



The Report By
Flt Sgt Arthur G White
Navigator
Lancaster 111, ND 675, HW/S
Of His Escape From Blajof,
Denmark
10th April, 1944.

What the crew thought of one another

*Feb 1944
1 Group
100 Sqdn
RAF Waltham
Grimsby*

F/Sgt. White (Navigator). Aged ????? – the daddy of
the crew (this is a metaphor). Home town is Twickenham.

Known to his crew as 'Big Arthur' or "The Air borne clerk".
He doesn't believe in P.T. as it hardens the arteries, over develops the muscles and deadens the finer instincts.

Is broad minded an the subject of Navigation, nothing under 85 miles of course really shakes him.

While on his first Op got a mite behind with his clerical work and asked the Skipper to lower his Airspeed down to 140 m.p.h. while over the target area.

Fl./Lt. Dickie (Skipper) – a native of Toronto (pronounced Torahnto), Canadian. Joined R.C.A.F. February 1941 for reasons of his own. After graduating spent some time on his native heath as an Instructor. Occupied most of his time binding to get over here; now spends all his time binding to get back.

Very athletic type being an expert (in varying degrees) at poker. pontoon, snooker and table tennis Never known to win a game of snooker.

Highly respected by his crew, especially when he receives a parcel. Whatever they tell his his invariable reply is "Don't worry."

Is being taught Basic English by his crew, and can now ask for "a cupper char anna wad" for his chinas without a trace of foreign accent.

Sgt. Price (Rear Gunner) first saw daylight 21 years ago at Hendon therefore just naturally air-minded.

Shewed aptitude for turret gunnery at an early age of two by rotating his high chair and directing short burst of porridge at elderly grandfather. Fell out of chair and thus acquired the nickname of "Crash".

Joined up at 19 and spent some time in Rhodesia. During his two years service has still to eat his first Service breakfast. Engaged but still fond of women in a general sort of way. Most familiar phrase is "Have you got a cigarette? I've just smoked my last." Is shortly due for his monthly shave.

Sgt. Rayment (Mid Upper Gunner) 22 years old and a native of Redcar, Yorks.

Left profitable practice as professional gunman to join up at 18. Saw service at Dunkirk and in India. Fond of music and is a violin virtuoso. Secondary inrestests bed and beer. Known to his pals as "Lofty"; calls everybody else Mush, for no reason except that it's easier that way.

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As we made our way up to the Technical site on the Airfield in the morning we could hear the steady muffled roar of the engines way up in the clouds as the planes flew towards the coast and then, through a break in the clouds, we saw them; flight after flight, squadron after squadron of Fortresses on their way to bomb and harry the Germans in their European "Fortress". This was the morning of April 9th, 1944 and the Germans were feeling the real air might of the Allies. Frequently, large numbers of U.S.A. Army Air Force Lightnings passed overhead on their way to help their heavier brethren, but this was the first time we had seen the Fortresses going out on a mission and, naturally, there was a great deal of speculation and many wild guesses as to their target; Most people favoured the big city (Berlin) which was much in the news at this time.

Later in the morning, after the "Station Master's" usual daily conference, when the Battle Order was posted up, we saw that our crew were down for "Ops" that night and wondered if we would be going to the same target as the Americans. Our Skipper, who was also Flight Commander, "organised" transport and we went out to do a D.I. (daily inspection) of our kite, a new Lancaster we had christened "Sweety Pie" – she was so easy to fly and had no vices. She had already done five "Ops" and proudly displayed five neat little yellow bombs painted on the side of the fuselage.

With a preliminary cough the first engine was started up and then the others in rapid succession and we settled down to check our equipment, guns, radio, radar, D.R. Compass and all the other equipment we carried, then, when we were all satisfied that everything was in tip top condition, we made our way back to the Mess for lunch and settled down to wait for the briefing times to be posted on the Notice Board. These were announced shortly after lunch and during the afternoon we spent our time reading newspapers and writing letters but, as is usual on such occasions, there were plenty of rumours flying around. First, someone announced three kites were being scrubbed, and later, another crew were told they were off duty that night, and then someone else said that we would be carrying a full petrol load – this started us off trying to work out our probable target. With a full load of petrol we were obviously not going to the Big City, some thought it might be a trip over the Alps to Italy, others were positive it would be Poland and so the guessing went on.

At last it was time for tea, and collecting my Bomb Aimer, Ray, we went in for our bacon and eggs – the Navigators and Bomb Aimers always had their pre-flight meal about an hour before the rest of the crew for they had a long specialist briefing before joining the others for the main briefing. With tea over, we went outside the Mess for the transport taking us up to the Navigation section and work. On arrival there we collected our Navigational equipment, found a vacant plotting table and waited for the Navigation Officer to announce the target – we were to drop mines this time – all our guessing during the afternoon had been very wide of the mark for the target was off Hel (near Gdynia) on the Baltic and only a few planes from our Squadron were taking part.

In the morning I had prepared a chart of Germany carefully marked with all the Flak areas and other hot spots but now found that this would be of no use for the evening outing. Obtaining a fresh chart I settled down for the briefing; route, with turning points and times, heights and speeds to fly, Met. forecast, and all the other information we required. After briefing, with Ray's help, I started marking my charts and maps and working out courses etc. and by the time this was finished and we had checked it, it was time to go over to the Briefing Room for the main briefing. On our way in the emergency rations and escape kits were collected and all the junk from our pockets put in little bags and handed over for safe keeping until our return – a wise precaution. There was little fresh information at the Main Briefing but we were told that it would be one of the biggest mining operations ever carried out. The mines were to be dropped fairly close to the shore and very heavy opposition was expected at this spot but over the rest of the route it would be fairly easy.

With an almost straight route out and back again and with hardly any defended areas to make things unpleasant, it appeared to be almost a Navigator's dream of the ideal trip.

With the briefing over I went back to pack up my navigational equipment and then went over the Crew Room to collect my helmet, flying boots and spare pullover – we were fortunate in having a really well heated aircraft and, with the exception of the bomb aimer and gunners, didn't need much extra clothing to keep us warm. Feeling and looking like a wandering junk man, loaded up with an enormous green canvas bag (full of maps and charts, navigation tables, instruments etc,) in one hand, a sextant in the other, my battle dress blouse stuffed with my rations and escape equipment, and with my parachute pack under one arm, harness over one shoulder and Mae West over the other, I staggered out of the room. It was a good thing my crew had been well trained for before I could get to the wagon they had taken part of my load leaving me free to breathe comfortably again.

On arrival at the dispersal site, we stowed all our kit and put on our Mae West's and parachute harness and sat down to do a final check, prepare the first course, speed, rate of climb for Alec whilst we waited for the time for "take off" – then I found for the first time I had brought only one packet of cigarettes. I was to regret this before many hours had passed. Always I had made a point of carrying plenty of cigarettes when flying on "Ops" for use when landing away or in an emergency such as was to occur later. During that short wait we didn't talk much – someone admired the peace of the evening which was to be broken so soon by the coughing of Merlin engines being started. Someone else spoke about a piece of music heard the previous evening – but we were all awed with the stillness and the immensity of the night and when we spoke it was in whispers whilst time seemed to hang still. I kept looking at my watch but even the second hand seemed almost stationary until finally it was time for us to get settled in and start up the engines.

As we taxied past the Control Tower a couple of WAFFs waved us good-bye and good luck and then we were off. As we got airborne I checked my watch and found we were dead on time to the second – a good start for the evening.

Setting course immediately without circling the airfield, we started climbing slowly and steadily – this was going to be a long climb with a full fuel load and a "belly" full of heavy mines, each fused in a different way, so we weren't to reach operational height until we were close to the enemy coast (Denmark). Working at my navigation I was very pleased to see that we were keeping right on track and keeping strictly to time. Warning the Skipper of the time to expect the Danish coast to appear, I carried on with my work – there were no interruptions from the crew as there was nothing to report – not another aircraft had been seen since taking off from Base and we weren't expecting to meet any of the opposition until we crossed the coast near Esbjerg. The roar and rhythm of the engines seemed to enter tight into my mind and the gradually to fade away until I felt that I was working in complete silence and in almost complete darkness. With the tiny orange light shining on my chart and instruments on the table, and the luminous figures on the dials on the instrument panel facing me, a ghostly greenish yellow glow coming from the radar set which shone on what little bit of Reg's face was visible between his helmet and oxygen mask, we might well have appeared as inhabitants from another world to an onlooker as we flew steadily on through the night.

Then we got our first contact with the enemy coast on the radar screen and warned the Skipper who warned the Gunners to be even more vigilant, if that were possible. By this time we were all very pleased with the trip for we had reached the coast right on track and 35 seconds ahead of schedule. As we altered course the Skipper said he could just see the ground below as the clouds were clearing away rapidly the further east we flew. But now there seemed to be an electric current running through the plane – no one had spoken after the Skipper but we all felt more tensed up and

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appeared to be working more quickly and carefully, keeping a very good lookout for enemy aircraft now that we were crossing over the ramparts of Hitler's Fortress and steadily flying further in. Suddenly, for the first time since we had got airborne, the rear gunner spoke – "There's a plane going down in flames behind us – looks like one of ours – yes, it's a Lanc."

So the opposition were on the look out and had drawn first blood. Alec, our Canadian Skipper drawled "Right, keep a good lookout – let me know if you see anything."

When it was time to alter course again and as we turned we saw a little way to port, searchlights and some Flak bursting below and slightly behind us – the Swedes (who were neutral) were warning us to keep away from their territory and perhaps they realized that their searchlights and flak were additional check of our position. On we flew out across the Baltic. Once more checking my navigation and timing I found we were still half an minute ahead of time. By now there wasn't a cloud in the sky and it was already rather light, although the Moon wasn't up yet; we began to feel ridiculously naked and exposed up there in the sky and felt sure we would run into trouble Over the target area when we descended to drop our mines. At least the German aircraft were just as visible as we were and so the odds were evened up a little.

It was hard to realise that we had been flying for nearly four hours as we approached our last turning point and I warned the Skipper to make a wide circuit so that we might lose part of the half minute we had gained whilst crossing the North Sea – straightening out as we approached the dropping point and as we reached it I looked at my watch and found we were ten seconds early but by then there was nothing we could do about it so we were the first to reach the target. The plane leapt a little as each mine was dropped and swinging beneath its parachute, fell silently down to the cold waters below, there to lie hidden, a menace to all shipping and another worry for the Germans. With the last mine dropped we set course for home as another Lancaster headed straight for us.

We took rapid, very rapid avoiding action. The crew reported that they had seen no enemy shipping and no flak or searchlights but within half a minute of leaving the target everything opened up to greet the remainder of the force who were also dropping their mines in the same area – we had been extremely fortunate and must have caught the Germans napping and when they did start up their "Brocks benefit" was of little danger to us.

As we altered course for home the Rear Gunner gave us a brief commentary on the fireworks we had left behind us but there were no signs of German night fighters at all.

Flying steadily on towards home a few of our planes were seen on their way out to the target and later we once more saw the flak and searchlight display put up by the Swedish forces but it was only a token effort. Altering course on leaving the Baltic we ran into a little cloud which became thicker as we traveled further westward across Denmark. Five minutes before we were due to cross the North Sea coast I gave the Skipper a final alteration of course – to take us back to our base – and a hot meal.

As we straightened out on the new course there was a sudden explosion in the bomb bay and the whole plane shuddered. Often one hears "everything seemed to happen at once" – it did. Alec took immediate evasive action whilst all my maps, chart, logs, flimsies and other papers just disappeared down the fuselage, the blackout curtain was hanging down by only one or two runners – all this I was aware of as I instinctively looked down when the explosion occurred and saw through some small holes in the floor, flames in the bomb bay. There was a terrific roaring and a real gale

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blowing through the plane – it wasn't surprising that the curtain had nearly come down and all the loose things disappeared from off my plotting table. I thought the cockpit windshield had gone. On reporting the fire to the Skipper he ordered us to put on our chutes. He was having a very difficult time – after taking the evasive action he had tried to level out but the plane kept diving down only to be pulled up again by the Skipper – we were slowly losing height in a series of gigantic swoops and at the same time there appeared to be a tendency to turn.

When it was obvious that it was no longer possible to keep the plane in the air much longer the Skipper ordered us to "bale out." By this time I could smell the rubber soles of my flying boots as they began to scorch – the floor was becoming rather hot and I noticed the blackout curtain which had fallen down behind the Pilot's seat, was smouldering where it lay on the floor. Pulling it off the runners I wrapped it round my fist and punched the side perspex window – my hand met no resistance for there was no window there – it must have blown out when we were hit – it wasn't surprising that we had a strong gale blowing into the plane. Meanwhile Bill (the Engineer) had been trying to undo and jettison the escape hatch in the floor of the nose but this was proving rather difficult. The hatch door was jammed and when finally it was undone he found it very awkward to throw out the hatch as the wind stream caught it. Having got rid of the escape hatch and making sure his parachute was firmly fixed to his harness he knelt down and rolled out. As he disappeared the Bomb Aimer took his place and I went and sat on the steps leading to the nose, but only for a second – they were much too hot for comfort even sitting on the parachute harness. Just as Ray started to roll out the nose of the aircraft came up with a jerk and he was thrown off his balance so he had to try again and was successful doing a forward roll as the nose dropped once more. Holding my 'chute to my chest I knelt down and tried to curl myself up into a ball around it and wished I wasn't so tall so that I could curl up into a smaller ball. I didn't want to hit the forward edge of the escape hatch as I rolled out. As I started to do a forward roll into space the aircraft lurched once more and at the same time the Wireless Operator kicked me and I instinctively put out my hands to save myself falling !!! In doing so I let go of the 'chute and the weight of it caused it to pull out the long webbing which had been tacked to the shoulder straps and to fall down out of the plane. Hauling it in and once again clutching it to my chest I curled myself up and this time got out.

As I fell out I was conscious of a tremendous roaring, of the slip stream and the noise of the engines and also saw and felt the heat of the flames belching out of the belly. At the same time I received a heavy blow on the nose and then felt a gentle jerk as the canopy of my 'chute opened.' Previously, when talking to other fellows who had baled out, I had been told that when the chute opened they had been pulled up with a tremendous jerk and I didn't realise that my parachute had opened successfully until I felt my two ears clamped on a young vice, formed by the two straps from my shoulders to the canopy above my head, and also felt myself swaying about rather violently. Quickly correcting the swinging I took stock of things. The result was far from cheerful for:

1. I didn't know whether I was over land or sea and was unable to see in uncertain light.
2. If I was over land – what country was it? We had been quite close to the Danish-German frontier just before being hit but after that we had twisted and turned so much that I had only the vaguest idea of our whereabouts.
3. Where would I land – if it was on land would it be in the country or a town – rather important this for roofs are never as soft as earth.

4. Finally – had I lost any of my escape kit and emergency rations when bailing out – I was soon able to satisfy myself on this point for they were all in the inside pockets of my blouse which I had done up to the neck when the gale first started blowing through the plane.

There was a dog barking somewhere – I was really sure of it now – I must have heard it barking for some time - it didn't sound quite natural at first – somehow was are such earthbound creatures that hardly ever do we stop to consider our world isn't just a flat place but includes the air above our heads as well. I, for one, had never stopped to consider whether sounds would be heard just easily from above as they can be heard along the ground – and yet I had known all along that sound travels in all directions. At least my major worry was settled for a dog was not likely to be swimming in the sea at night. I was feeling very, very comfortable, and with a shock I realized that I had very nearly fallen asleep until being roused by the dog. Time seemed to be non-existent, space was no longer a distance away from one, or above one, it was all around and no longer had such meaning as I floated down so smoothly and gently and silently. I felt completely divorced from the world – perhaps one can achieve that spiritual exaltation certain religions consider so important by cutting oneself off completely from the world – they do it mentally but I was doing it physically for a very short while and felt at peace with the world – and with myself too.

The barking of the dog had effectively roused me from my dreaming and once more I took stock of things now that I knew I was over land. Then trying to bend down to pull on my boots, found it impossible and had to bring my leg up to a position where I could reach the boot. Having pulled one on boot and starting to pull up the other I found something dangling across the top – incredibly this turned out to be my helmet and oxygen mask which had been dangling from my boot by the cable attached to the intercom plug. I must have had it on when I baled out but it is a mystery to me how it ever came to rest by the flex across the top of my boot whilst I was falling down before the parachute opened. I thought this would be a useful thing to drop when the ground was close, to listen for it landing and by judging the time interval it would give me some indication of my height above ground.

Now there was a roaring of engines becoming steadily louder and with a snarl our plane passed so close to me that I felt the slip stream which started me swinging violently once more and I had quite a job to correct the swing. The plane didn't travel far past me when it blew up in the air and fell to the ground – by turning my head a little I was able to watch the blaze on the ground when I hit the deck myself, rolled over backwards and finished up with my feet in the air, in the attitude of a half completed roll. As I fumbled to undo the quick release box I could see the fire lighting up the whole sky and at the same time heard some of the other planes flying overhead – I hoped that our blaze would act as a warning beacon to them as they passed over.

Now my real worries were to begin.

After a little fumbling I managed to get the quick release box undone and began to roll up the parachute canopy but, having no wish to leave it in a serviceable condition for the opposition if they found it, I cut out three small triangular sections from the bottom three panels, at the same time cutting all the lines off from one side of the 'chute leaving only half the shroud lines intact. Having finished rolling it up into a ball I buried it under the undergrowth among some small pine trees and started to look for a suitable place to park my Mae West – I soon found a likely spot.