches unseen and scores two superficial hits to the Bomb Bay and the

port wing after which he loses contact. He is replaced by a Do217 J1 who flies by without seeing us.

Trying to avoid the flak around Kiel and not leaving any contrails we manage to avoid detection and are untroubled by flak or night fighters.

Slipping out into the North Sea which is blanketed in fog we start to produce contrails again in the colder air and start to feel that Lady Luck may be smiling down upon us again. "Crack open the champagne chaps, or failing that cocoa all round." Even as we make slower than usual progress we don't see any night fighters in this sector.

A spell of clear weather opens up as we head even further out over the North Sea keeping well away from the Dutch coast. "Course correction Skipper steer three degrees to port as we seem to have a strong side wind blowing us too far North." "Skipper just spotted a couple of Hun buzzing around at 9 o'clock but they don't seem to have spotted us."

Intermittent cloud starts to brew up again to the North of the Zeider Zee but no contrails and we start to feel that Lady Luck is really with us as we are left untroubled by any night fighters out there.

As we finally leave the Dutch coast behind a Ju88 C6 tries a head on pass from 12 High but good old "Parky" Lane our Mid Upper Gunner gives him what for and we see his port wing tear off while the rest of the plane corkscrews into the sea. "Hope he's a good swimmer" says "Parky".

As we reach the mid point between Blighty and Holland the cloud thickens even more until it's 10/10ths cover and the world seems to close in and we seem to be all alone in the night sky.

Just off the Essex coast we have a system malfunction with an oil leak on number 4 engine and despite our best efforts we can't stop the leak although there is no fire yet. I trade height for speed to stop her stalling and we are almost on the deck. As we get nearer to the coast Gwyn Faifax our Bomb Aimer says over the intercom "That's Clacton Pier dead ahead. I recognise it from my summer holidays. There should be a large recreation ground just ahead where you can put her down Skipper." Through the ground haze I can just make out a large patch of open ground beside the railway through the ground mist. "Let's hope they haven't put up obstacles to stop Nazi gliders from landing!" losing speed I ease E for Ernest round to run parallel to the railway on our starboard side and put her down in a perfect 3 point landing. "I think the ground keeper may not be too pleased to see us parked on his putting green Skipper." Shutting down the remaining engines we climb down to a crisp cold morning and hear the start of the dawn chorus. "Oh I do like to be beside the seaside, oh I do like to be beside the sea. Anyone brought their bucket and spade?" "Yes, yes all very funny but who is going to find a phone and contact base to tell them where we are?" "Anyone got fourpence for the phone?" It had been a very long night.

(Historical note. A Wellington Bomber did make an emergency landing on Vista Road recreation ground Clacton on Sea on its way back from a bombing mission in Europe. Margaret Fairweather was a real member of the Air Transport Auxiliary and these brave women flew unarmed bombers and fighters to airfields throughout the United Kingdom often losing their lives in bad weather in aircraft with faulty instruments.)