

OPERATION KASSEL

Crew: Pilot - Denis Toombs
Observer - Taffy Evans
Front Gunner - Sam Embury, W.op/Ag. R.C.A.F.
Wireless Operator - Mac McCormick W.op/Ag.
Rear Gunner - Bob Henderson W.op/Ag.

Squadron: No.142, No.1 Group, Bomber Command.

Station: Waltham, nr. Grimsby, Lincolnshire - satellite of RAF Binbrook

Mac - recent transfer from Training Command to gain operational experience. Taffy had done one operation; a mine laying op off the Dutch coast in bad weather conditions - (the only aircraft from 1 group operating on that particular night).

Checking flight details in the B flight office we were down for an N.F.T. - night flying test - which was flown showing that our aircraft "N", a Wellington Mark 4 was serviceable.

Later at briefing the target named was Kassel, a German Army HQ and garrison town in the Ruhr.

Briefing followed its usual pattern but the met. report was for clear skies and moonlight making for easy identification of the target - also ideal conditions for enemy defences, including night fighters: my 13th op!

Six aircraft from B Flight were to be part of a medium sized bomber attack; our aircraft being in the first wave and to carry a full load of bombs and incendiaries.

Airborne at 21.45 hours, routed some 10 miles south of Munster. Over the North Sea, approaching the Dutch coast, found the Flak ships very active. Evasive action taken must have placed us slightly off course as we were coned by searchlights and received the full attention of Amsterdam's defences - very heavy flak, the only aircraft over the city.

As rear gunner I gave the skipper a commentary and advised on evasive tactics. We successfully avoided any damage and continued a weaving course across Holland.

Flew over an aerodrome carrying out night flying - the Luftwaffe soon switching off their lighting systems.

Shortly afterwards the Observer reported we were on course and time. About 10 minutes later we were attacked from underneath by nightfighters. We were about 15 minutes from target and the first we knew was severe jolting as cannon shells hit us. In the rear turret I seemed to be sitting in the middle of it. Managed to get in a short burst of fire from the Brownings at a single

engined fighter as it peeled away. Immediately a second fighter attacked but I got in a long burst of fire resulting in a glow of fire from the mid section of the fighter. There was just time to see him dive earthwards before seeing and feeling the flames that were streaming past the turret. Found the intercom useless, also the emergency call lights system no longer working and the hydraulic system would not turn the turret.

Using the manual system I centralised the turret, obtained my chute pack, deciding it was too hot to stay and with the aircraft diving slightly to port, turned the turret fully starboard, clipped on my parachute pack, put my forage cap inside my Irving jacket, jettisoned the turret dome and bailed out.

When clear of the aircraft I pulled the rip cord, jerked the chute open, it was very quiet - just the whisper of the air passing through the chute lines. Drifting down but not facing the direction of drift, I had to look over my shoulder to see that the drift was over forests and areas of water. Several attempts to turn were unsuccessful so, not wishing to push my luck too far, I left things as they were, crashing through branches and thumping to the ground. I was unable to disentangle the chute from the tree, reached into my hip pocket for my cigarette case to find it all crumpled up but the cigs OK.

One of my flying boots was charred, part of the sole missing and, except for blood flowing from a long scratch down one side of my face, no apparent injury. After checking my escape kit, I set off running and walking alternatively, in a westerly direction making good progress through the forest except for odd collisions with bushes. Later the noise of bombers flying back to England died away and all was quiet amongst the trees on a warm moonlight night.

To detour around a village I set off across an open field; after about 60 yards I heard a thumping noise, on looking in the direction of the sound I saw a large "white" horse galloping towards me. I took off, running faster than I thought was possible, towards the forest with the horse gaining with every stride! Finally I jumped clear over a barbed wire fence, hiding behind a tree, watching as the horse stopped and reared up before trotting off. Heart pounding, it was a while before I collected myself to seek another route around the village. Never before had I felt so frightened.

By daybreak I had reached the limits of the forest so I found a good spot of cover to hide during the day - sounds of trains in the distance providing a target for the morrow. Resting, I ate some Horlicks tablets, checked with my silk escape map and watched several people moving, walking a nearby dirt track.

Soon after midday, feeling very thirsty, I decided (must have been in a daze) to raid an orchard near a farmhouse about 1/4 mile away - picked up some apples but the farmer appeared, directing me to the house and leaving me in a parlour alone. I looked at a photograph above the mantelpiece to see Hitler's face so I took off quickly towards the forest.

Within half an hour I was surrounded by armed "Home Guards", taken to the

local Burgomeister's house, and later handed over to a Luftwaffe officer, marched to the village square where a lorry and trailer loaded with coffins awaited. Sam Embury was in the back of the lorry, we shook hands, pretending not to know one another. Also lying on a stretcher was Mac, wounded in the chest, upper arms and thighs, conscious and stoic.

We were then driven to a convent a few miles away where we picked up Denis wearing a large bandage on his hand; bright and cheerful as ever. We were then taken about 20 miles to a copse of scorched trees where a Stirling had crashed. The Luftwaffe men searching the still smouldering bomber for the remains of the crew. Bodies and parts thereof were then placed in the coffins. The Luftwaffe officer in charge said, "That's war, you were lucky - they weren't. For you the war is over."

We were transported to the town of Krefeld, confined along with two Luftwaffe N.C.O.'s who were supposed to be awaiting trial for some offences but they spoke perfect English and asked pertinent questions so we assumed they were intelligence officers.

Mac's dressed wounds began to smell septic, he was now in great pain. We demanded that he be seen by a doctor. Soon a Luftwaffe M.O. came and agreed he must be taken to hospital immediately.

That evening the M.O. returned telling us that surgery had been performed successfully saying, "Your comrade will recover, don't worry about him. He will get the very best of treatment."

Next day, escorted by two armed guards, the three of us went by train along the Rhine Valley to Cologne Railway Station; arriving in the middle of the night. Disregarding his two shouting guards, an Aussie airman walked over to greet us. Guards and prisoners then went into a troop canteen for soup before entraining for Frankfurt Am Mainz. All allied airmen taken prisoner after being shot down over mainland Europe, including North Africa, were taken to Dulag Luft for interrogation. The procedure was to place prisoners in a cell which was heated in Summer and kept cold in Winter. Clothing was taken away for searching, a wooden bench bed followed by interrogation by two intelligence officers in alternative shifts. Both spoke perfect English - one being very sympathetic and considerate in approach, the other being severe and aggressive; the former being much more dangerous.

Both had an extensive knowledge of one's R.A.F. history - the first one saying that I would be pleased to hear that a certain Squadron Leader I had flown with had now been promoted to Wing Commander after being awarded a D.S.O.

The aggressive type produced a Red Cross form to complete; a form which included details of station, type of aircraft, squadron details etc. Filling in my name, rank and number I put a line through the rest, then being told that as no one knew where I was they could take me out and shoot me - no one would know.

It was not easy to stick to name, rank and number and show no expression of surprise at the detailed information which they already knew but we had been thoroughly briefed about all this prior to going on ops. From their questions it seemed that they were puzzled about three wireless operators/air gunners taken prisoner in the same area and could not match us up as a crew. We must have been successful as I was kept in the cell for a couple of days more than normal. They may have concluded that I was a sole survivor of another crew.

My clothing was returned (compass buttons still in my battledress) and I was transferred to the adjacent POW camp. After a few days we were transported by rail to Stalag 8B Lamsdorf, Ober Silesia near the old Polish border.

The book - "Wellingtons at War" - A. C. Bowyer - gives an account of the night of 27th August 1942....Six aircraft from B Flight, No. 142 Squadron took off to bomb Kassel. His aircraft, H for Harry, badly shot up, full of holes and big chunks was forced to land at R.A.F. Harwell, none of the crew hurt but on arriving back at base learned to their horror that they were the only surviving aircraft of the six to return to England.

ON THE MARCH

Evacuating Stalag VIII B Lamsdorf, Ober Silesia on 22.1.45. we marched to Friederberg, arriving about 0300 hours 23.1.45. Slept in a barn.

23.1.45. After nine and a half hours reached Prieborn, billeted in a brick factory.

24.1.45. Arrived at Rogau Rosenu about 1700 hours. Stayed overnight in a barn.

25.1.45. With two other fit men, placed to care for a party of about 25 sick airmen. Two Jerry Postens in charge. Stayed in horse stables, straw bedding, horses very noisy at night kicking wooden stable partitions.

26.1.45. Demanded medical attention for sick; after long argument with guards they allowed parole for two of us to seek help. Walked a few kilometres to a Luftwaffe station. (Very similar to many RAF bases). Marched through main gates to guard room where N.C.O. in charge gave us permission to go to station sick quarters where medical officer refused to see us but a medical N.C.O. gave us several tubes of ointment (black/green/ in colour) named Frossheisse or something like that.

Called at guardroom on way out where an N.C.O. was severely reprimanding main gate guards for letting us into the camp. Returned to stables to treat cases of frost bite. This treatment, massaging ointment into frost bitten areas, continued several times a day until 6.2.45 - very effective.

26-28.1.45 Bartered and stole potatoes, barley and joints of ancient mutton - farmer allowed us to use old pig swill copper to make soup.

28.1.45 Left farm stables marched to Strehlitz - overnight in a barn.

29.1.45. Arrived in Wiesenrogau at 1600 hours. Stayed in a lager within a large 'sugar fabrick'.

30.1.45. Stayed one day - got some rations, bread and potatoes.

31.1.45. Marched via Frieborn to coal mine at Walchenberg staying in an old, damp and bitterly cold barrack. Demanded fuel for cast iron stoves, Told by Jerries - if you want coal godown the mine - there were thousands of tons on the surface but they were adamant. We had to go down the mine near coal face to fill two large rafia baskets. Soon had stoves glowing red hot. Very lucky; kitchen staff were survivors of General Bor Komoroski's Warsaw Revolt who warmly embraced us when told of the sick RAF personnel, they said all RAF were heroes who had attempted to fly in supplies to them in Warsaw. They provided marvellous soup, potatoes and bread. The warmth, food and ointment treatment resulted in an improvement in the health of the sick.

2.2.45. Left at 1450 hours, walked 8 kilometres to Rothebach.

3.2.45. Marched 20 kilometres via Landeshut to Pfaffendorf. Stayed night in carpenter's workshops, supplied with potatoes.

4.2.45. Made 13 kilometres to Schmiederberg; slept with cows in stalls, copious flatulence by cows! Potatoes as rations.

5.2.45. Reached Hirscheberg - slept in a barn. Potatoes.

6.2.45. Joined up with main column. Delighted with the general improvement of the health of the sick. Our two postens in charge of the small party were not too bright and after early disputations they went along with what we wanted. Stayed in a barn. Had a sixth of a loaf of bread.

7.2.45. Marched 29 kilometres. No water all day - very thirsty.

8.2.45. Arrived Gorlitz.

9.2.45. Stayed at Gorlitz.

10.2.45. Left Gorlitz.

TOWARDS LIBERATION.....

From Ober Silesia westwards across Germany the 800 kilometre march is covered in the book "The R.A.A.F. P.O.W's of Lamsdorf" and the following

account is a personal recollection of events of the final days leading to liberation.

The brick factory near Duderstadt ranked a high priority in a list of places where one did not wish to be.

Many prisoners, weakened by malnutrition, physically nearing exhaustion after the long march and suffering the effects of dysentery, were unable to make the journey to the temporary outside latrines. Consequently there was a constant drip of urine and faecal matter seeping from each floor to the ground causing a foul stench to pervade the building. Food was minimal, the rumours of Typhus spreading decided W/O Bernie Hughes R.N.Z.A.F., David Crabtree, Corporal - British Army and self to barter our wrist watches for bread and to attempt another escape.

The Germans, however, ordered us out to march again on 3.4.45. in a north-easterly direction. In driving rain the column moved through forested terrain. The guards on the right hand side of the column moved to the left hand side to seek some shelter from the rain. Approaching an S bend in the road we saw an opportunity to escape. Asking the lads around us to try and distract any guards who might try to shoot at us, we dashed towards the forest cover about 70 metres away, successfully hiding, watching the column go past. We then set a westerly course through the forest for about three hours when halfway across a clearing we were seen by a group of foresters eating their lunch. These men had guns and were accompanied by two armed Hitler Jugend. One of these was detailed to march us back to Duderstadt.

Going along a minor road we were stopped by a German officer riding a pushbike. He immediately berated the youth for consorting with prisoners. Dave Crabtree, who could speak German, seized the opportunity to support the almost hysterical reprimand of the officer, who ordered the sullen, dumbstruck youth to return to the foresters and the youth sloped away. The officer ordered us to go back to Duderstadt, mounted his bike and rode off!

Later that day we contacted Polish slave labourers at a state farm; they gave us food from their meagre rations directing us to keep going across country and to contact other Polish workers. We took their advice.

On 5.4.45. we made a mistake by resting too close to a road. Round a corner appeared a platoon of S.S. and at the head of the column, an S.S. officer. We decided to brazen it out. As they got near we "sprang" to attention, threw up our best parade ground salutes. He saluted back and the column march on!

On the 6.4.45. a Feldwebel from a road block house spotted us whilst we sought cover for the night, as it was late afternoon with rain threatening. He asked us what the hell we were doing so we spun him a yarn saying who we were and that, tired and hungry, we were on our way to the nearest town to surrender. Whether he believed us or was just fed up with war, we never knew, but he ordered us to proceed to the nearest town and so we went on our merry way!

Later we met a Russian P.O.W. - the sole survivor of a small party of escapees, the others had been shot by foresters. We suggested he stay with us but he decided to give himself up.

Next day a Pole driving a tractor directed us to hide in a large barn as the Americans were advancing towards the area. The 7th and 8th April we spent in a barn fifty yards from a manned blockhouse.

The night of 8.4.45, a Polish girl, about 15 years of age, arrived with a loaf of bread and a small bottle of medicine (probably Chlorodyne) for Bernie who was suffering exhaustion and dysentery. To reach us she had crawled past the Germans who, if they had detected her, probably would have shot her. She told us the Americans were continuing to move towards the area and to stay where we were.

On the early morning of the 9.4.45, a Polish man collected a tractor from the barn confirming that American tanks were only a few kilometres away. After he left many 2nd Tactical Air Force Typhoons and Mustangs shot up targets in the area; including barns. Fortunately, not ours! Then a tank battle ensued with shells from both sides whistling overhead. Soon after 1300 hours all went quiet, after the Germans retreated eastwards. Moving a board from the wall of the barn we saw that the blockhouse was deserted. We remained on the top of a high stack of straw at one end of the barn. About 1500 hours we heard a vehicle driving up the dirt track towards the barn. It stopped, the big doors swung open. We peered through the straw, saw three soldiers armed with automatic weapons. They were Yanks.

We scrambled down, the guns pointed at us, we were told to get our hands up. I said who we were, asking very politely if we could show our identity tags. The Master Sergeant was, "OK Bud but use your right hand only." I did exactly as ordered. Great joy and jubilation, cigarettes and K rations before being interrogated over a field telephone about German troop movements. We were joined by a party of Poles including the girl who had brought the medicine. Thanking the Poles for all their help, leaving them our old blankets and a liberal supply of cigarettes and K rations we went on our way staying with the Recce patrol in the van of the American advance. They armed us with automatic guns, ordering us to keep our heads below a steel cable fitted on the front of the jeep - the Germans strung piano wire across roads to decapitate the occupants of vehicles. That night the 2nd Division took over a village, desultory fire soon silenced by tanks blowing to pieces any house which sheltered snipers etc. White flags (usually sheets) hung from all the buildings - all the inhabitants on one side of the village given 10 minutes to clear out to the other side.

Within 2 hours the Americans set up kitchens (all stainless steel), telephone exchange, officers compiling lists of casualties etc. We were taken to meet Lt. Colonel William A. Smith who gave us a great welcome telling us that we were the first allied ex P.O.W's they had picked up and inviting us to dinner. He said he would arrange for us to be flown back to England. That night as we bedded down an artillery and mortar barrage started. We asked rather anxiously if there was a counter attack but were told, "Nope, we are just

softening up Kraut targets for tomorrow."

The 10.4.45. was spent advancing and after delousing on the 11.4.45. taken by trucks to a Luftwaffe aerodrome near Gottingen where Dakota aircraft were landing petrol supplies. Bernie and Dave were put aboard one plane which flew off to England. I was put on another plane with four soldiers being flown back to an airport on the outskirts of Paris.

There to greet us, or so we thought, were brass bands, dignitaries and a crowd of people. As we stepped down the band music petered out until only a bass drum could be heard - we were not the expected guests!

An R.A.F. Wing Commander took us to his office for tea, sandwiches and cake before loading us on a bus decorated with Tricolours - we went on our way through a cheering crowd as we waved regally to them.

So to R.A.F. Headquarters in Paris, given money, a Pay Book and a series of hot showers - the first since Lamsdorf!

Next day a tour of Paris conducted by a lady who had been a leader of the French Maquis Resistance. That night taken by train to Le Havre, thence by open car, driven by a maniac, to an aerodrome; warned about land mines we didn't walk too far before boarding a R.C.A.F. Dakota.

On board I met W/O Hughie Houghton who I knew on 142 Squadron, shot down some months before me. He was a very sick man, but on approach to the white cliffs of Dover, the Canadian pilot asked if there was a pilot amongst us. We assisted Hughie into the cockpit and he flew us back over the coast - a very touching gesture by our Canadian crew.

We landed at an aerodrome in Buckinghamshire, were welcomed by an Air Vice Marshall and his staff who congratulated our party of seven. One soldier was completely overcome when assisted by two W.A.A.F's, burst into tears on hearing their voices - I think we all felt the same way - we were free and home.

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