

'A Jump in the Night' is my adaptation of a story that appeared in a Dutch Newspaper on **March 28, 1970**, by A. Jansen.

It is the story of the crew of 'T for Tommy', a Halifax Bomber that was part of a raid on Hamburg, Germany. The raid occurred during the evening of Feb. 3, 1943.

I found this story in amongst my father's WWII memorabilia.

My uncle, P/O Jack Douglas Mackenzie, was the pilot of the aircraft. He did not return.

The story was translated for me by Arie and Nelly Van Ry of Winnipeg. I was subsequently able to access online records to authenticate it.

The story is unique, as it is based on an account given to the original author by F/Sgt A.H. Milton. Milton was the rear gunner.

In view of recent events in Ottawa and Quebec that saw tragic assaults on members of the Canadian Armed Forces, and the recent issuing of a Bomber Command Bar (Aug. 26, 2013), I feel it's an appropriate time to publish an abridged version of this story.

A Jump in the Night

As the evening of Feb. 3, 1943 approached, the Cremers family were going about the routines that had become typical for farm families in occupied Holland.

The Cremers farm was near Noor Sleen, a small village in the north eastern part of the Netherlands. It was the third year of the war, yet some rare spirits had been hoarded for special occasions. That evening's birthday celebration was one of these.

The first drinks were about to be shared when the family and their guests heard the sound of an airplane, an airplane that was in trouble.

A few peaked out the darkened windows. Others went to the doorway. Several lightning-like flashes appeared in the distance. These were soon followed by a ball of fire that plummeted from the heavens. A deafening explosion accompanied another blinding flash.



A Halifax Bomber similar to Halifax II DT-630 coded VR-T.

It was 7:30 p.m. and it marked the end for the heavy Halifax Bomber 'VRT (T Tommy)' from 419 Moose Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

'T for Tommy' along with eight other heavy bombers had taken off earlier that evening from their base at Middleton St. George in County Durham, England. The target for this raid was Hamburg.

Hamburg was a strategically important target for Bomber Command. The industrial city and

harbour had grown to over two million souls since the outset of the war, and had become a major production center for U-boats.

Three nights previously, Hamburg had also been a target for night bombers. On that particular raid, Bomber Command had used H2S Ground Search Radar for the first time.

“T for Tommy’ was one of five hundred heavy bombers that had been amassed for this raid. The pilot of the 28 ton, four engine aircraft was P/O Jack Douglas Mackenzie from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.



‘T for Tommy’ pilot P/O Jack Douglas Mackenzie of Furby Street, Winnipeg, MB (photographed as a Sergeant)

Prior to enlisting, Doug had been employed by the Canadian Wheat Board. He volunteered in May, 1941, training at Brandon, Edmonton, Boundary Bay, B.C. and Claresholm, Alberta, where he received his wings in December, 1941.

Despite of his youth, Doug was popular on the squadron, displaying a good-natured confidence that contributed to the camaraderie of his crew. He had just received his commission.

His brother Rod had recently visited his kid brother and had been quite impressed with his skill as a pilot. Rod was in England completing his training as a navigator and would join 419 Squadron later in July, 1943.

The rear gunner was 21-year-old Alexander Milton. Alex had already completed a tour of 30-plus sorties and was half way through his second tour.

On the return from a mine-laying mission in 1942, Milton had been the only survivor of an attack. He had been blown free from the aircraft and was able to open his parachute.

He was well aware that the odds of surviving another tour were not in his favour.

Flying conditions were less than ideal. There was a strong wind from the south west and in spite of the protection of the low cloud, they had encountered severe icing as they crossed the North Sea. This made the Halifax difficult to keep airborne. The ice accumulated on the wings and fuselage, adding to weight and reducing the lift of the wings.

The crew had discussed turning back, but as they had aborted their previous mission, they decided against it. They arrived at the Dutch coast ten minutes behind the main bomber stream and as a result, had lost the protection of the surrounding bombers.

These huge raids were intended to confuse the Wurzburg and Freya radar systems of the German

ground defences. Operators would have difficulty directing night fighters to specific aircraft because of sheer numbers.

As 'T for Tommy' flew over the coast and made its way across the Netherlands, the crew realized they were in an active fighter zone. There was an absence of anti-aircraft flak, yet the skies were being combed by powerful search lights. The Freya targeting radar would be able to pick up the straggling bomber and direct night fighters to intercept it.

Pathfinders were not common at this time. Crews were ordered to fly independently to the target and back. All crew members were expected to be vigilant. Gunners, bomb aimer and radio observer were constantly scanning the sky. Rear gunners were in the habit of removing a section of the Perspex glass from their gun turrets so they could see more clearly.

At cruising altitude it was so cold that the gun turret glass would fog up. Gunners would then protect their eyes with the same goggles that the pilots wore. The rear gunner was especially wary of an attack from below. It was not only his duty to fire at the attacking fighter but to direct his pilot in evasive manoeuvres.

At one point, Alex imagined a fighter coming in from the side but it was only a piece of dirt on the Perspex of his rear gun turret.



Focke Wulf 190 similar to aircraft that attacked 'T for Tommy'.

Then came the attack from a Focke Wulf 190, zooming up and firing from below. With the underbelly of the fighter exposed, Milton was able to get off a return salvo.

The next attack by the fighter was deadly for the bomber and its crew. Twenty mm cannon shells ripped through the mid section of the bomber, killing P/O Mackenzie and setting the fuel tanks on fire.

Sergeant W.N. Garnett, the navigator, tried to get his pilot away from the controls but was unsuccessful. The mid upper gunner, Sergeant Gonnet, a young French Canadian, and the flight engineer, Sergeant Pete Duthie, were also killed in the initial attack.

The plane was now on fire and out of control. Alex could not see forward within the plane because of the smoke and fire. He decided to jump from the rear exit but his foot became wedged in some part of the aircraft. Pulling the ripcord of his parachute, he was dragged free from the plane.

Alex Milton landed near Odoorn and was soon arrested by the German military police. He ultimately ended up at Stalag VIII B, near Lamsdorf, along with Sergeant Garnett, where they spent the remainder of the war. Alex' PoW number was 27475 and his RAF service number was 1003107.

Sgt Garnett had a PoW number of 27476 and a RCAF service number R/97454

Both were part of the infamous 'Great March' of January 1945. At that time, POW camps were evacuated in order to avoid being captured by the Russian Army. It is interesting to note that during this march, POW's were often helped by civilians they encountered and only had difficult times with the Gestapo.

'T for Tommy' crashed on the Cremers farm in flames. One of the crew was thrown free and the remains of the others were burned inside the plane. Little of the aircraft survived the fire but the bombs that separated from the aircraft had not been armed, and have been found over the years in the farm field.

Alex Milton was living in Chiswick near London in 1970.

The grave sites of the crew members who gave their lives during this attack are near the crash site in the Commonwealth War Graves Section of the General Cemetery in Sleen, Netherlands. Sleen is in the municipality of Coevorden, Province of Drenth in northeastern Netherlands. You will find the following information on the markers:

- P/O Mackenzie, JD (id. J/16924) Pilot Officer 419 Sqn. 21 years
- WO Hill, R.H. Hill, RH (id. R/79024) Warrant Officer Class II/Air Gunner 419 Sqn. 23 years
- WO Gonnett, LA (id. R/77325) Warrant Officer Class II/Air Gunner 419 Sqn. (Id. R/77325) 22 years
- Sgt. Duthie, WP (id. R/58766) Flight Engineer 419 Sqn. 21 years



The Commonwealth War Graves Section of the General Cemetery in Sleen, Netherlands.

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<http://www.communitynewscommons.org/culture/history/a-jump-in-the-night/>