

AIR LOG

The Wing Commander introducing a Sergeant Observer.

Forces Programme, Tuesday, 30th. July, 1940, 6.30-6.40 p.m.

W/Cdr

Good evening Forces.

Now that the war in the air seems to be on in earnest it's amazing - and pretty cheering - to see the amount of punishment our planes can take - and get away with. Time after time our aircraft have been getting home safely after being badly shot up over Germany. It speaks well for British workmanship and British material - and for America's too for that matter.

Tonight you are to hear a story of a bomber which by all the ordinary rules of the game should now be scattered in small pieces somewhere over Germany. This aircraft was nearly shot to bits long before it even reached its target; it was only the skill and determination of the pilot and the crew that made it possible for the job to be carried out successfully. When the bomber arrived home it was riddled with bullet holes and looked like a Gruyere cheese - tattered and torn almost beyond recognition.

It's the navigator of this aircraft - a Sergeant
Observer from Essex - who is ^{tell} going to you the story.

Here he is ...

Serg.Ob:

Yes, we left our base in an aircraft that was in perfect condition. When we returned the ground staff almost

gasped when they saw the mess were were in.

Our target that night was Wilhelmshaven, which is the main North Sea base of the German fleet. You can easily imagine how well defended it is. We started our journey serenely enough. There was a moon and plenty of broken cloud which at times seemed to make patterns on the sea. We didn't see anything out at sea - no! I'm wrong. We did. We saw a large British convoy. The night before I had read any enemy report which claimed they had successfully blockaded the East Coast. Seeing is believing. That convoy certainly gave the lie to the enemy propaganda.

Well, we passed over the convoy, across the enemy's coast-line and for quite a while met no opposition at all, but when we were about half way between the coastline and Wilhelmshaven we got a slight foretaste of what was in store for us. A few shells began to come our way. They didn't worry us unduly as we know how to avoid that sort of stuff.

We flew on quite serenely till we got to Emden - with 30 miles still to go. It was at Emden that the fun started. Shells came whizzing up at us from all directions. They began to get very close and made the aeroplane rock about all over the place. One shell went right through the starboard wing. It knocked us about a bit, but the aircraft stood it well and we carried on to Wilhelmshaven.

I think perhaps, at this stage, I ought to explain that I sit right in the nose of the aircraft and have quite the best view of any member of the crew. In front of me is what looks like a glass window, but is in reality something very much safer. A shell splinter is of course liable to break it, especially if the shell bursts almost on top of it. We call this navigator's window the Perspex and the perspex of this aircraft stood the strain exceptionally well.

As we neared Wilhelmshaven I could see the searchlights - there seemed to be hundreds of them - splitting the sky, trying to pick us out. I could see the barrage - one of the biggest I have ever met - through which we had to fly. We were ready for our first run over the target, which was to be a practice one, when the big barrage seemed to get heavier. My pilot called me on the inter-communication system and asked me if I was all set.

"Yes," I replied. "All set, captain!"

Down we went - engines all out - with shells bursting all round us. They made a kind of dullish thud. It was all over in a matter of seconds. We had flown through the barrage and confirmed the exact position of our target. A shell had burst near the starboard engine and slightly damaged the starboard propeller; another had peppered the fuselage, while yet one more had burst very near the perspex. Several bits of shrapnel found their way into my window and two of them hit me. One tiny bit came to rest

in my elbow, but I soon pulled it out. The other went into my life saving jacket, (which we call "Mae West"), and hit the gas bottle which pumps the jacket up if necessary. The gas bottle burst, but the only damage it did was to bruise my rib.

While I was feeling thankful that my window was still all right, we were circling round getting ready to make our business attack. Once more we went down - again the same barrage, but this time we got through all right after dropping our bombs.

While we were making our attack, the two rear gunners had been spending a lot of ammunition putting out searchlights and worrying machine-gun crews. As our height was less than 100 feet when we came out of our dive they had plenty of opportunity to see what they were aiming at.

The pilot, who is a Canadian, had to control the bomber which by now was a good deal shot about. We all got back safely because he kept his head and knew what to do in an emergency.

W/Cdr:

Well, tell us what did happen on the way home.

Serg.Ob:

We left Wilhelmshaven behind us looking a bit the worse for wear - climbed up again to about 6,000 feet and made for home. Over Emden we were again shaken up by anti-aircraft fire which was just as heavy as before, but this time all of it missed us.

W/Cdr:

And then the pilot had to nurse you back over the North Sea?

Serg.Ob:

Yes he did - and it is the devil of a job controlling

a badly damaged machine, as you know Sir. I remember the pilot telling us we might have to bale out when we did get home as he didn't know what had happened to the undercarriage.

W/Cdr.

How did you get down in the end?

Serg.Ob:

Well, the hydraulic system for lowering the undercarriage had been shot away, but fortunately our emergency device worked all right and we made a good landing after all.

W/Cdr.

You seem to have put up a pretty good show all round.

Serg.Ob:

I don't know about that, but I do know this. One of the reasons why we returned on time is British workmanship. If the men in the aircraft factories could see that aeroplane as it was when we returned, with two big shell holes in both wings, hundreds of holes in its fuselage, its peppered propeller and its damaged nose, they would realise why we have such faith in our aircraft. But as they make them, I expect they know that already.

W/Cdr.

Well I only hope that some of you who are listening to this story are aircraft workers, and that you are as proud of your work as we are.