

HAND FROM THE GRAVE

BY JULIAN WIELGOSZ

The shock of the explosion could be felt in the cockpit and from the mountainous clouds of black smoke I knew it was a direct hit. Three storage tanks with oil for Hitler's Panzer divisions, discretely hidden in a wooded area near Lille, France, were quickly destroyed in flames.

"No doubt about that one, eh Jule?" shouted my navigator.

"Good show! It's a double on me when we get back" I answered.

The operation was a success and the return home proved to be as uneventful as the flight over. It was just a matter of time before the Allies would be in Germany and the end of the 3rd Reich was clearly in sight or so it seemed, three months after the Normandy landing. Goerring's Luftwaffe was largely destroyed and posed little threat as we increased the number of daytime flying operations. Our thoughts turned to more pleasant things when suddenly over the radio Jim's voice cracked with a sharp: "This is Miller 20, port engine out. . . I can't keep up."

The twin engine Mosquito, an all plywood deHavilland fighter-bomber, could manage easily enough on one engine but it was vulnerable to enemy attack at the slower speed. It was Jim's first participation in a daytime raid and his voice sounded obviously anxious. As the squadron formed a protective corridor, he was assured that we were not about to abandon him. The return home was without incident. Jim sang *Waltzing Matilda*, his favourite song, while everyone else with their radio's turned on, joined in the refrain. Polish pilots were known for their liberal use of the radio while flying and those in 305 Sqn were no exception.

305 was a Polish fighter-bomber unit in the RAF, one of many combat groups formed by Gen Sikorski in England after the defeat of Poland by the Nazis. Its pilots and navigators came from all strata of Polish society.

Jim Mosely was a tall, handsome, blue-eyed lad of English extraction whose great-grandfather had served well HM's colonial interests in the Caribbean. Hence, the well-tanned skin that prompted everyone to enquire whether he had just returned from a tour in N. Africa.

Jim was one of several "foreigners" in our squadron and there were no men, by his own admission, he would rather be with than the Poles, especially after the rallying support he got on his first daytime mission.

He had a particular fondness for Canadian girls on account of three years spent in training and instructing in Canada. The Canadian base in Aldershot with its large nursing station found Jim spending much of his leave there and admittedly his popularity guaranteed us invitations to each of their dances. With shoulder badges bearing Poland, Jim never

failed to impress the girls by his excellent English.

What assured Jim's popularity with the men was his keen disposition to the Polish language and culture. In a very short time he was able to communicate with his ground crew winning him extra support. A couple of right words to the mechanic, a smile and next day Jim would have the name of his girl-friend in bold letters on the fuselage. From that moment on "Jean" flew in all our missions over France and Germany.

Jim was fascinated by the euphony of the Polish language but admitted openly his difficulties with the tempo on its speech.

"You create the impression of constantly quarrelling", Jim often remarked and laying his hand on my shoulder he would try to calm me jokingly:

"Easy boy, easy. . . take it easy Jule, don't panic. . . so what if he's bigger than you. . ."

Other "foreigners" among us included an English aristocrat who subsequently sat in the House of Lords, an English writer who credits to his name several wartime chronicles and a Canadian crew whose pilot after the war was active in the Canadian Armed Forces achieving the rank of major-general. There were two Norwegians, two Estonians and of course, Tom, the hero from Kent who received numerous congratulatory telegrams when he was decorated with the Polish Cross of Valor.

All these faces are fading in the dim memory of years gone by but the anniversary of a memorable experience suddenly brings back to mind even the smallest detail and you realize you haven't forgotten at all.

Jim was scheduled for take-off 15 minutes before me at 0145 hrs. We sat in the crew room awaiting our time. The tension before a mission always interfered with any desire to sleep regardless of need. Tonight there was an added eerie feeling of fate. It was the little slips and short comments that unnerved us most. Tom forgot his parachute and had to return for it before climbing into his plane. This was peculiar because Tom was always meticulous and careful. Tonight, also Jan didn't give his cheerful quip and goodbye, a routine we had come to take for granted before every take-off. What seemed most foreboding even to the least superstitious of us was Zbysz tripping over his parachute strap as he left the crew room. And he too omitted his usual, "See you in the POW camp, fellas."

I looked over at Jim who seemed oblivious to these bad omens and was deeply absorbed in thought. Noticing my stare he asked, "Is it really true, Jule, that they are going to cut down our flying operations from 50 to 30 sorties?"

That seemed unlikely at least as far as Polish crews were concerned. Directives from Gen Sosnkowski, commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces (after Gen Sikorski's untimely death) indicated otherwise. Further-

more, there were fewer Polish recruits for our squadrons. Our rate of attrition meant that our squadrons were being rapidly depleted, hence the increase of non-Polish pilots. In fact, we were all being encouraged to stay for another tour of duty.

"You seem rather concerned about that", I replied.

"Of course", retorted Jim. "I have already completed 17 missions and at this rate I'll be through in two or three months. And you know what happens then", he continued, "they'll send me to Canada as an instructor and I'll have to settle for being a schoolmaster again".

"You Poles are lucky," he continued after a pause. "You can carry on in the squadron as long as you like".

"Right Jim. We Poles are blessed with good fortune. History has singled us out."

Jim rose from his chair with an energetic move and went over to his navigator. Both finalized flight plans and then collected their maps, parachutes and other gear. As the two neared the door I gave our familiar shout, "See you in the POW camp, keener!"

"I'll be waiting for you, Jule, with a cup of tea," Jim responded with a smile.

The weather report promised us good flying visibility. It was a late, fall night with a fine alto stratus cloud layer. Only a light mist was reported over our course. From our airport, at Epinoy, our main task was to support the Allied advance with the bombings and strafings of cargo lines, fuel depots and supply convoys.

"Will we be back in our bed tonight between those clean white sheets or does fate have something else in store for us?" I turned to my navigator. Miet invested a lot of trust in his premonitions and his moods often depended on the daily horoscope, psychic feelings and various omens.

"Well, I didn't bring along my toothbrush," was his reply. We were on the runway now.

With both engines roaring we left the smoothly paved runway and began to gain altitude. At 3000 ft I asked Miet for the direction of our first leg of flight.

"Point the nose to Warsaw via Berlin and while over Berlin we harass and destroy," he quipped.

In fact our mission would take us over Germany tonight. The cockpit was dark except for the occasional flash of the navigator's penlight as he poured over the maps, verifying the course of flight. Only the rustle of the maps or a sigh in Miet's breathing would interrupt the background drone of the engines. For a while, a false sense of security and euphoric detachment from all that's unpleasant and disagreeable seemed to enshroud us both.

"Ten o'clock Miet!" I snapped. "Look, who's that ahead of us? They're softening him up well!" A barrage of anti-aircraft fire was coming up from the ground and we knew that one of our comrades must be flying not too far ahead.



Julian Wielgosz, standing second from left, with other members of 305 Polish Sqn, RAF

"Hey they're really out to get someone. . . with all they've got."

Multicoloured beads streamed evenly up to the sky from light ack-ack batteries on the ground followed by white flashes of heavy flak. As they slowed in their upward ascent, a fantastic array of patterns caught our attention and held us spellbound in a hypnotic gaze. At the same time large reflectors were beaming powerful rays of light across the skies. This myriad of colored streamers and bursts of staccato fire formed a seemingly impenetrable barrier. I couldn't see how a fly could get through safely.

"Look they've got him. He's been hit." Flames began to trail the plane as it started to lose altitude.

I broke radio silence and pressed on the R.T. button. "Is that you Jim, in those search-lights?"

Only silence replied.

"Look, look," shouted Miet. "His engine has exploded. Well that's it. Whoever it was, I hope he was able to bail out."

In a matter of seconds the skies were completely black. The guns had been silenced and only a flaming blot below gave evidence to the tragedy we had witnessed. We both pondered the same question in silence refusing to accept the possibility that it was indeed. . .

"We're coming near Wesel." Miet's voice was soft and unsteady, then clearing his throat he added, "They're not shooting anymore, I wish they were our targets for tonight, the

bastards. . ."

We passed Wesel and changed our direction for a north-eastward course. To the east was the Ruhr valley and shortly after, our objective.

That night three planes failed to return. One of them was Jim's. Next day in the officer's mess I did not have to wait very long before I was reminded that Jim is waiting for me in the POW camp, as promised. This of course was an expression of hope that Jim was still alive.

Before each of the next sorties, the question of Jim's fate was foremost in our minds. But in wartime there were so many new events that one could not dwell too long on such happenings. To the question of Jim's fate was added a new list of missing comrades and other concerns.

The Allies were advancing eastwards and our objectives changed accordingly.

50TH

It wasn't long before the momentous occasion of our 50th flight operation. Pre-flight briefing followed a familiar routine. Once all the pilots and navigators were assembled, the first to enter was Col Boleslaw Orlinski, commanding officer of 305 Sqn. He had distinguished himself as a capable pilot even before the war, being the first, in 1927, to make an overland flight across the vast European and Asian continent from Warsaw to Tokyo, Japan. Following him was RAF intelligence officer, F/L Z, then

liaison officer for the Polish Arm, Capt K. and finally "Little Cumulus." She was the one who would give us a detailed weather report.

F/L Z. revealed the mission objective and pointed out all known enemy ack-ack guns and defence installations. Col Orlinski customarily had the final say and in his usual calm and friendly tone added at the end, "I want to see all of you back. And that's an order!"

It was to be an easy mission. The weather was ideal. Enemy defences were much weaker now and less resistance was expected over the target prompting Miet to remark cheerfully, "Piece of cake, eh?"

As we left the crew room to board our plane a voice shouted out, "Last chance to see Jim. Give him our regards."

"He would have to say that." The remark obviously unnerved Miet who continued to nurture superstitious regard for psychic phenomena, omens and telepathies of various sorts.

"We'll be waiting with an unopened bottle of cognac," Cpl R. beamed with pride as he fastened my straps. There was an air of ceremony as he went about his task for the 50th time.

Miet was starting to mutter nervously.

The engines sparked to life with diabolic zest. All systems checked, a signal to the ground crew to remove the wheel blocks and we began to taxi to the runway.

The red lights marking the end of the runway were fast approaching and we still had not lifted off the ground in spite of repeated

Airforce

efforts. A quick glance over the illuminated panel failed to explain our inability to be airborne.

"Skipper", a name Miet reserved for me only in moments of stress and danger, "the red lights are beneath our wheels. What are you doing? It's the end of the runway. . .we're going to hit the trees!"

By now I was pushing the throttle controls with my right hand till I could feel the snap of the warning wires. The plane suddenly came off the ground as though shot from a cannon and we began to climb, heading into the darkness.

"Starboard engine on fire", shouted Miet in my ear. In a reflex move my hand went for the fire extinguisher button of the right engine and then as though in response to some command I stopped midway. A quick glance to the right confirmed that the engine was shooting sparks and emitting smoke. A panicky urge to do something began to dominate when suddenly I felt a firm pressure on my shoulder and a calm voice whisper in my right ear, "Easy boy easy, take it easy Jule, don't panic. . ."

The extinguisher button was left untouched. We continued to gain altitude.

"The fire's out", shouted Miet.

"OK", I answered trying to maintain my calm. Seconds turned into minutes as we continued our flight.

"A real phlegmatic, you are Skipper," Miet's voice mellowed somewhat. "I was sure you'd turn off the starboard engine and to be honest with you I didn't know if you would be able to

overcome the reaction of the controls at that speed with 20 feet to go".

After a pause, when I felt my voice would not betray my emotions, I answered in a self-assured manner, "Thanks for the compliment. You weren't really worried now, were you, a veteran like you? Meanwhile let's fly over the airfield and decide what to do next," I added.

"Great idea", retorted Miet. "I wasn't relishing the thought of flying over Germany on one engine".

After a few minutes of circling about and exchanging our views we came to the conclusion that the fire was possibly the result of too rich a mixture.

CARRY ON?

"These are Rolls-Royce engines Miet, and I am sure they're in perfect condition, so the question now is do you want to return to base or do we carry on?"

After a moment's pause Miet cleared his throat, coughed into his microphone and replied slowly, "My dear acrobat of the airways and rising star of the Polish Air Force, although I doubt you'd find a navigator in all of the Polish and Royal Air Forces who could stomach your fancy technique of take-off, I have a wise man's feeling that if we don't get this 50th flight over and done with now, you won't be able to drag me into it later with a team of horses. Let's carry on."

"Good man, we're on our way then, only remind me later Miet. I have something to tell you".

Three hours later we touched down on the tarmac in Epinoy. A few sparks from the wheels, a screech of the brakes and it was all over. As it turned out, this was our last war-time mission together. After parking the plane and shutting off the engines, I turned to my partner with a smile. "My friend, that's a milestone."

"Yes," nodded Miet, looking pensive, "what were you going to tell me?"

"Jim Mosely is dead," I answered solemnly.

"What? How do you know? Why have you not said anything until now?" Miet was obviously stunned.

"Our take-off tonight almost had us knocking at the Pearly Gates. I nearly made a fatal mistake then, but for Jim. He prevented me from doing it."

"What?"

"You know how he always used to kid me with his — easy boy, easy, take it easy Jule, don't panic. . . I can still feel the pressure on my shoulder."

"That's possible. Things like that do happen," said Miet who was quickly caught up in his favorite topic. "What a loss if it really is true. You know he was such a fine spirit — in many ways, very Polish," he added.

Three months later, the Air Ministry verified that F/L Jim Mosely of Nassau, Bahamas, had died in action over Wesel, Germany.☺

(Ed note: This was written 30 years after and was submitted for publication posthumously by Julian's family)