

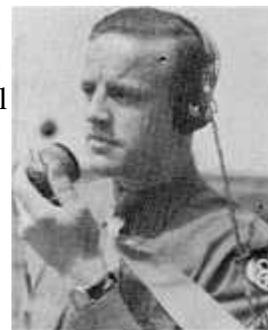
Home Was Never Like This

The following story was prepared by the 447th Public Relations Office at Rattlesden in the Spring of 1945, and gives us a picture of the work of "Flying Control".



Too often an officer or enlisted man whose contact with Flying Control is either fleeting or non-existent forms the impression that tower activities are inevitably humdrum and routine—that they are all cut from the same pattern. Because procedures are necessarily standard there is a tendency to regard the tower chiefly as an advantageous post from which to observe operational take-offs and returns and as a convenient source of information regarding the location of aircraft, the length of the runways at Nether Wallop, and the possibility of securing a ride to Scotland when that next furlough begins.

The fact is that Flying Control is all of this and more. During a twenty-four hour tour of duty at the Control Tower one never knows when the unexpected will occur to change a reasonably quiet Control Room into a bed-lam of ringing telephones, blaring radio speakers, and scurrying personnel. Some operational missions become airborne smoothly. Others are apparently designed by Fate to gray the hair of every person in the tower, whether he belongs to Flying Control, Group Operations, Group Engineering, or any other section.



One of those missions which had as their main objective the destruction of factories which were supplying the Luftwaffe with planes and aircraft parts was a good example of

the "rough" type of take-off. Visibility was less than 500 yards and, as each Fortress rolled down the runway, it was visible from the tower for only a fraction of a second as it passed a point on the runway nearest to the tower. The Airfield Controllers on duty in the caravan were unable to determine when an aircraft was actually airborne and the recon car was stationed at the opposite end of the runway for this reason. As each airplane roared overhead the recon man reported that fact to the tower and the caravan by field telephone. Everything appeared to be going smoothly when, suddenly, the recon car cracked out a warning that a plane was taxiing slowly along the runway in use and immediately followed this with a report that the aircraft had stopped on the runway near the perimeter track. Another Fortress at full throttle had already passed the tower and the tension among the personnel present mounted perceptibly. The RVT operator had already held up all further take-offs and the caravan was flashing a red light, but every man in the tower was listening apprehensively to the dwindling sound of the engines of that rolling aircraft and trying to lift it into the air by sheer effort of will. If a man's mind can be said to sigh, then the mind of every man of that listening group sighed with relief when the recon car radioed: "That last plane just cleared the obstruction. Everything's okay."

This incident, like most others, had no serious results. But it might have, and it shows that tower personnel have more than an impersonal interest in so routine an occurrence as an operational mission take-off. Not everything which happens to destroy the alleged peace and quiet of the Control Tower is the result of actual flying. Nor is there any guarantee that the hours of darkness will always be available for reading the latest best-seller or writing to some envious GI in Assam about that last pass to London.

The night of 20 February, 1945, had been progressing according to plan, as the experts say, and all was in readiness for the morning's mission by 0400 of the 21st. The three-hour period remaining before take-off time seemed ideal for reading, writing, or just relaxing. It proved to be a nightmare for practically every department on the base.

At 0409 the Duty Airman of the Watch laid aside his novel and reached for a peeling telephone with the muttered hope that this wouldn't be a red alert. It wasn't, but the words he heard drove all thoughts of reading from his mind.

"There's a fire at the Bomb Dump!"

Call the Fire Department, MP's, Group Operations, Group Engineering, and all the rest! Wake the crash crew and the alert crew! Get things moving and hope that the Dump doesn't go up!

The weather observer and the R/T operator open the blackout curtains and it is at once obvious that the fire is not in the dump but in a hardstand cluster across the airfield. But it is a hell of a fire and most A/C in the cluster are fully loaded in preparation for the imminent mission.

Five minutes after the telephone call the first plane explodes and henceforth everyone in the tower is busy



answering telephoned inquiries. A few minutes later the recon car reaches the fire area to report on the situation by radio. It turns into the mouth of the cluster just as the second aircraft explodes and the force of the blast throws the car into the mud near the perimeter track. Neither of the two men in the recon is injured but four firemen are taken to the hospital by the nearby medics.

The tower is a hive of activity by this time but the telephones must be partly ignored because the recon re-ports that seven planes seem to be afire and that the conflagration appears to be out of control. The Duty Flying Control Officer decides to call all neighboring bases for assistance, the R/T operator immediately calls them in turn on VHF and darky. Telephone contact is also made with nearby bases. Bury, Great Ashfield, Wattisham, Sudbury, and Lavenham instantly dispatch extra fire-fighting equipment and Lavenham sends additional ambulances because the tower has no way of knowing at this time how many casualties there are.

Within two hours the flames are brought under control and there is nothing left for Flying Control to do except to make the necessary reports. But the mission has been scrubbed, aircraft moved by Group Engineering from the vicinity of the fire are parked on runways, many hardstands are unserviceable, and the perimeter track is barred to everyone for nearly half its length. These things alone produce difficulties which will plague the tower for several days.



The lone bright spot of the morning is that, unlike a previous hardstand explosion precisely ten months earlier, there have been no fatalities in this disaster. If the reader still thinks that nothing much ever happens in the tower, let him put himself in the place of one of the tower personnel.

You are an Airman of the Watch and it is the night of the day after D-Day. The ETR of the day's mission is 2302 but the formation is late and it is close to 2330 as the aircraft approach the field. At 2325 3rd Air Division Flying Control (then 3rd Bomb Division) sets up a conference embracing all its Groups and gives you a red air raid warning, informing you that enemy aircraft are trailing the formations back to their bases. You pass this word to the Duty Flying Control Officer. He informs the Commanding Officer and the Gp. Opns. officers who are present, and alerts the field. The formation is now almost over the field; as you sit with the telephone glued to your ear you think that the returning Fortresses make inviting targets for intruders as they fly on with all landing lights blazing.

3rd Air Division then announces that there are enemy aircraft in the vicinity and orders all formations to extinguish their lights and to fly west for twenty minutes. You so inform the Flying Control Officer and the CO who are standing beside you. You are somewhat excited but try not to show it. Then you are pleased to note that this information has the same effect on the officers. The R/T operators broadcast instructions to the formation,

preceded and followed by the warning "Bandits! Bandits!" Some of the planes extinguish their lights but others, apparently not understanding the urgency of the message, continue to come over the field fully lighted although the field is completely blacked-out except for the lights glaring forth from the tower. The curtains of some of the tower windows are not drawn in order that the tower may observe how the planes are reacting to the broadcast. Division warns that hostiles are approaching Mendlesham ... you wish that the curtains were drawn.

The R/T operators redouble their efforts to have the aircraft turn off their lights and, one by one, they comply. You are relieved when the formation disappears into the west acknowledging a message to the effect that all 1st Division fields will be lighted but that they are to land only in case of emergency.

Your relief is short-lived. Other formations are moving west above you and Division says that a B-24 has just been shot down over Mendlesham. Additional information concerning hostile activity begins to pour into your ear now and you work feverishly to put it on paper and also to relay the highlights to the CO and the Duty Flying Control Officer orally. It's quite a trick because the voice of the Division Flying Control Officer seems thousands of miles away. A Ju 88 heads toward Bury at 300 feet and you think that you've had enough excitement for one night and that it would be nice to go away somewhere. You think that the tower stands a fair chance of being strafed. You hear the Tower NCO, clearance clerk, and WT operators patiently repeating explanations of why the formation hasn't landed to interested persons on the telephones, and you yearn for a few minutes or comparative silence.

Shortly after midnight the situation is further complicated by the approach of a RAF formation at 10,000 feet. It becomes practically impossible to distinguish between friendly and enemy aircraft. You cross your fingers.

In the meantime, your own formation has flown westward for the prescribed twenty minutes and is now re-turning. Hostile activity gradually decreases and finally ceases in your area. 3rd Air Division authorizes the landing of the formation and the first B-17 touches down at 0031 on June 8th. The "all clear" comes through at last.

But your troubles are just beginning. Eleven aircraft have not returned to base and it is for the tower to attempt to locate them. Almost countless telephone conversations finally elicit the information that all have landed at other bases. Both shortage of fuel and the lure of lighted fields have proven too much for weary pilots.

You are now thoroughly fatigued, but you console yourself with the thought that the morning's take-off will probably be late and you will have a chance to recover your breath. However, 3rd Air Division insists that all aircraft away from base be immediately recalled and you begin to lose faith. Then Group Operations advises you that the morning's mission will comprise twenty-four aircraft and that take-off is at 0440. You forget about losing faith and lose your mind instead. You curse everything and everybody. You feel that if you had a trench-knife you'd surely run amuck, but you set

about recalling the absentees while the other men make preparations for the mission's departure. The Duty Flying Control Officer works on recalling aircraft until he goes to Main Briefing. He is as harassed as the rest of you, there is no longer a thruppence-worth of pure sanity in the tower.

Fortunately for you the take-off of June 8th is smooth, but the wayward airplanes continue to arrive at intervals until 0608, when the last aircraft from the operation of June 7th lands at base. Then you all sit speechless until your relief arrives. This article does not pretend to be a comprehensive coverage of Flying Control activities. Its purpose is solely to give some idea of a few of the events with which the tower must deal without notice. Tragedy sometimes strikes swiftly and unexpectedly as it did on 2 October, 1944 when two aircraft of the 447th Group collided at 14,000 feet while the group was forming. As one Fortress hurtled toward the ground in a vertical dive and the other spun down almost as swiftly, Flying Control hopefully dispatched MP's, crash trucks, and ambulances -- but only one crewman survived.

Comic occurrences occasionally provide a welcome interlude in the ordinary course of business. There was one such occasion on a day in August, 1944, when the brakes of a B-17 ceased to function just as the aircraft touched down. It swerved from the runway, washed out its landing gear in a ditch, and came to rest exactly forty feet from the tower-headed directly towards it. Flying Control personnel who were on duty at the time will never forget the sight of several officers bailing out of the tower over the balcony railing. The tower personnel themselves would have liked to leave but could not. There were no casualties in either the plane or the tower.



42-31777, August 2, 1944

If the above incidents convince the skeptic that Flying Control duty is not always monotonous and leisurely they have served their purpose. Admittedly Flying Control duty certainly is not hazardous in the sense that combat duty is, but it may reasonably be described on occasion as "rough in the ETO."