

Ditched Fort Crew Sees Kiel Burn

1943

A U.S. BOMBER STATION, England, Aug. 21—The crew of the B17 Happy Daze bombed Kiel, had a fireside seat while it burned last Sunday and got home to tell about it with the help of a motor-boat which a RAF Coastal Command Halifax dropped by parachute, a fishing vessel and an Air Sea Rescue ship.

The Fortress went down in the North Sea 30 miles off the German coast after the wing was set on fire by three attacking German planes. One member of the crew was drowned after his Mae West came off as the plane hit the water, but the rest of the crew escaped with minor scratches and bruises.

"After we were hit," the pilot, 1/Lt. John P. Keelan, of Navasota, Tex., said, "the wing swelled up like a balloon and then burst into flames.

"We went into a dive and I got it under control about 150 feet off the water, just in time to land it fairly smoothly."

Despite the "smooth" landing, the ball turret was driven right through the top of the fuselage by the impact, and the

plane sank in 15 seconds. The crewmen barely had time to get clear of the wreckage and start swimming for the life rafts which had been automatically released and inflated.

"We tied the two dinghies and made tents out of our parachutes to keep the cold out," said 2/Lt. Thomas B. Nelson, of Tampa, Fla.

From their vantage point in the North Sea, the drifting crewmen saw a good deal of the week-long air offensive against Germany.

"We not only watched Kiel burn but we watched the RAF blast hell out of the German coast the first night," said T/Sgt. Edgar D. Cannon, of Olney Springs, Col. "We could see flak bursting and big fires which the first bombs started."

About noon the following day, Monday, a RAF Lancaster sighted the two dinghies, dropped three more dinghies and then stayed around to ward off a Ju88 which was in the vicinity. Finally, after they had been sighted and covered by several more Lancasters, a Halifax came along and dropped the motor boat.

After considering an Atlantic crossing in the dinghy, the crew headed due west with 2/Lt. William C. Gruelach of South Jamaica, L.I., N.Y., navigating.

The next morning the crew was picked up by a fishing boat. A short time later they were again spotted by a Halifax. Later that afternoon the fishing boat was intercepted by two Air Sea Rescue powerboats and the Fort crew was lifted from the fishing boat and returned to England.

Other members of the crew were: 1/Lt. Loren E. Hubbell, Mallard, Iowa; S/Sgt. John H. Kornich, Ridley Park, Pa.; T/Sgt. Eugene L. Deyoe, South Minneapolis, Minn.; Sgt. R. V. Hodge, Jackson, Miss.; and S/Sgt. Herbert H. Simes, of Brooklyn.

The RAF Air Sea Rescue service did another big job for the USAAF when it pulled the crew of the Fort Cherokee out of the North Sea in less than 45 minutes after the plane hit 125 miles off the English coast.

The ship was so badly damaged after

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