

MY LONGEST OPERATIONAL FLIGHT

L.5026-DISHFORTH TO POLITZ- (BAL TIC) NOVEMBER 1940

I have mentioned in previous stories that one of our greatest hazards was the weather and on this particular flight which would normally have been completed in about 10 hours, in fact we were in the air for 11 hours 15 minutes, and in this time we covered about 1,450 miles. I have good reasons to suggest that this was probably the longest flight by a Whitley aircraft. I say this, because when we finally landed at Linton-on-Ouse airfield, we had practically no fuel left in the tanks and it was only by the 'Grace of God' that we got home - here's how it happened.

We had taken off from Dishforth (Yorkshire) at about 6 p.m. on the 29th November 1940 with Sergeant Tilston as my co-pilot, Sergeant Chappell as Navigator, Sergeant Radford W/Operator and Sergeant Minassian tail gunner. The weather forecast was generally bad as one would expect in November, especially over the North Sea and Northern Europe. However, we set course for the Zuider Zee which was my custom on this route, as it was imperative to get a good pin-point on the Dutch Coast as this would enable me to check the wind and ground speed and so set a new course for the target, which was the oil installation at Politz. The distance from Dishforth to Politz was about 620 miles. Unfortunately things didn't work out like that, for soon after take off we entered cloud and there we remained for 3 hours or more and saw nothing of the sea, the Dutch Coast or anything else for that matter! Chappell, the Navigator,

came up to me and said, 'Skipper, our dead reckoning time for the Zuider Zee has expired.' and we were still in cloud and could see nothing - fortunately there was no icing. I told Chappell to keep our course and that I would continue for about another 15 minutes when we would be approaching Hamburg. The 15 minutes passed and no Hamburg, I was hoping for anti-aircraft fire which would have convinced me that Hamburg was underneath, but no anti-aircraft fire in any form heralded our approach. So, on we went, still in cloud - another 15 minutes passed - I was hoping for a break in the clouds, so I handed the controls over to Sergeant Tilston and I left my seat to check the maps with Sergeant Chappell. Just at that moment he pointed and called me excitedly as we slowly emerged from cloud. I told Tilston to come down to 4,000 feet (we were at 5,000 feet) and we could see these lights covering a pretty large area, not very clearly at first, but as we finally left the cloud there was a nice big town all lit up with all sorts of neon lighting. I could see the water, but poor young Chappell said, 'I have no bloody idea where we are Skipper.' I said 'Don't worry yet, let's have a good look at the map!' After a few moments it struck me - all Europe from the Dutch Coast along the German Coast to the Baltic Coast was 'Blacked Out', but north of that area was Denmark which, like Switzerland, was neutral. So I said to Chappell, 'I know where we are - that nice big town down there is Copenhagen. So let's work out a new wind and set our course to Politz.' Unknown to us the wind which we had been using was completely haywire and we had been blown nearly

60 miles off course - no wonder we didn't see Hamburg or Zuider Zee or even Bremen, we were well to the north of them.

Now the clouds were dispersing we knew we were not so very far away from the target, about 125 miles or so - because Politz which is not marked on the atlas is on the Baltic Coast about 120 miles N.E. of Berlin.

We had no trouble on the target, very little anti-aircraft fire. The weather was quite clear strange to say, and Sergeant Chappell, Navigator/Bomb Aimer took me over the target at 6,000 feet. We dropped our bombs with little difficulty and soon we were on our way home having plotted a new course using our new wind which had blown us so far off course on our outward journey. Unfortunately, the cloud which had been with us most of the way outbound was still there and soon we were enveloped in it heading for home but with no land visible. I had hoped the clouds would break before I got to the German Coast, as it was important to check the wind and our ground speed. But on we went, and after a couple of hours I was beginning to worry a bit, everything was so quiet, we were flying at 5,000 feet, then quite suddenly with no warning Bang! Bang! Bang! - all sorts of stuff came flying up around us, bursting shells, flaming onions etc. this was no place for me! I should have told you before that the anti-aircraft batteries take about 3 minutes to check the aircraft, height to check its speed and its position then load (sorry, the loading is done first) and then fire, so the thing is if you escape the first of the shell bursts you usually have a couple of minutes to take avoiding action. This however, is not the case

if there are two or three batteries each firing alternatively or in succession. Anyway, we were soon out of the way, but the question was, where were we? Where was this fire coming from? I went back to see Chappell and have a look at the map, but according to our plotted course and our time, there was nothing underneath - or rather there should have been nothing underneath, we were still in cloud. While we were thinking this out Bang! Bang! Bang! a repeat of the first attack which had happened only 5 or 6 minutes ago. Poor Sergeant Tilston at the controls seemed quite cool, so I went up and told him to get a bit more height, 6,000 feet, and weave about as best he could - then I went back to look at the map with Chappell - this was a mystery! The anti-aircraft fire stopped suddenly and unexpectedly, and just then I knew where we were. On our outbound course we had been blown to the north of our course quite some distance to Copenhagen, we had corrected this on our way to Politz. Then we applied the same wind for our course home, but it was still strong and blowing us off our course. Had we been passing over Hamburg or Bremen the anti-aircraft fire would have confirmed my position, but instead we were blown northwards or to starboard, and we were cruising down the German Occupied Prisian Islands which were heavily defended. By the time we had worked out a new wind and got a little more height, they had another Bang! Bang! at us, but soon we had set course for Dishforth, still in cloud and with a 3½ hour long journey ahead, across the North Sea. After being in cloud for about 3 hours Chappell came up and said we should be approaching the Yorkshire coast. Because of continuing cloud I thought I would come down to 5,000 feet,

but conditions did not change. I then turned to starboard about 20 degrees to keep me out to sea and came down to 3,000 feet, but this didn't make much difference either, except it was raining. I then set course southwards to fly hopefully, parallel with the coast, which would give me a view of Hull if only those clouds would break, but, they remained as thick as ever and I saw nothing.

I did not want to go inland without knowing my position as the Pennines were only about 20 minutes away. I had forgotten about the Balloon Barrage at Hull, and my 3,000 feet was too close for comfort so up I went again to 4,000 feet. All this messing about added a considerable amount of time to the flight, and finally when I checked the fuel I found I had only about 20 minutes of fuel left according to the gauges. I had a feeling we were not too far away from either Linton-on-Ouse, Leconfield or Dishforth, so for the first and last time I broke radio silence and had the operator send out an emergency signal 'PAN-PAN-PAN We are in difficulty and require immediate assistance.' This is the civil code tapped on the distress frequency. While the operator tapped out his message in less than a minute we had a reply from Linton-on-Ouse and in another minute I was given a QDM (magnetic course to steer to and RAF airfield (Linton-on-Ouse). Our fuel was now very low and I had my doubts as to whether we would make it. I told the crew to put on their parachutes and stand by the doors. I put the nose of the aircraft down, (I was at 5,000 feet), pulled back on the throttles and glided on my course, losing

height with my propellers just windmilling. Soon, in the distance, I saw the glim lamps of the flare path at Linton. I looked at the fuel gauges again, they were flickering on '0' - 5 or 6 minutes was all we had. Should we jump and get out? The lights seemed close now and I was still gliding down - I certainly would not have enough fuel for another landing, so I had to be sure I got L.5020 on the ground in one piece at the first attempt. The lights of the flare path were very close now, I was committed, crew and all, but we were almost there. I could see the first glim lamp, a couple of hundred yards away so I opened up the engines a little to help me along and keep me from stalling. Suddenly there was a gentle bump and we were down! As I looked at the fuel gauges in the cockpit and with the aircraft in the tail down position, all the fuel gauges read '0'! I just couldn't believe it, and said a quiet prayer to myself for it was a great risk to take, but there it is - some chaps get away with it and some don't!

We went to bed at Linton-on-Ouse just before dawn very tired, and cold and hungry. After a good night's sleep we had bacon and eggs at 11 a.m. and went down to the airfield to fly back to Dishforth. The Corporal who had refuelled the aircraft said to me, 'Sir! You had only fresh air in those tanks when you landed, I have just put in over 700 gallons.'

NOTE: For the record please note that this flight was carried out in Whitley L.5020 and not in Whitley T.4175 as it is numbered in the painting which hangs in the lounge. T.4175

was one of our reserve aircraft in which I carried out an operational flight in January 1940 to Gelsenkirchen (Ruhr)

The maximum fuel load for the Whitley was 705 gallons!