

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Gerald McPherson (Rear Gunner) will tell the story:

"On 11th April, 1945 we were briefed for a night raid on Kiel, which turned out to be our last trip. By mid-March 1945 our crew had completed thirty-eight operations and were regarded as highly experienced. The battle order went up early at Stradishall in Cambridgeshire where we were now based, and our names were on it for that night's raid to Kiel, a large German naval base.

Over the target and just after we had dropped our bombs, I was blinded by searing light as the aircraft was "coned" for about 15 minutes - caught like a moth in the beams of between twenty and thirty German searchlights which beckoned every surrounding gunner to get a bearing and open fire.

In an endeavour to escape the lights, Jeff Clarson, our pilot, threw the Lancaster around like a fighter plane. Later, Jock, the flight engineer told me that at one point we were actually upside down and that it was a remarkable feat by Jeff to get the plane back onto an even keel.

After Jeff successfully flew us out of the searchlights we set sail for the U.K. We were briefed to descend to 7,000 feet when we crossed the Danish coast and to continue to fly back over the North Sea at that height. As we reached the Danish coast Jeff was obviously tired and stressed and decided to descend to 7,000 feet quickly rather than gradually.

In the rear turret I was aware that we were descending very rapidly when all of a sudden the tail of the plane started skidding. I instinctively looked down and saw that we were skidding over the body of another Lancaster about 6 - 8 feet below. It was about midnight, but we were so close that I could see the two gunners in their respective turrets. Apparently, during the descent, Jock spotted the other Lancaster directly in our path and his immediate reaction was to hit Jeff across the chest. Jeff automatically pulled the control column back and began to climb and the sudden change of direction made me look down. To this day I don't know if the other two gunners saw us - if they didn't they must have been blind or asleep!

It is worth noting that the German pocket battleship "The Admiral Scheer" was sunk in this raid.

It was a sobering fact to learn that we should never have been sent out on that night, as we were told on our return that the tour of operations for bomber crews had been reduced to 35 - some hours before we were due to take off for Kiel.

Our crew was given to understand that this was brought to the attention of our new commanding officer, who had replaced Wing Commander Giles, and his only comment was to the effect that "they are already on the battle order for tonight - leave them there".

I have always maintained that it would never have happened if Wing Commander Giles had still been our commanding officer.

The Kiel raid completed our tour of 39 operations."