

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon's online campaign
Target Railway Laon, France 11/12 April 1944

"I say old chap! Be a sport and direct me to the RAF base, would you? Only I seem to have lost my way with all the damned sign posts removed." I stopped the Riley, the better to hear his reply.

"Ar ya reet bor? How yew gewin? Hev yew gotta loight boi?" the wizened local replied.

By golly, that was a strong Norfolk accent! I couldn't quite grasp what he was saying until he proffered his unlit roll up.

"Um.... The RAF base?"

"Do yews go doowne this loke, then tack the rud afore yersel."

"Er.. thank you very much." So I set off in the direction that he had indicated, more in hope than expectation.

Once I finally made it and had reported to the CO I barely had time to unpack before we were called for briefing. My new skipper seems like a jolly decent sort of cove. He has a dashing scar just above his eyebrow that gives him a permanent sort of quizzical look. He introduced me to the rest of the crew of A Apple. Luckily our crate is back on the top line having had a new nose turret fitted. There were some ribald comments about George our bomb aimer having somewhere comfortable to lay down and take the weight off his wound.

The target for tonight is a short hop into northern France by way of Belgium and our squadron will be at the front of the bomber stream so it is vital that we lay our eggs in the right place to avoid creep back by those who are following up. The weather is not so hot with a possibility of a recall due to the 10/10ths cloud but there is a good chance of some cloud breaks over the actual target.

Take-off went well and the crew tested their guns over the Channel. Engines and fuel delivery were all tickety boo and there wasn't a recall. All our electronic warfare counter measures seemed to having the desired effect as apart from a bit of light flak near Zebrugge we didn't have any enemy contact until we entered the target zone.

"Break left, break left!" Dougie, our tail gunner is shouting over the intercom and at the same time I can feel the vibration caused by his four guns pumping out bullets at an incoming nightfighter. But then white hot metal zips passed my eyes as shells rip up through the fuselage smashing into the instrument panel in front of me as pieces of bakerlite and shards of metal housing erupt from the board. As far as I can tell no significant damage has been done. I spoke too soon, number 2 engine must have been hit as it is running hot and needs to be shut down.

"You got him Dougie! He is on fire and going down." Eric's voice is shrill with excitement but then he reports that he has damage to his port ammo track for the MUG.

More pieces of shrapnel tear through the fuselage just as we start our bomb run but this time from flak shredding control cables and damaging the hydraulic hand pump for the flaps. Possible damage to the wing root and the inboard tank is hit but self seals.

"Bombs gone." We are on target with 30% accuracy. "OK chaps let's go home."

More flak, heavier this time but apart from the smell of cordite no significant damage that I can find. Eric, our MUG is dazzled by the searchlights which ruins his night vision for a while.

On the journey back to base the Jerries seem to be busy elsewhere and even the flak seems to have the night off.

Landing at base my first mission has gone well. As the skipper said, "Piece of cake, old boy. Piece of cake."