

A NAVIGATOR'S STORY

Written by John Howland

From my wartime diary
Gander Lake, Newfoundland

Dec. 17, 1943

Jim (Jim Tyson, Pilot) got out of the hospital two days ago and we are ready to go. Finally, it has stopped snowing and the snowplows have been working hard, trying to get the runways clear for takeoff. About noontime, we were told to be ready for briefing at 2100. Therefore, we spent the afternoon shopping at the PX, buying what we thought we might need, paying our bills etc.

The briefing room was crowded with the 36 crews of the Chambers Provisional Group who were scheduled to take off. According to Metro, the weather was supposed to be fairly good with 30 to 40 MPH tail winds helping us all the way. However, metro alerted us to a front we were supposed to pass through about 100 miles west of the Irish coast. I filled out my flight plan, drew in the route on my Mercator projection chart, grabbed the rest of my gear and headed for the plane that was being pre-flighted by the crew.

The gross weight of the B-17 was 58,000 lbs. We had a pretty good load aboard. Each member of the crew had a bedroll, a B4 bag and an A3 bag tucked in the bomb bays. In addition, my Navigators footlocker was jammed into the small nose compartment. Only the navigator knew that it didn't contain those many volumes of navigation books covering every range of latitude from the North Pole to the South. Instead, my HO-218 volumes were limited to the latitude range we would be flying. The rest of the weight and space was used up by soap, perfume, silk stockings and other "wampum", items I thought might be needed in England.

We were scheduled to take off in No. 3 position at 0006 (midnight). The fuel tanks, (main and Tokyo) were filled again after the engines were warmed up. Fuel capacity was 2750 gallons. Oil tanks were full with 36 gallons each. The #2 plane wasn't ready to go, so we taxied down to take off position in his place. It was very cold, and the snow was piled high on each side of the runway; but the plows had done a good job clearing the runways. The brakes were cold, and Jim had a little trouble with them sticking.

I was wearing my electric suit and my regular wool pants. Also wore my fleece lined flying boots over the electric boots. I wasn't nervous. Everyone on the crew realized our chances were zero if we were forced down in the Atlantic or became lost on the way across. I surely didn't feel cocky. Nevertheless, I had every confidence in my ability to navigate the ship and crew safely across the ocean. As a final check on the newly issued octant, I ran a Ho-Hc check on it the previous day. Everything checked out fine. Jim seemed to have confidence in my navigating ability and I certainly respected him as a pilot. We were ready to go. However, if we could have foreseen what was waiting for us out over the Atlantic, I am sure we would have preferred to wait for more favorable conditions.

Dec. 18, 1943

The all clear for takeoff was received from the tower at 0010 hours. Just as Jim was running up the engines a large trailer truck full of gasoline turned around in a runway intersection ahead of us. The words were hot and heavy as Bill Doherty told the tower what to do with that fuel truck. Finally at

0021, Jim eased the throttles forward, and we started for England.

With snow piled high on each side of the runway, it seemed like we were taking off from the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The air was cold and dense and the runway was about 7000 ft. long. After two or three bounces we were airborne about 3/4 of way down the runway. Later, Sgt. Jensen said the takeoff reminded him of a big old goose, flapping its wings and running while trying to take off from a lake. We made a wide sweeping turn and passed the airport climbing on course at 0028. We had never flown our ship at night before, and discovered that my navigator's light reflected into the pilot's eyes. I stuffed my leather flight jacket up under the rudder pedals and remedied the situation.

My chart was a small scale Mercator covering the entire distance between Gander Lake and our objective, Prestwick, Scotland. We flew a great circle course because of the shorter distance and more favorable wind metro claimed we would have by comparison with a rhumb line course. The stars were bright. VERY BRIGHT! I took my first 3 star fix about one hour after takeoff and got a ground speed of 174 knots. I had intended to use Polaris, the North Star, to determine our latitude. But we had problems. The night was so very clear, third and fourth magnitude stars looked like first and second magnitude stars. The field of view for identifying stars in the octant was quite limited. I could not positively identify Polaris, a second magnitude star, in the midst of a background of unbelievably bright third and fourth magnitude stars. Plans for using the North Star for latitude shots were abandoned. I used other, more readily identifiable stars such as Betelgeux, Sirius, Capella, Rigel, and Dubhe as well as the Moon.

The concern of the crew about our position was obvious. The radio operator tuned in on a station that provided accurate time checks for celestial navigators. Sgt. Churchill volunteered his services in the nose of the ship to help the navigator. I handed him the chronometer and told him to watch the second hand, and notify me immediately if it stopped. Churchill did his job well and I was relieved of the responsibility of conducting a training school when I was somewhat apprehensive myself.

The outside temperature was a modest -10C (+4F). My three star fixes were falling in place. The first part of the trip was more or less uneventful. I obtained position reports from celestial fixes at 0228, 0328, 0436 and a final fix at 0536. The ground speeds were 197, 196, 201 and 205 respectively. (phenomenal for a B-17) We were being pushed along by a strong tailwind just a few degrees off the tail. I was getting ready to take some more star shots about 0620 when the pilot called. He told me to put my oxygen mask on as he was climbing to get over some clouds. Churchill went back to the radio room. By the time we got things rearranged in the nose of the ship and my mask in place, it had closed in all around us. This was the front the meteorologists had told us to expect. We still had about 800 miles to go. I put the octant away and kept track of our course by dead reckoning.

We were homing by radio compass on a strong radio beam at Derryacross, Ireland and expected to fly out of the front within 30 minutes to an hour. The temperature was -20 deg C and we were flying smoothly at 16,700 ft. My ETA to Derryacross was 0841. About 40 minutes out of Derryacross the radio compass started to swing violently and had to be disregarded. We knew the storm was affecting the signal. We flew out my ETA still confident that we would clear the front as metro said we would.

Jim decided to go down and take a look below. We dropped to about 12,000 feet and hit some very bad icing conditions. One minute the black perforated outer barrel of the machine gun sticking out the starboard navigator's window was merely a shadow in the dim light. The next minute it looked like a huge white war club. Ominously, the air speed indicator dropped to zero because the heater in the pitot tube had failed. Jim applied power, climbing to try and find an altitude where icing conditions weren't

so severe. He flew by power settings from that point on. For the Navigator, there were no stars, radio signals or power settings to turn to. All I could use was my last three star fix position, already 2-1/2 hours ancient. The wind was stronger than any I had ever observed from my navigator's table. I used this to plot our position by dead reckoning.

The engines groaned as we climbed on our course to Prestwick. We finally broke out on top at 26,500 feet. Radio reception was very poor. The air was full of static, and it was cold, -45 deg C (-50 deg F). My ETA to Prestwick was 0927. After we flew it out, I put the pilot on a corrected circle course so the wind wouldn't blow us out of the country. There was nothing else to be done. I sat quietly and listened to the radio as Jim tried to contact the Prestwick tower.

Jim could make contact with both Nutts Corner and Prestwick; but they wouldn't respond when he asked for a QDM (magnetic heading) to their base. Finally, after trying fruitlessly for about thirty minutes, he made another call to Burton (the code name for Prestwick) saying:

"Hello Burton. This is Harry How (our code name). Come in please."

The response was loud and clear in a cockney accent, "Ello Airy Ow. Where are you?"

Jim replied, "We don't know. What is the ceiling over your base?"

The cockney accent came back again saying, "Ello Airy Ow. Where are you?"

Jim replied, "We still don't know. What is the ceiling over your base?"

Once more Prestwick came in with, "Ello Airy Ow. Where are you?"

Finally, Jim replied, "Burton, this is Harry How. We don't know where we are. We're sitting up here at 26,500 ft above a solid cloud layer in the vicinity of your field. We are low on oxygen, and running low on fuel. Our air speed indicator isn't working, and we are losing Number four engine (low oil pressure). Unless you can give us some help in the next thirty minutes we are going to bail out and leave this SOB sitting up here."

The response was immediate.

"Ello Airy Ow. DON'T DO THAT! Fly 180 degrees and give us a long count."

Jim went through the ritual of counting slowly up to ten and back to one again.

About one minute later the tower operator came back saying, "Fly 270 degrees and give us another long count." Just a few moments later he was back on the air with, "Come on down Airy Ow, you are right over the base".

At that moment the happiest navigator in the entire 8th Air Force was sitting in the nose compartment of a B-17 numbered 237986.

Despite several queries by Jim, the tower operator had never given us the altitude of the cloud layer above the field. We were all "goosey" about going through the same bad icing conditions that we had encountered earlier.

Finally, after descending through 10,000 feet of solid clouds (without icing) we broke into clear air at 16,000 feet. We marveled at the beauty of the English countryside spread out below us. The temperature soon rose above freezing (32 deg F) and the ice melted on the pitot tube. The air speed indicator started working again and our spirits soared.

Prestwick was a fantastic contrast to Gander Lake. Gone were the piles of snow and the snowplows. Everything was green; lush dark green and damp with moisture. It looked much like New England in late spring except the trees were bare of leaves. Dozens of aircraft were scattered about the airfield; everything from Typhoons to an old Gypsy Moth trainer biplane that looked at least 20 years old.

We grabbed our bags and started for our quarters; but we couldn't get into our rooms till after supper. I sat down in an easy chair in the lobby of the BOQ and promptly fell sound asleep. I was pooped! About four hours later I became aware that someone was moving my legs. I awakened to find a scrubwoman on her hands and knees lifting each leg gently while she scrubbed the floor. I was quite flabbergasted since I had never before seen a scrub person in any establishment get closer to the floor than the end of a mop handle. It was dinnertime, and I was famished. After eating, we went upstairs to our rooms, wrote a few letters home. I went to bed early to try and make up for lost sleep."

That's the way I recorded it in my diary. What I didn't record were the cuss words I let out about a month later when Jim Tyson told me he wasn't at all worried about our position. He knew that I had hit Deryacross right on the button because the marker beacon indicator on his panel lit up right about the time of my ETA. But the son of a gun never told me about it, and I desperately needed that check point at that time.

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