

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon online campaign
102 Squadron -- B Bobby
Mission 16 -- 6/7 July 1942
Target Dusseldorf

Our replacement for Flt Sgt Dixon is a young cove by the name of James Hathaway and coming as he does from a family of theatricals has been given the inevitable nickname of "Shakespeare". He is joining us from another Stirling squadron where the CO was a "press on regardless type" and a bit too quick to brand the men under his command as LMF if they turned back for any reason. On his last mission James' pilot had decided to cancel when they were in dispersal running up the engines and the gauges all went red. The furious CO belted out to the aircraft and had the pilot placed under arrest as he climbed into the pilot's seat to fly the mission himself. They were just over the boundary fence when all four engines seized and the Stirling crashed, killing everyone on board apart from James. Apparently he walked out of the crash with nothing worse than a black eye and a broken tooth. He retrained as a wireless operator and has been posted to us.

In this afternoon's briefing our CO told us about a new weapon the Jerries are using called "Scarecrow" it is a type of flak that when it explodes looks just like one of our aircraft going down in flames and is designed to put the wind up us. We are instructed to ignore any such sightings. He also tore us off a strip for taking any unofficial supercargo. The Jerries have just had a propaganda coup when they found the body of a young WAAF in the wreckage of a Stirling that they had shot down. As we hadn't actually been on that raid it can't have been from our squadron but still.

The crew are going through their pre flight checks and Fat Hermann has been touched for luck by all the crew. The weather is good although we have been told that the mission maybe recalled as there is expected to a build up of cloud over Holland and Germany. Sitting on the runway waiting for the green light is the worst part of the mission, the smell of the aviation fuel mixed with the familiar musty smell of the crate and then we are off and everyone's mind is on their job. With very little moon the countryside of Norfolk slips by unnoticed and as we reach the assembly point we break through the five tenths cloud we catch glimpses of the bomber stream spread out in front of us as we play tail end Charlie once again. All systems are on the top line and we are not producing contrails. "OK test your guns everyone." "I have got a good fix Skipper so we should be good on this heading all the way to the Hague. Very little drift." "OK Robbie."

As we cross the North Sea and get closer to the Dutch coast we are entering ten tenths cloud cover just as the Met chaps predicted. "Check for recall James." "No recall Skipper." "Just crossing the Dutch coast now Skipper good Gee signal strength."

"Course change to 134 degrees skipper." Just then the cockpit is filled with the harsh blue light from a radar controlled searchlight. "Brace yourself chaps!" Twisting and turning we manage to get out of the beam before the other lights can cone us. Blinking rapidly to clear my eyes and try and regain my night vision. A lot of medium flak fills the air around where we would have been without our avoiding action. No hits ... this time. "Dornier attacking in a vertical dive." Jimbo has opened up at the same time as giving this timely warning. Almost immediately the with its fuselage split open remains of the Dornier J1 plunge passed the cockpit with its long pencil thin tail gyrating wildly.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold"

The words of WB Yeates flash through my mind. Let us hope that the best do not lack all conviction as the worst definitely are full of passionate intensity!

Crossing into Germany itself and the solid cloud cover gives way to a ground fog. But at our altitude there are no contrails. "Course correction steer 92 degrees and that will bring us bang on target Skipper." "Thanks Robbie. Gee Gee time for you to do your stuff. Looks like the chaps before us have plastered the target good and proper." The fog had taken on a scarlet hue from the fires reducing the target zone to ashes. Monica starts her shrill warning as Hermit opens up on a Ju88 C6 trying to sneak in from 6 low and the Jerry's port wing shears right off and the crew bail out while the crate goes into a sycamore seed spiral to the ground. "Good shooting Hermit!" "Watch it there's any blighter at 6 high." Under a withering fire from Jimbo and Hermit this Ju88 has its horizontal stabilizer shredded and is trailing a stream of petrol vapor but continues to press his attack but without success and then breaks off. It looks like the flak has been overwhelmed by the weight of the attacking force that preceded us as there is only some light stuff which does not find its mark. "Over to you Gee Gee." After what seems like an absolute age ... "Bombs gone." Despite the target being mostly obscured by fog and by smoke Gee Gee manages a credible 40% on target.

The flak on the exit from the target zone is much worse and we are treated to a dose of really heavy stuff and we feel two distinct hits although nothing vital is hit on this occasion.

Passing to the North East of Duisberg and staying out of their flak zone we are on our way home when Hermit shouts, "Bandit at 6 high!" "It's a Dornier N2," adds Jimbo. Their combined fire only briefly touches the Jerry who handles his crate exceptionally well and doesn't seem the least bit put off. As he closed in we could feel the shells thudding into B Bobby. Apart from superficial hits the main damage was concentrated in the rear with the Dead Man's handle for the tail turret shot away leaving Hermit trapped and helpless unable to fire back and the master compass rendered inoperable making navigation and bit dickey. Before he could return for another attack I started to corkscrew hoping to throw off his aim. This time his shells went wide and he set up another attack staying on our tail at 6 level where we were unable to reach him with either the upper or ventral guns. Again we felt the shells hammering home while we could do nothing in reply. The tail turret was hit smashing up the guns, Port wing flap is now inoperable and the electricity supply to the mid upper gunner's suit is out meaning I will soon need to lose height. After that he broke off and we didn't see him again.

Thinking we were now in the clear I leveled off to take stock. Everyone checked in and I decided to drop to a lower altitude for the journey home. It wasn't long before we plunged through the ten tenths cloud base. "Skipper steer 299 degrees otherwise we will hit the flak around Amsterdam." We are briefly picked up by a searchlight but manage to evade enough to avoid getting coned. It is enough to attract the attention of medium flak but our luck holds and they misjudge our height with the flak bursting well below us.

"As far as I can tell we are now well out over the North Sea skipper although it's hard to tell exactly where with all this cloud." "Break out the sandwiches and cocoa chaps. How are you doing back there Hermit?" "In solitary splendor Skipper. I can't free up the turret and if we are attacked again the best I can do will be to give him a hard stare."

"Felixstowe up ahead Skipper nearly home." The flat Norfolk field rise up to meet us and no need for the Blood Wagon this time although Hermit will need to be crow barred out of his turret. We make a credible landing in the early dawn and taxi in to dispersal. All in all a piece of cake.