

Big Bombers' Gunners Highly Important Men

Are Much More Than Mere "Bullet-Tossers," Acting Also as "Eyes" of Crew and General "Pepper-Uppers" When Enemy Night Fighters Are Cruising About.

WITH THE R.C.A.F. SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND, Sept. 14—(C.P.)—These fellows who handle the guns in the giant two and four-motored bombers of the R.C.A.F. are mighty important.

They are much more than just bullet-tossers. They are the "eyes" of the crew and the general pepper-uppers when night fighters are about.

The pilot is the skipper of a bomber but there can be times high up in the darkness on the way to and from Germany in these big bomb-carriers when the gunners call the turns.

At this station in the Midlands the gunners of one Canadian squadron have three Nazi fighters to their credit. They are scored up on the wall in the gunnery leader's office for Sgt. Don Morrison of Chalk River, Ont., who now is back in Canada, Sgt. C. W. Robinson of Moncton, N.B., and Flt. Sgt. Pat Murphy of Halifax.

They fly with such gunners as Flt. Sgt. Russell Harling of Winnipeg, P.O. Jack Freestone of Toronto, P.O. Arthur MacMillan of Winnipeg, Flt. Sgt. Ernie Burnett of Toronto, all kids who go to briefings, hunt their target and then sail out into the night with a wave of the hand.

You think none of them ever gave a thought to the chance he might make it or he might not.

These chaps are rear-gunners, tail-end Charlies. They sit out in the tail of a Wellington all by themselves with their four guns in a revolving turret. They've got a good view there—but not much future.

Sooner or later somebody calls them "Four-gun Joe" or Bob or whatever their name is. It's because out in the back there they are jammed in with just about enough space to take a deep breath and their four guns. The front gunner has only two weapons.

Eager to Make Trips.
Most of the fellows want to complete their tour of operations as soon as possible. They don't care if they work every night just so long as they get their flying hours in in a hurry.

It takes about 30 trips into Germany and back before air crew men are pulled off operations and given a stretch of instructing.

Back home Harling was a manufacturer's agent. Over here he used to be a front gunner but he changed over to the tail position because he thought he'd get more work to do.

Both he and MacMillan came over to Britain with the first all-Canadian squadron, Burnett was with that outfit too. They flew in army co-operation planes before moving on to this bomber formation.

On this particular day they were getting ready to go to Saar-

brucken. They'd just finished some trap-shooting and were in the gunnery leader's office where he was drawing charts for guidance in air combat. The pictures showed the procedure for evading beam attacks. They gave a good idea of just how important a rear gunner is in a bomber crew.

The pictures showed a Nazi fighter swinging in on a bomber from the rear and on the port side. This is what the gunner would tell the pilot: "Jerry—1,000 yards, port beam, 200 feet up—turning in for attack—200 yards—700 yards—prepare to turn to port, prepare to turn to port."

That's the time when the gunner is calling the turns. He's the "bullet eye" of the team. He's got to be precise though, and quick, in what he tells the pilot and the rest of the crew.

Have To Keep Talking.

"You see you've got to keep talking," said Harling. "There's a basic commentary we all use when fighters are sighted. You've got to let everybody know just what the situation is and above all you've got to keep talking. If you don't, the boys will think you've 'bought it.'"

That's just another way of saying the Nazi fighter has clipped the rear-gunner with a bullet.

"Yes," said MacMillan, a blue-eyed sandy-haired youth. He used to serve sodas in a Portage avenue drug store back in Winnipeg.

"Once you've evaded him you'll try to line him up for a burk. Anyway, you'll keep your eye on him. Otherwise he may be on you again."

On the walls of the room were silhouettes of all types of enemy planes and ships. These fellows have to know what they are at first glance. That's all the opportunity they're likely to get up in the night skies.

Not only that they've got to be able to say right off and accurately just how far away an approaching plane is. The boys practise that in the gunnery room with model planes.

These lads think the Nazis are turning more and more to night fighters for defence. Just in the last few months there have been more in sight over German target towns than before.

"It's getting tough over there," said Freestone, a drawing kid from Toronto with whips of grey hair at his temples.

The gunners set up about 7 a.m. If they are down for flying that night they probably practise rifle shooting or trap shooting before they go out for a flight test. And late at night when they are heading in to Germany, they give their guns another test over the Channel.

"You always do that," said Harling. "You want to be sure you can drop calling cards if you have to."



Clipped By:
michellemciver
Mon, Nov 22,
2021