

Extract from Warrant Officer Ward's unpublished memoirs "Personal Observations" written in 1982

1 April 1942

Wednesday 1st April was a fine clear day with a blustery wind. We were briefed for a special op that night, special in as far as it was quite different from any preceding op. It was a maximum effort, all fourteen crews operating. We gasped in disbelief when we were told that we were to take off at exactly five minute intervals starting at 19 55 hours and fly at ground level over Belgium, France and into Germany to bomb rail communications near Stuttgart some three hundred and fifty miles from the French Belgian coast. The target was a tunnel on a particular stretch of railway line. We were to carry a specially designed delayed action bomb together with ordinary GP bombs. The delayed action bomb was to be placed as near as possible to the tunnel entrance. The route was allegedly free of any defended areas.

While there was to be an almost full moon to aid map reading none of us had had any experience of low level flying at night. Although we had been encouraged of late to indulge in low flying practice on our air test trips, no one envisaged that we would be called upon operate like this.

Details were posted in the crew room of take off times. Wref (Wreford William George Smith - pilot) and crew flying T-Tommy, the plane we had used on our two preceding ops, was to be the last and fourteenth aircraft to take off at 21.00 hours. We were too bemused to grasp the significance of this at the time. One other squadron would be doing a similar raid to another nearby target and using a slightly different route.

It was strange to watch aircrews wending their ways at intervals to Flights to prepare for the op instead of all going along in a group. I stood for some time at the door of our mess with the rest of my crew looking up at the darkening sky, the wind blowing from the west quite strongly. We heard the first two planes take off and then wandered down to Flights to collect our gear and dress. It was dark with a full moon as we taxied on to the end of the runway at 20.55 hours. We waited patiently, engines ticking over, and at 21.00 hours exactly, a green light from an Aldis lamp at the side of the flarepath, gave Wref the signal to open up the throttles.

We flew at about two hundred feet to the English coast. Practising low level flying and then set course for our usual rendezvous at the enemy coast between Dunkirk and Ostend. There was a cross wind around forty miles per hour, and my course gave us considerable port drift, which the gunners verified rotating their turrets so that the sea ran neatly down the lines of their guns.

As we neared the enemy coast, Wref climbed to four hundred feet and when the coast line came into view, put the nose down to increase speed for a dash over the coastal defences, if any.

If any? When we were a couple of hundred yards from the coast we were brightly illuminated by two searchlights holding us steady as we flew towards them. Standing next to Wref seeking a pin-point, I was staggered to see his terrible white ghostly face staring straight ahead holding the plane steady as we flew on and on. At such a low height there was no chance of evasive action as we became enveloped in light flak. Brightly coloured tracer bullets raced towards us from ahead and on each side as we tore across the coast. I had never seen light flak before, flak fired continuously from machine guns every four or five bullets being tracer. It was supposedly effective only up to eight thousand feet and we had always flown above this height on previous ops. Each tracer seemed to be heading straight at us, but at the last moment appeared to turn lazily away and pass harmlessly all around us. A peculiar sensation.

I stood beside Wref transfixed unable to perform any useful function. But not all bullets passed us. We could hear the rattle as several struck home on our fuselage and wings. I was conscious of the rattle of our own machine guns in the turrets as first Jimmy and then Mike sprang to life and returned fire.

I suppose the whole episode lasted no more than fifteen seconds, it seemed hours, as obviously the searchlights and guns were only positioned on the coast. Just as suddenly as the searchlights and tracers appeared, so they vanished as we flew on dazed and amazed that we were still in the air and not a mass of tangled debris on the ground. Wref announced that the controls were heavy and had been damaged. Everything was sluggish. The plane was hard to control. We could not go on to the target.

I calculated a rough course in my head of sixty degrees to take us away from this disaster area, to collect our thoughts. This new course improved our ground speed considerably as we now had the strong wind at our tail. We shot over the centre of a blacked out town and as I struggled to identify it, a coast line appeared ahead. I easily read this to be the mouth of the River Schelde upon which Antwerp stood lower down. We turned to port over this wide expanse of water lying between the mainland and the Dutch island of Walcheren, and flew towards the North Sea and home. I realised that the town we had flown over was Bruges. Must have given the inhabitants a shock.

As we left the Dutch coast behind us, I calculated the course home and passed this on to Wref. He climbed slowly to two thousand feet so that I could jettison our bombs. The controls were still very sluggish, but Wref considered that although we were badly damaged we should make our base despite having a very low ground speed of less than one hundred miles per hour flying into this strong head wind. In case we were forced to ditch in the sea, we radioed base with our position and said that we were returning.

It seemed an age before we landed. We had been airborne for two hours fifty minutes. As we raced down the runway on landing, the brakes failed to operate, obviously damaged by the gun fire. Fortunately, the strong wind into which we landed helped us to stop at the perimeter track. With no brakes we were unable to taxi back to dispersal and had to leave our aircraft just off the runway to be towed away by a tractor. We climbed out and were confounded to see the whole fuselage and wings riddled with bullet holes, but no member of the crew hit. Amazing. We opened the bomb doors and were alarmed to see that the special delayed action bomb was still there. All the other bombs had gone, but this one had defied our jettison, the release mechanism being damaged. We left that one for the armourers to sort out later.

We were greeted with some relief in the ops room. In view of the time since our SOS message giving our position, they feared the worst. The head wind had kept us airborne for much longer than expected.

Next day we learnt that seven out of the fourteen aircraft that had taken off were missing. A fifty per cent loss. Our T-Tommy was a write-off, damaged beyond repair. So we lost eight planes out of fourteen, forty two aircrew out of eighty four, all young men, five of whom had played football in such a happy spirit three days before. What madness the survivors thought to have sent us on such an op. No wonder as the fourteenth plane to fly over that part of the enemy coast, our crew, had had such a hot reception. For the previous hour and five minutes bombers had done exactly this at precisely five minute intervals. The German gunners and searchlight crews could hardly have believed their luck as T-Tommy appeared in their sights.

Frank Wheway was the observer in the only crew to find the target and drop his bombs thereon. The other five aircraft had all got lost at such a low level and had wandered over France, Belgium and Germany before selecting a suitable target and returning home.

It was probably not in the public interest to publicise our low level raid incurring a fifty per cent loss with only one aircraft out of fourteen reaching the target. However, there was great publicity of a daylight low level raid seventeen days later on 17th April by a force of twelve Lancasters on Augsburg entailing a flight of five hundred miles at low level over occupied Europe and southern Germany to the target. Seven out of the twelve planes were lost, but eight reached the target. The leader of the raid, Squadron Leader Nettleton, who managed to return to base won the VC.

In retrospect I wonder if whether our low level night attack seventeen days earlier entailing a three hundred and fifty mile trip over occupied Europe and Germany was an expensive sacrifice to determine whether or not the Augsburg raid should be a night op. The crews for the Augsburg attack did not start training for it until 14th April 1942.

I now believe that our raid on 1st April was a trial for bigger things as it is the only feasible explanation for sending untrained crews for the low level night flying on such a hazardous flight in adverse weather conditions as the strong westerly wind proved. But by the time news of the Augsburg raid reached Stradishall, 214 Squadron was in a sorry mess having less than half a dozen crews left all of whom wanted to forget the recent catastrophes.