Night Strike

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(This is the fifth article written for "The Roundel" by Mr. Feast. In his fourth, the author — who was a Flight Lieutenant in the R.C.A.F. during the war — described an attempt at escape made by himself and several fellow-prisoners while they were being moved from an Italian to a German prison-camp in October 1943. The present story tells how he became a prisoner in the first place.—Editor.)

ON THE night of 12 March 1943, *Beaufort "N"* of No. 39 Squadron was flying just below a low overcast, circling a position roughly ten miles off Sicily's Cape San Vito. Intermittent rain smeared the perspex, and low cloud-scud heralded a deterioration of the weather that was already shrouding an enemy convoy somewhere in the area.

We had been airborne for some three and a half hours, and the strain of low-flying on instruments was manifesting itself by the usual ache between my shoulder blades and by a slight touch of vertigo. High over us, hidden in the muck, an A.S.V. (* "Air Surface Vessel" aircraft, equipped with radar, were used for striking at shipping.) *Wellington* was orbiting, its insistent morse-beat rustling in the intercommunication 'phones. It had located the convoy shortly after the latter left the harbour of Palermo, and its W/T call had summoned us from an offensive patrol off Tunisia. Now we were on the scene looking for an opening to attack.

We altered course eastward and flew towards the coast. At a point which we believed to be well inside the target's reported course, I swung back on a reciprocal course and nosed the machine down, levelling out only when a deepening of the gloom below indicated the sea.

Then it happened. The overcast to the west broke slightly to disclose a watery half-moon. Its pallid light revealed the vague outlines of two tankers in line astern, ahead and to starboard. The escort vessels, four in number, were well separated and steaming off the bow and stern quarters of their charges. It was strictly "picture-book" — a page right out of the tactics manual. Our position at that moment was down-moon from the quarry, roughly five miles away from the leading tanker. A gentle turn to the right, and the *Beaufort* angled 45 degrees to the vessel's bow on a line that would cut between the two destroyers on the port flank. I flipped the arming-switch in the cockpit, yanked the mixture control into full rich, and moved the propellers into fine pitch. The navigator came scrambling back out of his nose compartment. "Torpedo armed, old boy", he said.

Four miles, three and half, three — then they spotted us. The first ranging-burst came arcing out lazily from the stern escort vessel, the tracer flashing well behind us. A moment later all the vessels opened fire, and the cockpit was lit up by the long ropes of glowing flak that streamed above and about us.

We were flying at an ideal drop-height of about 60 feet, but I now eased the 'plane lower and tried to hold a steady course. We crossed the "T" of the destroyer's course and dropped our height again. For one dreadful second, as the wings seemed literally to brush the waves, I thought that we were going to hit the water. At a mile and a half the tanker was taking on a firm silhouette, but I dared not climb, for the tracer was like a blanket overhead. It almost seemed as though the enemy's gunners could not comprehend-that an aircraft could fly so low. At half a mile we were still brushing the water and in the drop-zone, jinking slightly, but too low to drop. The navigator had his hand on the jettison switch in case the electrical circuit failed. With one of the tankers looming only a few hundred yards away, it was almost too late for us to use the torpedo, which would require at least that distance to smooth out its porpoise pattern and to run at its setting of 9 feet below the surface. Nevertheless I eased gently back on the column with one hand, aimed at the bow with nil deflection, and pressed the release button. The aircraft bumped as the eighteen-inch seventeen-hundred-pound "fish" dropped away, but I held the nose down and we skidded and slipped around the ship's bow. The twin *Wasps* howled as we sunfished, climbed, dived, and skidded our way out. Our relief was tempered by the knowledge that it had been a poor drop — and also by the realization that we weren't out of the woods yet. We jinked out to sea, climbing slightly at over 200 knots, and the gunfire from behind slowly slackened. I pulled out on a level keel, at the same time flicking on the cockpit light to examine the engine instruments more closely. The tail-gunner's voice came over the intercom: "It's a hit, skipper!" — then, in sudden alarm — "Put out that damned light!" More flak came flicking up from an extreme range and again the throttles were banged open as we hauled away in corkscrew turns.

The navigator slipped back into his office and gave the course home. The *Beaufort* swung on to a southerly heading that would skirt the Sicilian coast and bring us into the Sicilian Narrows on the homeward leg. A wide swing out to sea would have been preferable, but our acute fuel position dictated the shortest route. Two minutes passed, and I was settling back comfortably behind the wheel, fumbling in my pockets for a cigarette, when, quite by accident, I caught sight of a slender black shadow in the sea below. Even as I looked, it erupted into fire. I threw the machine around wildly on a reverse course, cursing our oversight, and went into evasive action. This vessel had obviously been doing a protective sweep miles ahead of the main convoy, and we had blundered right on to it.

The long flames from the short-stacked exhausts of the *Wasps* made a superb target for the gunners. The tracers bracketed us as I made a diving turn back, striving to mask the tell-tale flames against the water. We pulled out low over the sea, paralleling our previous course and well to starboard of our latest trouble. I glanced out over the port wing. The destroyer still bulked alarmingly large in the window. In my anxiety about our fuel situation and in my desire to get back on course, I had stupidly cut the turn too short. The gunfire increased in volume as we drew abreast, and three distinct lines of fire seemed to hang on the *Beaufort's* blunt nose.

Instinctively I pushed the control column forward in order to pass the 'plane beneath them. In the same moment the wheel kicked convulsively in my hands. The *Beaufort* hit the water in flying position, bounced prodigiously, then slammed into the sea at high speed.

I dimly recollect a great wall of black water geysering up, blotting out everything except the rending and racking sounds of the disintegrating machine. I seemed to sit impassively for an eternity, feeling all this, yet oddly detached from it. After the terrifying din that had gone before, all was now weirdly silent. A soft little whistle started, the subdued sound of wind passing through the broken perspex. I looked around in a daze, shaking my head to clear it. I was still strapped in the seat, my hands gripping the wheel; and water was beginning to swirl up around my knees.

It was the chill of the rising water that snapped me out of my trance. I unsnapped the Button harness, reached upward, and pulled the handle of the escape-hatch located in the roof of the cockpit. It fell inwards, and I clambered up on top of the fuselage. Light rain was falling, and choppy waves were already breaking over the wreckage. The fuselage aft of the rear turret, and the tail assembly, were gone. The wings were bent and twisted, and the starboard motor had been ripped from its nacelle.

The wireless operator appeared from the rear hatch, blood running down his face. He looked at me uncomprehendingly for a moment, then reached down and gripped the dinghy release-cord located at the port wing-root. The dinghy ballooned out of the shattered wing with a hiss and floated on the heaving water. He climbed slowly into it, holding a pocket-knife in his hand.

"Where's Pete?" I shouted at him. I had to repeat the question before he mumbled: "He's gone. The whole floor's gone. Gone." I swung back into the cockpit and groped in the water that now filled the navigator's compartment. My hand encountered nothing but debris. I jumped back on to the wing and into the dinghy, which the wireless operator cut loose from the sinking 'plane. As we drifted away, *Beaufort "N"* sank lower and lower in the water, and slipped beneath the surface about twenty seconds later. She had been due for a major overhaul, and it was to have been our pleasant job to fly her to southern Egypt on the 14th of March and then go off on leave.

The dinghy bobbed in the waves and the wind was cold. I shivered steadily, and a ridiculous phrase kept passing through my mind: "Who said the sunny Med.? Who said the sunny Med.?" I looked around the tossing expanse of black waves and could just espy from time to time the outline of the destroyer circling in the distance. I weighed the chances of our remaining undetected, making the coast and so escaping. A quick examination of the interior of the dinghy, however, disclosed nothing except a bundle of distress flares. Some hungry mechanic had probably removed the emergency food supplies months ago before the siege of Malta had been lifted.

The navigator hailed us feebly from some distance away, and, as we paddled awkwardly towards him, using the flares as paddles, he struggled in our direction. He was a pitiful sight, with his Mae West and most of his clothes torn from him, semi-conscious and bleeding from numerous cuts. The impact of the crash had pitched him right through the nose of the *Beaufort,* through metal frames, perspex, twin nose-guns, and heaven knows what else. His condition demanded immediate aid.

The wireless operator ripped the igniter on the first flare, and the five coloured balls sailed upwards into the night. The destroyer reacted immediately, and after a very few minutes came backing down on us. A heavily accented voice boomed over the loud-hailer: "How many are you?"

"Three," I shouted back, throwing papers, money, and revolver overboard. The low fan-tail with its churning screws gave us an uneasy moment before we were alongside. Many hands hauled us aboard, then up came the dinghy to be flopped on deck. We were led below, supporting the navigator who was now barely conscious. A deft surgeon, speaking flawless English, went to work immediately in the wardroom.

Later, when the navigator had been treated and wrapped in a blanket, and when our own superficial head-cuts had been bandaged and a few fingers of cognac were sending a glow through frames still shaking with reaction, I formally thanked the surgeon for his kindness.

"It is nothing," he said, white teeth gleaming briefly in a smile. "The fortunes of war. Possibly your side will do the same for us some day. And now," he went on, gesturing towards the door, "I am sorry, but we will have to move you from here. We have more wounded coming aboard."

I turned and assisted in carrying the navigator down a narrow passageway that led forward until we came to a small cubicle which appeared to serve as a machine-shop. The grated door swung behind us and was locked. We lay on the floor, the navigator between us, listening to the sounds of the ship and the water rushing by the thin hull. The destroyer was moving at a smart pace, and the vibration throbbed through the steel plates of our cell. Italian crew-members, bulky in their oil-skins and life-jackets, passed to and fro outside our door, from time to time pausing to stare at us through the grating and jabbering excitedly the while.

Later, a short cheery-looking individual unlocked the door and indicated in pantomime that we should give him our battle-dress blouses to be dried. The wireless operator and myself shrugged out of them and handed them over. The man departed with a happy smile, leaving with us a package of cigarettes and two oranges sent by the surgeon.

We were puffing steadily on our third cigarette when we heard the first sound of aircraft motors that sent the raucous horn for "Action Stations" reverberating through the ship. The dim lights in the passageway went out and we were in total darkness. Feet pounded on the plating overhead, the vibration increased to a steady pounding as the destroyer gathered speed. The deck beneath us heeled with each turn of the boat.

"Wonder what that's all about," said the wireless operator uneasily. "I thought this bloody show was all over."

My thoughts went back to the afternoon's briefing at the underground operations room at Luqa aerodrome. "That, I'm afraid," I said, "is the Fleet Air Arm boys coming to pay their respects."

The first guns went off and further speech became impossible for the moment. The noise in that enclosed place was deafening. The beat of screws seemed to be at maximum, and the ship was behaving like a live thing. We clung to one another as the floor tilted sharply with each full-rudder turn. I heard the sound of a motor somewhere close at hand in the night outside, but it was drowned out by the hysterical gunfire from the upper decks. I tried to shut out the scene from my mind's eye — the twisting and turning *Albacore* above us, the drop, the torpedo's wake. My whole body tensed as I counted the seconds. Another wrenching jar as the destroyer heeled. The seconds passed, the firing diminished in volume, and I breathed again. The din had roused the navigator from his torpor, and he began to shiver and groan. We pressed our bodies against him in an effort to keep him warm, but we could muster only a few words of comfort. A torpedo-hit on this slender craft would break its back like a stick and we would go down locked in our tomb.

Once more the ship heeled on a turn to port. Again the guns worked up to a crescendo, the water boiled along the hull below the locked porthole. My stomach muscles knotted, and again I began to count. When I reached twenty, a sigh of relief broke from me that lasted until the next attack.

It seemed to go on for hours — the continuous clamour of gunfire, the shuddering of the vessel, the impenetrable darkness that pressed down upon us in our cell. In actual fact, the attacks (I estimated six) were probably over in thirty minutes. We offered up prayers at each one — prayers that it would miss!

It ended with a final staccato pow-pow-pow-pow-pow from a single Bofors gun above. Then we felt the ship decrease her speed. The horn hooted a short "All Clear" and we could hear feet tramping down the passageway. The lights went on. The door opened to frame our former visitor, carrying our dried clothes. He waved an expressive arm, and, grinning happily, said: "Finite!" My battledress looked in much the same category: a large hole had been burned in the back, and the shoulder-tapes and wings had been removed by some souvenir-hunter.

Another crew-member pushed slowly into our cell and stood awkwardly, first on one foot then another. He grimaced for a moment as though cudgelling his brains, then blurted out: "Me, I speak a little English." His comrade gazed at him admiringly as he continued hesitantly: "Your 'planes are—gone. We go now to Trapani. You leave there."

* * *

Three weeks later as we crossed the Straits of Messina in the crowded ferry, we met three other members of our squadron being escorted by German guards. In quick asides, and despite the scowls of the guards, we learned their story and the sequel to our own. They had been shot down off the east coast of Sicily by a Me. 210 during a day-strike a week later. The final chapter to our own strike had been written by photo reconnaissance. Both tankers had been towed back to Palermo harbour in a sinking condition and there beached. Another of No. 38 Squadron's machines went missing on the night of our disaster. Neither the young English sergeant-pilot nor any of his crew were saved.

Two months later the Italian authorities formally advised me of the burial of Flt. Sgt. Peter Exton, whose body had been washed ashore on the west coast of Sicily. The navigator and I were by that time in P.G. 21, a prisoner-of-war camp at Chieti, Italy. The wireless operator was in Sulmona, some 65 kilometres away. He escaped about five months later.