Intercept the Flying Bomb by Jack Stafford 2005©

My first flying bomb interception took place June 16. 1944. It was a total disaster. I caught up to the bomb and while shooting my cannons jammed. I was almost shot down by our own flak, which was totally disorganised, firing constantly and badly, endangering our own fighters. On 19 June I shot down my first flying bomb and between June16 and July 31, I shot down 8, while recording 56 patrols. From July 31 to August 26 I shot down one further bomb while recording a further 30 patrols. During this period I also carried out intruder attacks in France on ground targets and Fighter sweeps.

This was not a notable score. Three pilots on our squadron had scores around the twenty mark. They were Ginger Eagleson, Jim McCaw and Ray Cammock. Ginger joined 486 Sqd. with me, Jim McCaw was our Flight Commander and Ray Cammock had done a tour of duty in Africa before joining 486. Three Squadron had several pilots who scored around 30. Several Mosquito pilots, I think, flying at night scored around 50

From the advent of the flying bomb the British Defence Forces moved quickly. British flak concentrated on the South coast and a balloon barrage was erected across Southern London to give protection. This concentrated flak was very effective and the balloons played their part. The area between the flak and the balloon barrage was left to the fighter aircraft. We were free to make our interceptions and engage the bombs without being subjected to interference.

We patrolled a couple of thousand feet higher than the anticipated height of the intruding bombs and were kept well informed, by control, of their imminent arrival. We would be vectored to the expected position where the bomb would cross the coast and were given a perfect countdown on the arrival of the enemy. Control was always totally accurate and we would see the flak barrage that met the bomb and heralded its position. As soon as any of the missiles cleared the flak we would make our attack, starting with a long diving turn to bring us into the best position to engage. We would be at full revs and boost. The speed of our targets would vary at times but usually they would cross the channel at around 350mph and by using up their fuel and so lightened, would attain around 400 mph when we met them. In our diving attack we would reach a speed of between 400mph and 450mph. This gave us 2-3 minutes to catch them before they reached London. It should be remembered that the Flying bomb carried a warhead of 2000 lb of high explosive. At a speed of around 430mph the Tempest was travelling through the air at something like 170 yds.per second. You don't need to be Einstein to calculate that in the event of a bomb exploding; the pilot has between one and two seconds to evade the blast. Depending on the distance at which he opened fire. Consider also that the blast will move in all directions, back towards the pursuing aircraft as well as up and down. No wonder there were so many scorched Tempests sitting around the airfield at times.

My technique was very simple and basic. I just attempted to close from astern and get within 2-300 yds of the target and fire with no deflection. The formidable armament we carried, four 20mm cannons, should do the rest. At times the bomb would blow up and we were forced to fly through the blast and debris, as previously mentioned. Pilots were killed on such occasions but the Tempest was one tough aircraft and took a lot of punishment. In my own case I just fired at the entire unmanned aircraft but seemed to hit the jet unit or part of the control surfaces. Sometimes a wing would be hit and the bomb would spin into the ground and explode. I did have several explode in front of me, without serious consequences. Occasionally the gyro controlling the bomb would be hit and the missile would perform the most impressive and entertaining aerobatics before hitting the earth and exploding: normally in open country. Speed was a requirement for success and the Tempest had the most magnificent performance. At this low altitude it was supreme.

Determination from the pilot was imperative you had to chase and close regardless, to obtain success. Any hesitation during the attack rendered the operation impotent. The intrepid obtained and deserved victory.

All success was to a certain extent, a lottery. If you were flying when they came over you had a chance. If unlucky you could fly many tedious patrols and see nothing. We flew in pairs and the leading aircraft got the first chance at the target. No2 had to wait, unless several came over together. While not often difficult to catch, with a Tempest, they were a minimal target, difficult to hit and destroy: also they were always dangerous. Pilots considerate of their own safety were not among the successful. As always, fortune favours the brave.

During the short period of the bombs major attacks, our Squadron, 486 Sqdn. had 3 pilots killed and several badly injured as a result of intercepting the bomb. Some of these, such as Kevin Mcarthy, were the patients of the famous NZer, Dr. Mcindoe whose incredible medical skill is so famous. Others suffered major physical damage which cancelled their flying future. From memory I think seventeen Tempests were lost.

Our desire was to destroy the bomb in the air. Our job was to defend the defenceless on the ground. I felt a sensation of virtue while engaged in these operations. I felt like a defender of the innocent. The knight in shining armour. It was different when intruding over Germany. There I felt I was an intruder, almost a violator. Despite this, flying over the land of the enemy, with its increased danger was always very exciting, nerves on edge, an unbelievable buzz. But still a trespass.

We lived under rather primitive conditions we had tents that slept 2, 3 or 4 pilots on cots with sleeping bags. Our officer's mess was a Marquee. Our airstrip was reinforced with a landing strip of steel support cross members. There were no facilities for bathing at the airstrip and the lavatory was a trench in the ground some distance from the tent lines. It was summer and far from pleasant. Water was obtained from a well.

A system was quickly established enabling us to spend 24hrs on duty at the airfield, followed by 24hrs off. This was great. The 24hrs off were spent at Eastbourne, Hastings or Ashford, which was the closest. Mid day would see those who came off duty leave in an assortment of decrepit old vehicles for the chosen city. Rick Tanner and I usually headed for Hastings where we were treated royally by the publican of the Railway Hotel. He was wonderful to us, good food, hospitality and always a bath. Bruce Lawless went with me on several occasions and ended up marrying the Inn keeper's lovely daughter. Together they made their home in England, which was a loss to New Zealand.

Newchurch was a place of great historic significance and had played many parts in English History. Numerous tales were told of the smugglers who frequented the area. Nothing much happened in early times, without Newchurch being in some way affected. I heard that a local vicar was, in the distant past, a most infamous Smuggler. Good for him!

On one occasion I woke early in my tent. I needed to use the latrine. I left the tent and walked out into the predawn with a swirling ground fog lying mysteriously all around. I walked through the mist and completed my ablutions. I returned toward the tent line and gradually the camp and the tent lines came indistinctly into view through the dispersing mist. I stopped and stood still. All was silent. I noted a lightening in the eastern sky. My imagination was stimulated; we were not that far from Hastings and that infamous battle Possibly some of the English survivors of that disaster headed east attempting to escape the Norman Conquerors. I had read that several of the Norman boats had come ashore by mistake at Dungeness where the occupants were savagely slaughtered by the English. One thousand years have passed since those days yet the attitudes remain unaltered. The Invader must pay for his temerity. The defender must pay the price of defending his home and family. Could this have been a resting-place for the Normans after the great Battle? Did the retreating English or maybe the persueing Norman camp here? Were their horses tethered in the fields where now our aircraft stand? Their tents could have occupied the same site where ours were now pitched. Technology so different, men so similar. The mingled blood of the Anglo-Norman still pulsed through the veins of many of us here that day. As men, we would be little different from those ancestors of one thousand years ago. Driven by the same desires, the same fears, the same hopes, not knowing what the future would bring to any of us. Fighting to the death in a conflict whose political causes and ultimate aims were little understood by most of the participants.

The noise of clattering pots and pans came from the cookhouse. More light was coming from the East. The ghostly groundmist swirled and disappeared around me.

A short flight for a fighter, away across the Channel, young men from many Nations lay groaning and dying in the sands of Normandy, and in the surrounding countryside. Hundreds of miles away- in some cases thousands of miles away, families would soon be mourning the loss of their beloved sons.

A few shouted commands came from the airfield. The noise of the ground staff preparing for the days' flying came clearly. The crack of a starter cartridge, followed by the ear splitting roar from the 2,500 horsepower Napier Sabre ended my ancient reverie, time to act not dream. Across the sea, in the land of the Norman, German soldiers were readying the flying bombs to launch the offensive of the day. Soon I'd be mounting my steel battle charger in much the same way as perhaps the Normans and their English enemies mounted their battle chargers in 1066. The ground mist faded from the damp fields but my dreams clung to me as I watched the sky above clearing, making ready for the young pilots to play their part in the defence of the defenceless. Was the desire to protect in the hearts of the English One Thousand years ago the same?

Perhaps.