



## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

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### **A BALTIC EXPERIENCE**

During World War 2, in my role as Navigator, I flew as a member of the crew of a Lancaster piloted by Flight Lieutenant Harry Redwood. We were with No. 467 (RAAF) Squadron based in the U.K. and operating in the European Theatre of War.

That memorable operational trip took place on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1944, and to that date, involved the longest distance travelled in any operation undertaken by Bomber Command aircraft.

We were briefed to fly from Lincoln (U.K.), across the North Sea to a landfall on the Danish west coast, across Denmark and the southern tip of Sweden, then over the Baltic Sea to KONINGSBERG, (also known as KALINGRAD), at the mouth of the Pregola River on the east coast of the Gulf of Danzig. The raid was in support of the Russian advance into German-occupied Poland.

We took off at 2015 hours (8.15 p.m.) and our trip was to take ten and a half tiring hours. We carried 8500 pounds (over 3800 kilos) of bombs and had a full load of 2154 gallons (nearly 10000 litres) of fuel.

To stay below enemy radar coverage, our flight across the North Sea was carried out below 1500 feet.

Reaching the Danish coast at dusk, we climbed to 9000 feet and flew across Denmark without incident. Flying over the southern end of neutral Sweden was an eye-opener because all the towns were ablaze with lights. There was plenty of flak, but it was well away to both sides of our track.

The forecast cold front was encountered as an inky blackness when we were crossing the Baltic Sea. The skipper descended to 7000 feet to take advantage of a slightly higher temperature in a successful attempt to avoid the formation of rime ice on our wings and control surfaces.

At that stage, there was a lot of electrical activity in the storm cells, and we experienced the phenomenon of "St. Elmo's Fire". Those in the cockpit saw brushlike blue (negative) sparks flashing between the barrels of the two forward guns and that the propellers were enclosed in a halo of blue light caused by electrical discharges on the rotating tips of the propellers. Mariners have known about "St. Elmo's Fire" for centuries.

One of the safeguards in minimising electrical discharges inside the aircraft was for the Wireless Operator (W/Op) to reel in his trailing aerial. The skipper had not warned the W/Op about the electrically-charged atmosphere, so he was treated to a red and blue fireworks display in his windowless cubbyhole as electric charges travelled along his aerial and discharged around his radio equipment. Fortunately, inbuilt mechanical and electrical devices minimised the discharge, so no damage occurred. But I assure you that the W/Op's trailing aerial was reeled in very rapidly.

I informed the skipper that we should be through the storm cells in about 35 minutes, so he had a tiring period of uncomfortable instrument flying to cope with, and we were all tossed around a fair bit. After getting through the storms, the cloud base improved slightly and he was able to climb to our briefed altitude of 9000 feet without reaching the cloud base.

Ten minutes out from the target, while we were in the Gulf of Danzig, Pathfinder flares could be seen in the target area, and there were some searchlights to starboard.

Suddenly, there was light all around us. German warships in the Gulf were blanketing our force with anti-aircraft fire and the whole area toward land on the starboard side was thick with red and orange flashes.

A near-miss on our port side flung our port wing skyward and as our skipper battled to regain our aircraft's equilibrium, the rear gunner yelled 'Weave, weave, weave!! Flak ship below'!

We (and some of our equipment) were flung around as the pilot "corkscrewed" the aircraft to get away from the barrage of flak aimed at us from directly below. Fortunately, we were soon out of the flak ship's range and we were able to concentrate on getting to the target.

Having our VHF radio tuned into the Pathfinder frequency, we realised that the target markers were having difficulty locating the target aiming point, and had dropped more flares than normal, so that the whole target area was a mass of light.

Two minutes before the planned "target time", the master bomber directing the raid ordered the whole force to orbit the target as the markers were unable to locate the aiming point.

The skipper considered that circling the target was not a crash-hot idea because that would take us over a lot of the flak ships and warships in the Bay. So he took the more prudent course of orbiting about 10 miles south-east of the target area to await the controller's call-in.

Even so, waiting around was not exactly a picnic, because over the whole area, fingers of searchlights roved the sky for a target Lancaster. The cloud base of 9000 feet was not in our favour, as reflected light from the cloud presented the ack-ack gunners with Lancaster silhouettes against a white background.

After a long, long ten minutes, the controller called all aircraft in to commence our runs in accordance with our target briefing which, by now, was yesterday.

Bombing runs were always a tense period of time, the worst part was always having to continue straight and level flight for 25 seconds after the Bombaimer's call of 'Bombs gone'. We all knew that the aircraft was a "sitting duck" during the run-up to the target, but it seemed worse after our job was done, having to just sit there as the camera whirred to record the bomb-bursts, until the call of 'Camera's finished'.

On this occasion, the relief felt by the crew when they heard the skipper's call to the Engineer for increased revs and boosted power, was interrupted by the Rear Gunner's urgent call of 'Dive port!! Searchlight'!

As the beam flashed across us, the skipper rolled the aircraft into an evasive steep turn starboard, but the searchlight stuck on us, and was immediately joined by several other beams. Lowering his seat to the floor to help avoid the blinding glare, he tried to work his way to the edge of the cone and slip away if possible.

We were being hammered at by light flak with accompanying red and green tracers, so the skipper tried an unusual dodge. He throttled back the engines while lowering 25 degrees of flap. That reduced forward speed drastically to stalling speed. He then executed a stall-turn starboard, falling away in height to recover at 5000 feet. That manoeuvre was successful, and the searchlights lost us.

I'm sure the whole crew joined my silent mental plea to 'Let's get the Hell out of here'!!

We decided to remain at 5000 feet until we passed through the frontal storms which we knew were ahead of us on our homeward journey. We would use a bit more fuel, but we had ample to see us home - or so we thought. But one thing we did know, and that was that the W/Op's trailing aerial would be reeled in!

After passing through the front, we climbed up to our briefed height to cross Sweden which was very quiet in the early hours of the 30<sup>th</sup> of August. Even the gunners seemed to have turned in for the night.

There was a complete blanket of cloud over Denmark, but we were about 1000 feet above it, and other Lancasters were visible up to 3000 yards to starboard as the northern sky was becoming lighter in the early dawn.

When we were about ten miles from the Danish coast, the W/Op reported a blip on his radar screen. It was an aircraft about 1000 yards off and closing rapidly. Mid Upper and Rear Gunners reported that there was nothing within 2000 yards when suddenly, cannon from below raked the aircraft from starboard to port. We realised that it must have been a Junkers 88 flying in cloud below us, and firing radar-controlled guns.

There was just the one burst, but normally that was all they needed to get a high percentage of damage or kills. German usage of radar-guided cannon by the slow-moving Stukas was very effective. The two starboard motors began surging, but they picked up again when the Engineer changed the fuel flow from No.2 to No.1 fuel tank.

A call from the Mid Upper gunner reported smoke or something pouring out of the starboard outer engine. The Engineer advised that it was fuel loss from No. 2 fuel tank as that fuel gauge was rapidly winding back to zero. We had lost 150 gallons (680 litres) of fuel in the matter of a few minutes.

The skipper immediately reduced power to economical cruising revs, which meant that, due to reduced speed, we were the last aircraft to arrive back at base. Actual time of arrival (ATA) was 0645, so we had experienced ten and a half hours of memorable flying, and fortunately, we were all physically unharmed.

Two more aspects of that trip remain to be told. The first being that, for the first time on our squadron, our aircraft had been fitted with compressed nitrogen which was released into the fuel tank as the fuel level decreased, thus leaving a mixture in the tank which was inflammable. The new experiment was highly successful because there was no fire when

the explosive cannon shell entered our No. 2 fuel tank. Without that protection, it would have been “curtains” for us.

The second aspect was that a ground-crew check of our No. 1 fuel tank revealed that there was not enough fuel remaining to complete another circuit if we had been unable to land off our approach.

All things considered, from that trip onward, my belief in Guardian Angels (and good counter-measures) was strengthened to the “N-th” degree.