

## Chapter Extract from "One Man's War" - The War Memoir's of G M Hyde

### Raid on Genoa

This would have been about the latter half of October 1942, just before the big landing in North Africa and just about the turning point in the war. Alamein was in the winning stage and Jerry was bleeding to death in Stalingrad. Not that we were very up on the battle situation at the time but looking back afterwards one can see how it was. To bomb Genoa or Milan from England was a hell of a long trip, particularly for old Stirlings with a full bomb load.

However in view of the forthcoming landings in North Africa scramble over the alps we must. The ceiling of a bombed-up Stirling would have been about fourteen thousand feet, if everything was in your favour.

To get to Northern Italy, and back, one had to fly directly over Switzerland which was neutral. The Swiss, to preserve their position vis-a-vis the Germans had to put up some sort of resistance to the violation of their airspace by combatant aircraft. This made for an interesting trip.

We would take off about dark and head off South. There was always that hollow feeling, waiting, from the time in the afternoon when you learnt where you were going until you got the aircraft unstuck and off the ground. The tongue glued to the roof of the mouth, the terrible quietness, no unnecessary talk, only some forced jollity particularly from those who weren't going! Once into the air not too bad. As soon as the enemy coast came in sight the adrenalin would start to flow and one was away.

Always a bit of bother at the coast where Jerry had his first line of flak. After that the long haul over France heading South. Fairly quiet, time to break out the thermos of coffee for the first snack. One could not relax too much though as there was always the chance of a prowling night fighter just looking for an opportunist kill. Gunners had to keep sharp.

In due course we would see the bright lights of Switzerland ahead. This was quite a thrilling sight for of course all of Europe that we knew otherwise was blacked out. As pilot I would be trying to squeeze the last drop of altitude out of what was by now a very sluggish, wallowing aircraft as we headed for, I think, the Great St. Bernard pass. We had to fly through the passes on the way down particularly if there was a down draft on the Northern side of the Alps. We couldn't get enough altitude in these conditions to go over the top.

This particular night I can remember a high pitched yip from the front gunner as he reported that 'The bloody Swiss had a bloody gun in the pass and were bloody pooping off at the passing aircraft' One gun normally would have been something to laugh about but at this altitude with the aircraft stretched to its upper limit it was not so funny. We could not weave about but had to maintain a straight and level and a very gentle flight path otherwise we would have lost enough height to put us into the side of an Alp. This made us a bit of a sitting duck. There was nothing for it but to go on and chance our arm.

As we got nearer to the pass so the tracer shells seemed more numerous, bigger too, somehow, until they seemed to be within arms length of the front turret.

Then a strange thing happened, as we slithered through the pass with the peaks higher than us on either side, the gun did not fire. As we drew further away on the other side the rear gunner reported that the gun was again firing. I can only surmise that the Swiss were putting up a good show for the benefit of any observers but taking good care not to hit anything! Down now over Northern Italy and find the target. It had turned to six eights cloud and this made it a bit difficult.

We got fairly close and then could identify the fires burning below. Also of course there was the Itie flak having hysterics. After Jerry flak this was a doddle. Over the target 'left left, right' etc. and that lovely statement 'Bombs Gone'. As you got rid of the bombs the whole aircraft seemed to jump in the air and become alive and buoyant again. Height is now no problem.

Back north across the Alps with a three quarter moon and a clear sky. I decided to go back for a pee. The Elsan can was right down the tail, so I called the front gunner/bomb aimer. He acted as 'ship minder' when I was not in the seat. His job was to watch the aircraft which was basically being flown by 'George'. I paddled off down the back. I had stupidly thought to go down without oxygen and just to have a suck on the tube while I was down there, no problem. I got down there fine and took the tube into my mouth (which nearly froze to my lips) while I completed the purpose of my visit.

On the way back however without a mobile oxygen bottle I got the heel of my flying boot caught between the slats of the grating on the floor and it stuck. To free myself it was necessary to pull my foot out of the boot then get down on my hands and knees to work the boot out and then put it back on. This required considerable effort, particularly in flying suit and all the other clobber. It took a bit of time say three minutes from when I left the pan until I was back to my seat in the cockpit. In this short time I as near as damn-it passed out before I made it and got my oxygen mask on. Having got there I experienced the most intense cold that I can ever remember. Shortage of oxygen I guess. I put the oxygen on full blast so I recovered fairly quickly. We were at about sixteen thousand feet

It is almost impossible to describe the beauty of the sight now laid out around us. The snow covered mountains stretch away in the moonlight both to port and to starboard as far as you can see. The bright clear moon overhead and the stars, brilliant and sparkling. It seems the whole thing must have been designed by Disney, but much much more real. The air is so clear that the shadows on the alps have edges as though cut with a knife. The stars in the Northern hemisphere seem to be better and more plentiful, maybe because I knew them so much better. There was Orion which I was to get to know so well in time to come, there was Vega, there Scorpio and there was the Great Bear with the superb pole star as bright as a diamond. The engines thrum along and the whole plane feels as light and responsive as a bird. In these moments it is good to be alive.

Then we started the long drag across France. Again cloudy. In Europe we seldom saw clear air as in New Zealand. So back to the usual bother at the coast, across the channel, and over the friendly shores of England. We could then see the flashing beacon lights that marked the whereabouts of home airfields. There is in my experience no sight that can quite compare with the flashing beacon lights on the completion of a reasonably successful op.

A terrific euphoria and release of tension would take place starting about the time we cleared the French coast. This grew all the way across the channel till it reached a crescendo at about the time one was preparing to land. The crew would sing inane and ribald songs and engage in feeble repartee at the top of their voices over the intercom. We were in such a state that if someone was to hold up a gloved finger in the air everyone would roll about laughing themselves sick at the humour of it!

Well, land, park the aircraft at dispersal, shut down and listen to the suddenly tangible silence, climb into the crew bus. Look for a kiss from a friendly W.A.A.F driver. Back to de-briefing. At about this time reaction would set in and one would feel flat. However a couple of good shots of over proof Navy Rum in the coffee used to help immensely, didn't do any harm to the grandeur of the account of the op either! However no doubt the de-briefing intelligence officers would be well aware of this effect.

And so to bed in our grubby smelly Nissen hut in a fuzzy haze compounded of tiredness, great adrenalin flow, rum, flat let downness and the memory of an indescribable beauty seen in a situation that nothing had prepared us for.

That's another one over -- do it all again tomorrow!!

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# One Man's War



Galbraith Hyde MBE

For information on the full book or to read another Chapter Extract - "Stirlings" which describes the quirky nature of flying the famous Short Stirling, the worlds largest bomber at the time.

<https://TimothyHyde.com/pow>

G M Hyde had an extraordinary war.

In the 4 years he was away from New Zealand he had ... bicycled his way across occupied France after surviving the shooting down of his fully laden four engine bomber, spent eight weeks on the run, served six months hard labour in a military jail, spent six months in solitary confinement and had been strenuously interrogated by the Gestapo. His bold and hair raising attempt to steal a German aircraft led to a Court Martial for "attempted sabotage of the Third Reich" and then a second semi successful escape led to him narrowly avoiding a sentence to Buchenwald. Then followed the 3 month "Long March" across the snows of Northern Europe before liberation by the 2nd US Armoured Division.