

NIGHT FIGHTING – FIVE HOURS OF A NAVIGATOR'S LIFE

This is an account of just one ordinary sortie, written within a few hours of the trip, whilst the details were fresh in my memory.

It was the night of September 14/15th 1944. The Germans were in a fix in the Balkans and 255 Squadron was trying to add to their difficulties.

With Flight Sergeant Dinham-Peren as pilot (called "D-P" for short)¹ I set off from Grottaglie aerodrome, near Taranto, at 8.45pm in Beaufighter C for Charlie², on an intruder operation in the Gulf of Salonika, 300 miles from base, hoping to intercept German transport planes evacuating the Dodecanese Islands³.

We had a little difficulty starting the starboard engine but, otherwise, the take-off was uneventful. It was a clear starlit night but there was no moon and it was slightly misty. As we left the flarepath, rising into the inky blackness of the night, we circled the airfield once and then climbed on an easterly course to 10,000 feet. We were then passing over the brightly lit towns of the heel of Italy, now bothering no longer about blackout. Gradually, our eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness, though we could only just discern the Italian coastline as we crossed it. We were due to reach the Albanian coast South of Valona at 9.22pm, but as we approached the land, the small patches of cloud below us merged into one complete cloud mass, and we could see nothing but an endless greyish-white carpet beneath us and the stars above.

As we crossed the 8,500ft high peaks of the Balkans, the cloud became denser and soon we were completely enveloped. We climbed in bumpy conditions to 12,000ft, where we emerged at intervals between towering cumulus cloud tops which rose to about 14,000ft.

The air temperature was just at freezing point – not really cold, but chilly after the warm September night at Taranto.

We could see, far away to the South-East, violent white flashes and reddish glows from

1 1392815 Flight Sergeant Burchall Cyril DINHAM-PEREN.

2 Beaufighter Mk.VIF serial KV924, fitted with Mk.VIII AI radar.

3 Mission mis-described in the Form 541. AIR27/1519 folio 92 has F/Lt GAYDON as the pilot and D-P (a pilot) as the navigator. This record also has Gaydon fly two missions in one night. Clearly an administrative error at Foggia Main, where the records from Grottaglie were written up. Form 540 at Folio 86 side 2 has the crew, the up & down times and the loss of the aircraft correct, but omits reference to the Intruder Patrol.

the aerodromes around Athens which we knew were being bombed heavily by our Wellingtons.

Then as we approached the East coast of the Greek peninsula the cloud became thinner and the cloud-tops lower. Here and there we could see odd lights from scattered buildings as we passed gaps in the cloud, but no well-lit towns like those of Italy.

Once, I saw, some miles away to the South and a little behind and below us, a reddish glow, brightening and dying away every few seconds, which resembled the light from infra-red detection apparatus used by German night fighters⁴. If it was a night fighter it must have passed well away from us, but for the next five minutes I kept a very good look-out behind us! Perhaps it was on the prowl waiting for our returning bombers.

Due to reach the East coast at 10.14pm, we actually passed over it at 10.15 but found ourselves over the Gulf of Volos, 40 miles South of our intended track. The large town of Volos itself, on the shore of the Gulf, was in complete darkness.



We turned due North into the Gulf of Salonika, losing height to 2,000ft. The sky here was practically clear of cloud but the night was still very dark and we could only just discern the coastlines. On our intercom we could hear the familiar crescendo wail from ground radar stations, which indicated that the enemy were "sweeping" us and plotting our track.

⁴ Possibly a reference to the "Keil IV" system, an airborne infra-red aircraft detection system that had excellent range and which was produced by Carl Zeiss in Jena. As at March 2018, technical data captured at the end of the war is missing from TNA file ADM213/910.

We stooged back Southwards down the Gulf for some 40 miles and had just turned North again when, at 10.45, I picked up radar contact on an aircraft 4 miles away to Starboard flying at about 3,000ft above the sea. We were then at about 4,000ft altitude, so we went down to our target's level, only to find that it was climbing hard. I warned my pilot that the range was closing so rapidly that it might be approaching head-on, but it proved afterwards to be on a North-Westerly course, crossing our proposed track from right to left.

We turned in behind it, and when it was two miles ahead D-P said he could see its lights. I assumed that it must be showing navigation lights preparatory to landing. I told D-P to throttle right back but, being engaged in my radar, I did not bother to examine the "lights" myself. He told me afterwards that there were three "lights", bluish-mauve in colour, so obviously they were not navigation lights at all, but exhaust flames from a three-engined transport plane. As we closed in, I realised the enemy was roughly on our own course climbing hard and only flying at about 100 MPH, whereas our speed had only fallen off to 160 MPH. We passed right underneath the enemy aircraft so that we were then ahead of it, but about 1,000ft below it. I looked back, expecting to see the "lights" which D-P had mentioned but, of course, saw none, as the exhaust flames would only be visible from behind the enemy machine. We were a little too far below it to discern its outline against the starlit sky.

D-P began to orbit, but I did not realise he still thought the enemy aircraft was travelling in the opposite direction to us (i.e. South). He was under the impression that, having passed us, it would have been going rapidly away from us behind, whereas in actual fact it was now following behind us.

Having a moment to spare as we were commencing the orbit, I thought I would switch my radar momentarily over to "beacon" range, which would enable me to see how far we were from the North shore of the Gulf. As we turned, I saw we were six miles from this shore. Then I switched the radar back to "interception" range, but for some unexplained reason it switched right off. I quickly pushed down the HT switch to put it on again, but only the first stage of HT would come on.

Previously, during the evening, I had experienced this trouble but did not imagine it could possibly happen in the middle of an interception, unless I switched off the HT.

So there we were, having lost contact with the Hun, and without the use of our radar. It was then that I first realised D-P had stopped his orbit on South, so I immediately told him to turn to North.

At the same time, I scoured the northern sky again for any sign of the enemy. Just at

that moment, as he approached the coast, the Hun aircraft switched on and off twice (like the letter "i" in morse) two powerful landing lights which threw beams down to the water. Behind these lights lay the star constellation "Plough", so I saw at once he was still roughly North of us. As the enemy was then just off Salonika⁵, I thought the flashing of the landing lights was a signal to the nearby aerodrome to put on its flarepath, so we decided to stooze around for a bit, waiting for the lights to come on. However, nothing happened.

A few moments later, the 2nd and 3rd stages of HT on my radar came on again, but there was no sign of the Hun. I realised later that he must have continued on his northerly course, up the Vardar valley towards Hungary. Too much time had elapsed to give chase, and in any case I did not know then, whether he was still in the vicinity waiting to go into land at Salonika. The lives of, perhaps, fifty German officers had been saved by --- what? A faulty electrical relay? A whimsical decision of an over-enthusiastic navigator to ascertain his exact position in the middle of a chase? A lack of imagination by a pilot who thought German planes might use blue navigation lights in place of the usual red and green?

When again would I be likely to get such a prize as a JU52 full of Germans?

We then decided to climb up to 10,000ft over Salonika to see if we could see any lights further afield, but we found none. Down we came again to 3,000ft and made three more patrols across the Gulf, but nothing of interest happened.

Continually, after this, the HT of my radar would not come on beyond the first stage until about five minutes after switching on.

On our way back, we found the cloud tops much lower than on the outward journey and we were just clear of cloud the whole way. We left the Balkans mainland at ten minutes after midnight and commenced to descend to 3,000ft. At 12.25am, not having sighted land or any coastal beacon, we called up Base. They asked if we wanted a vector home so D-P accepted the offer, but just as he had done so I saw the Cape S.Maria de Leuca navigation light ahead, bearing 325 degrees, so we headed for it. The wind had evidently maintained its high velocity for we were well South of track.

Shortly afterwards, Base told us we were 15 miles SE of S.Maria de Leuca which, we could now see, was an accurate "fix". We proceeded up the East coast of the Gulf of Taranto, arrived over base at ten minutes to one, and called up aerodrome control for permission to land.

5 Now known as Thessaloniki.

Then the fun started. On the approach to the flarepath, having put down wheels and 10 degrees of flap satisfactorily, D-P proceeded to put down more flap, but the flaps suddenly went up, instead of down. So he pushed the throttles forward and started to climb and go round the circuit again. The wheels went up all right but, as we came round to make another attempt to land, he again proceeded to lower the wheels, but they then unlocked and hung loose and would not go up or lock down. The flaps would not operate at all, either. He then tried the emergency hand pump for pumping down the wheels and flaps but, after fifty "pumps", this still showed no build-up of hydraulic pressure. I then crawled forward behind the pilot and tried to pump for him. I gave about 350 "pumps" but still no pressure had built up. So D-P came to the conclusion that the fluid had leaked out of the hydraulic system. The aircraft would only climb with difficulty now the wheels were hanging loose. We decided to go into a dive to try and lock the wheels by swinging them forward with a jerk. We were using the last of our petrol very fast. We had now been circling for twenty minutes and the gauges showed we had hardly any petrol left. Then the red warning light came on, showing tanks nearly empty. Quickly D-P switched over to his other tanks, but these too showed the red warning light "empty". Then suddenly the port engine cut, the plane swung violently to port on its one engine and lost a lot of speed. D-P put the nose down to regain speed, whilst he switched back to the few gallons of petrol left in the inner tanks. We were heading to earth and I was still standing behind the pilot not knowing whether we would be able to reach the airfield, or not. I asked D-P if I had time to get back to my seat (where I could strap myself in) and at the same moment the engine coughed and picked up again. We were able to climb once more - though very slowly. So I crawled back, whilst D-P called up to control to stand by for an immediate emergency landing. He was heading for the flarepath so I suggested he avoided using it as other planes were coming home. As we did not know where other aircraft were parked on the field, D-P called control again for instructions where to land and was told to come in on the East side of the flarepath.

The hanging wheels and empty petrol tanks must have altered the "trim" of the plane, for we touched down tail first and then flopped forward onto our engines. There was a grinding and crunching of metal and the machine shook and shuddered and stopped dead from 100 MPH in a few yards. I did not stop until a fraction of a second later!

My forehead struck the cupola and I smashed my goggles, cut my eyebrow and my left hand, and bruised my right elbow.

The starboard engine broke away from the machine, the main frame was twisted and D-P's emergency hatch would not open. Fortunately there was practically no petrol left, or I am sure there would have been a bonfire.

D-P smashed the perspex of his emergency exit with a hatchet and crawled through the

jagged hole, unhurt.

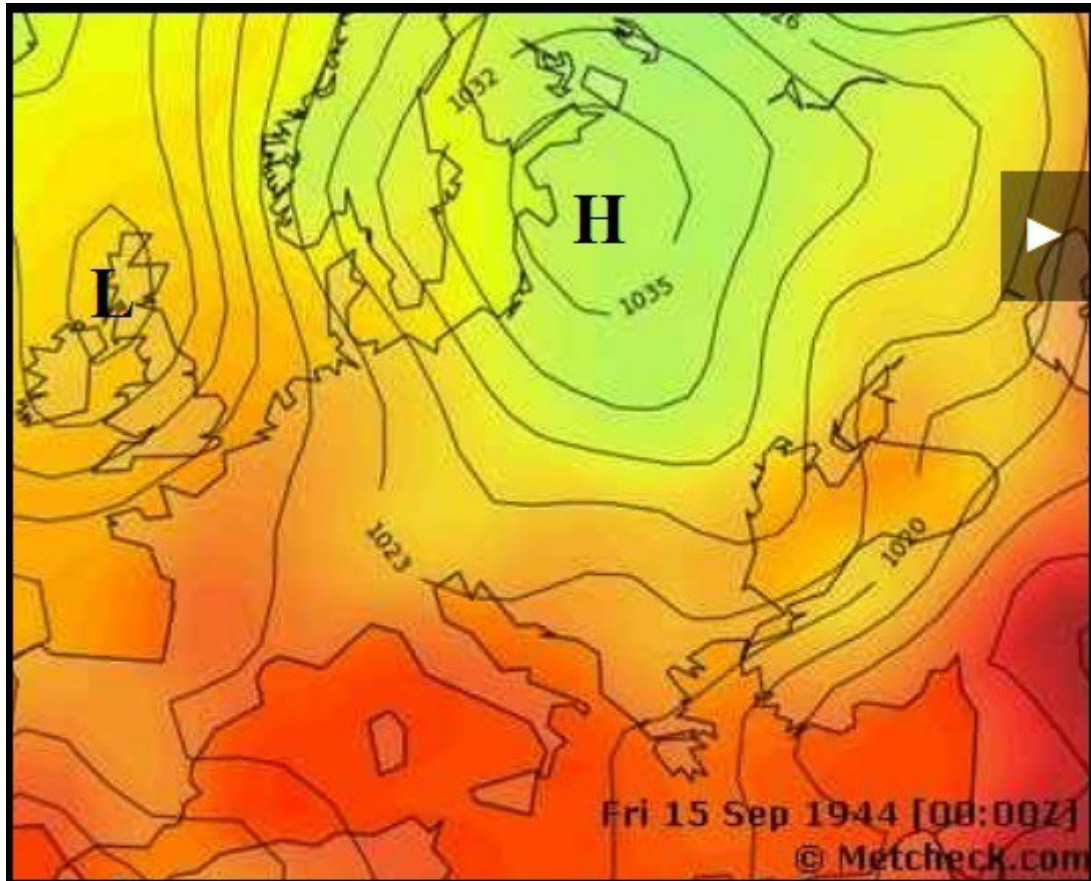
It was 1.15am. We had been airborne just four and a half hours. The ambulance was quickly on the spot and took me off to sick quarters where my wounds were dressed. F/Lt Binns, the 1435 Squadron doctor, came and stitched my wounded eyebrow. He finished at 1.45am. The five hours had ended in nothing but a battered Beaufighter and a bedraggled and disappointed aircrew. It takes greater skill and initiative, better judgement and quicker decisions to win DFCs.

Examination of the wreck next day revealed that two hydraulic pipes had rubbed together during prolonged engine vibration and had worn a hole in one of them, through which the hydraulic fluid had leaked. A tiny hole less than a quarter of an inch in diameter had caused the destruction of an aircraft.



The wreckage of KV924. Photo credit : George W. Eley.

Weather forecast for the mission:



The pressure chart for midnight GMT, 14/15 September 1944, suggests a North-Easterly wind, strongest over Turkey. This may have been modified somewhat by a catabatic northerly generated by the Balkan mountains, thus accounting for the aircraft finding itself to the south of intended track.

This illustration is not part of the original document.