

Mugged at 18,000 Feet!

Harry Wilson, DFM, Scottish Saltire Branch, ACA

At 1930 hrs at a height of 20,500 ft on 14/1/1944 we were returning from a raid on Brunswick, thinking we were getting the hang of operating and could look forward to shortly finishing a tour. Suddenly the aircraft gave a tremendous jolt and trace was striking the fuselage and screaming over our port wing. My skipper immediately went into a diving corkscrew and as we were climbing starboard we were hit again. The pilot continued corkscrewing for some time and we seem to have lost our attacker.

It was now time to take stock. The pilot called each member of the crew and all replied that they were ok with the exception of the rear gunner from whom there was no reply. The mid upper gunner reported seeing hits on the rear turret and the rear of the fuselage. The pilot ordered the Flight Engineer to go back and investigate. He was instructed to call up on emergency intercom points down the fuselage but there was no response from calls made to him. The wireless operator was then sent back but by the time he got to the first intercom point and called up, he was incoherent and was obviously suffering from lack of oxygen. He was told to stay put. I was then asked to go back. The aircraft was descending by this time so I didn't need oxygen. I came across the wireless operator, saw that he was now on oxygen and proceeded towards the rear turret where I found the flight engineer unconscious on the floor. He had been sick into his mask, so I cleaned him up and plugged him into the oxygen. He had obviously tried to open the turret, as lying beside him was the emergency axe. The turret was turned to the beam and there was a gaping hole just behind the turret so I started to pump the "dead man's handle" when I felt a blow from behind. For a second I thought we had been hit again then I saw the Flight Engineer with the axe in his hand. (He apparently thought I was a German and was trying to save the Rear Gunner). I struggled with him for a few seconds but he was bigger and stronger than me so I pulled his oxygen mask off and he passed out. I then continued pumping the "dead man's handle" until the turret was in line with the fuselage. With trepidation I opened the door and found the Rear Gunner smiling at me, though wounded in the leg, shoulder and arm. He was lucky; if the hole just above the "dead man's handle" had been a foot further back he would have been a "goner".

We landed on three engines with a damaged port tyre. The skipper had called control for an ambulance to meet us.

When they boarded the aircraft they passed the Flight Engineer who was standing by the rear entrance.

They thought he was OK and ignored him. He let himself out of the aircraft and disappeared. A search party was sent out to find him as he thought he was in Germany and was trying to escape! Both members of the crew recovered and were able to continue flying with us.

We have all had terrifying experiences, but being mugged at 18,000 feet must be unique!