

Our skipper, Bob Mooney now needed only a few more hours to complete his first tour of two hundred hours, so the next trip would be his last before partaking of a well earned "rest".

Later on a full first tour of Bomber "ops" would be interpreted as a total of thirty sorties, not much of a difference, on twin engined kites two hundred hours usually came up around the thirty or thirty two mark, but it would be a different matter with the faster four engined jobs.

Bob's big day arrived on the 6th September, 41 when we were briefed for a 5 Group only sortie with about one hundred aircraft due to take part. The target was a synthetic rubber plant at HULS, near Marl in the Rhineland. It was understood that with such a small target so near to the heavily defended Ruhr area, and with so few navigational aids available this rubber factory was going to be very difficult to find.

The following transcript of this sortie written by me nearly thirty five years ago as "Bob's last Trip" with me, was something special, and so therefore the old memory has not in this case had to work overtime, and is more or less repeated as such. It was not our usual crew Ginger Combie was still absent, and in his place as bottom gunner was a Sgt. Lambourne, having his second trip with us. As usual our kite was AD 802 "O" for Orange, and the bomb load was 2000 lbs of H.E., slightly less than our normal load, it was composed of one at 1000 lbs, and two at 500 lbs.

Our squadron were supplying eighteen aircraft for this special target, and we were due to take off at 1945 hours. Earlier in the afternoon Bob and I had concluded our night flying test, and we were satisfied that both the kite, and the W/T equipment were in fine fettle. Briefing took place around 1630, when all eighteen crews had assimilated all the different information needed concerning the raid. Rice paper flimsies (could readily be eaten for disposal purposes) containing information in respect of the colours of the day, both friendly and enemy, were listed on these along with enemy D/F beacon frequencies. Our own colours of the day cartridges when used were fired from a Verrey pistol, and were used only in cases of emergency, the usual circumstances being when an aircraft was being fired at by our own side.

Over Germany the "enemy" colours of the day were fired off usually as a last resort when attempting to escape from either heavy flak or cones of searchlights.

The main briefing had terminated with the emphasis that a successful attack would knock a hole in Germany's synthetic rubber supplies. After our pre night flying meal there was not much time to browse about the outcome, and around 1830 hours there was the usual jostling in the crew locker rooms as all the crews, who had previously emptied their pockets of all identifiable objects, were cheerfully, and noisily donning their flying clothing amidst the usual ribald, and jocular remarks.

Individually there was a varied choice of flying gear, some wore Sidcots which were one piece fur collared suits fitted with zips, and fastenings, and had two large knee pockets while others wore Irvin fur lined jackets over white sweaters. Most bottom gunners wore the complete Irvin suit jacket and trousers, all sheepskin lined with zips. As far as I was concerned it was always a perspirative experience before take off during the late summer months. The only heating available in an operational Hampden was the hot air pipe which was in some ways effective, but did not altogether compensate the dual cold draughts we experienced at the rear of the aircraft. Consequently it was necessary to wear as much flying clothing as possible in order to keep warm. Although on the ground I would be perspiring profusely, very soon after take off when a few thousand feet of height had been attained the big cool off would occur. The higher we flew the colder it got, as the temperature dropped lower and lower, and uncomfortable as the process was there was nothing we could do about it, these were typical Hampden conditions with which one got accustomed to. Additionally on top of all my gear I wore a Mae West life jacket, which was equipped with a CO₂ bottle which when pulled inflated the jacket, and finally a parachute harness which fitted over the entirety. My usual flying attire during the summer was the Sidcot one piece suit worn over my battle dress, and white sweater. The only accompaniments being a blue woollen scarf, and of course not forgetting my much esteemed black leather flying boots which were always pulled on over thick white long socks. Of course the pilot, and the Observer did not have to go to such lengths in their choice of flying apparel as their positions in the Hampden were enclosed, and draught free.

"Wakey Wakey" pills (Caffeine) were always available in the crew room before take off if any crew individual required them, personally I, never used them at any time, and simply never felt a need for them despite long trips together with the usual extended day and night activity without sleep.

With all the preliminaries dispensed with, the time was now one hour before our take off, all the crews, now fully dressed, and loaded up with data, parachute packs, were ready for the off. Bob, Geoff and I ambled outside the crew room to meet up with our bottom gunner on the perimeter tarmac road amidst a hubbub of colourful conversation and friendly jibes to finally clamber aboard what was now an overloaded crew bus. On the long run around the aerodrome perimeter track each crew was dropped off at the different dispersal bays to join their aircraft. Our crew were one of the last to be off loaded, and we walked the last few yards to meet our ground crew Corporal who together with the other lads, was standing waiting our arrival alongside the kite. Corporal Rasmussen greeted us with a smile, and assured Bob that AD 802 was in good order, bombed up, tanked up, and ready to go. Form 700, the "personal" log of the aircraft, was fully signed up by all concerned to be finally acknowledged by our skipper. As far as the F 700 was concerned each tradesman had a daily inspection to carry out, and until each of them had signed the form the aircraft was deemed unserviceable, and could not be flown. The 700 form had a turn over flap making it easy to discern at a fairly quick glance whether the kite was serviceable or not. We always carried a spare dinghy usually loaded up just before take off into its position behind the main spar. The main dinghy was housed in the port wing at the rear of the engine nacelle, and was released by an immersion switch which came into operation if and when the aircraft ditched, or at least shall I say it was supposed to. This dinghy when fully inflated was circular in shape, and accommodated five men.

Additionally, in view of the ever present probability of ditching in the North Sea, we carried a rectangular basket which contained a couple of homing pigeons. This procedure however, was discontinued later on during the year of 1943. Both the pigeon basket, and the spare dinghy were brought around to each aircraft by truck within the hour before take off to be stowed safely behind the main spar.

After the customary pre trip formalities of a last smoke, a natter with our ground crew, and the necessary relaxation of the bladder we occupied our crew positions with big Geoff all six feet three inches of him, attired in bulky flying kit, Mae West, parachute harness, and saddled with his cumbersome bag which contained all his navigation accessories taking his usual abnormal length of time to squirm through the small draught door space above the bottom gunner's position to then clamber over the main spar, and then wriggle his long frame downwards through the narrow passage underneath the pilots seat. This slow procedure was an ever present necessity for Geoff in order to reach his crew position inside the perspex "greenhouse" in the nose of the Hampden.

From a physical point of view it was hardly a labour of love as far as Geoff was concerned, and the awkward though short journey was always accompanied by a series of grunts, and curses plus a few choice expletives. Yes, the inner fuselage of a Hampden presented problems for big chaps, especially if they were navigators. ~~Yes~~ Geoff's antics always made me laugh, but I kept a discreet silence as big Geoff did not possess my sense of humour, and of course he was a hell of a lot bigger than me. That pre-take off exercise was only to stow his gear inside his working position in the nose. ~~After he had stowed his~~

After he had done that, and adjusted his fold-away chart table ready for action he had to backtrack, and prepare for the take off, which meant he had to crawl back up the passage and occupy a cushioned seat behind the pilot's armoured seat.

This navigators take off position was mandatory, as the navigators nose position was not considered safe for occupation during take off.

Once airborne Geoff had to, once again, negotiate the short downward tunnel, and from thereon in was comfortably ensconced inside his perspex greenhouse. Now fairly comfortable he could heave a sigh of relief, and get down to plotting the course. Yes, Geoff's pre-take off antics were a source of amusement, to me that is, but he didnt know how lucky he was inside that navigation cubby hole, with no cold draughts he was a bloody sight warmer than we Wop/Ag's at the rear of the aircraft with our wide open cupola gun positions.

Meanwhile during those minutes before take off the country quietness of our distant dispersal point was now punctuated by the intermittent noise of other aircraft as pilots commenced their engine drills. All aboard at our crew positions we went through our usual practices, and Bob added to the now general crescendo as he fully tested each engine in turn right up to full boost, hoping for no mag drops.

The fuselage had now ceased to vibrate with both engines now idling, and so with everything satisfactory Bob had a final look around his cockpit as zero hour was approaching. It was thumbs up from the ground crew followed by their shouts of "Chocks away". Bob released his brake button then taxied slowly but steadily towards the take off point by the Chance light, a revolving light on a vehicle mounting which illuminated the flare path during night flying.

With our engines idling I watched crews ahead of us take off in formations of three as it was still daylight at 1945 hours. On receiving a green from Control we taxied into position alongside Pilot Officer "Judge" Hardy, and Sgt Roger Purnell making up a V formation of three aircraft.

With a wave of acknowledgement from Bob our Hampden lurched forward down the flare path, we occupied the port side of the vic of three kites.

With throttles well forward we were now at speed with tail up, and a certain amount of slipstream was encountered, I certainly felt a slight air bump or two, but otherwise it was a good take off on this sunny September evening. Our eighteen Hampdens were airborne in just over ten minutes.

Upon reaching a height of one thousand feet Bob set course for a point on the Dutch coast, and proceeded to climb steadily. We ran into cloud at three thousand feet, and lost our two companions in the process, but eventually cleared the strata cumulus clouds at four thousand feet. At this point, from my open position at the upper rear of the Hampden, I marvelled at the eye catching colours which enfolded in the different shades of light with the sun slowly setting on the horizon.

Following a short period of scudding along the tops of a vast expanse of white fleecy cottonwool clouds we steadily gained height, and continued to climb with the carpet of cloud now well below us.

In the clear conditions I could see gaggles of Hampdens en route, and we joined up with three others from our squadron. We flew alongside our comrades for as long as we were able, and it was a pleasant feeling standing on the firing steps in my top gun position viewing, temporarily of course, the grandeur of the twilight sky, and at the same time acknowledging the hand signs of my various squadron mates in the kites flying alongside. Very soon after, with light rapidly fading, there was much criss crossing of aircraft, and we pushed on individually totally encompassed by the now near darkness.

In the distance, groping bands of searchlights, and intermittent red splotches in the sky denoted the very close proximity of the

enemy held coastline.

By this time we had already switched on the oxygen supply, having buttoned up our oxygen masks to our flying helmets, the masks also contained the intercom microphone, and its "On" "Off" switch. The combined mask covered the whole of the lower part of one's face below the eyes. Oxygen supply failures at height did occur to involve some crews, and individuals resulting in calamitous consequences although such a situation never at any time happened to me. In the course of the next few minutes our Hampden had crossed the Dutch coastline, and with a good pinpoint Geoff assured the skipper that we were dead on track. Bob weaved successfully out of the path of the coast searchlight units although they appeared to be merely groping aimlessly in our general direction, he had his throttles eased well back in order to fox the sound detectors. Now clear of our first obstacle I kept a strenuous, and alert look out for night fighters, standing on the firing steps I continually scanned the half circular view I had of the night sky. My twin Vickers guns were cocked, and ready for action. In the main W/T silence was observed, but I had a log to keep, and I had to listen out every half hour to our 5 Group broadcast frequency, which was a must, as any recall or diversion instructions were transmitted then. Diversions were fairly frequent: as Lincolnshire bases were inclined to be extremely foggy in the early morning hours. Recalls were very rare indeed, I can only recollect receiving just the one during the year of 1941. In the sky over Holland the visibility was still good, and although I had sighted several aircraft in the vicinity some of them may have been friendly as we were never molested. Now, immediately before us was the west searchlight belt, later to be generally known as the "Kammhuber Line", aptly named after its creator General Josef Kammhuber O.I.C of the German night fighter defences. This wide defensive line, very much respected by all of our bomber crews, stretched from Denmark downwards through North West Germany to below Liege, Belgium guarding all approaches to the Reich. Ground control radar stations dispersed at twenty mile intervals directed night fighters into positions within visual range, and the many searchlight units did their best to illuminate our kite as we jinked and weaved our way through this deep defensive barrier. We were already familiar with this illuminated zone, and the night fighters that lurked amidst the beams ready to pounce on the unwary. The German night fighter force during this period was composed of over two hundred aircraft which were mainly twin engined Messerschmidt 110's, and Junkers 88's, but their numbers would increase as the war progressed. The Kammhuber Line was gradually extended in both width, and length ultimately stretching down through Eastern France to the Swiss frontier. Progressively more ground control radar stations were set up, and as new radar devices were brought into action both on the ground, and in aircraft Kammhuber's radar guided fighter "boxes" became widespread to operate both behind, and in front of the line. Most of the Line searchlights were then moved during the year of 42 to occupy defensive positions around the German cities.

On this particular September night these searchlights posed many problems for our crew, but Bob had the Hampden's Bristol Pegasus engines well throttled back as we glided, and weaved our way through trying to keep in an avenue of darkness amidst a maze of brilliant stalks of light. The tension eased on leaving the searchlight belt behind, but caution was now the name of the game or we would stray into the heavily defended Ruhr areas which was just alongside our track. A slip up in Geoff's navigation could well find us trapped in the centre of a heavy flak box barrage, and as we had experienced quite a few of these situations I was quite apprehensive about the outcome. I was aware that Geoff was not exactly in the upper strata as a navigator, but I'll give him due credit we did not stray off track at this juncture, and furthermore he located the canal from which we would make our bombing run into the target. It was now an inky black night, and although the town of Dors ten was pinpointed we failed to find the rubber plant at HULS which seemed to be hidden amidst the Rhineland forests.

In hindsight it was a thankless task trying to find a small target on a dark night with limited navigational aids. We steered around the area for quite a time looking in vain for landmarks, whilst I and the bottom gunner were straining our eyes keeping a constant watch for night fighters, the air space around us was situated in the centre of a patrol area, and thus was free of heavy flak, but abounding with plenty of light stuff, and flaming embers.

At the point of exasperation we came across an illuminated airfield, which we thought was Harlsten, and flew around its circuit a couple of times, but not at low level. It appeared to our crew that the flare path personnel down below gave us a signal on a lamp, presumably permission to land. The Germans either took us for one of their aircraft or else it was a calculated ruse to induce us to go in low so they could give us a real hellacking with their ground defences. As we were unable to find our primary target, Bob tentatively decided in the circumstances to go in low, and bomb the airfield whilst I and the bottom gunner generally strafed the flare path, and surroundings. At that point of decision the Jerry airfield ~~was~~ and flare path was well lit up. I positioned my guns ready for action with spare pans of ammunition readily available for quick replacement as Bob checked that we were all ready to go. He swept the Hampden around in a wide turn put the nose slightly down and commenced a fast run towards and across the airfield. Suddenly the ground below was enveloped in total darkness, the Jerries had switched off the entire lighting system, and Geoff, our Observer was unable to spot anything down below, consequently no bombs were dropped.

From my rear view as we sped over at speed I could establish that we had passed over the drone. Immediately after as we climbed to a safer height I could see that the crafty buggers had switched ~~on~~ the Lorenz type flare path system once again as if it was some sort of game. Bob by now had seen the light, and decided against any further enticement, and resolved to make a final effort to find our very elusive primary target at HULS. Once more Geoff found the canal, and we followed it down from Harlsten until finally our Observer thought he had found

HULS. Bob decided to bomb from eight thousand feet, a safe height in his opinion as we had been told that balloons were located around the rubber factory. Accordingly we made our bombing run from twelve thousand, and our skipper eased his throttle levers back, and made a gliding attack easing down to our bombing height which seemed to take a hell of a long time, but was probably just a few minutes. Geoff kept on repeating that we were about there with his eyes glued to the bomb sight "Bomb doors open" preceded last minute instructions as Geoff uttered "Right, Right, steady" as finally the kite gave an upward lurch as the bombs departed on their downward trend, and Geoff had confirmed "Bombs gone". Bob then pushed his throttles

fully forward, and with engines at full power we weaved our way out of the area. It was observed that some fires seemed to have been started which were clearly visible down in the darkness, and some following aircraft dropped their loads on the same spot, seemingly having something to aim at. Satisfied that we had eventually found our elusive target, Bob set course for the Dutch coast at a point just north of Rotterdam, and on our return journey we once more battled our way through the defensive zone to emerge unscathed

Soon afterwards as we approached the Dutch coast defences, various groups of searchlights groped around looking for us with negative results, and we dodged what flak there was flying around as finally crossed over the coastline to settle down to the homeward sea crossing, but I was still keeping a wary eye open for fighters which would continue right up to landing back at base. The sea expanse that was the Wash at that time was a favourite rendezvous for lurking enemy intruder aircraft laying in wait for unsuspecting returning bombers. Additionally other Jerry night intruders, mainly Junkers 88's, made a habit of circling the many operational dromes in Lincolnshire, and joining the landing circuits to mangle with and attack our returning kites as tired, weary crews were attempting to "pancake" their aircraft. Although many surprise attacks were made on our landing bombers it was the normal procedure for returning crews to be warned that enemy intruders were in the immediate vicinity. This information was transmitted by respective ground control centres over the R/T system which involved the TR 9 set in each bomber. The pilot in each case being ordered in these circumstances to exhibit a certain flashing beacon at a given height until it was deemed safe to effect a landing. The TR 9 R/T set was the air to ground transmitter and receiver which was switch operated by the pilot, and had a varied range of twentyfive up to fifty miles, but the reception was apt to be slightly distorted at times. All the crew were linked by the aircraft intercom system, and were plugged in to their individual sockets at each working position. I had two plug sockets in my position, one being the intercom, with the other connected to my W/T set, so obviously when I was working the wireless set I was out of communication with the remainder of the crew.

Now that our kite had left the Dutch coast, and was over the sea on our way back home I switched on the I.F.F. (Identification, Friend or Foe) ^{device} which would identify our kite as friendly to our home based radar sets, and the set would remain so until we landed back at base.

I then got down to basics, tuned in my W/T received, and obtained a homing bearing from a radio beacon station using the loop aerial, and the visual needles indicator connected to my 1154/1155 Marconi set, which enabled us to make our landfall just near the Wash. From this position it was just a short stint to Coningsby where we touched down at 0245. It seemed we were the last 106 crew to land, but who cared, Bob had finally finished his first tour having taken seven hours to accomplish what we thought was a successful last trip.

He did not say much, the very fact of his accomplishment had probably not quite sunk in as yet, but inwardly Bob must have felt really great, and very much relieved. No more prolonged strain, and tension or getting shot up the rear, for at least six months or perhaps even longer. While taxiing to our dispersal point it was congratulations all round for him, and the big occasion was continued later on that day but celebrated in more genial surroundings with best Worthington bitter inside the most popular hostelrys of Boston. One of these happened to be my favourite house, the "White Hart" hotel which boasted a good steak room in its basement. I and a couple of my Wop/Ag "oppes", Jock Hunter, and Sgt. Young being regulars knew two of the waitresses very well, consequently we were privileged, and thus received advanced "gen" as to when the steaks were likely to be on, which was not very often in these days of rationing, ~~and that was the end of the matter.~~

RAF police (S,P's) from the Provost branch based at Lincoln were at times sent to patrol the main thoroughfares of the town of Boston during the evening hours. I knew they had a job to do, but quite a lot abused their privilege. They seemed to go out of their way to antagonise noncommissioned aircrew bods on our nights out, consequently several inflammatory situations were prone to materialise, and in fact did so on many occasions. Why some of these jumped up Corporals had to be so bloody awkward in their handling of certain trivial occurrences was beyond my comprehension. The reason could have been jealousy, yes that was feasible, but then the remedy was ever present. If they had been capable of coping with our job in every way they could have always volunteered, and chanced their arm at a very uncertain future. During one such night in the late summer of 41 one of their number, an S.P. that is, was pitched unceremoniously over the parapet of the bridge in Boston into the thick, black mud below, the tide was out at the time. A layman might think that such an action was rather drastic, but these were wartime days, in our circumstances we did not care much for intimidatory tactics. The incident undoubtedly brought forth official repercussions, it was said that one of our aircrew lads performed the deed, but I heard later that he and his crew failed to return from a subsequent operational sortie over Germany.

My friend, and pilot Bob Mooney having fulfilled his contract of operational trips was then posted to No. 14 Operational Training Unit at RAF, Cottesmore, Rutland to perform staff pilot duties on his ex-operational "rest", if one could really call it that. He was recommended for, and in due course awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal in recognition of his exploits on the squadron, a well deserved "gong", good old Bob. His last trip, the HUIS rubber factory sortie, which we thought in all sincerity had been successfully clobbered was later deemed to have been a failure.

In connection with this allegation I can only reiterate that on a pitch black night with enemy opposition, and the lack of any sort of radar navigational aids, which came later, it was probably asking too much to find, and hit a small target like a rubber factory. I can only assume that the fires bombed that particular night at HUIS were in all probability the flames of a decoy site close by. The Germans, very resourceful, and formidable opponents, were without doubt masters at the art of subterfuge, and progressively decoy fires, dummy sites etc were elaborately created for the purpose of luring our bombers away from their targets. Conspicuous amongst these being synthetic oil plants, and notably the "Big City", Berlin itself. The large dummy site eventually built up adjacent to the German capital city apparently had the lot, which included buildings, dummy fires, smoke, and to complete the realism the presence of some heavy flak guns, and searchlights. Camouflage was also well to the fore, and a singular good example of this art was the concealment of the large inner lake within the city, and port of Hamburg, which was adroitly covered entirely at one period by camouflage nets in order to fox the crews of Bomber Command.