

Sherwood Shirley
103 Squadron
Target Dusseldorf

A warm summer evening with that memorable scent of freshly cut grass as we stroll toward 'Sherwood Shirley'. The crew diligent with their the preflight checks, systems all operable, weaponry loaded and primed. Into the night sky steadily to settle in the middle of the formation and then... a stutter and lurch of the airframe, like the brakes have been pumped on on a motorcar. A glance outside reveals number two engine afire, and we are only just over the home coast. Flight Engineer Steve Gaskill cuts the fuel feed and isolates the engine, the flame extinguishes but the engine is now U/S. " We are running on three, chaps. Weather ahead is reported to be particularly unsavoury, so we may get called back anyway. We will go with it until required to do otherwise. Keeping at low altitude from now on and it will be slow going.'

Over the North Sea with cloud beginning to bubble up and a fleeting shape of an aircraft on a different trajectory to the bomber stream passes some distance away and above us.. not ours. "Bandit spotted over our bow, gentlemen, full alert, there may be more"... came the warning from the Skipper. "Incoming at 10.30!" A burst from our nose guns and a reply from an Me 110 as he hurtles past us; 'Frankie' opens up with the quad rear turret armaments... and with a bright flash along the fuselage our assailant takes crippling fire... as he disappears into the nighttime pall a lone 'chute can be seen below us.. 'Thats your first, Francis, good show that man!'

A nervous quiet ensues, realisation that we are in bandit country and being hunted... the engines rumble on as we near the Dutch Coast. A straightforward traverse until, out of the blackness tracer fire from below our six, no time to get a bead on him coming or in passing, but the Dornier 217 strafes our aircraft... holes appearing in the fuselage skin and both wings, the rounds hit hard and loud.. something must have hit the Monica as our F. Eng. reports no readings.... "high six, high six!!!" The Dornier swinging straight back into an attack line.... "'Frankie' is on song tonight... thats another hit! Keep on him, keep on him!" ... we take a searing line of fire along the fuselage taking out the mid fuselage oxygen systems, and turret ammo boxes. Our bombardier has a light cut on the shoulder from broken glass flying around the interior and Tail gunner a cut foot.. " just a scratch", Says Francis Jennings in reply to our commanders enquiries.

Literally, in a flash, we are coned in searchlights passing over Den Bosch and all hell breaks loose. Very heavy flak buffets 'Shirley', shells thumping into the superstructure and searing through the nose turret, leaving our bombardier seriously wounded. Our Navigator, Roy Wilson, goes to his aid to find devastation both to the turret and to our colleague.. pelvis shattered, but thankfully, amazingly it seems that the shrapnel has missed an artery... small blessings are sometimes all you get. Roy pulls him away and settles him as best he can mid section... " you are our target man now Roy... get ready for the run in"... no let up for us as the mid upper turret chatters into life, a JU-88 diving on us from above... gone in a second without inflicting more pain.

Nearing Düsseldorf and the action is unrelenting. Another night fighter is on us, but 'Frankie' is in his oils on this trip and gets another hit, this time to the nose and engine area of a 110 that breaks away after firing on us but way off his mark. AAA keeps knocking us around as we approach our bombing run.... "I will keep it as steady as I can, Roy... sight up and release when ready"... "Bomb door open..." "Bombs gone"... as the payload is released we feel the aircraft pitch upwards.. " Brace for strong manoeuvres..." full throttle on a port banking turn, nose up and climbing away.

Heavy flak on the way out past Den Bosch again causing further damage, no ventral gun from now on, oxygen out amidships.... coned again and a Dornier on our tail.. yet again 'Frankie' scores a bullseye, flame coming from the Jerry's engine... he veers away without a shot on us.

Glad to see the enemy coast receding into the background, we are headed over the sea once more... a rumble of engines but no longer gunfire... a thankful respite from the trials of the last hour. "Keep on alert, chaps, no slacking now... lets get back without further incident if we can"

Flt. Sgt. Davies has a concerned eye on the fuel gauges as we begin our decent to the airfield... 'I have to report that we seem to have a slight issue here' comes the comms from the Flight Engineer... " looking through a fair sized hole to our rear It seems we have been deprived of our tailwheel! Could make for an interesting landing.".... throttling back and easing her down we make a bumpy landing with the tail end swishing from side to side until we come to a breath emitting stop.

The ground crew were there to meet our return and take Toby Parkes away in the ambulance, he had lost a fair amount of blood but was still conscious. Halfway through a second pot of tea in the NAAFI the skipper shows up to report that Toby will be alright but that his service to King and Country is surely over. "By the way Francis, the chaps are stenciling a swastika marker behind the tail turret.... well done lad, that's the way...good show all'