

TARGET FOR TONIGHT

Mission 6 Berlin 23/24th August 1943

102 Squadron

PHOENIX

We have two new members of the crew Flt Sgt David “Ding Dong” Bell is our replacement Wireless/ Gunner, a nice young chap from the valleys of South Wales bearing the facial scars he received in a rather bad landing during a training exercise. Our new Tail gunner is a rather diminutive Scot from the tenements of Glasgow and an ex jockey by all accounts, Flt Sgt Peter Hamilton but known by everyone as “Jock”. He’s a cheery fellow who already sports a Caterpillar Club pin for bailing out over Norfolk returning from an earlier mission to Bremen with his previous crew.

At the afternoon briefing there was an expectant hush as the curtains were drawn back to reveal the target for tonight and then a roar went up as we saw that the tapes led to the big one BERLIN! This was it our first crack at the Jerries black heart as our C in C had called it. Right up until we were called to the ready room there was such an air of anticipation – a heady mix of excitement mixed with fear. What would the defences of the Nazi capital be like? The weather report was not good 10/10ths cloud for most of the way – would the show be called off?

I have decided to dispense with our usual ritual as it has proved to be so ineffective and instead I shake the hands of each of the crew in turn before climbing aboard.

The weather is good for our take off and everything is running smoothly. As we climb up to our cruising altitude Jock comes on the intercom, “Will you look at those Yank Fortresses – looks like they have had a wee bit of trouble somewhere.” Two or three of the Forts were streaming smoke and one had its tailplane completely shot away. Now out over the North Sea “Time to check your guns everyone.” For a few seconds the aircraft shudders under the recoil as each of the gunners tests that their guns are working. After being mauled so badly by Schrage Musik before I have ordered Clive, our Bomb Aimer to take up position at the Ventral Gun when he isn’t required for his other duties. The cloud is completely solid and with a crescent moon there is very little to be seen tonight.

“Enemy coast ahead, skipper.” That’s Pip our Navigator. “OK start chucking out Window Ding Dong.” “Skipper my wee turret has lost all power.” “Damn and blast – well do what you can to repair it.” “It’s covered in yon Christmas tinsel Skipper. It’s a wee bit early to be putting the decorations do yer no think?” “You funny little man. How do you fancy getting out and walking?”

The 10/10ths cloud cover has the flak subdued and so far no sign of nightfighters. “Gronigen off to port Skipper turn on to 82 degrees in 5 minutes exactly.” A blue finger of a master searchlight fills the cockpit with a ghostly light swiftly followed by some medium flak which bursts all around leaving a sickening smell of cordite but no real damage. I throw Phoenix into a dive followed by a corkscrew. “Yers was nae joking aboot throwing me oot were you skipper. I just thought you might like to ken that the turret is now working fine. Nae bother.” There is a sudden burst of firing from Fraser, our Mid Upper followed by a bright flash as an aircraft explodes on our left with a ruptured fuel tank. “Sorry to but in but I thought you chaps might be interested to know that we had an Me110 stooging around at 9 o’clock level showing an unhealthy interest in us.”

At last the cloud begins to break up a little as we cross into Germany. No contrails and we don’t seem to have woken up the inhabitants below.

As we fly on north of Bremen the thick cloud cover returns. "Skipper the Radio has gone US. I have tried everything that I can think of but it won't work." "OK Ding Dong take over the Ventral Gun from Clive. Clive you head back to the Nose." If the mission is recalled now it looks like we are going to be bombing Berlin on our own! Ten minutes later and we are again coned by searchlights followed by light flak. As I flew right into a salvo I just had time to shout out "Corkscrew!" to give the crew a warning to brace. Bits of hot shrapnel came up through the cabin floor striking the steering column causing it to jolt and a piece burned a furrow through my flying helmet before exiting through the roof. Just then a huge dark shadow appears immediately above us as another bomber goes hurtling past he is so close that I can actually see the other pilot by the glow from his instruments. And he isn't on his own as a Ju88 G7 who was on his tail sees us and makes us his intended target. Fraser opens up but the shot is a tricky one as he is in a vertical dive and Fraser has been blinded by the searchlights and his tracers go wide. The Ju attacks and canon shells shatter the glass in the nose turret. The bomb bay suffers some minor damage and the hydraulic hand pump for the flaps are damaged. The final hit damages the tail wheel. The Jerry continues his dive after the other bomber presumably as we don't see him again.

Crossing the Rhine the cloud breaks up enough for us to see the river as a dark silver thread weaving through the countryside. Contrails start forming in the clearer air. "Skipper I am going to have to transfer some fuel by hand pumping as the pumps have gone on the blink." "OK Chris. Let me know if it doesn't work as we might have to think about turning back." Window is doing a good job of blanketing the Jerry radar and we manage to carry on without being bothered by either flak or nightfighters.

After an age we enter the target zone the cloud cover is 5/10ths and we are producing contrails again. Not that it matters the Jerries have worked out where we are going by now any way and we dispense with Window. A Ju88 C-6 attempts to jump us from 6o'clock high but Monica has already alerted us as Jock and Fraser both let fly and although one of them goes wide the other manages to score hits on his starboard wing. This really puts him off his stroke and also damages some of his guns as all of his shots go wide after which he breaks off.

The Pathfinders have dropped a considerable number of Target indicators but without a radio we don't know which colour we should be using to bomb on. The flak is more intense than I have ever experienced over any target before and Phoenix is repeatedly rocked by explosions however apart from some small pieces puncturing the fabric no real damage is done. "OK Clive, passing control over to you." "Bombs gone." (On target 40% although our photo shows that most of our bombs fell in the southern sector of the Berlin outskirts.) Our navigator had asked permission to take a look at an actual bomb run, never having seen one before and he poked his head up into the Astrodome but came back down after a few seconds looking completely ashen. "My God! I never knew it was like that. It's like a scene from hell! The fires and explosions..." He staggered back into his cubby hole. The flak coming out of the target seems ten times worse and Phoenix actually seemed to stagger as she was hit not once but three times. The first hit the recently vacated bomb bay – a minute sooner and that would have been the end of us. The second hit the tailplane rendering the rudder inoperable but the third did the most damage hitting our number two engine and starting a fire which took both fire extinguishers to bring it under control. It is at that point that Monica starts pipping madly. "Me110 6 Low!" Jock opens up stitching a neat pattern of hits that cause the Jerry's port wing to shear off and the plane helplessly spirals down out of control. But before we can celebrate a Ju88 has snuck in to a vertical climb underneath us with a Schrage Musik attack causing walking hits superficial, pilot LW, bomb bay superficial, master compass, LW Tail Gunner. As he lines up for a second attack Pip opens up with the Ventral gun hitting an engine causing it to stop but before breaking off he fires and manages to hit me in the leg, causes an oxygen fire in the nose compartment and hits the electrical junction box No1 taking out the landing gear, bomb bay doors and making the flaps inoperable.

Finally we are clear of the target zone and get the fires under control. Neither Jock nor I mention our wounds to the others. In the cold air I can feel the blood freezing so that should stop it getting any worse.

The cloud south-east of Magdeburg remains at 5/10ths and no one is taking any interest in us for the time being. "Break out the cocoa Chris." Flying on a weariness begins to wash over me blood loss or the effect of the adrenalin wearing off I don't know which, but it is going to be a long haul back home.

An hour goes by and as we cross back into Holland the cloud bubbles up again and we have 10/10ths cover. Just south of Rotterdam Monica starts to shrill and Jock opens up on Dornier 217 J1 coming in from 6 o'clock high causing him some damage but not enough to put him off. He hits our inboard fuel tank causing a leak. He also hits our landing gear but as this is already inoperable it is not an immediate problem. His third hit shatters our windscreen taking the heat out for our compartment. As he comes round for a second pass both Jock and Fraser score telling hits which cause his entire tail section to break off but not before his port wing tears off. That'll learn him!

Time to drop down on to the deck before I freeze to death. Dropping down the sea is carpeted with fog. "Chris how is the fuel holding up?" "It is going to be tight but we should have just enough to get us back to base." "Din Dong send a message to base warning them that we are out of fuel and will need to make a wheels up landing." "No can do skipper. As I told you the radio is US." So fuel leaking, no radio, flaps out, landing gear out, master compass out, rudder out. Well this should be interesting.

We cross the coast much further south than I was expecting. "Pip – where the hell are we?" "That looks like the River Colne estuary and I think that is Clacton or Walton Pier off to starboard on the horizon Skipper." Chris interrupts, "Sorry to add to your troubles Skipper but we have only got the makers name left on the fuel gauge dials. Better put her down soon." "Got it Skipper steer 17 degrees to starboard there's a base marked at Earls Colne just ahead." One minute later and the number 4 engine sputtered then died. "Fire a flare Chris let them know we are coming in. Everyone else kick open the hatches and grab hold of something this isn't going to be a text book landing. Once we come to a stop get out as quick as you can."

Well any landing you can walk away from, right? Does it still count if you are stretchered away? We got down with what must have been the last teaspoon of fuel in the tanks as the engines cut out just before we touched the ground. In addition to the light wounds to my head, a torn tendon in my left leg with a boot full of frozen blood I managed to tear a muscle in my right leg during the landing. Looks like Phoenix and I are going to need a bit of repair work.

The next day in the Sick Bay the Quack brought me a copy of the Daily Express to read. Berlin Blazes: Himmler rules all Germany!" ran the headline. "Berliners still fighting the fury of an air raid more shattering than even Hamburg experienced, had tonight not yet been told that Germany has been placed in the iron grip of "Butcher" Himmler, Chief of the Gestapo and the Nazi Black Guard. Changes have been made by Hitler to gain a tighter hold on their home front."