

BOMBER COMMAND

REFLECTIONS OF WAR

BATTLES WITH THE *NACHTJAGD* 30/31 MARCH - SEPTEMBER 1944

VOLUME: 4



MARTIN W. BOWMAN

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Volume 4

Battles with the *Nachtjagd*
(30/31 March–September 1944)

Martin W Bowman



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The ‘Night of the Big Kill’

It was a story of the perfect air ambush and Germany’s greatest single defensive success in the grim cat-and-mouse game that was played out for nearly six years between the bombers and the fighters. The ground controllers had to guess where we were heading for and they guessed correctly. We were heading for the Stuttgart ‘gap’ – a small opening in the great flak belt. When we reached it there were hundreds of German fighters waiting in the brilliant moonlight to shoot down our heavily-laden bombers and they downed us by the score. Fifty miles from the target all hell was let loose. There were enemy fighters everywhere. We were sitting ducks with no cloud cover to shield us. We counted twelve of our aircraft going down in almost as many minutes, all of them in flames. Sometimes we could see two or three night fighters peeling away from one of our crippled bombers. Usually when we saw an aircraft going down or blowing up we reported it to the navigator, who made a brief note of the time and position; but on this raid it would have been a full-time job for him, so he told us to forget it.

Sergeant R E Holder, flight engineer, G-George, 460 Squadron RAAF, Nürnberg raid 30/31 March 1944¹

In the 1930s, Nürnberg – 90 miles to the north of Munich – had hosted the annual National Socialist rallies. Hitler called this Bavarian city on the River Pegnitz the ‘most German of German cities’. It was here that the infamous Nürnberg Laws, the series of anti-Semitic edicts, were promulgated. But Nürnberg was more than just an important political target. By March 1944, with an estimated population of 426,000, of whom 220,000 were potential war workers, Nürnberg was high on the list of the British Cabinet’s Combined Strategic Targets Committee, and several raids had been planned and then postponed. Nürnberg with Fürth was an important centre of general and electrical engineering with 50 factories and 46 other commercial plants. The famous *Maschinen Augsburg–Nürnberg* heavy engineering works produced land armaments of all kinds, from heavy tanks and armoured cars to Diesel engines. This factory had become doubly important since many of the Berlin tank works had been destroyed in earlier raids and the huge MAN factory at Augsburg had also been all but destroyed. The G Müller works manufactured special ball-bearings for magnetos and the *Siemens Schuckertwerke* made electric motors, searchlights and firing devices for mines. The large Siemens factory in Berlin had been damaged during recent air attacks on the capital and the Nürnberg plant had therefore assumed a vital role in the German war effort.

Shortly after midday on Thursday 30 March 1944 the master teleprinter at High Wycombe sent out the first alert signal to the six Bomber Groups and Group commanders who were given the code name of the target: *Grayling*. This was in turn sent to stations and squadron commanders. Nürnberg would

be a 'Maximum effort' – ten squadrons in 1 Group, eight squadrons from 3 Group, seven squadrons from No. 4, twelve from No. 5, nine from No. 6 and twelve squadrons from 8 Path Finder Force Group. Security was immediately put into force. All outgoing phone calls were blocked and those incoming were intercepted, cutting stations off from the outside world as preparations for the raid on Nürnberg began. This time it was definitely 'on' – unless there was a significant change in the weather forecasts. The weather did seem to be worsening, with a threat of snow and sleet that strengthened the feeling that the raid would eventually be scrubbed. Some thought that it might even be cancelled before the navigation briefing which always preceded the main crew briefing, but there was no such doubt in Harris's mind. At the pre-planning conference at High Wycombe the Commander-in-Chief announced that 795 RAF heavy bomber and 38 Mosquito crews were to be employed on the raid. On a huge wall map a line of red tape wheeling around marking pins traced the route that the bombers were to follow to and from their target. From a dead-reckoning position off the Naze where the force was to rendezvous, the tape streaked in a south-easterly direction to cross the Belgian coast near Bruges. With no change of course, it then went on to just short of Charleroi in Belgium; dangerously close to three known radio beacons which were used as gathering and waiting points for the night fighters *Funk Feuers' Ida, Otto and Heinz*, close to the Ruhr. From there it stretched in a straight line through the forest to represent nearly 250 miles to the final turning point at Fulda, north-east of Frankfurt. At Fulda the force would swing on to a south-easterly heading for the bomb run on Nürnberg. But for two slight changes the return route the bombers were to follow after the raid was just about as direct as the outward course.

This planned route flew in the face of everything that had gone before. In the month leading up to Nürnberg Harris had decided that because of mounting casualties he must, whenever possible, avoid sending single streams of bombers on deep-penetration raids since such streams could be easily plotted by the Germans and intercepted before reaching their target. The alternative was to divide the striking force and send the two parts to different targets or send both to the same target but by different routes, thus confusing the enemy's air defences and making it more difficult for the German controllers to plot the raid. Yet the plan for Nürnberg was to send a large force on a long flight in which was virtually a straight line that was ideally suited to *Tame Boar* interception.

At 15.25 on the afternoon of the 30th, a weather Mosquito confirmed to Bomber Command that the outward flight in the moonlight had little chance of cloud cover and if the cloud seen over Nürnberg persisted it would rob the Path Finders of the ability to mark visually by moonlight. The deadline for announcing whether an operation was on or off was 16.00. A further forecast was handed to the deputy Commander-in-Chief Sir Robert Saundby at 16.40. It read: 'Nürnberg: Large amount of stratocumulus with tops to about 8,000 feet and risk of some thin patchy cloud at about 15 to 16,000 feet.' Many years after the war, Sir Robert recalled:

I can say that, in view of the met report and other conditions, everyone, including myself, expected the C-in-C to cancel the raid. We were most surprised when he did not. I thought perhaps there was some top-secret political reason for the raid, something too top-secret for even me to know. The conditions reported by the Mosquito were not passed down to the stations. Every effort was made to keep from the crews the unpleasant fact that they were to fly a constant course through a well-defended part of Germany for 265 miles in bright moonlight with little chance of cloud cover. At a dozen stations Meteor officers forecast that there would be cloud cover at operational height. No one, not even the Path Finder squadrons, was told of the 'large amounts of stratocumulus' now forecast for Nuremberg.

Saundby was obliged to draw up a detailed flight plan for the operation in accordance with Harris's instructions but before doing so he contacted Path Finder Headquarters at Huntingdon on his

'scrambler' telephone and informed Air Vice Marshal Don Bennett DSO of the proposed route. Bennett was openly critical of the plan and he worked out an alternative route based on the Path Finder meteorological findings brought back earlier by the 'Pampa' weather observation flight by one of his 1409 Met Flight Mosquitoes flown from Wyton by Flying Officer T Oakes and his Canadian navigator, Flight Lieutenant 'Bob' Dale. Bennett's plan was replete with 'dog-legs' from the direct line of flight and other tactical feints aimed at confusing the enemy and making night fighter interception as difficult as possible. Bennett formulated the route backwards from the target and was influenced by his preference for down-wind attack rather than into wind to avoid 'creep back' from the aiming point (or bombloads being dropped short of the target). Because of the uncertainty of the weather Bennett advocated using *Newhaven* and *Parramata* markers and *Wanganui* flares floating in the sky. Bennett's proposed Path Finder route found no favour with the majority of the main-force commanders who believed that a straight route would fool the *JLOs* into thinking that the bomber stream would suddenly veer off to attack some other objective than the one for which it seemed to be heading. The AOC 5 Group, Air Vice Marshal Sir Ralph A Cochrane, did not favour a dog-leg route because he believed it would only lengthen the flying time to the target and in turn greatly increase the risk of night fighter interception. The 'austere and humourless' baronet and the straight-talking Australian could not have been more different. Bennett said that Cochrane 'would have been the best Group Commander in Bomber Command had he done ten trips – or if he had done any trips, but his knowledge of flying and of ops was nil.'

The need for diversionary ploys had been made uncomfortably clear only a month earlier, when the attack on Leipzig on 19/20 February had cost 82 bombers: Bomber Command's highest loss rate to date. Forty-nine Halifaxes were to sow mines in the Heligoland area and 34 Mosquitoes of 8 Group would be employed on diversionary 'spoofs' to Aachen, Cologne, Kassel and other cities. Thirteen more Mosquitoes would strafe night fighter airfields at Twente, Volkel, Deelen, Juvincourt and Juliendorf, five more aircraft would fly RCM patrols and 19 Mosquitoes in 100 Group would carry out *Serrate* patrols.² Before the main force reached Nürnberg, nine Mosquitoes were to make a feint attack on Cologne between 23.55 hours and 00.07 hours. And a second force of 20 Mosquitoes would drop 'spoof' fighter flares, *Window* and TIs on Kassel between 00.26 hours and 00.28 hours in the hope that it would fool the *JLOs* into thinking that the main attack would be somewhere in the Ruhr.³

In the final analysis the Met men preferred their original forecast of wind speeds of up to 50 mph and the flight plan was therefore tailored to complement this assumption. By the 16.00 deadline the afternoon weather report showed no appreciable change. The only additional information was that take-off visibility would be poor at most bases but not bad enough to prevent the bombers from getting airborne. Nos. 4 and 6 Groups were warned to expect a heavy, overcast sky over Germany with thick layers of cloud near to the target, and valley fog on return. Group Commanders were also told that they could expect large amounts of strata cumulus to 8,000 feet with a risk of patchy medium cloud at 15,000 to 16,000 feet. Bomb-aimers were warned that with a forecast wind speed of 60 mph at 21,000 feet over Nürnberg in direction 280° they would have to be quick with their bombing. Air pilots were told that the wind speed was expected to increase to 70 mph over the French coast on the way home. At 00.59 hours two Mosquitoes were to mark Nürnberg with green target illuminators and eight other Mosquitoes would bomb the city one minute later. These aircraft were to release four bundles of *Window* per minute. The main force was also to use *Window*, dropping it at the rate of one bundle a minute and increasing it to two per minute when the planes were within 30 miles of the target. The duration of the attack would be from 01.05 hours to 01.22 hours, during which time Nürnberg was to be saturated with 3,000 tons of high explosives and incendiaries.

At Metheringham, 12 miles south-east of Lincoln, Pilot Officer 'Dick' Starkey and his crew on 10 Squadron had flown 21 operations. They had been scheduled to take part in a raid on Brunswick on the

night of 29 March. However, four crews were on the last ten trips of their tours and it looked as though they would complete their tour at about the same time, so it was decided to stagger the remaining trips. Starkey's crew were therefore told to stand down for the Brunswick raid but this operation was then cancelled because the Met forecast was not good. On 30 March his Flight Commander told Starkey that his crew would be stood down. Starkey recalls:

I informed the lads of the order but as one man they said that as we had been a stand down crew for a cancelled operation one of the other crews should do so for the raid and they asked me to see the Flight Commander again. Although I had to decide whether or not to let the order stand, I agreed that we should be put on the Battle Order and gave my views to the Flight Commander. At first he said the order would not be reversed but after some thought he changed his decision.

Flight Sergeant C R 'Tubby' Holley of Southall was the rear-gunner in the Lancaster crew of Pathfinder *D-Dog* on 156 Squadron at Upwood near Ramsey and captained by Squadron Leader Brooks, a former Hurricane pilot. Most of the crew were on their second tour of operations. Holley wrote:

Having just had a very welcome seven days' leave, I had to get up at 05.30 on 30th March to catch the train from Southall, which would get me to Kings Cross in time for the early train back to Huntingdon. After meeting our bomb-aimer and radar operator Flying Officer 'Blackie' Blackadder, a tall, well-built Birmingham man and our wireless operator Flight Lieutenant 'Robbie' Bagg we arrived at Upwood just after ten that morning to find to our intense disgust that we were down for 'ops' that night. Having just spent a hectic week on leave we were all feeling dead-beat and in need of a few days' rest. We cursed the clot who put off-leave crews on the 'blood-list'. We were not altogether happy either when we saw we were being routed on a few miles south of the Ruhr.

At Coningsby on 30 March Pilot Officer A E 'Ted' Stone on 61 Squadron had drawn his pay, travel vouchers and the Nuffield bounty for Pilot Officers and senior NCOs on operational leave and was about to go to his home in Bridgewater, Somerset. For seven days the regular Skipper and his crew on *N-Nan* could plan ahead comforted in the firm knowledge that they would see each dawn without remembering the odds against such likelihood. And with this confidence came a boisterous and carefree attitude. But just before Ted Stone and his crew left camp he was called into the CO's office where Wing Commander R N Stidolph asked him to delay crew leave for 24 hours and fly a maximum effort operation later that night. In return Stidolph promised that upon their return to Coningsby the following morning, he would have a 'sprog' crew fly Ted to the nearest airfield to his home. Stone agreed though he and everyone else at aircrew level did not know what the target of the maximum effort was. Coningsby dispatched 14 Lancasters altogether. Sergeant Len Whitehead, a mid-upper gunner on one of these Lancasters, had already taken part in the Leipzig raid on 19 February with a loss of 79 aircraft and the Berlin raid of 24 March with a loss of 75.

Flight Lieutenant Stephen Burrows DFC of Evesham, the flight-engineer on *Y-Yorker*, one of 14 Lancasters dispatched by 44 Squadron at Dunholme Lodge, was on his second tour of operations. *Yorker's* pilot was 27-year-old Wing Commander FWThompson DFC AFC who was from Blackpool. Flying Officer William Clegg the 25-year-old bomb aimer was a bank clerk from Manchester. Another ex-clerk and fellow Mancunian, 23-year-old Pilot Officer Peter Roberts was the wireless operator. The mid-upper gunner was 23-year-old Flight Sergeant Middleham who was a factory hand from Leeds. Flight Sergeant Tony Stancer, the 22-year-old navigator had been a London office clerk. Flight Sergeant J Hall the rear-gunner was a mill hand from Yorkshire. This crew would face added hazard in that they had been detailed to photograph and assess the bombing of Nürnberg after they had

made their own bombing-run, which meant that they would have to fly back over the target while the raid was still on. Stephen Burrows adds: 'We were told it was to be a "maximum effort" deep into enemy territory and this shook us a bit since the Leipzig raid was still fresh in our minds. Although our crews were all secondtour types, we experienced the usual butterfly feeling in our stomachs. "Bloody hell!" remarks filled the air as crews entered the briefing room and saw the target map.'

Flight Sergeant Thomas N H 'Tom' Fogaty DFM, Skipper of a 115 Squadron Lancaster crew of average age 23 – operating from Witchford near Ely, recalled: 'Frankly, we were shaken when we saw that we were going straight to Nürnberg without any of the usual diversions; even though we were assured that there would be ten-tenths cloud cover for most of the way.'

Fogaty, who has been described by another man in his crew as 'a brave man but in a sense a very ordinary one, just a level-headed man from Devon,' had flown 13 operations. He had been awarded the DFM for bringing back a crippled Stirling in January after it had been attacked by a night fighter while bombing Brunswick. The bomber was hit in many places, one engine was rendered useless, the front and mid-upper turrets were put out of action and the aircraft became filled with smoke but Fogaty succeeded in evading the attacker and he reached Witchford, where he effected a masterly landing. In the first three months that 115 Squadron had operated Lancasters nearly 30 were missing or written off in accidents in one of the highest casualty rates in Bomber Command.

At Mildenhall 21-year-old Pilot Officer Oliver V Brooks, a Lancaster pilot on XV Squadron, and his crew, waited for the off. Brooks, who was from Hampshire where he was raised and educated, had left school at the age of 17 and worked for a short time as a temporary civil servant at the Royal Naval Armament Depot at Corsham near Bath in Wiltshire. A keen amateur boxer, he did not think his eyesight was good enough for pilot training and he considered becoming a RAF physical training instructor but he was accepted and in 1942 he honed his flying skills in the USA and Canada. In April 1943 Brooks formed his first crew at 12 OTU at Edgehill, a satellite to Chipping Warden, when the mount was the old Wimpy. Unfortunately, their time together was brief because Brooks had fractured his hand in a 'Wings For Victory' boxing tournament. The injury, which put him back two months, most likely saved his life. Crews were being fed into 3 Group, which at that time was operating Stirlings, and the 'chop' rate was very high. He had no idea what happened to his original crew and could only assume that they found another pilot.⁴

Brooks took a new crew with him when he resumed flying Wellingtons in July: Flight Sergeant Ken Pincott was navigator; Robert Allan Gerrard, who was engaged to be married, was the Canadian bomber; Harry 'Whacker' Marr, air gunner and Les Pollard, wireless operator. Later, at 1651 HCU at Waterbeach, Sergeant C H 'Chick' Chandler the flight engineer and Ron Wilson the mid-upper gunner joined the crew. In February Sergeant Robert Edward Barnes replaced Pollard as wireless operator. Brooks' first operation on the Lancaster was on the night of 20/21 January when he took *O-Orange* to Berlin and back. This would be the aircraft they would fly on the Nürnberg operation.

The Path Finder Force was led by 23-year-old Wing Commander 'Pat' Daniels DSO DFC, Commanding Officer of 35 PFF Squadron at Graveley, in *S-Sugar*. On hearing about the planned straight route he had warned that the force might well suffer 'the highest chop rate ever'. Daniels and Squadron Leader Keith Creswell DSO DFC, who flew *B-Beer*, were the primary visual markers responsible for finding the target and marking it for their supporters in the Path Finder Force. Shortly after 18.00 hours – three hours before 35 Squadron was due to taxi out at Graveley – Pat Daniels briefed the crews he was going to lead. He opened with a general pep-talk in which he emphasised the importance of the target they were going to attack and then he gave details of the types of flares and illuminators the Lancasters would carry and the precise times at which they would mark Nürnberg. With a billiard cue in his hand he went over the route, tapping the wall-map to indicate places along the course, which were dangerously close to heavily defended areas and he ended with a brief warning

‘Eight hundred aircraft are going to Nürnberg tonight and if we are to avoid collisions it’s important that you keep to your heights. Be particularly alert and weave your aircraft into gentle banks so that the gunners can get a better chance of seeing any night fighters that may be around. Good luck and good trip.’

At Waddington Squadron Leader Arthur Doubleday DFC RAAF gathered his crew together. Outwardly introspective, Doubleday never felt any different before an operation ‘other than for ‘waiting to get into bat [when] the fast bowler looked a lot faster from the fence but when you get there it’s not so bad.’ He had married Miss Phyliss Buckle at Beckenham, Kent in August 1943 after first flying 31 operations and completing his tour. The Doubledays had enjoyed four months of marriage before Arthur flew to Berlin on the first operation of his second tour. Arthur was now the ‘B’ Flight Commander on 46 Squadron RAAF in 5 Group. ‘Look boys,’ Doubleday said to his crew, ‘it’s on for young and old tonight. Just keep your eyes on the sky.’⁵

The first Lancaster off rolled down the runway at Elsham Wolds near Hull precisely at 21.16. The airfield’s flare-path twinkled below, tiny blue ghostly needles of light, rapidly vanishing as the wispy swirling cloud base embraced each aircraft. Then they broke out of the blanket of grey vapour. Some did not. At Skellingthorpe, where 19 Lancasters on 50 Squadron were dispatched, Flight Sergeant Geoff Bucknell crashed on take-off after a tyre burst and his Lancaster skidded out of control and was subsequently struck off charge. This Lancaster, in part funded from Andover’s magnificent total of £232,787 raised in a ‘Wings for Victory’ campaign and which had completed 47 operational sorties, thus became the first aircraft lost on the operation. None of the Australian pilot’s crew was injured. Bucknell and his crew later went to the Path Finders. All were killed on a daylight raid on Bois de Cassan on 6 August 1944 when they were shot down by flak near Paris.

Sergeant Ernest D Rowlinson of Northenden was the 22-year-old wireless operator on *H-Harry* of 50 Squadron flown by Flight Lieutenant George Charles ‘Chas’ Startin, an Australian from Tarbonga Queensland. Rowlinson recalls: ‘There was the usual back-chat among the crews but at the same time there was a feeling of tiredness amongst us. My crew had been on 50 Squadron only a fortnight yet this was to be our seventh night on flying duties and our fifth operation – one of which was on Berlin a few nights earlier.’ At the briefing he remembered that there was surprise expressed by many when the curtain concealing the route was drawn aside to reveal that they would be flying just south of the Ruhr. But anxieties had been allayed to some extent when they were told that thick cloud cover was forecast for most of the way.

Flight Sergeant Les Bartlett, a bomb-aimer/front gunner on 50 Squadron, flew on the raid as a rear gunner: ‘At 22.00 we taxied out and were first airborne. We crossed the enemy coast and it was eyes wide open.’

As soon as the intense bomber activity in the Norwich area was picked up by the forward *Würzburg* radars of the 1st *Jagdkorps* the German cathode ray tubes had lit up with hundreds of blips, each one representing a RAF bomber. The blips moved along an easterly heading and then converged over the northern part of the English Channel. The *H₂S* plotters reported the enormous stream, which was estimated at ‘approximately 700 bombers’ passing over the Belgian coast between the mouth of the Scheldt and Oostende between 23.10 and 23.50 hours. Of the original force of 782 heavy bombers that had taken off, 57 had already aborted with engine failure, oxygen supply problems and unserviceable radar sets and so on. At Lissett, East Yorkshire, twenty Halifaxes on 158 Squadron were dispatched but four turned back with mechanical problems. Only eight would complete the operation. Sergeant Reginald Cripps was the rear gunner on *L-Love* flown by 26-year-old Flight Sergeant Stan Windmill, six foot tall and an ex-policeman. Cripps recalls: ‘To the north and south of the bomber stream there was much searchlight activity as we crossed the coast. Visibility was very good and the moon was coming out so we could easily see the numbers on the aircraft flying near us.’

Once airborne each of the bombers' four engines beat steadily and monotonously through the night sky with only the occasional pitch up when they hit the slip-stream of another aircraft ahead upsetting the smoothness of their flight. When the stream crossed the Belgian coast the first fighters of NJC and NJG4 were sent up from their bases in the Low Countries on the orders of 3 JD, commanded by an ex-Battle of Britain pilot, *Generalmajor* Walther Grabmann at his HQ at Deelen. At Zeitz *Generalleutnant* Josef 'Beppo' Schmidt's 1st Fighter Corps HQ was also immediately alerted. The Bavarian was a personal friend of Hermann Göring and only a year earlier had commanded the Hermann Göring *Panzer* Division in Tunisia. Schmidt had studied the British radio messages that had been intercepted by the German listening stations, and the radar blips confirmed that a raid in some strength could be expected with the Ruhr the likely target. Over the next hour a total of 246 single and twin-engined aircraft were concentrated in waiting areas, predominantly near Bonn (radio and light beacons *Ida*) and Frankfurt (radio and light beacons *Otto*).

As the blips on German radar headed over the Scheldt estuary to the Liège–Florennes line Schmidt's staff decided, correctly, that a smaller RAF formation in the southern sector of the North Sea approaching the Heligoland Bight must consist of mine laying aircraft. Jamming was carried out on a large scale but Mosquito 'spoof' attacks on Cologne, Frankfurt and Kassel were also identified for what they were because to the German defences they were apparently flying without H_2S . The heavies on the other hand could quite clearly be followed on radar by their H_2S bearings. As the bomber stream was clearly recognized from the start, the attempt was made to insert ('switch in') night fighters as far west as possible. All units of 3 *Jagdkorps* at Deelen were switched in over radio beacon *Bonn*. *Generalmajor* Max Ibel's 2 *Jagdkorps*, with its headquarters in Stade, Hamburg, was brought near via radio beacons *Bonn* and *Osnabrück* and switched in by radio beacons *Bonn* and *Frankfurt* respectively. 1 *Jagdkorps*, commanded by *Oberst* Hajo Herrmann at Berlin-Döberitz was brought near via radio beacons *Bonn* and *Harz* and switched in by a radar station north of Frankfurt, was 7 *Jagdkorps*, commanded by *Generalleutnant* Joachim Huth at Schleissheim near Munich. Single engined units from Oldenburg, Rheine and Bonn were directed via radio beacon Frankfurt to radio beacon *Nürnberg*. Night fighter units from Ludwigslust, Zerbst, Jüterborg and Wiesbaden were led directly to radio beacon *Nürnberg*.⁶

G-George, a veteran Lancaster on 460 Squadron RAAF was being flown on its 87th 'op' by Pilot Officer Neal of Melbourne, whose crew were on their eighth operation. Three more and if it made back from *Nürnberg*, *G-George* would then be flown to Canberra to be exhibited in the Australian National War Museum. Aircraft on 460 also carried Australian names like *Anzac*, *Billabong Battle*, *Jumbuk*, *Kanga*, *Advance Australia* and *Jackass*. There was of course, *V-Victory*, with a kookaburra with a snake in its beak, and *K-Kitty* had a lion's head similar to the one that roars to introduce MGM movies.⁷ *George* was reputed to have been flown by 29 different pilots and had 200 different crews among its various crews. Neal's crew had the honour of flying this veteran Lancaster because *K-Kitty*, their usual aircraft, was undergoing a major overhaul. The only other Australian on the crew was the navigator, Flight Sergeant WA Gourlay from Tasmania. The rest were Englishmen. One of them, Sergeant R E Holder the flight engineer, recalled:

As we crossed the coast at a height of 18,000 feet, climbing towards our operating band of 22,000 feet we saw a vast change in the weather. The sky in front of us was clear with hardly a trace of cloud. We expected the usual anti-aircraft fire from the coastal batteries but there was none. And we spotted many other bombers cruising alongside of us, though normally we never saw them until we neared the target.

The weather over Belgium and eastern France was 0/10ths to 4/10ths thin cloud while Holland and the

Ruhr were cloudless. At Nürnberg there was 10/10ths cloud at 1,600 to 12,000 feet but the clouds veiled at 16,000 feet with generally good altitude visibility.

In the nose of *Y-Yorker* Tony Stancer studied his navigational charts, frowned, and leaned across his plotting-desk to take another reading from the *Gee* set in front of him. The former London office clerk quickly plotted it and then he flicked the switch on his oxygen mask that activated his intercom system and said: 'Navigator to Skipper. The Met forecast winds are all bull. Heavy tail winds have given us an incredible groundspeed. Unless we're to be well ahead of our ETA on the next turning point, we'll have to dog-leg. First dog-leg course coming up.'

Wing Commander Thompson asked if Stancer was quite sure of his calculations.

'Absolutely' replied Stancer.

Thompson then asked him whether the *Gee* set could be on the blink but Stancer assured his Skipper that he had checked and re-checked the set and that it was 'working perfectly'. Thompson knew they would now have to alter course 60° port for one minute and then swing 120° back: flying two sides of an equilateral triangle. It would lengthen their time to the first turning point, giving them two minutes to fly to a point they would otherwise have reached in half the time, but other aircraft would be doing the same thing and the collision risk would be high. The Wing Commander set the new course on his compass and swung the Lancaster in a gentle bank on to the first dog-leg. No sooner had he done so than Flight Sergeant Hall the rear-gunner reported on intercom: 'Unidentified aircraft coming towards us; port quarter.' Thompson was just about to throw the Lancaster into a violent corkscrew when he saw the massive shape of a Halifax as it zoomed 25 yards over the top of them.

'Jeeze, that was close!' someone gasped over the intercom.

Warrant Officer Jim McNab, a Scot among the Australians on 467 Squadron RAAF was not alone when he realised that the meteorological forecast was wrong. 'There was no cloud. It was so light that we could clearly read the squadron letters and identification numbers on the Lancasters flying next to us. One of our chaps said we were for it and he was right.'

'The forecast winds were not at all accurate and our navigator instructed the pilot to dog leg on at least two occasions' recalls Sergeant Len Whitehead. 'However, it was not as bad on this raid as it had been the week before on 24 March when we encountered a jet stream for the first time with winds of in excess of 100 mph, which caused the bomber stream to be spread over a vast area and was responsible for the heavy losses that night.'⁸

Squadron Leader Arthur William Doubleday adds: 'They started to fall within ten minutes of crossing the coast and from then to the target the air was not only of good visibility but seemed to be bright. The moon was really shining brightly although it wasn't a full moon.'

The first *Nachtjäger* reported making contact close to Liège, which was the start of a running battle that lasted 90 minutes until 01.30 hours. On the long 400 kilometre leg from Namur to the target, the *Nachtjagd* would shoot down 79 bombers. After the war General Schmidt said triumphantly, 'The flaming enemy aircraft served as flares, illuminating the bomber stream for the approaching German fighters.'

Wing Commander 'Pat' Daniels at the controls of *S-Sugar* had just made the course change over Charleroi when he saw before him a brilliant orange-coloured flash. Tracer hosed across off to port and then another dazzling splash of fire split the darkness. Moments later there was an explosion as a bomber blew up and was followed quickly by another. Daniels switched on his intercom and said 'Skipper to navigator. Log on the chart two bombers going down in quick succession.' He then warned his gunners to keep a sharp look-out, telling them that as there was no flak to be seen the bombers must have been shot down by fighters.

The second of these was most likely the Lancaster flown by Flight Lieutenant Bruce Simpson D

RAAF and crew on 467 Squadron RAAF at Waddington who were on their 22nd operation. They were attacked at Werbomont-Stoumont at 00.13 hours by *Oberleutnant* Richard Delakowitz of 7./NJG4 for the first of his two 'Lanki' victories this night. Simpson and his whole crew bailed out before the Lancaster crashed and blew up near Spa in Belgium. The second victim, which crashed north-east of Spa eight minutes earlier, was the first of three Lancasters shot down by 26-year-old *Oberleutnant* Martin Drewes. The former *Zerstörer* pilot had transferred to *Nachtjagd* at the end of 1941 and had been appointed *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./NJG1 on 1 March. After taking off from Laon-Athies Drewes headed for FF (*Funk Feuer*) *Ida* just south of Aachen, a route which crossed the bomber stream's path into Germany. His crew in the Bf 110 consisted of the *Bordschütze*, *Oberfeldwebel* Georg Petz and 24-year-old *Oberfeldwebel* Erich Handke, his *Bordfunke*. Handke has written:

There was no feeling of hate against the bomber crews. We knew that they also believed they were doing their duty. Our whole ambition was to get as many bombers down as quickly as possible so as to save the lives of civilians and prevent those senseless destructions.

We had been told by the running commentary that the bombers were about five minutes away. I hadn't even switched on the radar set when Petz poked me in the back and pointed, 'There he is up there, the first one!' As we came round we saw another straight away, about 200 metres directly above.

It was *N-Nan*, a 550 Squadron Lancaster flown by Flight Sergeant Arthur Harrington Jeffries CGM who was from Wantage, Berks. The crew were on their 19th operation. Handke continues:

I switched on my set but we had dropped 2,000 metres behind in the turn and had lost them. When the set warmed up I saw three targets on it at once. I headed for the nearest and Drewes picked it up at 600 metres. Weather was marvellous – clear sky, half-moon, little cloud and no mist – it was simply ideal almost too bright. It was a Lancaster flying nicely on a steady course so that when we were comfortably positioned underneath and from about fifty metres Drewes opened fire with the upward firing cannon at one wing which immediately caught fire. We followed the Lancaster for five minutes until it crashed below with a tremendous explosion.

Jeffries and three crew members were killed instantly in the explosion. The three survivors were thrown out as the Lancaster blew up, Sergeant S A Keirle sustaining very serious stomach, rib and leg injuries.

Handke continues:

It was always a sinister feeling to hang only 30 to 50 metres under a Lancaster, always expecting fireworks: but nothing of the kind ever happened. I always navigated my pilot to approximately 200 metres below the enemy aircraft. When about 50 metres below the bomber's port wing we opened fire aiming between the two engines into the fuel tanks; and then we dived directly to port to make sure that the burning aircraft did not hit us. With this kind of attack we always shot first, where in theory the tail-gunner should have spotted us first.

Ten minutes after Drewes had shot down his first victim of the night Handke saw another Lancaster. This was a 9 Squadron aircraft being flown by Flying Officer Jimmy Ling, a 23-year-old Scot from Newmilns, Ayrshire. The crew, who were on their 25th operation, had taken off from Bardney at 22.00 hours. Ling, who had made ten trips to Berlin, did not know that their Lancaster was above Drewes' Bf 110 and on the same course. Handke continues:

We got fifty metres under it again but the cannon jammed after the second shot and could not be reloaded. The Lancaster must have been hit however, as it lost height quickly. But as we kept behind it, not having turned off in time, it must have spotted us, for suddenly it twisted into a corkscrew. We also dropped 600 metres. At 550 metres the Lancaster seemed to steady and we had to overcome the compulsion to attack in our old way – where one was exposed to the fire of the tail-gunner. But we were already well used to the new tactics of firing into the wings, which did not endanger us so much when the bomber's load went off. At long last Drewes raised the nose of our fighter and fired a long burst with his front armament into the bomber's starboard wing, which burst into flame. For a second or so he forgot to dive away but there was no return fire from the rear turret. The Lancaster's starboard inner engine dragged a banner of flame and its nose fell. As Drewes pulled away the Lancaster blew up, showering the sky with thousands of fiery fragments. I took a quick fix on my directional-finding gear and noted that the bomber had exploded in the air over the Vogelsberg area. Around us, bombers were dropping like flies sprayed with an insecticide gun.

Only one parachute came out of Ling's Lancaster. It was the navigator, Sergeant H Laws. The rest of the crew, including Sergeant Leonard Moss, who was 19 and from Moss Side, Manchester, and the tail gunner, Sergeant Italo Prada, a Londoner from St. Pancras, were killed. The Lancaster came down near Cleeburg, eight kilometres WNW of Butzbach.

After a while Handke spotted another bomber and navigated towards it. It was a 97 Squadron Lancaster, which was being flown by Flight Lieutenant Desmond Rowlands DFC of Kenton, Middlesex. His crew were mostly second-tourists who were on their third operation with the Path Finders. Flight Lieutenant Richard Algernon D Trevor-Roper DFC DFM, with his Oxford accent and Billingsgate vocabulary, had been a sergeant gunner at Swinderby before he was commissioned and became Gibson's tail gunner on the Dams raid in May 1943. Handke continues:

At 700 metres we could see it was another Lancaster. We were about to attack from the rear again when Petz announced that he had cleared the stoppage in our cannon. With the 'oblique' cannon working we could now attack from below and to the side of the bomber, with less risk of being seen. Drewes edged the night fighter closer and for a few seconds we were almost on parallel courses. Unaware, the Lancaster flew on. Then Drewes raked it with a long burst aimed into the wing. Flame fanned from the engines along the fuselage to acknowledge the accuracy of his shooting. [Six bodies were later found near the main fuselage on the edge of a wood at Ahorn in the south-western suburb of Coburg. The tail came down some distance away and Trevor-Roper's body was found in his rear turret.]

A minute after Drewes' third victim went down, 25-year-old *Oberstleutnant* Helmut Bubi ('Nipper') Lent of *Stab/NJG3* picked out a *Viermot* 20–40 kilometres north of Nürnberg. Lent was eager to add to his score of 89 victories but he had been forced to wait on the ground at Stade until 23.40 hours before he was allowed to take off. And yet other pilots in NJG3 had by then already claimed seven kills. With Lent in the Bf 110 was *Feldwebel* Walter Kubisch, his 25-year-old *Funker*, a former blacksmith and the son of a machine fitter, from Helbigsdorf in Saxony. The third member was *Leutnant* Werner Kark, a war correspondent and peacetime editor of *Oberdonau Zeitung*, a Hamburg newspaper, who flew as a trained *Bordmechaniker*. Kark, who had been attached to a series of frontline Luftwaffe units since 1940, flying many sorties as a full member of crew over England, Greece, Africa and Russia, made it a practice only to report from personal experience.

Lent's quarry at 01.21 hours, when the bombing was at its height, was a Halifax.⁹ Kark's report of the night sortie, which included this graphic description of the shoot down, appeared in the *Oberdonau*

... At the very moment that the *Funker* calls out to the pilot, 'There's one up there,' the aerial battle reaches a renewed climax. Below us the fires from the crashed bombers illuminate a thin covering cloud. The flames of burning machines below it light it up bloodred. Around us it is as bright as day. Two, three, four combats have flared up very close to us. A fighter is just diving steeply down on its prey. To our starboard streams of tracer flash past our wings and above us we can make out the sharp outline of a Halifax swathed in flame from tail unit to cockpit. On our port side a bomber explodes in whirling fragments.

Now we have picked up a prey of our own. Our foe seems to be overcome with fear. He is twisting and turning for his life in this inferno. But the *Oberstleutnant* doesn't let his victim off the hook. We follow him into a dive, pull up with him and go over on to the left wing, then the right one, so that everything in the cabin that is not fastened down floats up, ghost-like. Our target comes into our sight for a fraction of a second. Our pilot fires a long burst. Blood-red flashes streak from the barrels of our cannon. The shells hit his starboard wing, tear it off. For an instant, wreckage fills the air and then the bomber goes down vertically and hits the ground. There is a ball of fire on the earth, a thick black cloud of smoke from the explosion, the 87th night kill of *Oberstleutnant* Lent. When we get back to base the *Kommodore* is dissatisfied with himself and with the world. 'Our comrades shot too many down!' he says – and then laughingly adds that nevertheless tonight has been one of his greatest experiences with the *Nachtjagd*. We will never forget this night. Even less so will the British *Terrorflieger*s.¹⁰

'It was easy to approach bombers unseen', recalls *Oberleutnant* Fritz Brand, 'as we nearly always came in from below, where it was dark. Bombers did attempt to evade us by weaving and corkscrewing but we fighters stayed on their tails and flew in the same manner.'

'We always had the feeling that our task was worthwhile' asserts *Unteroffizier* Ulrich Hutze. 'We thought its success depended only on sufficient men and enough fuel. The night fighters came out of the dark like Indians and always had a feeling of superiority.'

Squadron Leader Keith Creswell was shocked by the number of flaming bombers he saw dropping from the sky and equally disturbed to see the 'bright sickle moon' being reflected by a carpet of clouds directly beneath him, which exposed his Lancaster to all and sundry. 'One would have been less embarrassed in Piccadilly Circus with one's trousers down,' he wrote later. 'The route was marked by burning or exploding aircraft and for the first time I was aware that great losses were taking place. I considered that my chances of returning were slim.'

Flight Lieutenant D F Gillam on 100 Squadron reported an unexpected hazard caused by frequent weather:

We started leaving contrails at our allotted height of 19,000 feet. I decided to 'misinterpret' orders and get as much height as possible. We got up to about 22,000 feet, which was as high as we could go fully loaded. From there I could see a mass of contrails below us; they looked like a formation of American daylight bombers.

Another Lancaster pilot said:

As I looked down from my bomber, I could see the vapour trails of about a score of other bombers flying below me. That was the sort of night it was. Not only was there a moon to help the enemy but also their pilots could occasionally track us down from our vapour trails. We knew then that we would

have to blast our way through to Nürnberg. All this was fairly early in the flight. Then to our port we saw our first combat. Tracer darted across the sky and an aircraft began to glow red in the night. Down it went in flames and my midupper gunner was sure that it was a fighter. Most of the fighters seemed to have been waiting for us on the outskirts of the Ruhr and it was here the battle began in earnest. While enemy searchlights raced across the gaps in the cloud in the hope of picking up any bomber that might have strayed off course, the fighters flew in to the attack. We found that they had already started dropping their flares; most of which were going down in clusters of three; and the fighters were laying them as close to our route as they possibly could. It wasn't safe to relax for a single moment.¹¹

Flight Sergeant Les Bartlett continues:

As we drew level with the south of the Ruhr Valley, things began to happen. Enemy night fighters were all around us and in no time at all, combats were taking place and aircraft were going down in flames on all sides. So serious was the situation that I remember looking at the other poor blighters going down and thinking to myself that it must be our turn next, just a question of time. A Lancaster appeared on our port beam converging, so we dropped 100 feet or so to let him cross. He was only about 200 yards or so away on our starboard beam when a string of cannon shells hit him and down he went. We altered course for Nürnberg and I looked down at the area over which we had just passed. It looked like a battlefield. There were kites burning on the deck all over the place, bombs going off where they had been jettisoned by bombers damaged in combat and fires from their incendiaries across the whole area. Such a picture of aerial disaster I had never seen before and hoped never to see again.

On the way to the target the winds became changeable and we almost ran into the defences of Schweinfurt but we altered course just in time. The defences of Nürnberg were nothing to speak of; a modest amount of heavy flak, which did not prevent us doing our normal approach and we were able to get the Target Indicators dropped by the Path Finder Force in our bombsight to score hits with our 4,000lb 'Cookie' and our 1,000lb bombs.

Pilot Officer J Howell of Hobart, Tasmania said: 'We could see combats going on all round us. We spotted a FW190 on our port side. It started to turn in underneath us but our mid-upper gunner had well covered as it made a diving turn. Then the fighter tried again from the other side but before we could make the attack we cork-screwed into it and gave it the slip.'

Flight Sergeant Bob Whinfield of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on his 13th trip as a Lancaster pilot on 61 Squadron, was fascinated by what he believed to be 'scarecrow rockets'; but they were Lancaster bombers exploding, of which he said:

They came up like flares and hung in the sky. Then they burst and scattered on the ground, like clusters of incendiaries. The explosion of one of them as it hit the ground looked almost as if a one thousand pounder was going off. There was just one damned thing after another, all the way to the target and on the journey home. Tracer showed that air-combats were going on all the time and still more lights of various colours were being shot up as signals from enemy airfields as we passed overhead.¹²

Flight Sergeant Ronald Gardner the 19-year-old wireless operator from Tooting, London on 32-year-old Flying Officer Leonard Young's crew on 103 Squadron, whose 19th operation this was, recalled:

The fighters were waiting for us shortly after we crossed the coast, as if they already knew our target and route. And they were in force. Never have I seen so many gathered at one point during my tour of operations. We were attacked about three or four times but as soon as the fighters knew by our evasive action that we were alert they seemed to sheer off to look for less vigilant crews. Everything was fine until we left the coast. The clouds we had been flying in suddenly broke and the sky was absolute clear and it was full of Me 109s and 110s. Normally, flying in the leading wave, we were seldom attacked by fighters until well into France or Germany. This raid was the only one in thirty operations when I could see in large numbers our fellow bombers. I counted fifteen of them being shot down within fifteen minutes of crossing the enemy coast. The losses I think were increased by pilots ramming their throttles through the gate to get more speed and burning their exhaust stubs off. Then they were lit up like Christmas trees and easy targets. Usually the fighters took at least half an hour to get amongst us. But this time they seemed to be waiting in strength ...¹³

Flight Sergeant C P Steedman, a Lancaster bomb-aimer of Parry Town, Ontario, Canada on his 26th operational flight, recalled:

We were on our run-up when we saw one particularly large explosion in the target area. At the time the whole area was covered by cloud and the target was further obscured by the condensation trails left by our bombers; which criss-crossed over the target and caused a layer of haze through which we had to fly – but the light of this explosion flashed up in a bright orange glow. It lasted for some seconds.

Flight Sergeant Edgar Oberhardt RAAF of Maryborough, Queensland, Australia, a Lancaster rear gunner on 460 Squadron, reported:

We were going in to bomb when we saw a Junkers 88 about 350 yards away. I warned my Skipper and he gave the fighter a burst as it came in from the port side. Then it went over to starboard. I had my gun trained on it as it snooped below. I saw tracer going through its fuselage and it soon made off. Other combats were going on near us at the same time. A shell from the Junkers went through our starboard wing, near the starboard inner engine and left a very large hole. A few minutes later, the engine began to get troublesome and we had to feather it. In the end it stopped altogether. We made our way home on three engines.¹⁴

Another Australian, Flight Sergeant Norman David L Lloyd of Winton, Northern Queensland, Lancaster pilot on 460 Squadron RAAF recalled:

During our run-up, I was told that a fighter had seen us. It kept away until we had dropped our bombs and then came for us. It was a FW 190. My gunners were ready for it and after a sharp exchange of fire it made off. A few minutes later, another fighter took up the challenge. It was a better stayer than the first one and we didn't shake it off until it had followed us for about ten minutes.

Lloyd's luck and that of his crew were to run out on 3/4 May when they were shot down and killed on coming home from Mailly-le-Camp.

Flight Lieutenant T R Donaldson of Brighton, Victoria, Australia, another Lancaster pilot, said: 'There were fighters all the way and they were making the most of the bright moon. I watched tracer flashing across the sky as, bomber after bomber fought its way to the target. The Germans were doing their damndest to beat us off. Searchlights ... flak and fighters ...'

But Flight Lieutenant C G Broughan, a Halifax pilot from Sydney, Australia reported: 'There was

cloud over the city but it was broken. Through the gaps we saw fires getting a firm hold. The Pathfinder Finders had marked out the area with sky and ground markers and though there had been scores of fighters along the route, there were not enough of them over the target to interfere seriously with the bombing.'

Nürnberg, as far as the *Nachtjagd* was concerned, was the 'night of the big kill'. Despite the British jamming the first interception of the bomber stream in the area south of Bonn was successful. From there on in the bomber stream was hit repeatedly and the majority of the losses occurred in the Giessen–Fulda–Bamberg area. A staggering 82 bombers were lost *en route* to and near the target.

Flight Lieutenant Reginald George 'Tim' Woodman on 169 Squadron, who with Flying Officer Paul Kemmis, his navigator-radar operator, were in a Mosquito night fighter supporting the operation noted:

Instead of the bomber stream being five miles wide it was more like fifty. Some had already been shot down and before I reached to the far side of the stream they were being shot down on my left. Masses of *Window* were being tossed out of the bombers, which also jammed our radar. Twice we tried to turn *Serrate* contacts into AI contacts but, with all the bombers there, it was odds of twenty to one against it being a Hun. Twice I came up under bombers but turned away before the rear gunners saw me. 10 Group Mossies were Huns to the bomber boys. The third time we came up below a bomber the rear gunner spotted us, his tracer coming uncomfortably close whilst his pilot did a corkscrew. It was hopeless; we were doing more harm than good. Ahead the bombers were being shot down one after another, some going all the way down in flames, some blowing up in the air, the rest blowing up as they hit the ground. I counted 44 shot down on this leg to Nürnberg. What was happening behind could only guess ... I was inwardly raging at the incompetence of the top brass at Bomber Command.

Woodman failed to add to his score of three victories but a 239 Squadron crew had better luck. Flight Sergeants J Campbell DFM and R Phillips on 239 Squadron picked up a Ju 88 on AI near beacon *Ida*. Campbell and Phillips attacked once but missed and lost their contact. A few minutes later they again found and attacked a Ju 88. It was a 4./NJG3 Ju 88C-6 piloted by *Oberleutnant* Ruprecht Panzer. His rear gunner was alert and put just seven bullets into the Mosquito, setting one of the engines on fire. By this time Campbell and Phillips had not missed. One of the Jumo engines exploded and the Mossie crew were able to see the 88 fall all the way to the ground where it crashed and exploded 10 kilometres south-west of Bayreuth and only a short distance from beacon *Ida*. The Mosquito's engine fire was extinguished and the fighter nursed safely to West Raynham on one engine. Panzer, who was wounded in action, his *Bordfunker* and *Bordschütze* all bailed out safely.¹⁵

Oberleutnant Martin 'Tino' Becker, *Staffelkapitän*, 2./NJG6 took off from Finthen airfield near Mainz on a *Tame Boar* sortie with his *Bordfunker* *Unteroffizier* Karl-Ludwig Johansen in a Bf 110 not yet fitted with *Schräge Musik*. Becker, whose current score stood at 19 victories and who eight nights earlier had shot down six bombers when Frankfurt had been raided, was guided by 3 JD into the bomber stream to the south of FF *Ida*. There they intercepted and shot down six bombers between 00.20 and 00.50 hours in *Zahme Sau* fashion. Becker's first victim, south-west of Cologne, was the 427 'Lion' Squadron Halifax flown by Squadron Leader Jack Montgomery Bissett DFM, a Canadian from St. Vital, Manitoba. This crew, who had previously flown a tour on 78 Squadron, were on the fourth operation of their second tour. Becker slid across into his favoured final attacking position and fired two bursts into the Halifax in rapid succession before either of the gunners could react. The Halifax reared up and climbed at a crazy angle for a few seconds and then slipped into a wild glide before turning over, its fuselage a mass of flames. The Halifax crashed at Herhahn, four kilometres NNW of Schleiden. Bissett and his crew were killed.

While Johanssen was recording that the Halifax had hit the ground between Lüttich and north Frankfurt, Becker, who had seen the silhouette of another *Viermot* about 400 metres away, was already lining up his next victim. It was a Halifax III on 51 Squadron, which was being flown by Sergeant Jack Percival George Binder, who was from Moulton, Northants. Banking the 110 into attacking position Becker kept the Halifax in sight but for some quick glances in his immediate vicinity. It was clear no other aircraft so he closed in and opened fire. He saw a flush of orange flame smear along its starboard wing. Another arm of fire reached from its outer engine as the Halifax went out of control and into a shallow corkscrew dive. Becker swung the 110 round and from close range pumped another withering burst into the stricken bomber. The nose of the Halifax went down and the bomber plunged almost vertically to the ground, south-east of Rosbach. All the crew, who were on their third operation, were killed. Johanssen recorded that the Halifax hit the ground at 00.23. As they looked down at the burning wreckage Becker and Johanssen saw six other bombers fall within seconds of each other.

Five kilometres north-east of Bad Hönningen at 00.33 hours the crack night fighter team picked off their third victim of the night. It was Lancaster *T-Tare* on 50 Squadron at Skellingthorpe, flown by 27-year-old Flight Sergeant Donald George Gray, from Ilford, Essex. That morning when he found out that he and his crew were 'on' Gray thought that 'at least it wasn't Berlin' and that this first operation 'might be an easy one'. Gray had been bored with his job as an RAF Training Command staff pilot and then a classroom instructor in navigation. He had wanted 'action' but his natural aptitude as a navigator had kept him off operational flying, until that is, he made himself enough of a nuisance by indulging in some unauthorized low flying, which resulted in a reprimand and a posting to a Conversion Unit. He had been promoted to Warrant Officer but the notification had not yet come through. The crew had not had leave for three months and had not been allowed to leave camp for 10 days after their arrival at Skelly, in case they were sent on a cross-country flying exercise. On Thursday evening, 29 March, some members of the crew decided to visit pubs in Lincoln and Gray was ordered to get them back as Wing Commander A W Heward wanted them for flying duties. Early on the morning of 30 March Gray escorted his wayward crewmembers to the Orderly Room to see the CO only to be told that he was too busy to see them.

That same evening Donald Gray was sitting in the Sergeant's Mess having tea when a young WAAF reputed to be a 'chop-girl' began chatting to him. From that moment on he regarded the coming of the night with trepidation. At take-off time the friendly WAAF was at the forefront of well-wishers who had waved the Lancasters off. Soon after take-off Sergeant Bert Wright, the WOp, discovered that his *Fishpond* set (used to indicate enemy aircraft below the bomber) was not working properly. Then the intercom connection to the rear turret was found to be faulty and Sergeant Douglas Maugham, the rear gunner was given another helmet but Bert Wright reported that Maugham was losing consciousness. By this time they were at 22,000 feet, skirting the edge of the heavy flak defences south of Aachen. Sergeant Joseph Grant the flight engineer took a portable oxygen bottle and made his way to the rear. Within a couple of minutes Wright reported that the flight engineer too, was unconscious. *T-Tare* was now on course for Fulda, about 90 miles NNW of Nürnberg. Suddenly, Frank Patey the mid-upper gunner shouted that they were being attacked and he began firing. Becker set the starboard outer engine on fire. Within seconds of being hit the Lancaster, which was still carrying a 'Blockbuster', exploded over Waldbreitbach, a village in picturesque countryside, twelve kilometres east of the Rhine town of Sinzig.

When Gray gave the 'Bail Out!' order, Flight Sergeant Alan Campbell the navigator, one of two Australians on the crew, clipped on his parachute and left his compartment to make his way forward to the bomb-aimer's position in the nose of the Lancaster. Through the pilot's window he could see long tongues of blue and yellow flame streaming back from the starboard wing and reaching almost to the tail. The bomb-aimer, Flight Sergeant George Wallis, a fellow Aussie, was trying to open the escape

hatch, but it would not move. As he threw up his hands in a gesture of failure there was a 'Whomp' and Campbell was propelled forward, down the steps into the nose. He hit something hard. There was pressure, flame, disorientation and then – nothing. He opened his eyes. The stars were above: all was quiet, no sound and no sense of motion. Not certain whether he was clear of the aircraft, Campbell pulled the ripcord anyway. There was a jerk and he looked up and in the moonlight to see 'the glorious great canopy billowing above him!' Below Campbell was another parachute. Campbell landed in a quiet German countryside. The time by his watch was 00.30. Campbell had a cut head, facial scratches, swollen right arm, sore knee and a painful kidney. His parachute was tangled in bushes and Campbell gave up the task of getting it out of sight. He cut pieces off as souvenirs and headed west towards the Rhine. Then a figure loomed up. Campbell raised his hands, explaining he was an RAF navigator from a shot-down Lancaster. But the figure placed a hand on his shoulder and said: 'Don't panic Al, it's me, George!' It was Wallis, who had escaped through the shattered nose after the explosion. The two crewmen headed for the Rhine, but it was not long before they were spotted and escorted to a police station in Neuweid, on the east bank of the Rhine north of Koblenz. From there they were sent to the Interrogation Centre at *Dulag Luft* and finally to *Stalag Luft VI* at Heydekrug on the Baltic, where they arrived on Easter Sunday 1944 to await the end of the war and liberation.

Gray had also managed to get out and almost landed head first on an Autobahn. He was quickly captured by four elderly *Volksturm*. The other four members of the crew were killed.¹⁶

Becker and Johanssen's fourth kill, which followed at 00.35 hours, five miles north-east of Bendorf was a 622 Squadron Lancaster flown by Pilot Officer John Sutton, who was from Newport on the Isle of Wight. The Lancaster crashed at Mönchengladbach, five kilometres east-south-east of Wetzlar. Sutton and his crew, who were on their 12th operation, were all killed.

Johanssen checked the fuel gauges and warned Becker that he had enough fuel left to keep him for one more kill but it would have to be a quick one.

Minutes later, Becker scored his fifth victory of the night. It was MH-Z², a Halifax on 51 Squadron which was being flown by Flight Sergeant Edward Wilkins, an Australian from Maleny, Queensland. Becker gave the Halifax a five-second burst and the wing wheeled up and tilted over. Johanssen logged its time of impact on the ground 12 kilometres WNW of Wetzlar as 00.40 hours. All the crew who were on their sixth operation, were killed. Although Becker now had little fuel remaining, Johanssen picked up a blip on his radar screen almost at once and quickly guided Becker to the *Viermot* ten kilometres northwest of Alsfeld. It was MH-QZ, another 51 Squadron Halifax which was being flown by Flight Sergeant Geoffrey Graham Brougham RAAF of Marouba, New South Wales. The crew were on their first operation. Becker framed it in his sights and gave it a five-second burst. Brougham and four crew were killed with two men surviving to be taken prisoner. The Halifax crashed at Eisfeld, a small town on the east bank of the Werra, 19 kilometres NNW of Coburg. Johanssen logged its time of impact on the ground as 00.50. After returning to Mainz-Flinthen to re-fuel and re-arm, Becker and Johanssen took off on a second sortie, once more under *Himmelbett* control in *Rau* (Box) *Kauz* on the bombers' homeward track. South of Luxembourg they destroyed a Halifax III of 158 Squadron, which had been fired on over France by flak guns near Metz; *P-Peter* crashed at Eischen, 17 kilometres WNW of Luxembourg. Sergeant S Hughes, the pilot, and his crew who were on their eighth operation, were taken prisoner.

Next day 'Tino' Becker received news that he had been awarded the *Ritterkreuz*. 'There were such a lot of British bombers around that we could have knocked them down with a fly-trap' he said. He was decorated personally by the Führer at Hitler's HQ in East Prussia.¹⁷

Flight Lieutenant Burrows noted:

Combats appeared to be going on all around us, with aircraft blowing up as they received direct hits

Some exploded so close to us that *Y-Yorker* rocked alarmingly, as if every rivet would pop out from its socket. It was our duty to report each combat to the navigator, who logged the height, speed, time and position of it. But after the tenth was reported our Skipper told us to disregard them. The atmosphere was tense and I continued to report them. I was frightened out of my wits when Wing Commander Thompson dug me in the ribs and shouted, 'I said enough!' These conditions persevered for what seemed like ages. It was obvious to all of us that we were suffering alarming casualties with little or no cloud protection.

Jim Marshallsay DFC an experienced PFF pilot on 627 Squadron at Oakington was aloft in a Mosquito this night, as a 'Window Opener' for the heavies with navigator Sergeant Nigel 'Nick' Ranshaw by his side as usual. Marshallsay recalls:

As we turned onto the 'long leg' we realized that something was going badly wrong. The moon was much too bright for the heavies. The expected cloud cover was not there. The Main Force was leaving persistent condensation trails, so there was a great white road in the air, leading into German territory. Combats soon broke out below us. As this was our 38th trip we knew what was happening to the heavies. First a long burst of tracer from the night fighter, then a ripple of flame from the wings of the 'Lanc' or Halifax. There was a short interval and then a massive explosion and fire on the ground. Nick logged the first few crashes but after we had seen 16 go down in six minutes, he stopped, preferring to use his time and eyes searching for fighters.¹⁸

Basil Oxtaby on 467 Squadron said that 'it was common to see four or five Lancasters or Halifaxes going down in flames, sometimes with three or four engines on fire, exploding on the ground. This made it even worse because when the aircraft exploded, there was a pool of light for hundreds of yards and the fighters above could see bombers silhouetted against that light.' After his gunners had reported something like 20 going down, Freddie Watts, a pilot on 630 Squadron, told them not to report any more because he did not think it was doing very much for the morale of the crew. Keith Pincott, the navigator on *O-Orange* flown by Oliver Brooks, was advised by his Skipper to stop recording the number of aircraft being shot down. 'I believe', says Pincott 'that I logged fifty such positions before reaching the target.' Flying Officer George Foley, sitting in his curtained-off and isolated H_2S position of a Path Finder Lancaster, was shocked to hear his pilot call over the intercom 'Better put your parachutes on chaps, I've just seen the forty-second one go down.'

The navigator on *M-Mother* on 78 Squadron, one of 16 Halifaxes that had taken off from Brighton had also given up logging bombers that had been shot down. The pilot was Squadron Leader Cooper DFC who was on his second tour of operations. Flight Sergeant Ramsden, the wireless operator, was a veteran of the Berlin raids and during the early part of these operations was usually completely absorbed by crossword puzzles in the *Daily Mirror*, but although Nürnbürg meant relatively little to him as a target, for once he found it too unnerving to concentrate. Then he picked up two blips on his *Fishpond*, a second H_2S cathode ray tube indicator which showed other aircraft as spots of light. A night fighter was obviously circling a bomber. Then the blips disappeared from the radar screen. Flight Lieutenant F Taylor, the squadron gunnery leader who had replaced the regular tail-gunner who had reported sick, confirmed that he had just seen a bomber going down in flames four miles to the port quarter. A little later Ramsden picked up a suspicious contact almost dead astern and it was closing rapidly from a range of half a mile. Ramsden warned the rear-gunner and Taylor fired his four Brownings at the angle given to him by the wireless operator. 'He's on fire! Going down to port!' Taylor shouted. Ramsden jerked back his blackout curtain and peered through the porthole to see a FW190 as it hurtled under their wing tip in a mass of flames. Ramsden wrote later that 'another five

seconds on that course and we could have thrown cream-puffs at him.’²⁰

It seemed to Ernest Rowlinson on *H-Harry* that more and more shoot-downs were being logged with each minute. He had never seen a bomber blown up before so he eventually decided to leave his radar compartment on the port side of the aircraft for a moment and take a look to satisfy his morbid curiosity. He had hardly stepped into the astrodome when a bomber ahead of him exploded in flames and commenced its death dive. Severely shaken by what he saw Rowlinson hurriedly returned to his compartment and quickly busied himself with his *Fishpond*. At once a blip appeared on the 8-inch diameter radar screen, small at first but growing bigger by the second. It was closing on *H-Harry*. Rowlinson alerted Startin on intercom to tell the Australian that a fighter was approaching fast from 10 o’clock on their port quarter. Sergeant E Hopkinson the rear gunner shouted for them to corkscrew to port. He had seen the enemy night fighter clearly enough to identify it as a Bf 110. The blip now filled Rowlinson’s screen and he jumped nervously as Hopkinson fired his four Brownings, quickly followed by those of Sergeant Ernest McIlwine, *H-Harry*’s short and stocky Irish mid-upper gunner from Armagh. Hopkinson informed Startin that the 110, possibly hit, had broken off the attack. Startin brought the Lancaster back on course and warned the crew to keep a sharp look out. He then asked his Canadian navigator, Pilot Officer T Evans, who was standing in for the regular navigator who was on the sick list, to give him a new course to the target. Dismayed, Startin noticed that the moon was getting brighter.

Rowlinson’s *Fishpond* now decided to go out and the screen went completely blank but he knew that the picture would fade if the rear escape-hatch accidentally opened and let in cold air to blow over the transmitter and cool the valves, so he went back to check. Sure enough, the escape-hatch door was wide open. Twice he tried to grasp the open door, missing it each time because the Lancaster lurched. The exertions of clambering around the weaving Lancaster to the hatch door and trying to shut it while using a portable oxygen bottle made it heavy going and he had left his parachute in his radar compartment, so one false move and he would have been whisked away into the night. On the third attempt Rowlinson got the door shut but the effort had exhausted him and he had to rest before returning to the nose of the aircraft.²¹

Sergeant R C Corker, a flight engineer in a Halifax on 578 Squadron at Burn was another who experienced a fighter attack: ‘Without any warning at all, we were attacked from underneath; there was an enormous bang as a cannon shell exploded in the starboard-inner and four or five pieces caught me in the fleshy part of the bottom. The fighter shot across our nose and attacked another Halifax about 11 o’clock high from us. It blew up. He had made the two attacks in about 20 seconds.’

Squadron Leader Philip Goodwin, who had been married for just six weeks, was on his 47th operation flying as pilot of a PFF Visual Backer-up Lancaster on 156 Squadron and had just started his bomb run when the aircraft burst into flames. The night fighter’s one long burst of cannon fire also killed Warrant Officer Victor Gardner DFM the rear gunner. Goodwin ordered Flying Officer W C Isted DFM the visualmarker-bomb aimer to dump the bomb load but not the TIs, in case they confused the following bombers. Goodwin was pressed flat against the roof of his cockpit watching the trees and snow on the ground revolving as the Lancaster spun. Luckily, he was wearing a seat-type parachute for the first time on operations and when the aircraft broke up he and Isted and two others on the crew were out before it was too late. The other three men on the crew died in the aircraft.

Pilot Officer ‘Dick’ Starkey and his Lancaster III on 106 Squadron crew continuously operated the ‘banking search’ looking for enemy aircraft coming up from below:

This was achieved by turning steeply to port for 15° to see if fighters were preparing to attack and then banking to return to the original course. Our *Fishpond* aircraft detector failed to work. We had been flying the long leg for many miles. When we were in a position 60 miles northwest of Nürnberg or

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