

# **OUR FIRST MISSION**

**Written by James W. Brady**

**Pilot Lt. Bob Tibbetts - Skoal**

On Thanksgiving night, November 25, 1943, I was alerted for a mission the following day. I went down to the Armament shop, and thoroughly checked my guns, and removed the excess oil, in readiness for the morning, and checked over the many things one has to do before a mission. This was to be my first mission, so I was rather excited, for had heard many tales from my roommates who had had some experience in combat. I went to bed about 11, and tried to get some sleep. We were awakened at 4, were to eat breakfast at 4:30 and briefing at 5:15. I went over to the mess hall, and for some reason unknown to me had to sweat out a line, and was a little late for briefing, but was there before they gave us the target for the day, the flak installations, etc.

Bremen was the target. We were to fly up over the North Sea & come into the target from the north, our altitude being 25,000ft. After briefing we went to the Armament shop and again checked our guns, then went to the equipment hut & get out equipment & loaded our things on a truck & were taken out to our plane. We had over an hour before take off time so got everything in shape, checked out oxygen, etc.

We started our engines at 7:50 and taxied out on the runway for the engine check. Our radio operator, Bucky Walters, was the only one on the crew that had flown in combat before. I asked him how he felt flying with such a new crew; he said he was willing to take the chance.

After the engine check, the planes began taking off at about 30 second intervals. (Just as we were about to taxi off, Morse, the left waist gunner, called me on the interphone & said he hadn't brought his oxygen mask. I felt like pulling out my hair but remembered we had extra equipment with us, so I got him a mask from up in the nose, and we took off.)

After getting in the air, and our formation began to take shape, I went back in the bomb bay & removed the pines from the bombs, and turned on the bomb release switched, and then put on my "Mae West" life vest, my chute harness & got everything about my turret in readiness for altitude. After quite a while we finally started on a course and we knew we were finally on our way. We kept up an almost continual conversation on interphone, everything was going fine, and everyone seemed calm & in good spirits.

After flying quite a while the pilot told all members to go on oxygen as we were beginning to climb. Everyone put on their masks & checked in individually. Beginning at the tail, to the nose of the ship.

We had been flying on oxygen quite a while when the ball turret gunner called up that his pressure only read 125 lbs. The pilot told him to check his regulator to see that it was on auto-mix & that the emergency was on the off position. He then called Morse & had him fill the turret bottles from the main systems.

In the meantime a couple of ships had turned back, and in a few minutes the lead ship of our element aborted, and still later our right wing ship. We then had to change positions to fill in where the others had been.

We were the left wing of an element & Gibbons Gremlins was right wing. By this time we were well over 20,000ft and were not far from our target. There were planes in all directions, as far as one could see. We heard later that this had been the largest force ever sent out to date. The planes were leaving long vapor trails. It was a very interesting thing to see, and it gave one the feeling this was really a

great show.

Finally we were nearing the target and we began seeing bursts of flak, ahead to our left, then over right & it seemed they were bursting everywhere. I had heard about flak but one can't imagine it until he actually sees it bursting all around him. We were just a couple minutes from the target when I heard a lot of talking on interphone, but being up in the turret had a difficulty in distinguishing what was being said. Our No.1 engine had been hit by flak & oil was streaming out and I thought for a second that it was on fire but when I didn't see any flames I knew it was oil being blown that looked like black smoke. The pilot tried to feather the prop but it wouldn't feather and the prop was windmilling so that it shook the plane violently. We had to cut down our speed because of the windmilling prop, so began slowly losing our formation. By this time the planes ahead were opening their bomb bay doors so we did too and all the while flak was side up and down. I glanced down for just a second and saw the bombs leave the bomb bay. We had 8,500lb black busters and a lot of incendiaries. I felt a surge of relief to know that at least we were rid of our bomb load. We then made a turn and started what was to be the most thrilling and yet unspeakably horribly dash towards England.

After turning from the target I could see we were losing our formation. The flak was still bursting everywhere, and in the distance I could see vapor trails of single engine fighters, and it began to look as if the trouble was really falling down on us. We followed our formation, which by this time was steadily going from us. The pilot and copilot were babying the remaining 3 engines along. We still had to keep down our speed because of the windmilling prop. When I think of all this, now that it's in the past, it seems like a fantastic, horrible nightmare.

We were about 15 or 20 minutes off the target, or at least it seemed that long. At a time like that it is impossible to measure time unless you actually have a watch, for a minute can seem like an eternity. We were seemingly doing fine. Flak was coming up but not nearly as thick. It seemed we made one little mistake. We must have zigged when we should have zagged, for flak hit our wing between the spars, just outside of engine 4 and at about the same time our no. 3 engine went out. The pilot tried to feather No. 3 but again it wouldn't feather but fortunately something happened that it finally stopped turning. At approximately the same time all this was happening, we were attacked from the rear by fighters. I had great difficulty in hearing now, because of the roar of the 2 remaining engines and the men were rather excited and were shouting over the phone. Fighters were in all directions by this time although many were out at a distance and probably we couldn't even have seen them had it not been for their vapor trails and we shot a flare to call in our fighter escorts. P-47 came in and I saw at least 4 and possibly five enemy fighters being shot out of the sky. It was a beautiful sight and no one can imagine how beautiful a P-47 can be unless he is in a position like ours. Even now when I see one sitting on the ground, I feel like going over and kissing it, for if it hadn't been for our fighter escort, we wouldn't have a chance in getting back. We were attacked 3 times in all by fighters and each time shot out flares the 47's came in to help us out. We had 3 fighters at a 10 o'clock level. They came in about 6-8,000ft. They began turning their noses toward us. I got one in my sight and I opened a couple of bursts on him and 2 47's dived down on them and one of them was shot down. The ball turret gunner shot a 109 and as it came out from under the ship it was smoking and appeared to go down in a dive. No one saw it hit the ground, however.

By this time we had lost quite a lot of altitude and a formation of 24's that hit the target shortly after us and now were leaving us behind. I had looked back at the target and saw the 24's. It looked as if the Germans must have thrown everything they had up at them for the sky was literally a massive black cloud from the flak bursts and the 24's appeared to be scattered all over the sky.

The co-pilot saw one 24 go down in flames and I heard someone on the interphone said he saw a 17 go down. We lost quite a lot of gas out of tank No.4, probably from the burst that went through our right wing. I had to get out of my turret and begin pumping gas out of No. 1 into No. 4. What happened from here on out is rather vague to me as I spent most of my time pumping gas out of the tanks of the 2 dead engines and keeping the gas equalized in the 2 remaining engines. We lost altitude from 25,000ft over the target to about 3,000 at the coast. After the formation of 24's passed us we began going from 1 cloud to another. We had to cross one of the Froshon Islands and the North Sea to get back to England. When we came to the island, we were about 3,000 feet and our indicated air speed was between 130 and 120. We knew the island was heavily fortified with flak guns and it happened. My opinion is we must have surprised the gunners. At any rate, they didn't shoot up any flak until we left the coast and they then began shooting up flak. Our gas supply was getting uncomfortably low by now. I pumped every drop I could from the dead engine tanks and we had made up our minds to go towards England as far as possible. If we could make shore we would try to locate a field near by and if we couldn't we would ditch near shore.

While I was still transferring fuel, I took off my flying boots and got into my GI shoes, took off my chute harness for knew it wouldn't be any use, and turned the turret forward so the pilot and co-pilot would have the guns to help them out for the fuselage when we ditched and then waited for the order to prepare to ditch for it was pretty apparent we were going to have it by then. Finally the pilot gave the order we were going to ditch. I went back to the waist and helped throw out everything loose, ammunition guns, radio sets, cranks, parachute, oxygen bottles, etc. We saw we were going to hit sooner than we anticipated so I started for the radio room. I noticed we hadn't closed the left waist window so I went back to close it and then hurried into the radio room and was just closing the door into the waist when we hit the first time. Water rushed in the door and I couldn't get the door closed. The pilot made a beautiful landing for I wasn't even knocked down. We seemed to skip once and the next hit we stopped completely. I tried to release the rafts. The mechanism seemed jammed. I got the left one out but it didn't inflate itself. The water seemed to be above our waists. The fellows were a little panicky and wanted out. I helped 2 or 3 out and then climbed out myself and pulled the right release from on top of the fuselage and got out open enough that the co-pilot could get his fingers over the door and pull the raft out. The sea was pretty rough; the waves probably 10 feet high. The wind and waves carried the raft under the stabilizer and after working with it back there the men on that side had to give it up for fear that the plane would go down and possibly take them with it. In the meantime on the other side 5 of us had gotten our raft inflated. The bombardier and I got in it and I pulled the radio operator in and one of the waist gunners (Morse). The radio operator in and by then I was pretty weak. Davis was rather frantic. He was holding onto the raft. I tried to get him in but didn't have the strength then. Finally I gave what seemed to me a mighty pull and got Jim (Davis) in the raft. The plane had gone down in the meantime but in the excitement, I didn't see it go down. We got out the oars and the bailing bucket, and tried to reach the 5 men in the water, but the sea was rough and couldn't get to them. The men were calling to us for help. One can't possibly imagine the helpless feeling one has in the water with 5 men possibly drowning and the sea so rough you can't get to them to try to help them. About this time I turned and was amazed to see a boat coming towards us. I thought for a moment my eyes were deceiving me and when I told the fellows, the Bombardier thought that I had gone crazy. We began motioning towards the men in the water so that they would pick them up first. The men on the boat told us that afterwards they could see us but not the fellows in the water. They put out a life raft and picked up the men in the water and the boat. The minesweeper, came on over to us and picked us up. The men on the boat took us below deck to their quarters, and gave us towels and dry clothing and drinks of heated scotch. It was wonderful to get dry clothing and to know that we were safe. We felt

that we were very lucky to be found so soon, and that all of us were ok. We were the first crew the Eastbourne had ever picked up, and the crew seemed to get a thrill out of it. One of the officers were popping in every few minutes, offering us drinks, and served us hot tea and sandwiches.

After everyone had gotten warm and was beginning to feel better, we went up to the Captain's cabin and sat and talked. A little later they set a table for dinner, and we had a very nice dinner. After dinner we had a toast to the Royal Navy and the Allied Forces. Then sat and talked until a launch came out from Yarmouth to take us to port. On the launch, we were given hot tea, and scotch for those who felt that they needed a stronger stimulant. Woody had swallowed a lot of salt water so was in pretty bad shape. Lt. Wertheim had sprained his arm and Lt. Sharum had bumped his ribs so they slept in the naval hospital until the next eve. The rest of us slept in the barracks overnight, but in the meantime, when we first got to the hospital, they gave us chocolate, and then cooked us fresh eggs, bacon, and coffee.

The next morning when the fellows in the barracks got up they came over to us with hot tea, which we drank in bed. We then slept until after nine, got up and ate a nice breakfast. We then read the morning papers and went over to see the 3 fellows in the hospital. They were all in pretty good shape by then. We went back to the barracks, played either snooker or billiards until noon, and ate dinner. We spent the afternoon loafing around to be taken back to camp. The fellows in the naval station were very friendly and were offering us cigarettes and tea all afternoon. Just as it was getting dark, 2 reckons came in, and after thanking the Navy fellows for their kindness, we started back for Bassingbourn. We stopped in a town and ate supper in a restaurant and then went on down to camp. Capt. McPartlin met us. We told him what had happened to us and of our experience after being picked up. We then had a beautiful steak supper in a backroom of the Consolidated mess, and then to bed. We were interrogated the next day, and an account of our story was to be sent to our home newspaper. I can truthfully say that this was the greatest experience in my entire life. Although some of it was horrible and terrifying, it all ended well. We are ready to try it again but we are all hoping our remaining 24 won't be nearly as rough as our first.

I shall always remember the beautiful sight of the minesweeper as it approached us at our darkest moment, and the grand way we were taken care of from the time we were picked up until we got back to camp. What has happened from then on is another story, but I will ass we were sent to a rest home for a week. And our squadron gave us a case of cigarettes to send to the crewmembers of the minesweeper, the Eastbourne, in appreciation of their good work. I shall always have a very warm spot in my heart for our allies, the British, and especially the Royal Navy.

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