

CHAPTER II

Dave checked his figures and calculations. Everything was correct. In two minutes they would arrive at the turning point, ten nautical miles north of the target, and then head due south to perform their night's work. All aircraft had to obey this ruling so that the bomber stream would be flowing in an orderly direction and collisions in mid-air would be minimised.

The cackle of the intercom broke the silence, 'Okay, skipper, navigator here. New course 184° magnetic, ready, now!'

The aircraft wheeled to starboard as if it were a winged mallard avoiding a fusillade of shot, and then settled down for the run-in. There was silence for about thirty seconds and then the bomb-aimer took control: 'Two degrees to starboard, skipper, steady, steady, bang on, hold it!'

Dave estimated that they would continue this straight and level run for six minutes and in that time the bombs would have gone, the target cleared and then they could turn for home, so at 2328 hours they would steer 278°. He left his seat and peered over the crouched back of the bomb aimer through the perspex domed-nose of the Halifax. The night was literally on fire and the red, lurid glow of the holocaust below was doing its best to banish the enshrouding darkness. The target was festooned with flames and the glow of the tracer bullets was like lianas creeping up from below to entwine and squeeze the marauders from the sky. The descending coloured flares of the Path Finder Force made the area a veritable fairy-ground, but the crump! crump! of the exploding ack-ack shells reminded the intruders that this was hell on earth and the beckoning fires were waiting to envelop and consume them.

'Steady, skipper! Hold it! Hold it! Bombs gone.'

The Halifax seemed to lift upwards as if relieved of a weighty problem, but still continued on its straight and level run.

'Christ! Did you see that Lanc?' exploded Jack Wilson, excitedly. 'It almost crashed into us.'

'The bloody fool was going the wrong way,' chorused Bill Mussen, the rear-gunner.

'Keep off the intercom!' commanded the skipper, and then there was silence.

'Get ready to steer course 278° magnetic, skipper—now!' commanded Dave, and the four-engined bomber slewed once again to starboard and hurried into the night away from the inferno.

'Thank God for that,' whispered Dave to himself, 'and now let's get home to those bacon and eggs. Bugger this for a lark!' He settled down to his charts and navigation, plotted a few loop bearings to determine position and discovered that for once the wind speed and direction were constant and no course change was necessary. So it was going to be a piece of cake and another op nearer the magical twenty-eight and 'screening'. Each crew member, excepting the skipper, had to complete twenty-eight operational flights before being rested as an instructor at an Operational Training Unit, and this was the Mecca everyone strove to attain because it meant a well-earned lull where relative safety and longer life expectancy existed. Not that any member of aircrew felt that he was going for a burton. The consensus of opinion was that it just couldn't happen to them, and Dave thought, like every other member of his crew, that he was luck personified and untouchable. The gods would always smile in his direction, even if they were angry at times and vented their wrath on others.

'I for Ink' stooged on unmolested, although both to port and starboard the luckless ones were trapped irretrievably in the bright glow of the spider's web weaved by the German searchlights. The bomber force was on its way home, but there would be many an airman missing when breakfast was served. The

rules of the game were being observed. The invaders had hit hard and relentlessly, and the German night fighters would do their utmost to wreak vengeance.

'Look out, Skipper! Fighter to starboard!' excitedly warned Bill, and then, almost immediately, from Jack: 'another coming in from port. Look out!'

The rattle and clatter of machine gun bullets ripping and tearing their way through the fuselage were so sudden and unexpected that Dave stood as if movement would help avoid destruction. Then there was quiet, a deathly quiet, and Dave thought that he must be the only one alive, and was just about to click on the intercom, when, 'Skipper here. Are you alright, navigator?'

'I'm okay, skipper.'

'Are you alright, bomb aimer?'

'Okay, skipper.'

So the roll call was carried out, and the seven members of the crew were all unhurt.

'Well done! We're all still hale and hearty so let's get our heads down and get this ship back to base. By the way, rear gunner, which fighter attacked us?'

'Both, skipper. The attack was simultaneous - the starboard fighter came across the rear, while the one from port struck underneath at the belly. Bloody miracle that we're all still alive and airborne.'

'Don't underestimate I for Ink, Bill, she's a tough old girl. Engineer, check for damage! Now let's keep quiet. We've still a long way to go. Keep your eyes peeled for fighters!' So the excitement was over, and it was back to work. Dave glanced out of the astrodome and, although they were miles away from the target, the fires were plainly visible and the distant sky was suffused with a reddish glow. The incendiary bombs had done their work and the explosions would go on all night as the conflagration spread.

'I'd hate to be down there,' thought Dave. 'The farther I can get away the better. God help those who bale over the target area, they'd get curry.'

His thoughts and feelings of smugness and security were rudely shattered with, 'Skipper, the port outer's on fire.' It was Jack's voice and sounded so matter of fact.

'Flight engineer, skipper here, see what you can do with the fire extinguisher! Do you think I ought to dive her to see if we can blow it out?'

'Hang on, skip! I'll give it a go first.'

Dave switched off the light above the table, pulled aside the small blackout curtain and peered into the night. Flames from the port outer engine were being swept back by the slipstream but, although this was a dicey situation, there was no need to panic as the engineer might be able to come up with an answer. However, Dave couldn't understand how the fire had started. Some time had elapsed since the attack, and it seemed that the aircraft was functioning efficiently. Still you had to be prepared for all eventualities in this game.

'I've tried the extinguisher, skipper, and it doesn't seem to have any effect. You'd better dive.'

The big bomber seemed to lurch forward, and Dave held on tightly to his seat as the aircraft's nose dipped and the rapid descent began. However, the flames just wouldn't disappear and were still licking hungrily around the engine cowling and being swept backwards by the force of the slipstream when they attained, once again, the straight and level position.

'I'll give her another go, engineer,' and immediately the rapid downward motion began again, but to no avail. The flames were determined in their resistance.

'What's our position, navigator?'

'We've just crossed the Dutch border, skipper, and within ten minutes we'll be over the North Sea.'

'What about 'ditching'? Engineer, do you think the kite will hold together until then?'

'I don't think so. She could blow.'

All the crew heard the conversation, and Dave knew that ditching would be preferred to baling out. They had practiced baling-out drill when the aircraft was on the ground, but all had voiced the opinion that they wouldn't be keen on the real thing, believing that pancaking into the sea would be preferable, although they had never experienced the latter.

'Let out the trailing aerial, wireless operator, so that we can transmit an SOS before ditching. Then they'll know our position.'

I for Ink, still fully operational, relentlessly ploughed its way homewards, but now the flames from the engine were leaping and dancing their way backwards in the slipstream current, seeming to reach half the length of the aircraft.

'Okay, skipper here. Bale out!'

The terse and dreaded command struck home forcibly. This was it, the real thing. It was to be obeyed immediately.

Dave knew the drill: he clipped his 'chute to the snugly fitting harness; upended the navigator's table, fastening it to the fuselage of the aircraft; then kicked the fallen navigational instruments out of the way so that he could get to the escape hatch in the floor of the aircraft. He bent down, grasped the ringed handle and tugged upwards, but it failed to budge.

Looking up he saw the bomb aimer, wireless operator and other crew members lined-up in the correct order for baling, then heaved once more. The hatch door shot upwards and he fell back on his arse with the wind whistling in, twirling and twisting the small navigational slips and the paper log. Holding firmly to the floor of the fuselage, he lowered himself out feet first, his back facing the direction in which they were heading. His legs hit the full blast of the slipstream to move upwards and adhere to the underside of the fuselage. Then his knee-length suede zip-up flying boots slid off into the darkness, and he was left in the ticklish position of having his head, shoulders and arms inside the Halifax, while the lower portion remained outside. Taking a final look at his oppos, he heaved upwards with his arms and was out into the night, sliding below the fuselage and hitting and taking something with him. Feverishly, his hand sought the handle of the ripcord, pulled hard, and within seconds it seemed that he was going upwards towards heaven rather than earthwards. The quiet and calm of the night surrounded him and it seemed as if nothing stirred. Perhaps this silence and serenity were accentuated by the tremendous contrast between being a prisoner of the noise, tension and unceasing, feverish activity of the aircraft for so long and then being suddenly liberated from it all. He was safe.

The sky, the clouds and the filtering moon were his, but way below him, to his surprise, was the flaming torch, 'I for Ink'. How it had got there was beyond him, because he thought his rapid descent would have taken him below the Halifax. The blazing aircraft riveted his attention as if mesmerised, and then the spell was broken by an explosion, accompanied by a sheet of flame, and 'I for Ink' plunged relentlessly earthwards.

Dave closed his eyes. 'Jesus!' he whispered. 'What an end!' He knew that the bomb aimer would have had time to bale, but the other five members of the crew would be trapped in the flaming hell by gravitational force and would be incinerated before they reached the ground. The German defences had done their work ruthlessly and efficiently.

The parachute oscillated in the cold September air and Dave placed one stockinged foot on the other for warmth. Claspng his hands, he realised that something was amiss as they felt sticky and wet and on examination, he discovered they were bloody. His right knee felt cold and as his hand slid down to succour it, it contacted the bare, sticky flesh.

'Christ!' he blurted, 'My trouser leg must have ripped. How the hell did that happen?' Then it dawned. It was the trailing aerial which he had hit and carried away and the flesh of his hands and knee must have been cut in the process. Still, that was nothing. He was alive and kicking and that's what counted.

The descent seemed long and so he had time to ruminate upon the situation. He had no boots and no escape kit, having left the latter in the Halifax, and would be landing in Holland. The Germans were there as in every other occupied part of Europe, so it would be a long walk home. But he felt he could do it, such was the confidence of youth.

Suddenly a group of trees became discernible and the ground came rushing to meet him. He was going to land on his back, so frantically pulled on the parachute's silken lines to gain control.

Then bang! He hit, not the ground, but what seemed a tall, wired fence. It held him for a moment, and then he crashed to the ground.

'Oh, my bloody ankle! My ankle!' he moaned.

Releasing himself from the harness, he hobbled around in small circles and realised he wasn't alone, but had a spectator. On the other side of the fence was a large bull, which snorted away and was most angry because his nocturnal quiet had been shattered by the billowing, white angel from the skies. 'Piss off!' cried Dave angrily, and then, 'Jesus, my bloody ankle!'

The bull moved away but Dave still kept moving around in circles as if movement would alleviate and banish the pain. Finally, he gathered his life-saving silk and moved to a spot a few hundred yards away to bury the evidence of his arrival. It was hard work and a sense of dissatisfaction existed with his handiwork on completion. Still, it would have to do, as he couldn't afford to linger.

He set off in a westerly direction, keeping the Pole star to his right, hobbling and favouring his left foot, the stars, the clouds and the night his companions, and the quiet and stillness making their impact.

'So this is Holland,' ruminated Dave. 'It could have been worse.'