

OPS. WALCHEREN.

23 OCTOBER 1944, as seen by Cy Boreht and Brian O'Connell

I was the pilot of Lancaster JO 'G' No. NF977, No 463 Squadron R.A.A.F and my crew consisted of:

W/O. Brian O'CONNELL, Navigator,
F/Sgt. Max STAUNTON-SMITH, W / Operator,
Sgt. Eric LEIGH, Engineer,
F/Sgt. Tom LAING, Bomb Aimer,
F/Sgt. Tom LONERGAN, Mid Upper Gunner,
F/Sgt. Glynn COOPER, Rear Gunner.

On that day, 23rd October 1944 our target was the gunpositions at Vlissingen.

We received two previous briefings for this operation, which were cancelled due to bad weather, but the decision was finally made to go, in the hope that cloud basement would be above 4000 ft, in which case we were to proceed and bomb at 4000 ft.

We broke cloud near the coast at about 4000 ft. and having identified our course for the target, settled down for our bombing run. We were no. 3 aircraft and shortly after saw both lead craft struck by light Flak.

We had our bomb-bay doors open and were struck shortly after, knocking out the starboard inner engine and a port engine, starting a fire in the Navigator's compartment and mortally wounding the Engineer beside me.

We were unable to release the bombs, either electrically or manually and as the aircraft became impossible to control, I gave the order:

"Abandon aircraft!"

This was done in rapid and orderly fashion except for the Engineer who was unable to help himself, although still conscious.

I managed to drag him down the stairs to the forward hatch and push him out, although I was unable to pull the ripcord on his chest 'chute' and hoped he had the strength to do that for himself.

I followed shortly after, immediately pulling my ripcord as we had rapidly descended to about 1000 ft. I saw the steel anti-invasion stakes on a beach, directly below me and spilled my chute sufficiently to allow me to land there.

As I was quite close to the target area and the bombing attack had begun, I released my chute and dived into a culvert for protection. The attack lasted for about fifteen minutes and when it stopped I emerged to be greeted by German soldiers approaching from their bunkers.

I was taken prisoner and searched and briefly interrogated and then taken to a barn where I joined my Mid-Upper Gunner, Rear Gunner, Wireless Operator (slightly wounded), Bomb Aimer and a couple of the other crews. We had no knowledge at this time of the fate of the Navigator and the Engineer.

We subsequently learned that the Navigator was picked up by the Dutch Underground and returned to England and the Engineer was fished out of the water and died 24 hours later in hospital.

Next day we were marched to a town - MIDDELBURG I think and imprisoned in a cellar and later taken to a barge which took us to DORDRECHT and thence by train to the main interrogation

centre at FRANKFURT for three days of solitary confinement and intense interrogation, finally ending up in a permanent camp STALAG LUFT IIIA BELARIA near SAGAN.

I believe that our aircraft ended up in the Scheldt Estuary.

This trip was our 28th operation.

CY BORSHT,

per brief, 6 januari 1992.

I was the Navigator of Flying Officer BORSHT'S crew. We had been briefed to attack the gun emplacement at Flushing in the afternoon of 23 October 1944. We thought that this would not be difficult compared with our last two trips which were to Bremen and Nuremberg.

The weather was not good and we were flying at about 3000 feet when we approached the target. On our bombing run we encountered a steady stream of light Flak and were hit in the nose of the plane, the wing and the engines. One light shell burst in the cockpit-area and severely wounded the Engineer Eric LEIGH. I also received minor wounds to the left leg.

On leaving the plane I thought Eric was dead and I continued out through the front escape hatch. I was over a flooded area and landed in the water up to my waist. On the dry land I could see two men who beckoned to me and I struggled ashore. They were unable to speak English but indicated that I should follow them. They took me to RITTHEM, which was only a short distance away and we went upstairs somewhere. Once again by sign language they indicated , they would get somebody who could speak English.

Eventually they returned with the Pastor BREUGHELMAN from the Ritthem Church. We stayed in the attic till it was dark and then went to his house near the church. We then had a meal and I spent the evening there. Before dawn a large gentleman arrived and took me to a nearby barn. We made a hide-out in the bales of hay. After a few hours a doctor came and treated my wounds.

I spent a few days in the barn and then moved to a deserted house. I moved a few other times and was eventually rowed at dusk to a barn which was partly flooded. It could only be reached by boat. The barn already had some Italian prisoners of war there and we all stayed there till the invasion took place and I was able to return to England.

At all times the resistance managed to get me some food although there was very little around. The secrecy was such that the only name I knew was that of the Pastor and I did not get a chance to see him before I left.

However, I did get back in 1950 and we had a pleasant time together, although he was no longer at Ritthem.

BRIAN G. O'CONNELL

per brief, 17 februari 1992.