

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon's online campaign
102 Squadron G for George
Target Ossun, France 18/19 January 1944

Excerpt from the Daily Chronicle:

On a frosty night at a bomber station somewhere in England your intrepid reporter joined the aircrew of a Lancaster bomber on its mission to bomb a target deep in the heart of Vichy France. This was only this young crew's second mission.

We went to the locker room about an hour before take off, calling at the parachute section along the way. "If it doesn't work bring it back and we will give you a replacement" the young WAAF told me as she handed me my chute. Then we picked up our escape pack with a map printed on a square of silk. After that was the lengthy process of getting into all the flying clothes – silk and woollen underwear, shirt, heavy roll neck sweater, electrical suit, white woollen knee socks, an Irvine flying suit made of fleece lined leather, fleece lined brown suede flying boots and a scarf.

As we were driven out to our waiting aircraft I glimpsed the half moon shining briefly weakly bathing the airfield in milky glow. Once aboard the crew all took up their respective positions and given the signal we took off into the night sky.

Crossing the coast I glimpsed what in peace time would have been holiday resorts but which were now heavily defended shores against the German menace and then the aircraft lurched violently as the tail gunner shouted through the intercom "corkscrew left skipper" and I felt a shudder run through the plane as he opened up with his quadruple machine guns. Bright streaks of light passed before my eyes as white hot bullets tore through the fuselage of the compartment where I was as again the plane dived then turned violently in the opposite direction. "Everyone alright? Check in." said the skipper then one by one the crew reported in. There was a smell of cordite mixed with aviation fuel but apparently nothing vital had been damaged. According to the South African Flight Engineer we had lost a bit of fuel but he was able to compensate by transferring some from another tank.

"Enemy coast ahead" said the voice in my headphones as calmly as a bus conductor announcing the next stop. As we pressed on some light flak started to burst around us while fingers of searchlight beams tried to pin us to the sky. The pilot skilfully made the plane dance around the sky a little just enough to put them off their aim.

As I looked over the navigator's shoulder he asked if I had ever been to Paris. I replied that I hadn't – "Well now's yer chance. It's only a few thousand feet straight down."

Further and further we intruded into the enemy held land. The wireless operator made frequent checks for wind speed updates and passed the latest "gen" to the navigator who calculated any necessary course corrections.

Hour after hour this continued. Looking out the Astrodome I could see the canopy of stars through broken cloud but as far as I could see we were alone in the sky.

Nearing the target zone and once again the call went up "Break left, break left." This time from the mid upper gunner as a nightfighter attacked us from above and behind. One of his bullets hit the navigator's table scorching a livid groove and throwing his plotting instruments all over the shop. "Well done Ray! You got the blighter!" I learned later that it was a Ju88 that had crumpled under his withering fire.

Again the barking sound of the flak as we started our bomb run. Watching from the Astrodome I could see coloured flares marking the route to the target and then up ahead one of the “Scarecrow” shells exploded. These are designed to look like a burning bomber in attempt to unnerve our chaps. “Bombs gone.” Immediately the plane rose up released of its load. Then as we turned for home more flak and then the sound of something like light rain pattering on the fuselage. But this was something far more deadly as pieces of red hot shrapnel rained down on the fuselage puncturing holes as it went.

Halfway home and a welcome cup of coffee and corned beef sandwiches but still no time to relax our guard as the nightfighters would be waiting for our return. Although the crew caught the occasional glimpse of He111s and Ju88s in the moonlight we went unmolested.

Landing back at base the skipper looked over his “kite” at the various holes caused by the night’s action and sticking his finger through one of the holes, turned to me and said, “Moths.”

I later learned that we had dropped our bombs slap bang on target* and the chaps went off for the well deserved meal of bacon and eggs.

** some slight press exaggeration 50% on target*