

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon's online campaign
Mission 5 – Area – Karlsruhe, Germany 14/15 April 1944

“There you go lad. Get that down you.” The old fisherman handed me a mug of tea. As I raised the chipped enamel mug to my lips I could smell the rum that he had laced my tea with. My hands were shaking so much that I had to hold the mug with both hands. “Would it help to tell me what happened? Only if you're allowed, like.” “We were on a mission to Germany. The weather was clear and with a full moon everything was as clear as day. Our squadron was in the tail end of the bomber stream so they had had plenty of notice that we were on the way.”

How do explain to a civvy what it's like. Getting ready for a mission. The gut wrenching tension. The familiar routines. The smell of the aircraft and the rubber oxygen mask.

It had all started so well. A good take off, gaining operational altitude, testing the guns. The North Sea laid out below in the bright moonlight. It all seemed so calm and peaceful until...

“Enemy coast ahead.”

The bright blue master searchlight locked onto us immediately and then we were coned. Nothing could shake the blighters off. We must have drifted further south than we had intended and run into the heavy flak batteries around Zebrugge. A Apple suddenly pitched over as flak hit our port wing and the control column was wrenched out of my hands. Levelling the bus there was an almighty explosion inside the plane as flak burst in the rear centre section just below the Mid upper gunner. The controls became sloppy and a huge draft of wind sucked everything that wasn't strapped down through the rupture in the fuselage. Losing height rapidly the searchlights finally lost us as we were almost down on the deck and switched to another target. I could see tracer coming up from ground fire and fighting the controls eventually managed to take the bus out over the sea.

“What's the damage James?”

“The mid upper turret has gone completely, H2S and the DR compass are destroyed. Dougie is completely cut off in the tail and the dead man's handle has gone west so he can't get out. The hydraulic hand pump for the flaps and control cables are shot. Oh, and just about everything is banged up in that section. There is also a ruddy great hole that you could drive a bus through.”

“What about Eric?”

“He's gone, skipper.”

“OK tell George to dump the bombs immediately and get Hugh to send out a message to base that we are returning. Pass the word that I can't make enough height for parachutes so get ready to ditch just in case I can't get us back to England.”

As it happens we made it just as far as the Essex coast before crash landing on Mersea Island.

The fisherman who pulled me out of the wreckage and given me his coat and the mug of tea was still waiting for an answer.

“Got a bit of a prang so had to come back. Piece of cake old boy, piece of”