

Head on collision

2/3 January, 1944; BERLIN:

Every available person on the station gave a hand in clearing the snow ready for the evening's operation. Take-offs were able to begin 15 minutes before midnight with Fiskerton managing to get 12 aircraft airborne from the 13 detailed.



Canadian skipper F/O Johnny Young (JB231) and crew in N-Nan were in the last wave and on approaching the final turning point before the target were made well aware of the presence of night fighters by the lanes of flares in the sky. For the first time, the 'Fishpond' radar screen was functioning well and Ted Cachart the Wop/Ag reported a large number of 'blips' reflected from the aircraft below them, a number of these were heading in the direction of the final turning point but with the majority heading towards the target.

Up in the top turret sat Allan 'Spud' Mahony (survivor of the FIDO crash in Nov 43) keeping a watchful eye out for fighters as many combats had already been sighted. He had requested the pilot to gently roll the Lancaster so as to give the gunners some vertical vision.

Allan recalls what happened next:

"We were skimming through hazy cloud... the pilot had just lowered the starboard wing when in a split second I saw another Lancaster heading straight towards us and before I could yell a warning, the on-coming Lanc's cockpit struck our aircraft's starboard wing between the two engines."

Ted Cachart the crew's wireless operator continues:

"We were about 30 miles NNE from Berlin when an almighty impact suddenly shuddered throughout the aircraft tipping me out of my seat. My helmet and oxygen mask were ripped away as I dived for the astrodome, just in time to see a large piece of the starboard wing complete with engine disappear. With no intercom or oxygen I grabbed my chute but became stuck to the main spar by the G-force as Johnny and Allan Vidow our engineer fought to pull 'Nan's' nose up. Eventually I slid over the spar and got down to the tail where both gunners stood waiting with the door open. The well practiced drill for abandoning the aircraft from the rear was: I would go aft and check the mid-upper gunner was out of his turret and whilst he opened and clipped back the door I would help the rear gunner out of his turret. I would be No. 1 to jump. Unable to communicate without my helmet and with both gunners standing ready by the open door, instinct took over, I remember sitting on the step and rolling out, then hanging in my chute watching the aircraft flying away into clouds and wondering if I was supposed to have jumped or not. It would be two days before I knew the rest of the crew had jumped!"

Incredibly, all the crew managed to get out safely, but the skipper who was the last to leave did dislocate his shoulder on landing.

On opening his parachute, Allan Mahony had another shock:

"I looked down and all I could see in the semi-darkness was a large area of black. I thought 'My God' it's the sea and this being January there would be no chance of survival. The wind was blowing a gale and making the parachute oscillate violently but as I neared the ground, I realised the blackness was in fact a forest and moments later I was crashing through branches. My fall was halted as the chute snagged on the tree tops and I remained suspended some thirty feet from the ground. After releasing my harness and in attempting to climb down, I fell and hit the forest floor injuring my back."

In fact the fall had broken Sgt Mahony's back and it was never reset properly resulting in Spud having to wear a support harness for the rest of his life. This modest Australian airman who remarkably survived two horrendous accidents has been left with a terrible legacy of war.

Ted Cachart picks up the story:

"After interrogation at Dulag Luft and a short spell in the transit camp, the three officers were sent to Luft III at Sagan whilst the four NCO's (Spud, Alan Vidow, Len Crossman and myself) were sent to Stalag 4B near Muhlberg. During appel (roll call) one evening just after Easter my name was called out and told to be ready to leave next day. No reason given and much speculation during the night (Commissioned, Batman at Luft III, Repatriation, Shot! were all options discussed).

The following morning two Luftwaffe personnel told me that I was to be taken back to Dulag Luft for further interrogation. We travelled for two days by train, always in the reasonable luxury of second class coaches.

On the second night sitting in a darkened carriage, I was lighting a cigarette when I sensed the intense stare of the person next to me, then a broad Northern English voice said 'Where are you from?'

The voice was that of a Royal Army Medical Corp POW who was accompanying a Serbian Officer back to his camp; this officer had been shot through each hand and tortured into insanity. I don't recall if the Orderly had any guards with him or not but remember him asking me if I needed any cigarettes.

The interrogation at Dulag was all about some new radio jamming equipment they found in the wreckage of our Lanc, this had been installed a few days earlier whilst I was in hospital and all I knew was how to switch it on! After 11 days I was sent to Luft 6 at Heydekrug near the borders of Lithuania and I did not see or hear from the rest of the crew until 1945."

Just before entering his Lancaster on the night of that last op, Ted found that he still had his wallet in his pocket. He gave it to WAAF MT driver Dot Everitt for safe keeping. When Ted didn't return, Dot contacted his parents, and some time later, she and Betty Wilcox (a local Reepham girl whose Mother had adopted the crew) visited his home in Pinner and returned the wallet and spent a few days leave there. Also missing in N-Nan that night was 'Nancy Pants', the 'Lucky Mascot' rag doll made for the crew by Dot, together with all the groundcrews' caps; they always put them just inside the aircraft's entrance door as a gesture of faith that the aircraft would return.

It is just possible that F/Lt Palmer's S - Sugar was the Lancaster that was in collision with N - NAN as it would have been in the same wave, and if slightly ahead of Nan it would have changed course and be heading back across the track of the oncoming tail-enders.