

Target for Tonight Steve Dixon online campaign
102 squadron C Copper
Mission 20 2/3 August 1942
Target Vegesack

“Darling Agatha,

It was so good of you to come with me to Buckingham Palace to see me receive my DFC, I really don't feel that I have done anything to deserve it and feel a bit of a fraud actually. But it was so very good to see you and to snatch a little time together. The other chaps have had a whale of a time with two weeks leave and have been ragging “Jimbo” Japp, our Mid Upper, about his elevation to the rank of Warrant Officer in recognition of his outstanding service. Back on ops tonight but I will be thinking of you and about our time together in London and that quaint little flat of your friend in West Hampstead.

Until we can meet again,

Ever yours,

Roddy”

Sealing the envelope with a heavy heart I wondered where we might be headed for tonight. By all accounts we had been fortunate in the extreme to be stood down for the last mission which saw the other squadrons badly mauled.

As the curtain was draw back to reveal the target map there was a collective buzz as at first it looked like Bremen but the C.O. soon put a stop to that. “Your target for tonight gentlemen is Vegesack.” “Isn't that what you keep potatoes in?” whispered FltSgt Hathaway. “As you see gentlemen your course will take you well out into the North Sea avoiding the flak barrage on Texel Island and coming in to avoid the flak on Heligoland. There will be a diversionary raid which we trust will divert the bulk of the nightfighters away to the South around Munster. For those of you who flew the Bremen raid back in June will remember that the target is in the valley on the bend of the river and even with tonight's crescent moon you should have no excuse for not locating the target. Good hunting gentlemen.”

The crew seem a bit wound up as it is their first mission after a bit of a break. As we are collecting our parachutes the WAAF who hands me mine cracks the usual joke, “If doesn't work bring it back” and the familiar routine kicks in and we lose our jitters.

Back in the “office” the smells of aviation fuel, doped canvas and engine exhaust cloak themselves around us. Comms check complete it's time to go at last.

C Copper trundles down the runway and despite her heavy bomb load lifts gently into the sky. As we rise above the ground mist the late summer sunshine bathes the East Anglian countryside below in a golden light and I have never seen anything more beautiful. Heading out over The Wash remember family holidays at Wells Next the Sea and I wonder if we shall ever know days like that again.

Mind back on the task at hand. “Test your guns.” The smell of cordite drifts through the bus adding to the familiar atmosphere of being back on the job. Over the Dogger Bank and the slight sea mist below shimmering in the weak moonlight but at least we aren't producing any contrails as we now appear on the German radar. Gently weaving the bus and banking to give the boys a chance to check the blind spots beneath the wings. “Skipper I thought I saw an Me110 crossing left to right behind us. Gone now and nothing on Monica.” This from our rear gunner Flt Sgt Crabbe. “Thank you Hermit. Is it a bit draughty back there with the centre panel taken out?” “I'm thinking warm thoughts of home sir.”

As we fly further out over the North Sea the sea mist disappears and we are left with clear skies. The cold air at this altitude makes the stars shimmer and we start to produce contrails. "I've got a canny astra fix skipper." Our resident Geordie and navigator pipes up, "we're due North of Leeuwarden slight drift about two degrees of track skipper." "Roger that. Correcting."

Monica starts shrilling and the kite vibrates as Hermit opens up with his guns before announcing on the intercom, "110 at 6 level.... Got him he's breaking off."

The controls are feeling sloppy. Looks like he did some damage before leaving us. A Parthian Shot. Port elevator out.

"Number 4 engine is losing oil skipper. I can keep her going probably as far as the target but then I will need to shut it down." Our Flight Engineer Flying Officer Hasting sounds slightly peeved as if it's my fault!

"OK do what you can." "Where is he now Hermit?" "Dived away skipper. Seemed in a bit of a rush probably needs some sauerkraut."

"Due North of Wilhelmshaven and on course skipper. Turning onto bearing 169 degrees in 24 minutes." "Thank you Robbie." With five tenths cloud we get intermittent glimpses of the sea below and the contrails have vanished. Far ahead we can just make out the red glow as the the first two thirds of the bomber steam let go their bomb loads on the target. "Bandit ahead 10.30 level. It's OK his port wing seems to have fallen off." Sgt Hathaway, wireless/gunner sounds very pleased with himself, as well he might with his first kill. However, I am startled as the remains of the stricken Me110 comes barrelling across nearly clipping the cockpit and leaving smears of engine oil all over the windscreen. "Jolly good shooting Shakespeare. It's almost like you've been practising!" This from WE Japp our Ace gunner – praise indeed.

"Change course now skipper and stay on that bearing directly on to target." "Thanks Robbie." Up ahead the searchlights and flak are doing the deadly work while below the area around the target is ablaze with the smoke reaching up to our altitude and the ten tenths cloud reflecting both the fire below and the latticework of searchlights. "Sorry skipper I am going to need to shut down number 4 engine, as its badly into the red now." "OK Arthur." Up ahead a burning Halifax streaming burning fuel plunges down from above one parachute makes a brief appearance before the aircraft explodes showering burning debris all over the ship catching the poor devil who had just bailed out and his chute catches fire as he plunges down into the burning city below. The nightfighters seem to be busy with the lads up top and we are subjected to a brief burst of wildly inaccurate medium flak. "Right George time to do your stuff," this to Flt Sgt Gently our bomb aimer. We are on target and the city itself is only slightly obscured as the fires are burning so fiercely that the up draft it carrying the smoke away from the target. "Bombs gone "(50%) A sudden updraft and the sudden release of the weight of the bombs causes C Copper to rear up like a frightened stallion and the dark outline of another bomber fills the windscreen and for a split second I think that we are going to crash into his open bomb bay as I see the cookie detach itself and come hurtling towards us. Then we make a hard turn to port and I can actually see the startled faces of the crew in the cockpit by the light of their instrument panel as we miss a collision by mere inches. Shaking with fright and with the sheer effort of fighting with the control column I somehow manage to get us back on an even keel. The crew is stunned into silence as with my heart pumping nineteen to the dozen I struggle gain control of both myself and the aircraft. "Erm... Robbie can you give me a course for home." There is no immediate replying but eventually Robbie tells me, "Steer 357 skipper." Coming out of the target zone the flak is patchy and the searchlight seem to be busy elsewhere and the nightfighters have taken the night off our have used up all their ammunition and gone home.

Coming out of the cloud the sea is covered in haze and a Mosquito takes up station on our starboard wing. "Steer 269 degrees skipper."

"After that close shave I think that perhaps we could all do with a cup of cocoa and something to eat. Can you see to it George?" Looking down at the haze over the North Sea I see the Mosquito break off and chase away a grey shadow there is a brief flicker back and forth of tracer and then they both are swallowed up by the gloom.

The cloud bubbles up as we enter the next zone and we start producing contrails in the moister air without warning we are attacked from 3 high by a Ju88 G7 who manages to score walking hits on his first pass smashing up the oxygen supply in the Nose compartment causing a fire and shutting off the oxygen. It takes George two fire extinguishers to get the blaze under control. The Front windscreen is hit and shatters under the impact, while the Bomb Bay doors jammed. Worst of all in the Rear Centre section the Tail Turret dead man's handle is shot up trapping Hermit in the turret and he can't fire his guns or bail out but what we don't know is that he has taken a severe wound to the abdomen Tail Gunner hit in the abdomen inflaming his liver and spleen.

Jimbo hits the Ju88 G7 in the fuel tank which brews up and explodes killing the crew.

Diving down so that we can come off oxygen and to prevent frostbite. I have had to smash part of the windscreen in order to be able to see and to prevent shards of glass from whipping back and lacerating my face.

The sea fog persists into the next sector and at this lower altitude we can just make out the rest of the bomber stream silhouetted above us against the stars.

There are no further incidents and we circle the field having fired a flare to let them know that we are damaged and may have wounded aboard.

The landing goes better than expected given the circumstances and as soon as we are back in dispersal we rush round to see what we can do for poor old Hermit. It doesn't look good and we give Hathaway a bunk up onto the tailplane but he can't get any response from Hermit who is pale and motionless. The blood wagon arrives and a couple of Erks start attacking the canopy with axes. As they lower Hermit down very gently he looks to be in a really bad way. He died later that day in hospital.

After debriefing I am too whacked out to eat breakfast and go and collapse on my bed still dressed in my flying gear.

