

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon online campaign
102 squadron C Copper
Mission 18 14/15 July 1942
Target Saarbrucken

“My darling Roddy,
Won’t you let me come and see you. I am so worried since I heard about your head wound – no matter how dashing you think it makes you look. Will you at least think about it?”

I am sorry that you have not heard from me for a while but the place where I have been working is very hush, hush and we are not permitted much contact with the outside world. I would not even be permitted to send this but the CO has given me a special dispensation due to your rotten luck.

Do take care darling. You are more precious to me than you will ever know.

With all my love

Agatha”

I read the short note for the hundredth time before carefully putting it away in my locker. Such things are not allowed in the air however much they buck a chap up. And I needed bucking up. Losing the old crate was bad enough although C Copper didn’t seem too bad, just unfamiliar. It was losing JB like that and not even being able to remember it – not even now the concussion has gone. I have been passed fit for flying but tonight’s mission looks like a bit of of beast. Apart from the Channel it is all over land and despite our protests we are flying almost a direct route to the target. Well only an absolute clot would do that.

Our new bod, Flying Officer Arthur Hastings seems like a good sort. Turned up in an MG – God knows where he gets the petrol for it. Seems to know Flt.Sgt. Japp quite well although they have never actually served together before.

New moon tonight but the weather forecast isn’t too good. Bags of fog and cloud about over the Continent. I hope that we do better with hitting the target as I got a bit of a strip torn off by the CO considering the high percentages obtained by the other chaps. Then he told me that I had shown commendable pluck pressing on despite the lost intercom and getting back with such a badly shot up kite.

101 Squadron leading the bomber stream tonight with us in the middle and 104 bringing up the rear. Green light time to go at last. Smooth take off, all systems on the top line and C Copper leaps the boundary fence like a gazelle and we race off over the flat Norfolk countryside in the dying embers of the day.

As we cross the coast over Ipswich the 10/10ths cloud rolls in. “Hathaway check for a recall, there’s a good chap.” “Nothing received skipper.” Our second newest crew member is surprisingly cool given that he has now survived not one, but two crash landings and this is only his second mission with us. The chaps gave him an awful ribbing about coming from a family of theatricals and inevitable gave him the nickname “Shakespeare” but he took it all in good heart and even promised to get them all tickets for his sister’s show next time we are on leave. “Test your guns chaps.” And then just like that my rotten mood shifted and I really felt that we were going to be lucky tonight. I don’t know what changed, perhaps just being back in the air again and the comfort of routine. I felt a great weight lifted off my shoulders.

With that the cloud cleared and down below everything was carpeted in fog. "Enemy coast ahead skipper. Just passing over Ostende now, correct three degrees to starboard. We don't want to run into that bunch of flak around Bruges." "Thank you Robbie. Course corrected."

No contrails, well that's a blessing and although we must have shown up on the German early warning system we are left untroubled by either flak or nightfighters.

Back into solid cloud as we press on but recall. We manage to avoid the searchlights but they are showing us up against the cloud. Crump, crump, CRUMP. Either they are extremely lucky or they are using radar guided flak. "Any damage?" "No everything OK skipper." "Dornier at 9 high skipper!" As usual it's our MUG Jimbo Japp who spots him first even as Monica shrieks out her warning. Jimbo neatly places his tracer into the Jerry's fuel tank and there is bright flash and bits of burning aircraft rain down out of the night sky. "Jolly well done Jimbo!"

As we press on further into Europe the solid cloud clears and the ground below is shrouded in mist. Blessedly little in the way of enemy activity either. "We are outside of Gee range now skipper and now we are out of cloud I managed to get a good celestial fix so we are still on course." The cloud is replaced by dirty brownish grey smudges as the flak opens up but we emerge unscathed. If there are any nightfighters out there they don't spot us either and we go on our way.

"Coming up on the target area. I just about made out Luxembourg through the mist directly to starboard skipper. Course change 145 magnetic in 12 minutes." "OK Gee Gee get in position to do your stuff." "110 on out tail skipper. 6 low" Hermit Crabbe out tail gunner shouts as his opening burst shreds the tail plane of the Me110. In reply we receive 8 hits all over the shop. In the nose and both wings. The nose hits miss anything vital, out four hits to the port wing we get one in the wing bomb cells but live to tell the tale and one in the fuel tank which blessedly self seals. The damage to the starboard wing is relatively minor with some shells bouncing off the number three engine and the only casualty, apart from our pride, is the dinghy. The Me 110 drops away under control but clearly not coming back for more. "Are you chaps alright?" Affirmative messages are received from the whole crew. "Running into the target zone now." The flak is pretty feeble affair, definitely second XI stuff and in mist mixed with smoke we can see that the lads from 101 have done a good job of stoking up the fires. "Target slightly obscured skipper. On target. Bombs gone!" "Let's go home chaps unless anyone wants to stock up on some duty free? No? Thought not." The flak on the run out was even more desultory than the run in. and no night fighters pop up to give us a hard time.

"Skipper number three engine is running jolly hot. I wonder if that Jerry did more damage than we thought?" "OK keep an eye on it Arthur and let me know that moment I need to shut it down if it is in danger of catching fire." "Wilco." Flying along with no moon to speak of and the ground blanketed in mist if gave the impression that we were just suspended there with no sense of movement whatsoever. "Robby I want to avoid the flak around Brussels can you give me a course that will take me slightly north of that area?" I didnae think that's a canny idea skipper. We are more likely to cop a packet from the flak south of Antwerp." "Well better risk that or we run the risk of running into the chaps from 104." "Good point, well made skipper. North it is. Er steer 336 magnetic skipper." "I hope that you have done you sums right Robbie. I don't fancy a dip in the briny deep at this time of night."

Finally the ground fog clears and we can just about make out the landscape below. "Come round to 289 degrees now skipper." Crump, crump, crump goes the flak making dirty smudges in the sky just in front of us. As we pass through the cockpit is filled with the acrid stench of cordite. Shells rip into our recently vacated bomb bay hitting nothing vital now the bombs have gone, some superficial damage to

both wings and bits of hot metal strike the ammo feed chutes to the tail gun. “Where the hell is he? Anyone?” “Just seen him 10.30 high.” Our nose and mid-upper guns blast away and we see the tracers stitching a very neat pattern along his fuselage and he breaks off combat.

The fog is back as we get pass well clear of Brussels and with so little moon it is damned near impossible to make out any distinctive landmarks. Flak bursts all around again but one unlucky piece of shrapnel severs the oxygen supply in the front compartment and causes a small fire. FO Hastings leaps to it brandishing a fire extinguisher and soon has it under control. I have to dive before we all pass out and I don’t know whether it is the momentary loss of oxygen or the sudden change in altitude but my headache returns with a vengeance.

At this lower altitude we can just make out the coast as we pass over Bruges the tower of the cathedral is just visible poking up through the mist. “Number three engine is running very hot skipper. Suggest you feather it just to be on the safe side.” “Rightyho Arthur.”

Midway across the North Sea and we are nearly home. Lady luck certainly seems to have been on our side tonight. Then we spot Cromer pier as we cross the English coast. “Home again, home again jiggedy jig.”

Our landing is text book stuff and the tensions of the last few hours drain slowly away. We head over to the debriefing and breakfast. Time to write to Agatha and catch the first post.