in 1944

Flight Sergeant 1582682 Sydney R. J. PRICE RAF

Sergeant Price survived by being thrown out of the Lancaster and was held as a Prisoner of War (No. 3422) - Stalag 357 Prison Camp. In 1944 Stalag 357 was situated at Oerbke, a small village near the North German city of Fallingbostel, very close to death camp of Bergen-Belsen. In the questionnaire completed by Sgt. Price on repatriation, he states that the other 6 members of the crew could not get out of the aircraft and he presumed that they were killed when they hit the ground.

in 2004

Personal account by Flight Sergeant 1582682 Sydney R. J. PRICE RAF

http://www.need-family.demon.co.uk/Price.htm

DOB 20th April 1924

His diary for Saturday March 18th 1944

"If we are lucky we may have an early night in bed", said my navigator as he returned form the navigators pre-briefing. We discovered that the target for tonight was to be Frankfurt on main. This seemed like a 'half holiday' to us after doing long 8 and 9 hour trips into the heart of Germany, often taking the long way round to deceive Huns defences. Maybe with a bit of luck we would be back in bed for 01-30 hours.

It was an early take-off and I remember wondering if this would be our last operation in these Mark II Lancaster's as we went down the runway holding the throttles full open. The rumour around the squadron was that when the moon came up again we would be converting to the new Mark III. As a Flight Engineer this meant more reading up on the engines, as the later models had Rolls Royce Merlin compared to the Bristol air cooled engines fitted in our present aircraft.

The flight to the target was quite normal, even the Met people were bang on with their weather forecast. We were flying at a height of 24,000 feet, which was all about we could manage. On reaching the target at 22-15 hours we put our nose down to get as much speed as possible when crossing the target, coming out at about 20,000 feet. The skipper asked if everything was alright, and then decided to regain some of our height. Meanwhile I squatted on my parachute and made an effort to update my engine and fuel log.

I was suddenly brought back to my feet by the sharp voice of the skipper on the intercom, "Syd you had better had better look out for those fighters." For a few moments I stared into the darkness watching the odd can of incendiaries go down after being jettisoned by aircraft in the bomber stream. The usual practice was to open your bomb bay doors and try to shake off all the hang-ups that had failed to drop over the target. If this wing waggling failed to get rid of them then you just had to bring them back and hope they still stayed hung up when you landed.

Then on the light side of the sky I saw a fighter, which looked to be a M.E. 262. He was most likely shadowing us after seeing the glow from our hot exhaust baffles. I fumbled with my microphone switch and stuttered "Enemy on the starboard beam down". As I gave this warning the fighter crossed underneath us into the dark side of the sky. The skipper went into a violent corkscrew and both rear and mid-upper gunners blasted away at the night sky. After we had straightened out and resumed course the gunners remarked that they had saw nothing but perhaps the sight of the tracer bullets may have scared them off anyway.

The intercom went quiet again, and everyone seemed to concentrating on what might be lurking out there in the dark. Then right beneath my feet there was the roar of an explosion in the middle of the bomb bay. The starboard engine gauges all went hay wire, and the petrol gauges just registered nothing. I took a quick look at the port engines, which appeared to be quite normal. The Skipper said in his usual voice "we've had it, prepare to bail out".

My first impression was to stay put, as I had become rather fond of this old Lancaster, which had been ours since first arriving at the Squadron. However I soon realised that this was a bit silly and I started feeling behind the pilots seat where the parachutes were stored. As I kept bending down I kept peering into the bomb-aimer's compartment and thinking what's the matter with Pete, he should have that escape hatch open by now, but I could see no movement in that direction.

The rear gunner informed the Skipper that he was ready to bale out, and I informed him the same message. By now I had fitted my parachute to the harness and I was feeling around for the Skippers cute, when I found that I had hold of the K Type Dinghy. This was soon tossed away and I picked up the pilot's chute, however I never had time to give this to him.

While all this was going on, the plane must have been going into a dive, and at that moment we tried to pull out and the tail broke off. From then on we went down vertically, spinning over and over again making it impossible to do anything let alone stand up.

I remember rolling around inside the fuselage, my head seemed to be hitting everything, and I imagined I must have been cut in numerous places. At this point I thought well this is it, when we hit the deck it will be all over. I was quite surprised that I was looking death in the face this way. But then it was something that had always been at the back of my mind, and I had to expect it anyway.

With those thoughts in my mind I must have just relaxed knowing that it was impossible to escape my fate. The next thing I knew my head and shoulders hit the Perspex at the top of the cockpit. This broke and I went flying horizontally across the sky, still rolling over and over.

I was amazed to find myself still conscious, and made a quick grab for my parachute release handle. I had no idea which side this was fitted and so just clawed away with both hands at my chest. There was a sudden jerk, as the harness seemed to clap against both my ears. I almost thought I was going to slip straight through the harness, but there was the white canopy floating above my head and to me a miracle had happened.

I started to feel my head and face to see if there were any cuts or injuries. Very much to me surprise I found that I had only a small lump on my forehead from where it had gone through the cockpit. The shoulders of my battle-dress and the seat of my trousers were cut to ribbons. I had on only one of my gloves and my intercom lead was tangled up with my parachute harness.

Somewhere in the distance I heard an explosion as the Lancaster C for Charlie ended its carer. I remember thinking that the other six members of my crew had just died in that crash and I was still alive of no fault of my own but just sheer luck.

It was a pleasant feeling of satisfaction drifting down, but I decided I had better think of what I was going to do when I reached the deck. I could see a dark patch on the ground below me, and I tried to get away from it in case it was a pond or a pool. I twisted my straps to see if I could swing away from it. Needless to say I landed right in the middle of the dark area which turned out to be a clearing in the wood. I landed on my back with a thud, which seemed to knock every ounce of strength out of my body.

Sitting on the ground I could hear the rest of the bomber stream returning home. I remember thinking as I looked up, you lucky devils, on the way back to eggs and bacon. The German sirens then sounded the all clear, and I could see the sky was red with the glow from the burning aircraft. I decided to stay where I was until morning, so I rolled up in my parachute and went to sleep.

I awoke early on the Sunday morning cold and damp, I ate a bar of chocolate, which I still had in my pocket. I then buried the parachute that had saved my life in the undergrowth, with this went my May West, I would never see them again.

My escape kit was still intact and looking over the silk handkerchief maps I decided to walk west and hope for the best. After all I was no navigator so why waste time trying to plot a course.

Even in this countryside there seemed quite a few people about. I suppose they were going to see what was left of the bomber that had crashed the night before, or maybe they were going to church, after all I had heard the church bells ringing and a choir singing that morning.

The authentic way to walk according to the experts was at night. However all I seemed to do was get into snowdrifts, after all it was March and there was still plenty of snow about in Germany. Even though the sun had been shinning when I left home, which seemed a long way away now.

I had been walking for a few days when I came across a clearing in a wood rather unexpectedly. There on guard of a concrete building was a sentry, he was probably the first German service man I had ever seen. It was too late now to run away or make any detours. The only thing to do was try and bluff my way past him, so I just carried on walking as nothing had happened. He seemed very puzzled and made no attempt to stop me. I just walked on past him and when I was out of sight I ran about as fast as I could.

It was a few hours later and I was still plodding on in a westerly direction, keeping away from the roads when a voice shouted behind me in English "halt". I ignored this but when they shouted again "halt or we shoot" I thought perhaps I had better look around. Behind me at the bottom of the hill I saw a search party being lead by a village policeman, and they were all armed. When they got close enough I could see they were more frightened of me than I was of them. They could not understand why I had no gun.

From there I went to an interrogation camp at Frankfurt. The village policeman had been instructed not to feed me. However he asked me not to tell anyone that he had given me a cup weak coffee and a piece of cake that tasted like sawdust.

It was a strange feeling returning to Frankfurt at ground level seeing some of the devastation we had caused only a few nights earlier.

I spent the rest of the war in various prisoner of war camps in East Prussia, Germany and Poland. We were chased one way by the Russians and then the other by the British.

Finally I escaped off a forced march and spent another 2 weeks in the woods in Germany. We were recaptured again by German Marines, only a short distance from the British lines. However this period of captivity only lasted two days when we were over-run by the 7th Armoured Division. From there onto a long awaited return flight, without a parachute this time.