

4. 'Ended in a single crash'

LATER, in July, I made my second trip, this time with a new crew. The observer, straight from OTU, was John Lancaster. He and I became firm friends. He survived the war, with a D.F.C. and Bar, and stayed on as a regular airman.

Landing at Malta was no longer an option so we were asked to make the 14-hour journey, non-stop, from Gibraltar to Egypt, a formidable task in a 'plane which cruised at under 130 m.p.h. The journey was possible only because the front turret was removed and spare petrol tanks carried inside the 'plane.

Not all the crews made it to Cairo and some had to land at forward air strips. However, we just managed the trip and were taken off by lorry to the transit camp. But this time we were given no choice. We were posted to an aerodrome just outside Ishmailia [Ismailia], on the Suez Canal.

Here two Squadrons were sited, 70 and 37. Our crew was split between the two squadrons with John Lancaster joining 37, while I went to 70. Fortunately the two squadrons shared facilities so the two of us stayed together in the same quarters. The station was so crowded that we were forced to sleep on the veranda of one of the huts.

Practically every operation was against the harbour at Tobruk in an attempt to disrupt the Axis supply lines. Because it was carried out daily, it was known to us as 'the milk run'.

Copper Wire

Aeroplanes were in short supply so two crews shared one. This meant a routine of one night on and one off.

On the 19th of August, 1942, news came through that Allied forces had landed at Dieppe. Some of us took this as the invasion and were cheered by the news.

On the 18th, the other crew had run into trouble and had returned with an aircraft damaged by anti-aircraft fire. We took this as a sign that we would not be needed that night and made plans for a visit to the town. But, late that afternoon, a replacement was flown in from Palestine and we were back in business.

There was no time for an air test so all we could do was to make a ground check, only to find that some of the instruments were not working. In those desperate days, to refuse to fly put us in danger of a court marshal for 'Lack of Moral Fibre'. None of us wanted this. So we flew!

In the early stages of these flights one flew over the desert at a reasonable height and only started to climb to operational heights, when the 'ack ack' at Tobruk could be seen. But when, on this occasion, we began to climb, the aircraft suddenly lurched violently to the left. It took the joint efforts of both us pilots to hold it back on course.

Only when we had stabilised the 'plane did we realise that our port propeller had broken loose and that we now had only one engine. There was nothing for it but to ease the aircraft gently round to the right and head for home. This was a delicate operation, for had the left wing dropped we would not have been able to raise it again. It was an old machine and incapable of holding height on one engine, even though we dropped our bombs and threw out everything loose, including the portable lavatory.

Fortune was on our side in as much as it was a brilliant moonlit night, so it was decided to crash land on the, hopefully, flat desert. This we did, wheels up, but the friction set the fabric skin alight and

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in a matter of a minute or so the whole 'plane was burning. We had anticipated problems so had touched down with all escape hatches already open. Like scalded cats we left the machine but, unfortunately had no time to evacuate our water and supplies.

As we lay on the sand a few yards from the fire we began to realise just how desperate a position we now were in.

Thursday 20th August, 1942

We had a great deal to learn about the desert, especially the worst times of day in which to attempt walking. We had set out to travel eastward where many, many miles away lay the British lines and safety. As dawn rose we found that it brought with it a thick ground mist which made it necessary for us to close ranks to prevent us from losing touch with one another.

When the mist cleared, we were able to see what lay ahead. Mile upon mile of barren rock, covered by a thin layer of sand, varied only here and there by sparse clumps of camel thorn, stretched to the horizon. But, foolishly, we carried on into the growing heat of the day. But before long we realised our mistake and, finding a thick clump of camel thorn, lay down trying to keep our heads in the shade.

The day dragged by so terribly slowly until, at 4.30p.m. we became impatient and started to walk again. But this was a mistake and after about twenty minutes we were forced to rest and to share a sip of water from the only bottle that had been saved.

Later, in the cool of the evening we started out again, but this time heading north-east partly towards our own lines but also to take us nearer to the only coast road. From then on we walked for periods of an hour, resting then for ten or fifteen minutes.