

The Last 'Operation'. – 16th January 1945, Little Snoring- The location was Stendhal fighter airfield, near Berlin.

'At the briefing Cockie and I were thanked for our efforts, and told to be on our toes, as we were coming to the end of our 'tour of operations' with just two left. The intelligence officer Charles Price had given me a page from his personal diary, recording our efforts, with a 'hearty', 'well done chaps'-and he reminded us of this.

We did our pre-flight checks, spoke little, and departed from Little Snoring in timely fashion, as we had done so many times before.

We headed out over the North Sea and over Holland, picking up the, by now, same familiar 'landmarks' that we both knew so well by now.

As we crossed the coast Cockie's watch stopped, which meant I had had to remove my left glove, and was now reading the navigation times 'off' my watch, and repeating them to Cockie.

It had turned into a 'dirty' night-thick as a bag up to 16,000 ft. but the 'trip' to Stendhal was uneventful. I used a square search system for nearly an hour, but could pick up nothing-as far as we could tell, the airfield was lifeless, so without another thought we turned and headed for home, back to Snoring.

About halfway back we were at the point where we should have been over the Steinhuder Lake, and what should we see? A fully 'lit' airfield, with runway lights on, and planes 'taxiing', with their navigation lights clearly visible. This was unheard of. As a rule opportunities such as this, were very rare, and few and far between.

Without another thought, I shouted to Cockie, 'Buckle up chum, we're going in'. Turning to port, and diving, I went in to have a bash.

There was a chap sitting at the taxi point as I approached, he was my target. I opened up and saw a good cluster of cannon strikes on the aircraft, and was about to break away, when I saw the exhaust flames of another aircraft half way up the runway. 'God, someone's taking off! I'll have him', I thought.

I was trained to recognise aircraft by the number, type, and disposition of its exhaust flames, and I reckoned it was a JU88. So, instead of breaking off, I closed in and opened up.'

(The first 'burst' on the 'taxiing' aircraft had alerted the German gunners to the presence of an 'intruder' on the airfield-the second attack meant they were 'ready', and let go with all they had.)

'As I opened up I realised it wasn't a JU88; it was an ME109! What I had thought were the exhausts from two engines, were the flames from both sides of a single engine. Being so close to the aircraft my muzzle flashes were lighting up the back of the pilots Head. The difference in height between my gun site and the cannon beneath my feet meant I was shooting low, being so close. As I fired I watched the cannon strikes rip the bottom of the fuselage out of his ME109. He crashed at the end of the runway.'

Unwittingly Tommy had flown between the flak towers, at the downwind end of the runway, during this prolonged attack. The two German 40mm Quad batteries could see nothing, but had the cannon flashes from the mosquito to aim at. They said Tommy and Cockie were hit coming in over the airfield perimeter at a height of 200ft in a dive.

'Flak set my right engine on fire, and I automatically feathered the prop while pressing the extinguisher button. I zoomed up to a 1000ft. My mind was racing on the daunting prospect of flying home on one engine when the other engine suddenly stopped. The first engine was by now blazing merrily with the prop 'feathering' and then 'unfeathering'. The aircraft was done for. I yelled at Cockie, 'That's it! Bail out!' 'If you're staying, so am I.' Came the reply. 'I'm the pilot, get going, NOW!' I shouted. It's not easy trying to get out of a mosquito, and cocky was having trouble jettisoning the door.

I had seen a small white patch amongst all the 'black'-and knew it was a snow covered field amongst all the trees of the black forest, and was making a beeline for it. Time and height were running out-very very fast. I grabbed at Cocky shouting, 'we're too low', and had to take my hand off the back of his flying suit to switch the landing lights on. The treetops showed up below. I shouted 'Knock it off. Do your harness up'. Cocky didn't answer. I looked over to him, but he was gone-a burst of flame lit up the opening left by the jettisoned hatch. He had bailed out.

I found out later he was found several hundred yards from the aircraft with a broken neck-his parachute had not opened fully.

The trees came up to meet me while I was preparing to stuff the nose in while I still had flying speed. I could feel the 'whiffle', which indicated the approach of a stall. I stuffed it in at about 200mph with a terrific 'bang' in the snow-covered field. In no time at all I was reaching the end of the field, heading for more trees-I thought 'this is it', but as I struck the trees it was only a windbreak, a line, not the wood I had thought it was. The first two trees I hit ripped off the outer wing sections with the drop tanks on board. Simultaneously the fuselage hit something else, a tree stump, maybe. Missing me, it ripped through the fuselage, and in an instant the throttle control disappeared from my left hand, with a huge thump. Then I was out of the trees again and into a snow covered field where the aircraft came to a grinding stop.

A feeling of relief came over me. All I could think of was 'A forced landing in the Dark! What fantastic luck to be alive'.

All I had to do now was lift the roof emergency hatch, climb out, and run away. Except that in the crash the whole of the seat had come adrift and shot me forward right underneath the instrument panel, and the cockpit was full of earth. The left rudder bar had taken my foot back underneath the seat and locked it. I had some grim moments stuck in the middle of a raging bonfire trying to extricate my foot. As I looked up the armoured glass was inches from my face. I could see the inches thick rubber seal running out of its groove, like gravy. The full horror of my situation had become apparent, and I began fighting to unlock myself from my seat. I was screaming with real venom, 'God, not like this, not like this.' Repeatedly.

As I fought I had to rip my goggles from my face, as they melted. Any oxygen that got into the cabin

caused the starboard tanks 'to vent' into the cabin and I could feel my right leg being roasted by the roaring jets of flame that threatened to finish me.

I broke free from the seat and piled through the hole in the aircraft. As I did so my parachute got caught on something in the aircraft-I was now stuck half in, and half out. The port radiator and its contents were burning fiercely right outside the hole I was now stuck in. I could feel my face burning with the heat, as I closed my eyes, and began thrashing to break free. I lunged forward into the snow, as the parachute came free. I crawled away, some yards from the aircraft, stuffing my face and hands into the snow, to try and cool them down.

As I lay there, watching the flames, several hundred feet high, I thought 'there's' no-one about, perhaps I can make a getaway.' As I looked at my smashed burnt left hand I tried to stand up, and fell over. had broken my leg when it had been trapped underneath the rudder bar. It now dawned on me that my flying career, certainly wartime, had come to an abrupt end.'

The fire lit up a farmhouse on the edge of the field, and I started crawling over to it. Two soldiers hiding in the hedge, for fear of exploding bombs, saw me and carried me over to the barn, putting me down inside it.

I lay there for some time, not understanding what the Germans were saying, but thinking 'perhaps I should find an officer to surrender my revolver to,' when a member of the Hitler youth appeared. He shouted at the first two, and gave me a hefty kick in my right side, as I lay on the floor of the barn. I didn't move. He went to do the same thing again, but I caught his heel with my right hand and 'flicked him up'. He landing with a resounding crunch on the barn floor-much to the obvious amusement of the first two soldiers. One of Hitler's' finest, covered in shit!! He got up, presumably swearing, and picked up a pitchfork, with which he was going to finish me off. I managed to draw first-the revolver that my father had given me. Even without the aid of language it was obvious to all in the barn, that for the moment, I had the upper hand. In what seemed like hours, but only minutes, we had a standoff, until an ambulance arrived, from Fassberg, the airfield I had just shot up .

That was the end of Tommie's War!

The Squadron war diary records:

It is with very deep regret that we have to record the loss of F/LT. Smith and F/O Cockayne, they took off in "C" at 17.40 hrs to patrol STENDAL and no further news of them has been received. It is indeed very bad luck as they were an excellent crew and had nearly completed their tour, having only two more trips to do. Their loss is very much felt by the squadron and it is hoped that with an element of luck they may have landed elsewhere, even if on enemy territory.

Logbook: Opn: intruder, Stendal A/F, not yet returned.