

THE JAIL-BREAKERS

Prelude to an epic operation by the R.A.F. Eighteen Mosquitos of the 2nd Tactical Air Force, including a squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force, carried out the task led by Group Captain Pickard of "Target for Tonight" fame. It was to prove his last flight. For security reasons it has not been possible until now to give a full account of this exploit. In the words of the briefing officer, "Mosquitos are to attack the prison at Amiens to assist more than a hundred prisoners to escape. These prisoners are French patriots condemned to death for assisting the allies". At briefing the crews detailed for the task learned that the prison wasn't difficult to find. In order to deceive the Germans as to their destination, the aircraft swung north at a given point and flew to Doullens and then turned south until they hit the main Amiens to Albert road. This road provided an excellent lead into the target which lay just to the east of the town of Amiens. Zero hour was midday. At this time last February the prisoners were to be released by the most welcomed raid of the war. It was snowing hard as the aircraft flew out from England, north-east across the sea to the French coast. They were picked up by their fighter escort of two Typhoons to each aircraft. So bad was the visibility that they had to fly almost wingtip to wingtip. Out over the Channel the snow stops and the weather improves. Here is a model of the prison which the aircraft were to attack, this was used for briefing the crew. At the back you can see the Albert-Amiens road, the guide to the target. At each extremity of the prison are the buildings which house the Nazi prison guards. The main buildings in the form of a cross, house the French patriots. The task of the first twelve aircraft is to breach the wall in two places and to destroy the buildings housing the Nazi guards. The remaining six aircraft are to bomb the prison out of existence, should the first attack be a failure, in which case many of the condemned men might be killed by British bombs instead of Nazi bullets. They would at least have a chance to escape. So to the target itself. You can see the fighters protecting the bombers fly across our path as we fly up to the target. The aircraft carrying the cameras will take you over the target after the first twelve aircraft have bombed and you will be able to see how successful they have been.

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Here's the shot again slowed down. There could be no doubt of the success of the attack. As the aircraft ran over the target the pilot said he could see men running through a large hole where the wall had been breached, and inside the prison he could see many in dungarees running for the hole in the wall. The Nazi prison guards quarters are covered with smoke from bursting bombs and the wall had been breached. With amazing skill the bomb aimers have made an exit in the main building. Perfect discrimination in this, one of the most difficult operations of the war. The walls are breached and hardly anything is left standing of the prison guards quarters. Although some of the patriots were killed by German machine guns as well as by bombs, a high percentage escaped. The Germans also suffered casualties by the attack. Two of the fighter escorts and two Mosquitoes were lost, one of them Group Captain Pickard. He died leading probably the most successful operation of his gallant and brilliant career. The breached walls were twenty feet high. Through the gaps friends of the allies made good their escape. Nearby rests the body of Group Captain Pickard, the young man who led his squadron to brilliant success and made sure that the R.A.F. had paid another debt.