

Target for Tonight -Steve Dixon's online campaign Mission 7
Bremen 27/28 August 1943

Not a particularly good start to the day as I have just received notification that my younger brother, Toby has been posted as missing after his Sunderland was brought down after engaging a U Boat somewhere off Iceland a couple of weeks ago. However on the plus side, the Quack has declared me fit for flying and they have managed to retrieve P Phoenix from Earls Colne and bash the dents out of her, so it looks like we will both be on Ops tonight. Clearly the C.O. isn't so sure as he has decided that he will fly as spare bod with us tonight.

At the briefing we are all waiting for the curtain to go back and reveal the target for tonight. Like every other crew in the room I am hoping that we aren't going back to Berlin just yet. Relief as we see that the route is much shorter and we are going back to Bremen! But then the Met Officer warns us that the weather is going to be far from ideal and that coupled with the fact that our squadron will be some of the last over the target sets up a groan that ripples around the room.

It may be late summer but I have never known such dreadful weather with incessant rain and high winds buffeting the aircraft as we wait for the signal to take off. The wound to my head starts to throb in time with the engines and both my legs are stiff and aching damnably. There's the signal and finally we are off. Almost immediately we are swallowed up by the murk of 10/10ths cloud blanketing the whole of the east coast. Out over Cromer we gain our maximum altitude and manage to just get above the cloud but even up here with a crescent moon there is very little to see except the stars and occasional flickers from the exhaust of the chaps in front of us. "Permission to try our wee guns Skipper?" Jock's broad Glaswegian accent brings me back to reality. "Yes, go ahead." For a few seconds the aircraft shudders as the gunners ensure that their weapons are functioning properly and are ready for what is to come.

"Everything alright Simon?" The C.O. makes it sound like a greeting in the mess but I can sense the concern behind his question. "Tickety boo, Sir. Everything is on the top line." In truth I feel dreadful, and now we are at altitude my head feels like it is going to explode and my legs are throbbing like mad. "Fine, I'll go and see how Clive is getting on." So saying he ducked down and squeezed into the bomb aimer's compartment.

The cloud begins to thin a little as we get further out across the North Sea. "OK chaps start chucking out Window." Although I'm pretty sure they must know that we are coming by now as most of the bomber stream have been to the target and even now are on their way back. Window has proved to be really effective but on the downside it renders our Monica warning system useless and mucks up the chances of our tail gunner spotting anything.

Just as the C.O. pops his head up as he emerges from the bomb aimer's compartment P Phoenix is hammered by several canon shells ripping through the rear compartment and starting an oxygen fire and then both the wings as a Ju88G7 executes a well timed Shrage Musik attack. If only the H2S installation hadn't meant the removal of the ventral gun! "Hold tight everyone I putting her into a steep dive." "Chris - what's the bad news?" "Number 1 engine fire out and prop feathered. Number 3 engine looks OK probably superficial damage. Rear section oxygen fire is under control." "I'll keep her in a dive until we are below 10,000 feet. Everyone OK? Check in." Relief as everyone confirms that they are OK but it is going to be a long haul to the target. "Are you OK Simon? Would you like me to take over for a bit?" "No, right as rain sir."

"Dutch coast off to starboard, due north of the Texel Islands skipper. Not that you can see anything down there as it is all covered in fog." Pip, our navigator always unflappable. Chris comes to shout

in my ear. "We don't seem to have lost any fuel but the fire has knocked out the oxygen supply so we are going to have to stay downstairs for the rest of the trip."

Flying on three engines it feels like it would be quicker to just get out and walk. "Just north of Schiermonnikoog now skipper. Looks like the high winds are causing a 3 degree drift so you need to steer 68 degrees magnetic." "Keep an eye on those patchy clouds chaps. I don't want any more nasty surprises on this trip."

As we draw level with Wangerooge the clouds break up and the ground fog returns. "Need to correct for drift again skipper. Steer 69 magnetic." I wonder whether there will be any target markers left by the time we reach Bremen? The sound of gunfire comes from every direction as first the nose guns, then the MUG and finally the tail guns all open up as the shadow of an Me110G4 fills my windscreen trailing smoke then a bright flash as it explodes in a ball of fire just behind us. "D'ye think we got him?" Jock's laconic voice breaks the tension as that was a very near miss.

"Stop Window. We will be crossing the enemy coast in two minutes and I'm sure they know we are on our way. Clive get into position." As we cross the coast somewhere between Emden and Wilhelmshaven the thick cloud cover returns which is not so good as we will be silhouetted by the searchlights against it. Already we can see the bright red glow of the city burning and the bright flashes as cookies explode. No sign of nightfighters on the way in – they must be busy with all the targets they have to choose from. We are coned by searchlights and however much I twist and turn there's nothing I can do to shake them off. The bright blue of the Master searchlight has us pinned. We are taking hits and I break out in a sticky sweat as my body remembers the punishment it took from flak on the last Op. Nose turret is hit and the guns are out of action. The windscreen cracks but doesn't shatter. The joystick is wrenched out of my hand as the rudder is hit. More flak as we claw our way to the target. Windscreen shatters and the cockpit is filled with the smell of cordite followed by the smoke from the burning city just below and the heat is almost unbearable. The port wingroot is hit while the port flap is torn away. Just how much more can Phoenix take? The plane is being buffeted by the turbulence caused by bomb blasts as well as the updraft from the burning city which at its centre is now white hot. Choking on the smoke it is all I can do to hold her steady on course. "Over to you Clive. Only don't hang about." Time is standing still while the aircraft tries to shake itself to bits and with the bomb bay doors open there is now a howling gale ripping through the cockpit from the shattered windscreen as if someone has opened the doors of a vast furnace. The strain on the airframe is tremendous as it creaks and groans while any second I expect the wings to be torn off by the turbulence. Finally the bombs are dropped and we soar up on the thermals with the sudden release of weight. Shutting the bomb bay doors helps to reduce the through draft but it is still hard to breath. Phoenix suddenly drops port wing low as something hits the wing as the flak batteries on the east of the city have a go at us. A chunk of red hot jagged metal rips through the control panel and exits through the roof leaving a hole big enough to put my fist through. Above the Jerry fighters are dropping bright white flares and it is like driving along a brightly lit street in peace time. I can see two nightfighter diving down through the clouds to have a go at us. "Hold on to your ha'pennies chaps! Time to corkscrew." The first Nightfighter, a Ju88C6, screamed down in a vertical dive whereupon Fraser left him have it with the MUGs and he broke off and was not seen again. The other, a Do217J1, tried his luck from 6 High but Jock was having none of that and smoke started to appear from his engine. In reply he added some ventilation holes in our fuselage and an unlucky shot took out our brand new master compass. "Time to head for home chaps. I get the distinct feeling that we have outstayed our welcome."

Back out to sea and the fog was just as bad but at least the cold air was scrubbing away the stench of the burning city. 30 minutes later and the C.O. brought me a mug of coffee and a bar of chocolate. "Here. I think that you could do with this. Help you keep your energy up." I hadn't realised just how tired I have become, the adrenaline that kicked in over the target was wearing off and I felt

exhausted. “Thank you sir.” “Those flares are a new trick by the Jerries. I don’t think that we have seen those before. Looks like they were dropped by some high flying fighters to show their friends their targets. By the way, I was watching from the astral dome when I noticed that the port wing was hit by a small bomb from one of OUR friends upstairs. Lucky for us it seems to have passed straight through. Simon I really think that I should take over for a spell while you get that wound seen to. I insist.” “What, what wound sir?” “Well apart from the shards of glass in your cheek you seem to be bleeding a lot from your shoulder.” As soon as he said it I could feel a burst a fire shoot down my back from my right shoulder and realised I couldn’t move my arm. Feeling distinctly woozy I just about managed to slide out of the pilot’s seat before collapsing on the floor.

There is the smell of disinfectant and the feel of crisp clean sheets. Someone is talking to me from a very long way off. I think that if I really concentrate I might just about be able to make out what they are saying. “... that’s it old chap. Nothing to worry about. Good to have you back with us.” It’s the Quack but I was discharged this morning.. er, yesterday morning. Then the C.O. saying something “... job well done... thoroughly deserved.... pressing on like that.” Think I will just have a little sleep now.