

A Night to Remember

by Ron Homes

It's the morning of the 12th August 1944, on the RAF Bomber Station, Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire. The base of 101 Squadron, 1 Group, Bomber Command, a Special Duties Squadron with aircraft fitted with "Airborne Cigar" a highly secret radio counter measure for disrupting the enemy night fighter's radio controllers transmissions. Our eighth crew member being the "Special Operator" to operate the set.

The village of Ludford Magna is completely surrounded by the RAF Station with the living quarters on one side of the main road which runs through the centre of the little village and the massive aerodrome on the other. We RAF types feel completely integrated with this rural community with the slow steady pace of the countryside infusing us with a sense of security. The sun is shining, the weather looks fine and the morning air is heavy with the scent of new mown hay and life seems very sweet.

With a jolt we wake to reality. Our names are on the Operations Board for tonight! There it is! Aircraft N2 (Nan squared) Pilot P/O Homes, Navigator F/O Kabbash, Flight Engineer Sgt Waind, Bombaimer Sgt Wade, Wireless Operator Sgt Davidson, Special Operator Sgt Holway, Midupper Gunner Sgt Reynolds, Rear Gunner Sgt Smith. Oh hell! That means that our own Lancaster L,love, is still unserviceable. We've done our last two ops in N2 and we don't really like it. You develop a fondness for your own aircraft, it just feels right and although on the face of it all the aircraft appear identical they feel different and you get the "feel" of your own. Perhaps it's the confident relationship one builds up with your own ground staff, for you know that they are totally conscientious in their work and they are truly a part of your team..

The change of aircraft does nothing to settle that nasty empty sinking feeling in the stomach, and the thoughts of whether you will see this sunshine tomorrow have to be quickly dismissed. Don't think like that! Think of something else! Anything, but don't show your fear!!! Right! Let's get the crew together and cycle out to the aircraft and give it a flight check. All the crew must check over their equipment to make sure that it's fully operational for tonight, and the aircraft may have to be flown to make sure she is completely airworthy before she is loaded up with fuel, bombs and ammunition for the trip.

The butterflies in the stomach seem to be settling down a bit, now that we have a job to do to take one's mind off the coming night. Our proficiency in our respective jobs and the camaraderie between us helps to build up our confidence. The jokes are a little too loud and a rather forced, but they will get worse as the day goes on as the anxiety gnaws at our insides and we strive to put a brave face on it. The aircraft is OK but we still have the rest of the long day to get through before briefing at 19.30hrs. So let's go and have some lunch..... but somehow I don't really feel like eating!

We set off around the perimeter track on our bikes and already the bowsers, heavy with fuel, are approaching the aircraft to fill up their tanks with thousands of gallons of 100 octane fuel. Following them come the 'trains' of bomb trolleys with the various bombs on board and being

towed by tractors. We try to find out what the fuel and bomb loads are, and from that, get some idea of what the target might be, but it's not very conclusive. We shall just have to wait until we get to briefing to find out.

Back at the mess the smell of food being cooked is a bit hard to take and I would rather go to the bar for a stiff drink but I need to keep off the booze in order to keep a clear head for tonight. Just take a deep breath and go into the dining room and try to do justice to the steak and kidney pie and mash and boiled cabbage,.....oh dear!!

More banter and jokes around the table helps to renew the flagging appetite and the meal begins to seem quite appetising and with a full stomach I might be able to manage a little sleep this afternoon. I really should try, because it will probably be near dawn tomorrow before I have a chance to sleep again. Oh dear, I wonder what will happen between now and then? I wonder if there will be a "then"???

Back in the "Nissan hut" accommodation, all is surprisingly quiet, maybe everyone is trying to get some sleep. It's pleasantly warm with the sun shining on the corrugated iron roof, sometimes it can get unbearably hot, and sometimes damned cold. I can hear the birds singing outside and the low drone of Merlin engines being run up on the other side of the village. It has a comforting sound, powerful and warm and reliable.....

The noises in the next room wake me, it's just before four o'clock and I've been asleep for an hour and a half and I'm feeling drowsy and comfortable and then I remember..... that damned sinking feeling hits my stomach again. Briefing is at seven thirty, which leaves just two and a half hours before we get our pre-ops meal of egg and bacon.

It's just a short walk down a gravel path to the Mess in the warm August afternoon sunshine and somewhere behind all the Nissan huts further up on the hill a tractor is working in one of the fields and its muted engine noise joins in with the bird song and the warm air is full of the heavy smell of new mown grass. Life seems so good and you wouldn't think there was a bloody war on but for the increasing noise of activity from the airfield on the other side of the village. I wish I didn't have to fly tonight!

The Mess is very quiet, everybody subdued and deep in their own thoughts, most of the armchairs are occupied with lounging figures pretending to read well thumbed copies of Flight and Picture Post or yesterday's papers, but finding great difficulties in concentration. Two or three chaps are at the small tables around the edge of the room, writing letters, sometimes gazing into space seeking inspiration. What can you write about other than what fills your mind; tonight's operation and the chances of survival but that must not be mentioned.. There's a copy of Tee-Em and an empty armchair which I soon make use of and get lost in the antics of 'Pilot Officer Prune', the feather brained pilot who puts up every flying 'black' in the book. Then suddenly I'm drawn back to the real world by my Navigator sinking into the next armchair with his friendly Canadian greeting 'Hi'. "Hello Alex, have you been sleeping", "Awe no" he tells me, he's just taken a walk down to the farm to see if there were any jobs to do, but Mr Martin was out in the fields, probably driving the tractor that I heard

earlier, but I guess it filled in a bit of the time for him in these long empty anxious hours before an operation.

The minutes drag by until it's time for the six o'clock news on the Home Service of the BBC. The radio is switched on and the precise well rounded voice of the announcer tells us of the successes of the armies as they push their way into France, and that, last night a strong force of Lancasters and Halifaxes attacked targets in the Ruhr and extensive damage was done to oil refineries and marshalling yards. I wonder where we shall be going in just a few hours time. Soon it's time for the eggs and bacon. The faces begin to look less worried for everybody knows that it's the other chaps that don't come back, not you. Anyway the food is comforting and the atmosphere is full of high spirits, even though a little false.

"B flight bus is outside!" shouts somebody from the dining room door. A hundred or more chair legs scrape the floor and a crowd make for the door to grab their hats in the scrum in the hall. It's amazing how most people manage to get their own hats when they all look alike. Outside the sergeants are streaming out of their Mess across the road and gathering together in groups with their officer crew members and a lively chatter of speculation develops as they board the buses to take them down to briefing. Not long now to find out what the target is!

As we all file into the briefing room all eyes go to the big map on the wall to see where the red ribbon goes to. Where is it ? Frankfurt? Mainz? The loud general chatter and the scraping of chairs as the crews get themselves grouped together at the tables is suddenly silenced by the arrival of The AOC, The Base Commander G/Cap King, and the Squadron Commander W/Com. de la Everest. Everybody stands until brought to ease by the Squadron commander who steps up to the briefing platform with the words "Tonight's target is Russelsheim here between Mainz and Frankfurt" as he points to the spot on the map, with a long pointer "It's the Opel motor works that we have to flatten gentlemen, in order to reduce Hitler's already shortening war supplies ever further". "There will be 450 aircraft on the raid and as usual this squadron will be timed to be spaced evenly through the bomber stream. Start engines at 21.00hrs for take-off at 21.30hrs. Climb on track for Skegness where you will join the main stream at your allotted times. Climb on track again to be at this point on the Dutch coast at 18000ft, then on to the next turning point here (again the stick taps the chart) when you should be at your bombing height of 21000ft".....and so on. Then follows the Met man with news of fair weather, then the Navigation leader emphasising the importance of staying on track and in the stream and on time to the half minute, then the Intelligence officer with warnings of heavily defended areas to avoid, "the run into the target will be from the north-west between Mainz and Frankfurt so hold your track to avoid these areas". Then the Bombing leader and the Flight engineering leader and the Gunnery leader all with their instructions and words of warning, set your watches, and finally a word of encouragement from the AOC, "hit the target hard and good luck chaps".

There's a look of determination on some of the faces now. We know the job and how to do it. This is what we have been trained for and we feel confident. The general chatter gets louder as we all file out of the briefing room to walk to the Locker Room to get kitted up for the trip.

For most of the crew it's just flying boots, a sweater and silk scarf, Mae West and a parachute. Let's hope that we don't have to use them. The gunners and special-operators have to put on heavier, warmer gear. It's colder in their part of the aircraft. Pockets are emptied of letters, bus tickets, cinema tickets and anything that could be of use to enemy intelligence in the event of being shot down. I notice Smithy, our rear gunner, slip his 'lucky' wishbone into his top pocket before he struggles into his thick, yellow, electrically heated suit and he catches my eye with a shy grin on his face. I hope it works! I mean, the wishbone.

All kitted up and ready to go we file out to the crew buses to take us out to the aircraft.

The buses trundle around the perimeter track full of noise and ribald remarks. Nerves are stretched to breaking point now. It's funny how you feel chilly and a little shivery at this point regardless of the temperature, but it will be all right when we get on board the aircraft. We drop off the crews at their respective aircraft with loud shouts of "farewell" and "good luck" and "see you in the morning". Then the shout of "Nan Squared" means that we have arrived at our dispersal. In the cool half light of the evening, the aircraft stands there, big, black and menacing against a turquoise sky. The ground crew greet us with small words of assurance as to the airworthiness of the aircraft and Stan, our Flight Engineer, and I go around the aircraft doing the external checks. Pitot head covers removed, all cowlings, inspection panels and leading edges secured. Check tyres for creep. We climb aboard to our respective positions, checking escape hatches, etc etc. Inside the aircraft there's that familiar smell of cellulose, oil and 100octane fuel. Checking more equipment in the fuselage as we climb the steep slope forward and struggling over the main spar, our minds are beginning to get to grips with the task ahead. Settling into the pilots seat on the parachute, buckling it on and doing up the seat belt, my hands are shaking a bit and none of the buckles seem to go together easily. The seat seems a bit hard and a bit too low. I adjust it and that seems to be more comfortable. Helmet on, plug into the intercom and connect the oxygen, check the instrument panel, switch on radio and check the intercom.

20.50hrs, ten minutes to start up and all the crew are now in there positions with their equipment checked. Switch on intercom, "Pilot to Rear gunner OK?" "Rear gunner OK Skip", "Pilot to Mid upper OK?", "Mid upper OK", "Pilot to Special OK?", "Special OK", "Pilot to Wireless Operator OK?", "OK Skip", and so on checking on each of the other seven crew members in turn. "OK Engineer it's 20.58hrs and we're ready to start up". "OK Skip ground/flight switch to Ground, Trolley Acc is plugged in, Engine controls set, Fuel OK". "Right start up number one", the big prop turns slowly with a whining noise,-- it kicks, and with a cloud of exhaust smoke it bursts into life with that deep throated roar. Number two-three- and four. All engines running now, all gauges OK. "Ground/flight switch to FLIGHT" set engines to 1,200rpm to warm up. Temperatures and pressures building, check hydraulics, Gunners check the movements of their turrets, Wireless Operator checks the radios, Navigator checks the Gee, compass etc etc. All the crew are working like clockwork now, going though the actions that they have been well trained to do. With the work in hand, you can feel the confidence building and the butterflies are being flushed out. Set each engine to 1,500rpm and check magnetos, open up all four engines in turn to zero boost and check the

superchargers, check constant speed units. Open up each engine in turn to takeoff power and check boost, rpm and magnetos. The whole aircraft shakes and trembles like a huge animal coming to life. All OK throttle back to 1,200rpm and ready to go. "Pilot to Rear gunner, all OK?" "Rear gunner OK Skip", "Pilot Mid upper OK?", "OK Skipper" and so on checking on all the crew in turn once again, a procedure that will be carried out over and over again during the trip. "Right Chaps, we are ready to taxi".

It's now 21.20hrs and the light is beginning to fade and other Lancasters are starting to roll along the perimeter track, big and black with their navigation lights on, towards the takeoff point. Thumbs up to the ground crew and wave the chocks away and we get a good luck wave back as we open up the throttles and trundle forward onto the perimeter track to take our place in the queue for take off. The usual group of well wishers are gathered by the signals hut at the end of the runway. All ranks, Officers, Airmen and Waafs, all with friends and loved ones taking off into the evening sky, perhaps, never to be seen again. An experience that could be shattering in any normal times, but they have all learnt to steel themselves and put on a cheerful smile and a wave to give us confidence, and they repeat this performance night after night.

All pre-takeoff checks have been done, we now roll heavily forward to the hold position straight and lined up with the runway and brakes on. The cockpit is flooded with a green light from the Aldis lamp as the signals hut gives us the OK to takeoff.

"OK chaps, here we go!" Left hand on the control column, feet on the rudder pedals and the four big throttle levers in my right hand are eased forward leading with the left engines to counteract the swing, keep her straight with the runway, the deep throated roar envelops us. A bit of right rudder, that's it. Ease the stick forward, get the tail up, that's it! The rudder is beginning to respond now, keep her straight, that's it! Throttles go forward "Full Power!" The Flight Engineer takes over the throttles and pushes them right forward "Full Power Skip". Both hands on the control column now, keep her straight, aircraft is throbbing, the roar from the four engines is deafening. Airspeed is building, "60, 80, 90mph" is called out by the Flight Engineer. The runway roars past but the full massive weight of 2000 gallons of fuel and six tons of bombs makes itself felt through the controls and the end of the runway gets nearer and nearer. If one engine fails now we would run off the end and the whole lot would blow up and leave a nasty big hole in the ground. "100, 110, 115, 120mph" calls the Flight Engineer, gently ease back on the control column and all the rumbling and shaking stops, and we are airborne, just in time to see the end of the runway slide away underneath. "Airborne 21.34hrs Navigator" "21.34hrs Skip". Phew! L 'love' would have made a better job of it than that!

A touch on the brakes to stop the wheels spinning and "Undercarriage up" "Undercarriage Up" responds the Flight Engineer. The heavy aircraft begins to slowly gain speed and height. Three hundred feet and the familiar trees and village houses slip away underneath the upturned faces of village friends wishing us a safe return. "Flaps up to 10 degrees" she gains a bit more speed, "OK Flaps all the way up", "Flaps right up Skip". Trim nose up, now she

seems to be 'flying' as the airspeed builds to our climbing speed of 175mph. One thousand feet "Reduce power to 2850, +9", "2850, +9 Skip" and we slowly turn onto our heading for Skegness of 135Compass. "Pilot to Navigator on 135Compass", "OK Skip, ETA Skegness at 41", "Roger". The higher we climb the brighter it gets and now the low setting sun glistens on our Perspex and that of the swarm of Lancasters that are gathering around us and all going our way. The sky ahead is a deep indigo with the oncoming night and the coastline is just visible in the grey mist below. Another crew check and everybody is OK except Smithy the rear gunner who can't see a thing with the setting sun in his eyes I tell him not to look at it in case it spoils his night vision. We shall need all the good eyes we can muster to look out for enemy fighters and to avoid collisions with friendly aircraft in the dark. "Navigator to Pilot, we're running about a minute ahead", "OK Nav we'll slow up a bit, make it 160mph"

"Pilot to Navigator, she's climbing about 300 feet a minute which should put us about 18,000ft at the Dutch coast", "OK Pilot I'll just check". "Bombaimer to Pilot, Skegness is just coming up now, dead ahead", "OK Bombaimer tell us when we are right over it", "OK Skipper" Onward we drone and slowly the night settles in, the sun has gone now and the instruments take on that familiar green fluorescent glow. "Bombaimer to Pilot, we're right over Skegness now", "Right Bombaimer, that's Skegness at 44 Navigator" "OK Skipper that's fine, turn onto 128Compass", "128Compass it is Navigator".

The sky grows steadily darker "Pilot to gunners, keep your eyes peeled for friendly aircraft and enemy fighters, the stream is beginning to bunch up now and it will soon be completely dark", "Rear Gunner, OK Skip", "Midupper OK Skipper" With a steady drone we climb into the darkness as the outside world fades away with the cold, now invisible, sea two and a half miles below. It's warm in this part of the aircraft and one could begin to feel that the rest of the world doesn't exist, just this cocoon of metal with the instruments glowing comfortably on the instrument panel. With this false sense of protection and with the steady drone of the engines one could easily be lulled off to sleep. "Lancaster, starboard bow, same level Skip", "OK Bombaimer I see him" The call quickly shakes me out of my cosy feeling and I make some adjustments to avoid him. It's not healthy to creep up behind another aircraft, a twitchy rear gunner is likely to think you are an enemy fighter and give you the benefit of his four Brownings and it would seem such a waste to be shot down by a friendly aircraft. "Navigator to Pilot, ETA Dutch coast at 34", "Pilot to Navigator ROGER Dutch Coast at 34, I'm holding 128 Compass, Air Speed 160", "Nav to Pilot the G's good and we're bang on track", "Pilot to Engineer, engines look OK, how's the fuel consumption?", "Engineer to Pilot it looks OK so far Skip". Onward and upwards we drone though the dark, chill, space of night, checking this and that and searching the blackness outside for the slightest smudge of blacker black, which might be another aircraft on a collision course.

Onward and upward the steady drone goes on with the regular scan of the instruments and the night outside punctuated at regular intervals by the crew check. Everybody fully occupied with their own job and their own deep inner thoughts. The Special Operator back there in the fuselage is busy with his cathode-ray tube searching the frequencies for directions to German Night Fighters from their controllers so that he can jam them with one of his three

transmitters.

“Searchlights and flak ahead on the port bow Skipper!” “OK bombaimer, it looks like somebody has wandered off to port of track and is getting a reception from Rotterdam. Are we on track Navigator?” “Navigator to Pilot, the G says we’re bang on and the signal’s pretty good so far” “Good show! Navigator”. “Pilot to Bombaimer, see if you can get a fix on the Dutch coast, it should be just about visible and we should be there in three minutes” “OK Skip”. “Pilot to Gunners, keep your eyes open chaps, it looks as though they know we’re coming now”. “Midupper, OK Skip” “Rear Gunner, OK Skipper” “Pilot to Special, any activity in your department yet?” “Hello Skipper, Special here, no, it all seems quite quiet at the moment, no doubt it will liven up soon” “OK Special, keep us informed”

My eyes sweep the green glowing instruments, again and again, then into the inky black sky, all OK, - just saw another sparkle of exploding anti-aircraft fire ahead. It looks quite pretty from here, but it won’t when we get nearer.

“Bombaimer to Skipper, I can just see the Dutch coast coming up now, I’ll give you a fix when we cross-----now! 34 and a half on the tip of Overflakkee and I’m glad that it’s not living up to it’s name at the moment” “So am I Bombaimer, it all looks very quiet, that could mean that there are Jerry Night Fighters about, keep your eyes open Gunners” “Pilot to Navigator, did you get that?” “OK Skip, we’re on track and 30 seconds late. Turn onto one zero two Compass, ETA Turning Point is on the hour”. “Roger, Navigator one zero two Compass and on the hour”.

Over occupied territory now and right over a whole nest of German Night Fighter airfields, but so far all seems to be quiet, time for another crew check, all OK. I slowly become conscious of a beat developing in the steady drone of the engines as they become slightly unsynchronised, a quick check of the engine instruments shows that the starboard inner has dropped a few revs. The Flight Engineer leans forward, he has spotted it too, he checks the Boost and temperature gauges and gives me a thumbs-up sign and a shrug of the shoulders. “Could be a little icing in the carb Skip” “OK I’ll adjust the throttles, but keep your eyes on it”. With a slight adjustment of the pitch levers the engines revert to their steady drone.

“Engineer to Pilot, fuel consumption is fine, just changing to number 2 tanks” “OK Engineer”

The monotonous drone is broken by a crackle on the intercom as somebody switches on their microphone. “Navigator to Pilot, we’re about 3miles to port of track alter course to one one zero Compass for the turning point” “Pilot to Navigator, one one zero Compass it is, we’re levelling out at 21000” “OK Skipper 21000, the wind seems to be a bit more southerly up here”-----“Midupper to Pilot, Lancaster on the starboard beam about 300 feet above us” “OK Midupper, keep you eyes on him, we will probably converge on him with this new heading” “OK Skip” Staring into the black night sky to hold onto a black smudge while you’re searching the blackness for other black smudges which could turn out to be a lot more sinister is very tiring, but if we can spot them first we stand a chance of living.

My eyes are getting tired now and I have to fight off the drowsiness that threatens to engulf

me. Onwards into the blackness relieved only by the red glow from the exhaust of the port inner engine. They always seem to be uncomfortably bright on these very dark nights. "Pilot to Navigator, we must be getting close to the turning point now" "Navigator to Pilot, yes Skipper, only another minute to run, then onto one three six Compass, ETA for next turning point is 38. "Roger Navigator, turning now onto one three six Compass, ETA at 38, Airspeed 190.

Suddenly a bright orange ball of fire lights up the sky about a quarter of a mile on the port beam when a Lancaster and it's full fuel and bomb load disintegrates. "Some poor sods have bought it Skip", "Pilot to Midupper, OK we can see it" "Pilot to crew, there was no sign of flak chaps, so that means fighters. Keep you eyes skinned. Navigator, make a note of that on your log." "OK Skipper" Onward we drone with the aircraft swinging slightly from side to side as the gunners swing their turrets in their endless searching into the blackness. Eyes staring into the dark sky,.....what's that?.....a faint patch of light on the port beam. What the.....? Of course it's the moon just coming up and behind a patch of cloud. Not a full one tonight, thank God! "Pilot to Rear Gunner, OK?" "OK Skip, the moon's just showing up on the Port Beam", "Good show, I'm glad you've spotted it, keep a good look out to Starboard, we might be silhouetted against that light patch. Midupper?" "OK Skipper" "Pilot to crew, everybody still awake?" "Special OK Skip, there's quite a bit of fighter activity on the frequencies" "OK Special" "Wireless, you OK" "OK Skip, we just got the broadcast wind and I've past it to the Nav" "Navigator's OK Skip, turn onto 138 Compass, we're slightly to port of track, the wind has gone round a bit to the west. ETA is still good at 38 for the turning point" "Roger, Navigator, Pilot to Bombaimer, are you OK?" "Bombaimer to Pilot OK, I'm still chucking out this bloody Window!" "OK keep up the good work!" "Ha, Ha!"

Onward into the night we drone, check the heading, the airspeed, the altimeter,..... we've gained a couple of hundred feet,.....trim the nose down a bit. Must be getting a little lighter as we burn off some fuel. The green glow of the instruments seem so bright now that they seem to be burning into my eyes, it must be past my bed time. How nice it would be to be in bed now, all warm and safe instead of four miles up in the dark over Germany with the Luftwaffer intent on killing you. "Rear Gunner to Pilot, there's Flak and Searchlights about five miles on the Starboard Quarter" "Pilot to Rear Gunner, Roger, - somebody's wandered over Cologne I expect". "It might be a diversionary raid" says the Engineer who is standing next to me, scanning all his engine instruments and writing up his log with the aid of a glow worm of a torch. "Yes, Engineer, let's hope it works, we're only about 20 minutes to the target now; engines look happy?" "Yes Skip". "Navigator to Pilot, we're running a couple of minutes early, can you cut the speed back to 175?" "Pilot to Navigator Wilco". Bring back the throttles a bit, trim up the nose, and the airspeed creeps back to 175, a slight adjustment to the pitches and the four big engines resume their regular drone. "Navigator to Pilot, it's 14 minutes to the turning point then 10.5 minutes to run into the target. "Pilot to navigator, Roger, things will start hotting up soon chaps, ..everybody keep you eyes skinned" "OK Skipper". "Special to Pilot, There's a lot more fighter activity now Skipper" "Ok Special, did you hear

that chaps? Keep your eyes open Gunners” “Bombaimer to Pilot, it’s all looking very quiet and dark ahead Skipper” “OK Bombaimer, I expect they will be switching on the bright lights for you soon”

“Navigator to Pilot, turning point in one minute, then onto 171 Compass”. “ Roger Navigator, 171 Compass it is”. Only 10 minutes to the target now! You can feel the tension growing, five pair of eyes constantly searching the blackness for a darker patch that may be an enemy fighter or at best another Lancaster on a collision course. It may come from above, or below, fighters usually attack from behind and below, but only the gunners have a chance to see them, so I swing the aircraft slightly from side to side to give them a chance to spot them under our tail.

Eight minutes to the target now and some green TIs (target indicators) start to go down, way out in front and on our starboard bow. That’s right, it must be our target because we have a twenty degree turn to starboard for a short run-up of ten miles to target. “Pilot to Bombaimer, you had better get your gear set up” “Bombaimer to Pilot all set Skipper, they’re beginning to switch on the lights now” “Yes, searchlights and a bit of flak going up now”. Suddenly over to port there is a concentrated load of flak finishing with a bright orange ball of fire as another Lancaster is hit. “Another one’s got the chop Skipper” somebody shouts over the intercom. “Pilot to Mid Upper, if that’s you, OK I saw it” “Pilot to Navigator, log that one, over Frankfurt I guess,” “OK Skipper”

Bombs are beginning to go down over the target now, and I tune into the frequency for the Master Bomber. His voice is just audible over the static saying that the marking is good. Fires are beginning to light the night sky over the target and more flak is coming up ahead. Five minutes to run now, “Pilot to Navigator, turning onto the bombing run now, speed 175” “Nav, OK Skipper” “Pilot to Bombaimer, all set?” “Bombaimer OK Skip, bombs selected” “Pilot to Crew, OK chaps here we go, keep you eyes open, but with this amount of flak coming up I don’t suppose there’s any fighters about”

The Master Bomber’s voice is clearer now saying “Bomb the red and green TIs, the marking is good”, as we slowly, oh so slowly advance towards that huge dome of fire. Exploding anti-aircraft shells sparkle in clusters like iron filings dropped in a flame, just at our level but still a little ahead. The fires below begin to reflect a glow on the under side of the aircraft and other Lancasters come into view like little black toys silhouetted over the fires of the target. “Bombaimer to Pilot, starting the run up now, we’re a bit to port, Right-Right” “Roger Bombaimer, over to you” “Roger, Bombdoors open skipper” My left hand drops to the lever and selects, Bombdoors open “Roger, Bombdoors open” A slight change of trim as the two massive doors under the aircraft open, fluttering into the slip stream and a tremble comes up through the controls. Everything has to be very steady now, keep the heading and airspeed correct. Airspeed steady at 175, heading 071 degrees, steady, steady. A sudden change will upset the Bombsight and we will miss the target. “Right Right” says the Bombaimer and I respond with a slight pressure on the starboard rudder pedal and the direction indicator swings slowly through two degrees. “Steady” responds the Bombaimer. I hold it at 073 degrees,

brilliant flashes in the target area as bombs burst sending out concentric ripples in the fires below. The tension mounts everybody seem to be holding their breath...CRUMP..CRUMP.. two shells burst near enough to be heard above the roar of the engines and the aircraft jumps. Steady, check airspeed, check the heading, OK. "Left-left" calls the bombaimer, "Steady-steady", as the red and green TIs slowly creep up the wire on his bombsight. Flashes from exploding shells seem to be all around us now, the Bombaimers instructions become more frequent, "right....steady.....left-left.....steady.....steady....s.t.e.a.d.y.....s.t.e.a.d.y - BOMBS GONE!!! "Donk....Donk....Donk.... go the bombs as they are released from their hooks and the aircraft rears up as its massive six ton load drops away. Trim nose down to keep the airspeed steady, check the heading, keep her steady now for a long , oh so long, two minutes, while the flak bursts seem to be getting closer and closer, until the photo flash goes off and the camera takes a picture of where our bombs would strike. Then "BOMB DOORS CLOSED" from the Bombaimer. "Bomb doors closed" I reply as my left hand pulls up the lever and my right hand pushes the control column forward to build up speed while the Flight Engineer pushes the throttles forward. You can sense the massive release of tension in the crew as the engine's roar takes on a higher note and the airspeed builds up to get away from the target area and out of the flak as fast as possible.

Check the crew, "Pilot to crew, everybody OK? Rear Gunner?" "Rear Gunner OK Skip" "Mid Upper" "Mid Upper OK Skipper" and so on. "Right chaps, everybody's OK , let's go home"

"Navigator to Pilot, turn onto 297 Compass" "Roger Navigator 297 Compass, airspeed 195" "Roger Skip, airspeed 195, I'll give you the time to the next turning point in a minute" "Roger, Navigator". There's comfort in the steady drone of the engines now and quite an elated feeling at having survived another target and we're on our way home. Suddenly the Mid Upper shouts "FIGHTER" I slam on full left rudder, control column forward and hard to port, his guns begin to chatter and instantly the plane is shaken by a series of dull thumps. What a strange noise... WE'VE BEEN HIT! A brilliant yellow-orange light fills the cockpit. " Starboard Outer's on fire Skipper" shouts the Engineer, "There's a bloody great flame going past the Tailplane" Shouts the Mid Upper. "OK chaps, settle down,- Pilot to Engineer, feather the Starboard Outer and push the fire extinguisher". "OK Skip -----Fire's still burning Skip"..... "Blast!" Thoughts rush through my mind as I continue to throw the aircraft about in a corkscrew to avoid the fighters. We must be a choice target now, lit up in the night sky like a flaming comet and if we don't get this fire out we have HAD IT! "Engineer to Pilot, it looks like a fuel fire, ----if we turn off the fuel to the Starboard side we might be able to starve it but it will mean feathering the Starboard inner engine as well" " OK engineer try that!" "Pilot to Crew, anybody hurt?" "Rear Gunner, OK Skip but my turret's U.S." "Mid Upper's OK but so is mine." "OK Gunners keep your eyes skinned for that bloody fighter and just give me directions to avoid it" "OK Skipper". "Special OK" "Navigator OK" "Wireless OK Skip" "Bombaimer OK Skipper" "Good show chaps ----- What the hell is happening Engineer? "Starboard Inner's feathered Skipper!" "So has the bloody Port inner, I've only got one engine left!!" The Engineer looks puzzled and runs his eyes over the controls and instruments and I think I catch a glimpse of a shrug of his

shoulders.

Is it getting darker?----- I think it is!----- “The fire’s going out Skip!!!!” “Thank God for that, Engineer, I think I can stop corkscrewing now, Pilot to Gunners, shout as soon as you spot a fighter, and tell me which direction to corkscrew!” “Rear OK Skip” “Mid Upper OK”.

We’ve lost a lot of height over that and we are now down to 10000ft and all on our own well below the bomber stream and won’t be able to maintain that on just one engine. My left leg is aching with the pressure required to keep the aircraft straight against the uneven thrust of the one outboard engine. I become conscious of the sweat on my back and a dryness in my mouth and a growing determination to get this lot back. Please God, I don’t want to end up in a prison camp. “Pilot to Engineer, as soon as the fire has cooled down we will have a go at starting up the Starboard Inner, meanwhile let’s see if we can get this Port Inner wound up, we’re losing too much height like this.” “OK Skipper”. “Pilot to Navigator let me have a new heading for home as soon as you can, we are down to 10000ft now so there will probably be a different wind, you will have to take a guess on where we are now”. “Navigator to Pilot, hold onto 297 Compass while I work something out” “Roger Navigator”. “Engineer to Pilot, starting up Port Inner now”. “Roger Engineer”. The big propeller by my left hand window slowly begins to turn as it becomes unfeathered, a couple of blue flashes from the exhaust and she winds up to 1200 revs to warm up before opening up to cruising power. Everything appears OK and I get the thumbs up from the Engineer. Another hurdle over!

“Engineer to Pilot, we seem to be losing a lot of fuel from number one Starboard tank, I think it must have been holed. I’m switching all engines to that tank” “OK Engineer, have we lost much?” “Three or four hundred gallons I’d guess” “Christ! we’d better start leaning out or we shall never get back, I don’t fancy a swim in the North Sea after all this”. “OK Skipper I think we can have a go at starting up the Starboard Inner now” “OK turn on the fuel to that side but if the fire starts up again shut it down straight away” “Roger”. Everybody has their fingers crossed as the propeller out of the right hand window begins to turn and the engine slowly comes to life and as she comes up to cruising power a blessed relief is given to my left leg as the thrust becomes more even and I can trim it out. Another blessed relief is enjoyed by all when the Starboard Outer remains dark.

“Pilot to Crew, OK chaps we’ve now got three engines again which should get us home alright, if we are careful with the fuel. We are 10000ft, well below the Bomber stream and we can’t afford the fuel to climb up and anyway we’re not really sure where we are. All the guns are out of action and it looks as though we have lost all our hydraulics, so keep your eyes skinned for fighters. “Rear Gunner to Pilot, my eyes are smarting and I’m soaked in bloody petrol”. “Pilot to Rear Gunner, I think that some of the fuel we lost has been sucked into your turret, hang in there as long as you can”. “OK Skipper”. “Navigator to Pilot, I can’t get a fix on anything and I’m not sure exactly where we are so hang on to 297 until we can get a fix” “Pilot to Navigator Roger 297 it is”. “Pilot to Engineer, let’s reduce the power to zero boost and 2000 revs “. “OK Skip” “ That should give us about 160 at this height” the engine

notes become softer and return to the steady drone as the Engineer adjusts the pitch controls to synchronize the remaining three engines. All appears quiet and very black outside as the airspeed settles to 160. “Navigator to Pilot, at this speed, it should be just over the hour to the coast”. “Roger Navigator, it’s going to be a bloody long hour” “Pilot to crew, did you hear that chaps, keep your eyes open and your fingers crossed” Onward we drone long minute after minute through the darkness with every body deep in their own thoughts, nerves stretched to breaking point. The Engineer over my right shoulder is busy with his glow worm of a torch and his fuel log working out the consumption, the Navigator busy trying to get his Gee set to work and give us a fix to find out where we are and the gunners manually winding their turrets from side to side to search the inky black sky for any signs of enemy fighters. “Pilot to Special, are your sets still working?” “Special, yes Skipper but there’s not much going on locally, we seem to be on our own” OK Special, let’s hope it stays that way”. “Pilot to Bombaimer can you see the ground?” “Nothing worth while Skipper, I’ve been trying to get a fix on something but so far, no good”. “OK Bombaimer, keep looking” On and on we fly though the night on the heading of 297, heading for the coast of mainland Europe, but which part? Any minute we could fly into a heavily defended area, be coned in searchlights and be the sole target for all the flak, heavy and light, at this level. “Engineer to Pilot, we’ve used up all the fuel in number one starboard tank now and switched to Number one port. We seemed to have enough fuel for just over an hour and a half at these settings” “Roger Engineer, Navigator, would you like to take a guess at our ETA for Base?” “Navigator to Pilot my guess is about one hour fifty” “Roger Navigator, that seems a bit tight”.

One and a half hours of fuel and hour fifty to Base..... it looks as though we should go for an alternative. Without hydraulics, no flaps, possibly no brakes and a chance of a dodgy undercarriage an emergency field seems to be the answer. “Pilot to Navigator, if we can get a fix on the coast we had better set a course for Woodbridge we might need their two mile runway”. “OK skipper we should be getting near the coast in about ten minutes”. “Pilot to Bombaimer keep your eyes on the ground for some kind of fix” “OK Skip”. “Engineer to Pilot, there’s some flak way over to starboard” “Roger, might be the main stream”. Minutes drag by with all eyes searching the darkness for some point of recognition. How long can our luck hold out. Where the hell is that coastline? It must be coming up soon! Can we slip out over the sea without being attacked by a fighter or run into defended area? “Pilot to Engineer, what’s the fuel state?” “OK Skipper ’should get us to Woodbridge”. Where’s that coast line? I’m getting anxious now, check the heading for the hundredth time-- yes OK on 297 Compass. Perhaps we’ve got a stronger headwind at this level. A crackle on the intercom, somebody switches on their mike. “Bombaimer to Pilot, I can see some water down to starboard” “Good show Bombaimer can you identify anything?” “No Skipper, it’s wide..... not just a river..... hold on there’s another bit of coast coming up.... it’s an island.....it’s big.....Christ it’s Walcheron! We’re going to go right over it”.

“Pilot to crew, at least we know where we are chaps, Navigator let’s have a course and ETA for Woodbridge” “OK Skipper “. Suddenly a hundred searchlights pierce the night sky forming what looks like an impenetrable fence of light. Now they start to move and sway

about and three or four move in our direction. One sweeps across towards us and a heave on the controls into a diving turn to starboard and it sweeps past our port wing, hard over to port as another comes in from that direction.... missed us, a steep climbing turn to the right and, dam! One catches us, like a moth in a flame, the whole cockpit is lit up with a brilliant blue-white light. Immediately five or six others join in and we are coned, a sitting target for all the guns on the island..... No guns fire! Not one! That could only mean that there are fighters in the vicinity and the searchlights are holding us as a sitting target for them. I've got to get out of these lights. Another heave on the controls into a vicious diving steep turn to port down, down, then over to the right with the airspeed screaming and the altimeter going through eight thousand feet then hard over to the left again and a pull back on the control column into a climbing turn to the right and suddenly it's dark again and we're out of their clutches. Thank God that starboard wing, which must have been weakened by the fire, held on. The lights continue sweeping and searching as we weave our way through them anticipating their next move, diving and turning to avoid being caught again. I can see the edge of the island now just down on the port side. Nearly through and out to sea. Now what? All the searchlights have laid down their beams pointing straight out to sea along our route out. "Pilot to Gunners, look at the lights, they're showing the fighters which way we are going, keep you eyes skinned for them" "Reargunner OK Skip, Midupper OK Skip" We're now down to five thousand feet and keeping up a gentle corkscrew. "Pilot to Navigator, after that bit of excitement, have you got that heading?" "Navigator to Pilot, Compass Course for Woodbridge is 280, and 44minutes to run. "Roger Navigator 280 Compass and 44 minutes" "Pilot to Engineer, how's the fuel?" "Engineer to Pilot, we've got about 170 Gallons left, enough for about 68 minutes" "OK That gives us a little in reserve, but not much". "Pilot to Crew, everybody OK? How's the eyes Reargunner? "OK Skipper, a bit sore" "Glad you were able to stick it out, not long now, but don't relax too much they will still be after us, Midupper OK?" "OK Skipper" "Bombaimer OK? Good bit of map reading there". "Bombaimer OK Skip" "Pilot to Wireless operator, call up Woodbridge and ask for an emergency landing, our ETA will be 0246hrs". "Wireless to Pilot, Roger ETA 0246hrs".

Onward through the night, the engines keeping up the continuous drone, enough to induce sleep after all that excitement but we must keep wide awake, for we are not home yet. It would be a shame to be shot down on the last leg and the thought of all that cold black sea underneath us sends a chill down my back and a longing for a warm bed. "Wireless to Pilot, we're cleared to Woodbridge, call on R/T when we get closer" "Roger, fifteen minutes to run now". Switch R/T over to Woodbridge frequency and call "DARKEY from RELATE NAN Squared request QDM one two three four five, over" "RELATE NAN Squared QDM two seven zero, two seven zero over" "NAN Squared, two seven zero, Roger out" A slight turn to port on to 270 and ease off power to reduce height to 2000ft. Ahead all is dark until, a glimmer of light, flashing, yes, dar dar dar dar dar dit dit, yes OZ, the beacon at Woodbridge. "Woodbridge from RELATE NAN Squared your beacon in site, landing instructions please" "NAN Squared you're cleared for a straight in approach Runway 27 QFE 1012 wind 260, 15 to 20 knots, what is your damage, over" "Woodbridge, NAN Squared, three engines, no hydraulics, undercarriage suspect, your runway in site over" "Roger NAN

Squared call finals” Reduce power, down to 1000ft “ Right Engineer, landing checks, undercarriage selected down, operate the emergency compressed air system” “Undercarriage down Skip.....we’ve only got one green light Skipper” “OK Engineer, the port’s OK, look out of your window and see if the starboard leg looks OK” He searches with a torch and it appears to be down but we can’t be sure it’s locked. “Woodbridge from NAN Squared we only have one green, starboard leg is down but we don’t know if it’s locked, over”. “Roger NAN Squared can you do a circuit and be number two for landing, we have another aircraft in distress” “NAN Squared, Wilco”. Blast! I guess they don’t want us doing a wheels up landing and blocking the runway. Ease over to starboard to fly up-wind with the runway lights looking very inviting down on the port side. “Pilot to Crew, hang on chaps we’re doing a circuit....we may finish up with a wheels up landing so get to your crash positions and brace yourselves when I say, OK Reargunner?” “Wilco Skipper” “Midupper OK, Skip” “Special OK Skipper” “Wireless OK Skipper” “Navigator OK Skipper” “Bombaimer coming up Skip” “Engineer Wilco”. Just past the end of the runway and a gentle turn to port holding 1000ft and on to the down-wind leg and now for the landing checks. Undercarriage is down, Trim set, Mixture rich, Pitch to 2850 RPM, Flaps we haven’t got, Fuel Booster pumps on. “ OK Engineer” and I get the thumbs up. “Woodbridge from NAN Squared down wind” “NAN Squared call finals” “NAN Squared Wilco” This is it, will that starboard undercarriage stay down? Round we go again to the left in a gentle turn with the perimeter lights sliding away underneath, reduce power to start a gradual decent at 150mph, I can sense every body holding their breath. “Engineer, I will land slightly port wing low to keep the weight on the port wheel as long as I can.. As soon as I feel the starboard leg collapsing I will shout Undercarriage Up, OK? “OK Skip, I’m holding the lever”. The runway lights slowly come round into line as though the land below is twisting and we are standing still. “NAN Squared, Finals” “NAN Squared, clear to land”. Glide path indicator showing green..... now changing red, GETTING TOO LOW increase power.....that’s it, airspeed 130, back in the green.... runway suddenly begins to approach rapidly....end of runway coming up....”Pilot to Crew BRACE BRACE!” Back gently on the control column, left wing low, ease off power, back, back, power off.....with a slight squeal the port wheel touches the ground..... rumbling along, faster than usual, the starboard wing gently sinks and as the wheel touches, we hold our breath and.....IT HOLDS! Keep her straight and control column hard back the speed slowly drops off. “NAN Squared, clear left if you can” “NAN Squared, Roger”. With the aid of the inboard engines we steer gently to follow the van to the parking area where we come to a very gentle halt., close down the engines and the ground staff quickly chock the wheels.

Silence, everything is still while everybody digests the fact that we have survived and slowly we start to unbuckle seat belts and parachutes and gather together our bits and pieces and start to make our way down the fuselage to the exit door. The Flight Engineer stands aside to allow me to stiffly get out of my seat. “OK Stan, we made it!” “Yes Skip, I’m glad that undercarriage didn’t fold up”. The Navigator is just finishing stuffing his charts and gear into his green canvas bag. “OK Alex” he gives me a wry smile “Yep, I guess so”. Why are we all so subdued ? Mentally exhausted? We should be cheering and shouting, but we don’t, we just

climb into the crew bus which takes us over to a welcome cup of coffee, a tot of rum and de-briefing. “Your eyes look very red Smithy you had better get them looked at after we’ve been de-briefed.” “OK Skip, they are bloody sore but I’ll have my rum and coffee first”. We walk to the mess where egg and bacon is on the menu and at four o’clock we fall into bed and sleep the sleep of the exhausted.

We wake in time for lunch after which we report to the Admin Office to discover that our Squadron can’t spare a crew to come and collect us and that we will have to make our way back to Ludford Magna by rail. We are a motley looking bunch in our flying boots, May-Wests and parachutes etc when we are taken to the railway station to board the train for London, where we find that we have missed our connection to Lincoln and will have to stay over night. Who’s complaining? I live in London, so does Peter, our Special and Junior the Midupper, so we make our way through the underground and on buses, six of us to my home where I can be with my wife and the other two to their homes having made arrangements to meet up again in the morning to catch the train back to Lincoln. It’s very strange, dressed as we are nobody seems to be taking any notice of us. It feels as though we are invisible and nobody knows that just a few hours ago we were over Germany in an aircraft in flames and facing instant oblivion. Oh well, we won’t tell them, we will just go on enjoying the fact that it’s good to be alive and hope that we can survive the next twelve operations.