lovereading.co.uk Please print off and read at your leisure

Tuesday's War

David Fiddimore

Published by Pan

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

lovereading.co.uk

If you love reading, you'll love the unique benefits of lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author 'like-for-like' recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



PART ONE

Tuesday's Child

Krefeld

We called Piotr Paluchowski the Pink Pole.

That's because he wasn't quite a Red, if you see what I mean. Not that there was anything wrong with being a Red. In 1944 the Red was our ally in the Roman sense: our enemy's enemy. Anyway, to get back to the Pink Pole: the night this began, he nearly killed the lot of us, and then he saved our lives. That must have been about late August 1944 – I'll check the date for you in my logbook later, if you like – and we were into the seventh trip of our tour, flying in a lovely used-up old lady of a Lancaster bomber.

We had come through the first few trips, which was when most crews got the chop, and were well into the next danger area. That was the cocky *we know the bloody lot* stage. That's when most of the rest copped it. If you could keep going, get through ten or twelve trips, your chances of surviving another twenty before they screened you out of operations for a rest increased spectacularly, although it never felt like that at the time. We were too cocky by half the night the Pole almost killed us. It was on a trip to Krefeld – you never forget Krefeld.

We had overlooked two vital factors. First was that we hadn't yet met a single Jerry night fighter, and second was that Paluchowski, like most of the Poles and Czechs, had joined up to kill Germans. Personal longevity wasn't in his business plan. Looking back, Krefeld cured us of this curious oversight: we had to watch him after that.

We had this simple drill: everyone in the aircraft not actively involved in flying the damned thing, or dropping bombs on the gut volk in Germany, was supposed to spend every spare moment trying to *spot* them: gazing into the night sky looking for Mr Kraut and his radar-directed night fighter, as well as our brother aircraft: flying into another Lanc, or worse still a Hallibag or Stirling (both were hefty, strong brutes), could kill you just as efficiently as the Kraut could, believe me. If you caught a glimpse of anything out there that was darker or lighter than the rest of the night sky, you shouted out. No time for thinking; you just hollered. If you stopped to think it was already too late. You hollered 'Corkscrew port!' or 'Corkscrew starboard!' and the Old Man threw the bus into a violent corkscrew flight pattern towards the shape you thought you had seen. In fact some crews even used *corkscrew left* or *right* as the commands. You could say that just a fraction of a second quicker. No one complained about false alarms – they were just too relieved to blame you. Having screamed out the command, a gunner, if it was a gunner that had seen whatever it was, was free to open fire. Pete the Pole was our rear gunner: he was more interested in killing Krauts than getting us out of the way, which is something we should have anticipated. You following me so far? We were coned by searchlights on the run in – the

bomb run – over Krefeld, and the Old Man, Grease – our Canadian pilot – flung our thirty tons of fully laden bomber around the sky like a sports plane, to throw off those lights – and then, because we were cocky and immortal, told us we were going to circle around, gain height, and do it all over again to put the eggs we were carrying into the right basket (ten trips later we would have dumped them in the nearest bloody field and bolted for home). It was during the dive away from that second stupid run across the target that the fighter ran in behind us, and the Pole, instead of shouting out, let him in close enough to get a good shot. Looking back, I think the three things happened simultaneously: Paluchowski started firing at the Kraut, shouted 'Corkscrew port!' and the Kraut pilot let us have it at close range. Our bus physically staggered, like someone who has been unexpectedly slapped several times around the face. There was a lot of noise, both inside and outside the aircraft – bits were coming off, after all – and behind us in the sky was a light like those thousand suns you've read about, because the Kraut, flying down the Pole's bullet stream, simply blew up: two Krauts in an Me 110 most like, doing the Valhalla Quickstep wondering what the hell had happened to them when the music stopped.

Grease recovered the old lady at about 7,000 feet – which meant that we'd lost 10 in less than a minute – and it was immediately obvious that all was not quite as it should have been: she'd lost her knickers. At least, that's what it felt like. It was bloody draughty, for a start. There were big holes all over the shop, letting in the freezing cold air at 150 miles per hour. You get the picture. There were several small fires, which I

helped the Toff, our mid-upper gunner, extinguish, then we had a call through on the intercom, and found that we were all still there and alive. Almost immediately the radio gave out a spitting stream of blue sparks, and lapsed into sullen static. Toff had taken a shell splinter through his right ankle. He didn't notice until after we had finished with the fires.

Something was very wrong with the way our old girl was flying – turning stubbornly to starboard all the time: Grease was having to fight her into a straight line. It was the port outer of our four engines: we could see that it had taken a slap, because the cowling was missing. Every now and again a small flame would shoot out behind it, and then *bang*, like a car's backfire. It was racing way beyond its maximum rev rating, and we couldn't kill the damned thing: Fergal – our engineer from Belfast – couldn't cut off the fuel flow to it or fully feather its propeller, which was racing faster than the other three, pushing us to starboard around the axis of the wings. You still following this? You need a quick course in bomber design? All you need to know is that, unlike its frightened crew, the old cow wanted to fly in a circle. The port aileron had also copped it and was flapping around like a Wren's drawers, both elevators had stiffened up, and there were pieces missing from one of the rudders. Both main wheels had dropped, and one of the bomb-bay doors had badly distorted, letting in even more cold night air: don't get me wrong, she *could* fly like that, but had definitely seen better days.

That wasn't the last time we left pieces of aeroplane all over Germany, but you remember your first time. It's just like your first kiss.

Conroy, the navigator, unflappable as usual, passed Grease the first direction for an unorthodox course for England, Home and True Glory. I should have had a lot to do – but there was a hole in my radio I could pass my arm through: cold air was rushing in. I tried stuffing that with Conroy's spare maps but after a few minutes they started to smoulder – so the cold proved to be the lesser of the two evils. I made myself useful binding up the Toff's foot and giving him a shot of morphine. What might surprise you is that there was no talk of putting it down in Krautland and surrendering, or using our chutes. You might call that British pluck. I'd call it something to do with rumours we'd heard about angry Kraut civilians killing bomber crews with spades and forks. They are an agricultural race at heart, your Germans.

It was Conroy who passed me a shakily written note from Grease: Fergal must have written it down, because Grease's hands were full at the time. It read: *Charlie – fix the fucking radio. NOW.*

I got frostbite that night, with my fingers inside my smashed-up RT and WT equipment, and got an honourable mention in the squadron operational daybook as a reward. I always wanted one of those.

As luck would have it I brought the internal communications back very quickly. A piece of shrapnel had laid open an insulated wire, and bridged it to the cage, creating a mark one short. As I pulled the shrapnel clear with my fingers I didn't feel the jolt from the electrical short until it reached my wrist – I was already that cold. You can't work inside radios with gloves, you see. At least we could talk to each other then: other than that it

was mostly a dead loss. After an hour's work all feeling in my hands had gone and my upper arms were hurting so bad with the cold that I was crying. I was able to hear other bombers exchanging with base and station controllers, but the signals drifted in and out randomly, like spirit voices at a seance in Surbiton – I had no control of them. On a couple of occasions I was able to speak to one of the aircraft myself, but never to England. Grease thought that they were physically very close to us – once I got an acknowledgement just as we wallowed in the airstream of a Lanc overtaking us in the race for home. I remember feeling very lonely at that moment, even in the knowledge that my pals were in the aircraft all about me.

One of Fergal's jobs was keeping a record of the fuel consumption, and reminding the skipper of what we had left: arguably a futile activity when one engine's racing away consuming fuel twice as fast as you normally allow for. It was glowing red hot, with less time between the misfires, and at least one of the wing tanks had been holed and was squirting out fuel into the air.

Martin Weir, Marty, the bomb aimer, had just called back: 'Dutch coast; Channel ahead – no flak,' when Fergal said, 'Skipper?'

'Yes, Fergal?'

'You know I said that we had fuck-all fuel left, back there?'

'Yeah, so what?'

'Well now we've got *fuck* fuck all left. If we clear the Channel put her down on the first bit of flat you see.'

Conroy broke in. 'Don't worry, Skip. Keep this heading. Manston's coming up in about . . . seventeen minutes – they've

got a nice long new runway there.' Conroy was lying about the elapsed time, but we all felt better for it.

Grease said, 'Thank God for that. Charlie, where the hell is that radio?'

'Most of the best bits are still in Germany, Skip.'

'Keep trying for us, Charlie. Keep trying until we're on the deck.'

'OK, Skip.'

I privately agreed with Conners: sometimes you have to lie to the bosses to keep their spirits up, you know – otherwise they're likely to give up on you and go to pieces. What I was actually doing was sitting on my hands to get the feeling back, rigid with fear, and chilled in the airstream of my exploded radio. I tried again.

More than seventeen minutes later – it seemed hours – Marty shouted, 'Runway lights,' from up front in his glass blister, and then, 'Aw Christ!'

Grease said, 'I see it. Heads down everyone,' to which he added, 'Sorry, Charlie, not you – keep trying to raise them: we'll do one quick low circuit, then barrel straight in – I might just beat the fog.'

'What fog?' I asked Marty.

'The fucking great bank of it rolling down from the north, it's—'

'Shut up,' said Grease, 'I'm thinking.'

The truth was, he was *straining*. It had taken all his strength to fight the line against our runaway engine, even though Fergus had looped a belt around the spade grip of the control column and was taking a share of the pull. I was shamed into doing my

bit, spinning the dial and broadcasting to anyone – *anyone* – with the wit to be listening out for it. Grease was taking us on a great leftward sweep low around the airfield, at one point flying parallel to the great malignant wall of fog. The runway lights kept on flashing on and off. That must have been a nervous duty flying control officer in the cabin down there, scared of intruder night fighters stooging around, waiting for busted birds like us. I got a weak response from someone, but lost it immediately.

Grease said, 'Don't mind,' then, 'OK we're going in – lining her up *now*.' He had this flair for the dramatic you see.

Don't believe all the guff they tell you about spatial disorientation. When you fly a lot as a passenger you get instinctive messages from your body which tell you about the attitude of the aircraft: most of them are right. You don't always have to see an outside world to work out where you are in relation to it. I knew that Grease had levelled her out, straightened her up and was putting her down – without flaps to slow us through the air, without brakes to slow us on the ground, and an undercarriage which would collapse if it hadn't already locked down.

Again Marty shouted, 'Aw Christ!' and before I could assume that the fog had beaten us to the runway, added 'There's another Lanc in front! Less than fifty yards . . .'

The new guy must have gone straight in like us, trying to beat the fog.

I want you to understand this problem. The new guy was making a slower, routine approach, and had brakes to slow himself on the ground. We could land behind him no worries,

but once on the deck we would collect him as soon as he slowed down. And we would be travelling too fast to turn aside, even if the undercart held up – a turn at a hundred miles per hour would rip it off, and we would cartwheel. Up his arse most likely.

Grease didn't have to shout 'Charlie' the way he did, I was already spinning the clock and screaming at the radio, begging the newcomer to get off our road. Toff told me later that I was screaming so loud he reckoned they could have heard me in the other kite even without the radio.

Afterwards Marty always used to say that what happened next was the most beautiful thing he ever saw. He couldn't take his eyes off the Lanc in front of us. When he tells it he says, 'That Lanc was *death* in front of me, and it hypnotized me; I didn't move to a safer place or anything, because there wasn't one. I knew that we were going to fly into it, and that stuck out there in front I was going to get it first. And I didn't care. I don't think I ever really cared again.' Just as the new Lanc touched – just as its wheels kissed the runway in a very sweet three-point landing – the pilot turned the taps on again, raised his main wheels and flaps, and climbed away into the fog. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone.

Grease had his hands and feet too full of Lancaster to think about it. He produced an unusually acceptable landing, and then proceeded to weave the great wounded beast gently from side to side to get the speed off. The engines died on us just as Fergal moved the throttle controls down their box – he had been right about the rate we had been using fuel. Instead of running off the end of the runway, as we anticipated, the old

bus slowed quite quickly, but started to pull perversely in the other direction, to port. As I recall, Grease swore quite imaginatively about this last trick she played on us. When we were down to walking pace, he let her pull off the runway to the left and park herself on the grass. Then the fog swallowed us.

It turned out that the port main wheel was punctured and three-quarters deflated. It had acted like one of the brakes we no longer had before the tyre ripped itself to shreds at the last knockings.

One of the things I can confirm is that when you've landed a kite that's full of holes and unfriendly pieces of German ammunition, you don't hang about in it. I can't remember getting out, sliding over the main spar, stomping down to the little square door near the tail; what I *do* remember is how quiet it was out there in the fog. We stood in a group. The Pink Pole looked unconcerned, and as usual was the first to light up. The Toff was hobbling about, trying to find out why his ankle wasn't working, and Grease stood awkwardly, his right arm clenched hard into his body – like a response to a stomach pain. I wondered if he had been hit and had kept quiet about it, so I faced off with him and tried to straighten his arm. I couldn't.

'It's locked. Can't move it,' he said.

In finding the strength to hold the Lanc against its natural inclination to fly in tight circles, he had locked and cramped the muscle in his arm. It unlocked about an hour later.

It was one of those wet, noise-distorting fogs, but we could hear a vehicle crawling around the perimeter track at the edge

of the airfield, hopefully looking for us. You could see that Grease was listening hard, but it wasn't for that. It was for the Lanc who'd made way for us. You could hear its four Packard Merlin engines moaning as it circled low looking for a hole in the fog, or for the airfield's FIDO fog lights to be switched on. We all knew the score; if it was still stooging around instead of sloping off to an airfield which wasn't fogged-in yet, then it hadn't enough fuel to do so. Sooner or later it would have to have a shot at landing or excavate an unfriendly hillside.

The vehicle found us first, a small Bedford five-cwt. lorry with a tilt, and benches in the back. An old crew bus, most likely. Surprisingly the driver was a sparks – a radio operator – like me, and his passenger up front a full wing commander. The Wingco was a tall, lanky type; tired looking with a bit of a cadaverous face, and deep sunk dark eyes.

He offered cigarettes, and when he spoke it was with a languid almost drawling accent. 'Nice landing, Skipper.' He held out his hand to shake Grease's, but Grease could only offer his left. They looked odd for a moment, two men holding hands like girls. 'I saw you touch down just before this lot rolled in – no brakes left?'

'Not much of anything left, sir.'

He laughed with us. Not a bad type. It was good seeing Grease standing there swapping jokes with a wingco as if there wasn't a half mile of rank between them. It was often like that – out there on the runways and the field you all could be just fliers – the rank nonsense didn't kick in until you were standing inside RAF bricks and mortar.

'Care for a lift?' he said.

'Thanks, but we've got to wait for . . .' Grease raised his left thumb towards the sound of the circling Lancaster.

'Of course. I'll just wait in the bus then.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Pleasure, old boy.'

He angled off towards where the lorry was parked with a stiff, deliberate gait, like a heron stalking minnows in the shallows. I heard the door click shut, and then the engine die. I was left alongside the sparks who had been driving him. He was a ranker too – a full flight lieutenant – but you could tell he had been a sergeant; he had the look.

'Your fingers don't look too clever,' he said.

'That's the trouble with Lancs; they either burn you to death or freeze you.'

We both grinned: we were alive, after all.

'Any other damage?'

'Toff – mid upper – he's got a cut foot, and it's a funny shape. I haven't told him that yet.'

'I suppose you all want to wait for the other guy to get down. From your mob, is he?' We ducked instinctively as the lost bird thundered low overhead again, looking for a way down, poor sod. The fog eddied in its wake, then stilled again.

'Haven't a clue, but . . . yeah, we'll wait, if you don't mind.'

There was one of those moments when everything seems momentarily *crisper*, as if life comes into sharp focus, and every detail is etched on to your brain like a photograph. As if you are an actor in a film.