

102 squadron B Bobby
Mission 2 25/26 July 1943
Target Essen

The chaps are in good spirits after the milk run of our last mission and Window certainly proved to be a boon but as the curtain went back to show us the target for tonight a collective groan went up from all the crews – Essen and the Ruhr again! “Alright settle down! 102 will be in the middle group of the bomber stream tonight and the weather conditions should be pretty fair so we don’t anticipate a recall. Some of you chaps will have been to Essen before but now we have much improved radar and pathfinders marking the target so I am expecting you to really plaster the target and get the job done.”

I propped up a letter to Agatha on the mantelpiece in my quarters it seems to have been such a devil of a long time since I have seen her. Will I get to hold her in my arms just once more and smell her hair and that jasmine fragrance of her perfume. I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror and just for a moment I wonder who that poor man is with the hollow eyes and the furrowed brow. My God I seem to have aged at least 30 years in the last 12 months. Time to snap out of it and get on with the job – the other fellows will be looking to me to show some confidence, although all of us will be experiencing that gut wrenching fear that going to the Ruhr brings on.

As we pour out of the lorry B Bobby towers above us, silhouetted against the setting sun. Pre-flight checks complete, engines run up and then we trundle from dispersal to take up our place in the queue for take off. Funny thing one of the Erks told me that the bullet holes that they patched up just below our Mid Upper Gunners position were made by 303 calibre and not by the Germans. A bit thick to be shot up by one of our own chaps I must say. There’s the green light and I ease all four throttles up to maximum and after what seems like an age B Bobby is airborne and we head out over the vast flat Norfolk landscape and out over the North Sea with Great Yarmouth below us bathed in the last red embers of the sinking sun. “OK chaps, test your guns.” The hammering of three gun positions vibrates through the old bus as she slips gently into the night.

The clouds bubble up as we get further out over the sea and in the cold of the higher altitude we start to stream contrails just visible in the crescent moon but of the enemy there is no sign at all.

“Skipper time to change course to 1 4 2.” “Thanks Robbie.” As we get nearer to the Dutch coast the contrails disappear although the five tenths cloud remains. “Keep your eyes peeled everyone. Enemy coast ahead.”

Skirting south around Rotterdam and its flak batteries the cloud starts to thin out and we seem to be all alone in the cold clear night. The stars of the Milky Way carpet the sky and Oh damn and blast it, I have forgotten all about Window. “Shakespeare start chucking that ruddy Window stuff out through the tube.” The cloud returns as we steal further into Holland.

“Skipper – just caught sight of a couple of what looked like Dorniers at 9 o’clock.” “Keep an eye on them Jimbo. Can you see them Jock?” “I cannae see a damn thing with all this damn tinsel stuff floating by.”

Crossing into Germany the cloud clears again but the ground is covered with a layer of haze. "OK Skipper stay on this heading for the bomb run." "BREAK LEFT! BREAK LEFT!" The shock of hearing Jimbo's normally lugubrious voice raised to a shriek as a Ju88C-6 attacks us in a vertical dive. Jimbo clearly got some shots in before the Hun rakes us from stern to stem. Jock has been hit and his tail guns are out of action, the hydraulic hand pumps for flaps have been damaged, the autopilot bomb drop mechanism is inoperable, Mandrel jamming set inoperative. GeeGee our bomb aimer is wounded but worst of the lot is number 3 engine is on fire! "Arthur do what you can to put out that damned fire!" The first attempt is not successful and now the ruddy Hun is back for more but this time Jimbo has him banged to rights and bits of flaming wreckage cascade down as his fuel tanks explode. "Arthur - try again!" This time the fire is under control and it doesn't look like we will have to join the silkworm club this time at any rate. Now it's the turn of the flak to have a go at us and we seem to have taken a couple of hits but I'm not too sure where but the controls seem a bit queer. "GeeGee you are going to have to do this on manual and be quick as you can as I am not sure how long I can hold it." The T.I.s are clear and Master Bomber is telling us to bomb on the green. The target is just about visible as the first group have really plastered the target area and there is bags of smoke. "Bombs gone!" "Right let's clear off out of it." This time the flak is a lot worse and we take hits all over the shop. Controls are really sloppy now and it is a real battle to keep her flying straight so I think we have taken some damage to the tail section. Oxygen is out to all sections so nothing for it but to drop us down to a lower altitude. "Robbie where the hell are we?" "Just...north... of Duisburg.... skipper." "Right can you give us a course straight back home, nothing fancy. Hold on a sec, are you OK Robbie?" "Got pranged by a bit of flak....I'll be OK." No more nightfighters so that's a blessing anyway.

Crossing into Holland and we are below the ten tenths cloud cover. "Bad news I'm afraid Skipper. I don't think that we are going to have enough fuel to make it back." "Do we have enough to get us to the coast Arthur?" "Yes and a bit more besides but not enough to make it all the way." "Right go and check on all the chaps starting with Jock and see how badly hurt they are."

It has taken Arthur a good 30 minutes to check on everyone and as he comes back to report I see that he has a First Aid kit with him. "I think that you had better let me take a look at that Skipper." "What are you talking about?" As he starts to cut away a section of my flying suit on my right thigh I suddenly notice a ruddy great splinter of ragged metal sticking straight up at right angles to my leg. Oddly I hadn't noticed a thing but as he grabs hold of it and yanks it out it hurts like hell. But that is nothing as to the pain I feel when he pours in some iodine before slapping a wound dressing on it. Everything starts to swim and I feel really giddy. Arthur reaches over and steadies my hands on the steering column. "Best take a few deep breathes, old chap. Then you'll feel better." A hot sticky sensation creeps over me and I feel really sick. Shock I expect.

Floating on my back in the warm seas on a gorgeous summers day off Lyme Regis. I can hear children laughing and playing while a brass band is playing on the promenade while above me the sky is a deep azure blue and the warm sun makes me feel sleepy. There's something not quite right as the whistle gets jammed between my Mae West and my collar which scratches my neck and suddenly I feel dreadfully cold and it's dark and my leg hurts like hell. Where am I? Hands grab my arms and haul me into the J type life raft. What seems like hours later Arthur makes me drink some brandy from his hip flask. "Come on old chap. It will make you feel

better." As my eyes come into focus I can just make out Jimbo turning the handle on the BC778 "Gibson Girl" distress transmitter. Cranking the handle sends out a Morse signal and we have to hope that some friendly soul picks up the message. I can just hear the drone of the last of the bomber stream returning home above the slapping of the waves and the grinding of the transmitter. "What happened?" My voice is barely more than a whisper. "I'm afraid we had to ditch old chap. The flak coming out of the target had done quite a lot of damage and then we lost number 1 engine when it seized up before running out of fuel. Jimbo and I managed to get Robbie into the life raft and the poor chap's in a pretty bad way – looks like a stomach wound. I suppose the sea water hasn't done it much good. Then we found you. I'm afraid there's no sign of GeeGee, Shakespeare or Jock though."

I could feel the warmth of the brandy spreading through my body before I feel into a deep sleep.

I woke with a start as a klaxon blared out. Jimbo fired a flare and I saw that it was daylight. Salt was encrusted round my mouth and I found myself unable to speak to ask what was happening. An RAF rescue launch loomed up above us and with some difficulty we are all transported aboard. I don't really remember much after that.

Four days later the WingCo himself came to see me in hospital. The good news is that Robbie has started to make a good recovery but is unlikely to be fit enough to fly again. Jimbo and Arthur are both OK and have been given some leave after which they will rejoin the squadron. I could tell that he was bracing himself to tell me bad news but as I looked down at the cage covering my legs I think that I can guess what he has come to say. I knew that they had amputated my leg and that flying was no longer going to be an option. "Roderick, I am so terribly sorry. It's Agatha. She didn't suffer."