

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon online campaign

102 squadron B Bobby

Mission 13 codename ARTICHOSES 18<sup>th</sup> / 19<sup>th</sup> June 1942 Take off 20.00 hours

Gardening Mission to Lorient

My dearest Agatha,

Although this is only our second mission as one crew we have all settled into our own routine and it already seems like we have been flying together for ages. They are a wizard crew and no man could ask for a better bunch of chaps. You asked me what the chaps are like. While we are waiting to taxi out I like to go round the crew and see that each man has settled in and perhaps have a few words before taking up my position for the night. So let's pretend that you are with me.

First up is GeeGee (Flt Sgt George Gently). Washed out in pilot training in Canada and trained as a Bomb Aimer. Unusual chap as he is a teetotaller and vegetarian and spends his off duty time bird watching.

Then back to my "office" and next to me is JB (Pilot Officer John Barnaby) our Flight Engineer who is busy going through his pre-flight checks. He has got himself the most intelligent little Jack Russell that he has named Sykes that he carries around the base inside his jacket. Just check that he hasn't smuggled him aboard.

Meanwhile Robby (Flt Sgt Robert Lewis) our Navigator and Jack (Flt Sgt George Dixon) our Wireless Operator have adjoining cubby holes and are singing what sounds like Noel Coward's Mad Dogs and Englishmen but as I got closer I began to make out the words:

*When the sirens moan to wake Cologne*

*They shiver in their shoes*

*In the Berlin streets they're white as sheets*

*With a tinge of Prussian blues;*

*In Rostock the wardens knock and yell "Put out that light"*

*When the Stirlings go out in the moonlight, out in the moonlight, out on a moonlight night.*

A quick shout up to Jimbo (Flt Sgt James Japp) our Mid Upper Gunner. Served as a rear gunner in a Daffy (Boulton Paul Defiant) 141 Squadron during the Battle of Britain before being shot down over Kent. He's a keen gardener and has planted all sorts of shrubs and things outside his quarters.

That just leaves Flt Sgt Henry "Hermit" Crabbe out tail gunner. Stout chap who gets his nickname not only because of his name but because he spends long hours reading recipe books including some in french by his hero some cove called Alexis Soyer. Hermit used to work in a hotel in Middlesbrough where he was justly famous for his steak and kidney pie apparently. He has removed the plexiglass screen over his guns as this gives him a better chance of spotting a nightfighter on our 6. It also means it is as cold as charity and to prevent frostbite he covers his face with scarves under which he has smothered goose fat. He is terrified of being trapped in his canopy so has a small axe tucked into his boot.

Right who have I left out? Of course our lucky mascot Fat Herman. He copped a packet on our first mission which literally knocked the stuffing out of him but he has been re stuffed and sewn up again and apart from a bit of a hump back looks none the worse.

So these are the chaps that are going with me tonight.

I was glad to hear your portrait of my sister in law, Lady Allen is going so well. I am sure that my brother the baronet will be thrilled.

Sending you all my love and looking forward so very much to seeing you on my next leave.  
Ever yours, Roddy.

I left the letter propped up on the mantelpiece for my batman to send and headed out get suited up. As this was going to be a low level gardening mission I had decided that we would fly as low as possible in order to try and delay detection by the Jerries. I have found that 4,000 feet is a good height over land as it is just beyond the range of the light flak and too low for the heavies to depress far enough to get in a good burst.

It was good to see that Fat Herman was back swinging from his noose and all the crew gave him a good luck pull on their way to taking their places. At least the weather was good this time and with such scattered targets the enemy controllers would have their hands full. We've got the green light at last and make a good take off. Flying over a blacked out London we can see very little sign of life even at this height and with 5/10ths cloud a very little moonlight only just make out the distinct bend in the River Thames off to port.

Crossing the coast between Brighton and Hove the cloud breaks up and a slight mist carpets the sea but by mid channel we run into 10/10ths clouds but there is no recall or any sign of nightfighter activity either.

"Enemy coast ahead skipper." The cloud cover once again gives way to a low mist as we approach the French coast. We can see the searchlights in the vicinity of Le Havre to port and Cherbourg to starboard but we don't appear to have been detected, either that or they are busy with trade elsewhere.

10/10ths cloud again as we fly over the Channel Islands. "I just fancy some Jersey spuds," says Jack. "Pipe down you clot and keep the intercom clear while we are in enemy airspace." Then we are all blinded by searchlights as we cross St Malo. "That's torn it!" As flak bursts all around us the aircraft gives a sudden jolt and the strong smell of aviation fuel is everywhere. "Jaybee damage report!" "Starboard inner fuel tank has been hit – looks like it has self sealed.... no fire." "Monica is buzzing like a wild thing.... there's something on our six." "Hermit can you see anything?" "I thought I saw a shadow of an Me110 between us and the searchlights but I think that he must be as dazzled as us."

The clouds start to break up to 5/10ths cover as we press on. "Loudeac coming up shipper. Then I suggest turning right onto 250 degrees to avoid the flak around Redon and St Nazaire. Once you cross the coast lose height and turn onto 278 degrees for the run." "Thanks Robby." "Just seen a couple of 110s off to port but I don't think they saw us""Thanks Jimbo. Keep an eye on them. Over to you GeGee. It's all yours bomb doors open." A bit of light flak bursts overhead but nothing to write home about. "Mines going, going ... all gone. How's do they look Hermit?" "Very good. Very, very good. Slap bang in the shipping lane that should give the U Boats a nasty surprise." "Flak ship dead ahead!" "Thanks Gee Gee I see him. Not much I can do at this altitude." "Must be his night off – he didn't fire a shot!" "Steer 11 degrees skipper that should be Quimper just off to starboard." "OK time to go home boys."

Once again we are coned by searchlights this time over Lannion and the flak really opens up and really lets us have it. As the aircraft is buffeted Robby has to bend down to pick up a pencil that has rolled off his chart table and a piece of flak embeds itself where his hand had been a moment before. "Damage

report Jaybee.” “Nothing serious.” “Harraway man, you would not say that if you could see my chart table!”

Back over the Channel Islands and the cloud has cleared and been replaced by haze. Monica starts beeping. “Dornier 6 o’clock high skipper!” We hear Hermit’s guns firing before he finishes speaking. “Good shooting Hermit. You’ve torn his wing clean off.” “Thanks Jimbo.”

Mid Channel with 5/10ths cloud and we are bounced without warning by a Ju88 C6 in a vertical dive. His first shells smash up our radio and Jack is lucky not to be hurt while the next two shells take out our control cables and then his last hit sets fire to our number 2 engine. It takes two attempts to put out the fire and feather the engine. Despite doing his best Jimbo isn’t able to get in any hits before he dives just below us and we take advantage of the cloud cover to lose him. “There he is 3 o’clock high. No ... correction it’s a Mossy. I can just make out his identity letters. It’s OK he’s seeing home safely.” The Mosquito keeps station with us all the way to the coast and as we near Southampton he peels off into the cloud.

Jaybee comes on the intercom,”I don’t think that we will make it back to base skipper. I suggest you put her down at Andover.” “Good idea. Get a flare ready will you.”

Robbie and Jack started singing again:

*Keep the homes fires burning,  
While the props are turning  
Keep the beacon flashing bright  
Till the boys come home  
Then when ops are over  
We shall be in clover  
Keep the IO up all night  
Till the boys come home.*

The next day when we finally made it back to base I put in a call to the Mosquito Squadron to thank their crew for scaring off that Ju88 and for seeing us safely back home. Funny thing was they said that they didn’t have any Mosquitos flying that night and the one we identified was reported missing a year ago.

Historical note the ghostly Mosquito is inspired by the experience of 12 Squadron's Lancaster B Boomerang (it always comes back) in 1943 on it way back from a mission over Hamburg.