

No. 12

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(4.)

Sergeants Mess.
RAF Elstham Woods.

28. 6. 44

So Win wants to know what it feels like to go on a bombing raid. No doubt she will have seen the scenes on the News films of the raid on La Havre. Well I took part in that raid which was my first "day-light" although it was almost dusk by the time we were over the target area. That would give her a pretty fair idea both of what the target area looks like when the bombs are bursting across it and also of what the flack looks like as it is pumped up into the sky.

However, as we usually operate in the hours of darkness perhaps I had better try to give a picture of what it feels like under those conditions.

— Continued on J. 5

After a trip or two one soon ceases to experience any special emotion at being told, perhaps in the morning, that one is on "ops" that coming night. Except perhaps a feeling of relief to think that we shall soon have completed another trip which will be one nearer our 30 for our tour.

Briefing usually provokes a feeling of excitement, relief or apprehension according to the target and our route out and back. Even this feeling is of brief duration and one is soon too busy with the many pre-flight matters to have a thought for what lies ahead.

From take-off to shortly before we arrive at the target area I am very busy indeed at my various tasks so again there is no time for idle thoughts. This is a great blessing and helps a lot.

However about 10 minutes before we are due at the target area my job is to do nothing but stand beside the pilot and use my eyes to see anything and everything which is to be seen on my side of the kite. For we must be on the look out that we do not collide with any of the many friendly bombers we know are surrounding us; that there is not one immediately above to drop its load of bombs on us, nor one below us for the same reason; that there are no enemy fighters in the offing; to locate searchlights and flack bursts in the sky.

In front of us we can see literally

hundreds of searchlights probing the sky with their slender fingers. Our target, we know, lies right in the midst of these and it seems impossible that we could fly through without being picked up. We see that already a few Lancs. have been picked up and are now in the centre of a colossal cone of slowly moving searchlights. This is bad for them but good for us as it means that fewer searchlights are looking for us. In the distance we see the flack coming up and bursting looking like so many pretty fire works but it is bursting right on our line of flight. Then we realise that flack is bursting all around us but it now looks more like a puff of white smoke when it bursts (in daylight the smoke looks jet black').

One thinks of those near and dear ones at home and says a prayer for them. For oneself one only prays for courage and that "God's will be done".

I think at these times I am afraid, not of death, but of not being dead if we are hit. I rehearse in my mind what I must do if any of the engines, fuel tanks, etc. are hit and pray that I may make no mistakes. I measure with my mind just how long it will take me to fit my parachute and leave the plane if the skipper ever had to give the order — and I reckon I could do it in 3 to 4 seconds. But afraid I am as I think we all are to a greater or lesser degree.

After what seems like years we hear the skipper asking the bomb aimer if he

wants the bomb doors opening. Although we can now plainly see the target illuminated in the light of the first bombs to fall upon it, the bomb-aimer quietly replies, "Not yet Skip." More years go by and then the bomb doors are opened and eventually we hear the bomb-aimer say, "Bombs going" What an age it seems after that before we hear him say, "Bombs gone. Bomb-doors shut." During this while we have felt the kite shudder, almost as if some huge hand was banging up underneath the kite, as our ram of death leaves the gaping maw of the bomb bay and goes cascading down.

We are still among the searchlights and the flack but somehow feel amazed that we have passed through so much of it and been neither hit nor picked up in those revealing beams of light. Our fear changes, I think, at this point to a kind of anxiety lest the good fortune which has attended us so far through the worst of the barrage should now forsake us.

The ever alert eyes of our gunners discern the shadowy shape of an enemy fighter and a sharp order sends the plane diving, climbing and twisting away into the night. Perhaps because the fighter never managed to get into a

8.

position to open fire before loosing sight
of us accounts for the fact that we
have not felt afraid at least not like
we were over the target.

Once the enemy coast has been left
well behind we all, I think, have a
big sigh of relief though we remain as
vigilant as ever for there is always the
danger of that lurking fighter which
may strike at any time even when we
are at last circling our home base.

It is strange perhaps that one of
the most loathed sensations on an "op"
is one to which is attached very little,
if any, real danger. That is getting into
the slip-stream of a kite in front
(= very rough air created by passage of aer-
craft). This has to be experienced to be
believed - it can be awful, even "George",
the automatic pilot, cannot cope with it.

Something else which has to be experienced
to be believed is the unbelievable sweetnes
and warmth of that cup of coffee from our
flask after crossing our coast-home.

That is the picture as far as my poor
pen can draw it.

Love to you all. May God bless and
keep you. Darling, yours always
P.S. Thank you letter again.