

F/LT Vern L Scantleton DFC War Experience 4

My tales of a "worn out airman" would not be complete without a description of an actual raid and for this purpose I have chosen the operation of Stettin on the night of 29th August 1944. This particular raid combined sufficient anxieties and excitement to give me a few grey hairs (most of which I have since lost). This was a dual attack in which the main force split into two, one going on to attack Konigsberg (Poland) and the other to Stettin.

My log book shows we were airborne for 8 hours 40 minutes, which was about a maximum endurance time for most bombers with a full load. I well recall the raid as it was the only time we were briefed to fly on into Russia, if our calculations were such that we would have insufficient fuel to return, or damage to the aircraft or motors was such, that it would be impossible to return against the strong prevailing head wind. Naturally, no man looked forward to spending a vacation in Russia - however short the stay. To the best of my recollection no aircraft flew on into Russia on this raid, though on some other raids, aircraft were forced to do so.

With an actual airborne time of 8 hours 40 minutes it is necessary to add the pre-take off check and the taxi-ing out to the runway, and on return the time taken to return to the dispersal pan, and shut down the motors, to get the total time the pilot would have sat at the controls without any relief. In this case probably a minimum of at least 9 1/4 hours. Actually we did a longer trip on 30th November 1943, when we dropped mines at a low level, at night, in a shipping lane just off the coast of Spain. On this occasion we were airborne for 10 hours, and it was the longest time ever recorded that a Stirling bomber had been airborne, so much so that we had been "written off" as missing at base.

What happened was that we lost a motor, soon after the return flight began, in which we were to climb to 16/18,000 feet, and fly back over enemy occupied France. With only three motors, I decided to skirt France and fly over water. This long trip used up so much fuel and our gauges were so low, we decided to do an emergency landing at a drome only 25 miles from base. Hence the panic back at Chedburg - our operational base.

With temperatures of up to -30 celsius or lower, it is a reasonable question to ask what did the pilot do if nature called? Well the simple answer is he went without, or performed with bloody great difficulty. A funnel with a hose attached was fitted to the pilot's seat, but with all the flying clothes, and parachute harness etc, only a person of Houndini capabilities could have come up with a specimen. I vacated the seat on one occasion for relief, but returned immediately when the rear gunner reported an unidentified aircraft on our tail - I NEVER tried again!!!

The normal procedure on an operational squadron was that Group H.Q. would advise each station, whether "ops" would be on, and how many aircraft were required about 10-11 am each day. The squadron commander would then draw

up a battle order with a list of pilots names, and the allocated aircraft number. The pre-take off briefing time was usually given later. The pilot would then gather his crew, and go out to the aircraft and carry out a 20 minute air test. Any problems or malfunctions would be reported on return to the "Chiefie" who was the N.C.O. in charge of the ground crew allocated to that aircraft on a permanent basis. The "Chiefie" held a responsible position as the serviceability of aircraft determined very much the total success of a raid.

To have to turn back on a raid was very much a case of "letting the troops down", and was frowned upon by Group Headquarters.

Briefings were usually carried out about two hours before take off, and were held under tight security. After briefing, all aircrew had a meal of eggs, and prior to take off thermos flasks of tea and coffee plus a bar of chocolate for each crew member was put in the aircraft. This may seem churdish today but in wartime England these were virtually unknown luxuries to the people in the street. It was a well known fact that babies and aircrew were the best fed in those years.

From when the target was announced at the briefing until after the actual take off occurred was the time that many aircrew found it difficult to relax, and in some cases symptoms of stress existed. Strangely, once airborne and on the way, this problem largely disappeared, no doubt largely due to the fact that they were occupied with their particular tasks.

The well known saying "no moon tonight" relates to the fact that aircrew had a distinct dislike of "going on ops" during periods of full moon, as this gave the enemy "cats-eye" night fighters a definite advantage, as they could readily pick out the bombers visually, particularly when silhouetted against the sky and ground.

On the raid to Stettin on the night of 29th August 1944, we were briefed to fly out over the North Sea at a height of below 500 ft., to a pre-determined latitude and longitude and then to climb as rapidly as possible to a height of about 18,000 ft, and on a route which would take us over the southern part of neutral Sweden, who would fire on us, but with little intention of doing any damage.

A tremendous amount of work and detail went into the planning of each operation by Bomber Command, and a lot of tactics were used to confuse the enemy. This is too complex to explain in a short story such as this, but suffice to say that the routes were planned to avoid heavy coastal batteries, areas of concentrated search lights and of course fighter dromes.

On this raid it was a full moon, and 350 Lancasters and Halifaxes were in the force to attack Stettin. The planned tactics were that we would fly over the North Sea, at below 500 ft, which was a height at which the enemy radar in those days, could not pick up aircraft due to the curvature of the earth's surface. About forty minutes ahead of the main force some six aircraft were to carry out a "spoof" raid by dropping "window", and simulating a bomber force of several

hundred aircraft. The objective was to bring up the night fighters to attack the "spoof" force. German night fighters had a limited range and endurance and if all went to plan, they would have to return to base for refuelling, and this would allow the main force to fly through relatively free from night fighters. In this case, either deliberately or by poor finger work by the controllers, the fighters were late in getting airborne, and they struck the Jack Pot by flying up into the true bomber force.

On the Stettin raid we took off about sunset and headed out over the North Sea. It was interesting to see aircraft from various dromes in England converging to make up the force of 350. As darkness fell it became apparent that there was going to be little joy in flying a heavily laden aircraft with full fuel capacity at below 500 ft. with all the other aircraft about. Evasive action at any height with a full load was bad enough, but at below 500 ft, it was plain suicidal.

All raids were carried out under strict radio silence and total black-out conditions. I am not sure what caused the first pilot to panic (or use his common sense), but someone put on navigation lights, and a lot of others followed. This is the only occasion I can recall pilots putting on navigation lights on a raid. The risk of being shot down at that early stage would have been far less than the chance of a collision and a watery grave. I have no hesitation in saying it was a bit scary!!!!

Beyond any doubt the most memorable 15 minutes or so of my flying career was when the night fighters got amongst the bombers. In some ways it still seems a bit unreal, as we had a beautiful full moon, and one could pick out other bombers and landmarks easily, and all seemed right with the world. Needless to say the night fighters had a picnic and losses were severe. There is something totally eerie about watching a bomber on fire and plunging to earth, or exploding in mid-air, and one wondering how many of the crew would be lucky enough to escape.

Fortunately, the rest of the trip was pretty normal. There was only 1/10th cloud over the target, which permitted a concentrated attack. Flak and search lights were only moderate which was appreciated.

Vern Scantleton
(F/Lt. R.A.A.F)
214 Squadron
Bomber Command