

101
NIGHTS
RAY OLLIS

Edited by
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101 Nights

Briefing

This is the story not of the few but of the many; the true story of Bomber Command. A special security release has enabled me to base the story on the hitherto secret activities of 101 Squadron. This is not a squadron history. Some events, times and one significant code-name have been changed either for security or art.

All the characters are imaginary and have no connection whatsoever with their true-life counterparts. I know of no true instance where a flyer was charged with sabotage, where a flight commander was posted from the squadron during a tour, or where a German 'Special' baled out over his homeland.

Fort Smith, Kenya, Ray Ollis

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Hyde

It will be strange flying with another crew. I had grown used to our shower. My new squadron is 101, based at Ludford Magna, right on top of the Wolds. They've got Lancasters already. I'm to navigate for a Squadron Leader Parke: he's B Flight commander. I've heard that 101 are on some new special duties lark. I hope not. Special duties usually mean you stick your neck out even further.

At times I almost wish I were in that comfortable hospital with you. It gets a chap a jinx reputation being an only flying survivor ...¹

Nothing in Vincent Farlow's letter to his ex-skipper showed how bewildered he felt arriving at his new squadron. Previously he had moved with his crew and they had bolstered each other. Here, he was alone.

Pausing, he looked around at the tiny village of Ludford Magna.

'If this is *great* Ludford,' he reflected, 'then *little* Ludford must be non-existent.'

A forty-minute walk past the village, down a path that forded the creek, over three fields of waving grain and half a mile around the aerodrome perimeter brought him to flying control: a fortress of stone made brittle with walls of glass.

Above its observation roof was the revolving searchlight, stilled now by the embarrassing brilliance of day. Beside it, three spinning cups measured wind-speed. Their message was repeated on two dials inside control; one upstairs in the control-room itself, another in the ground floor Meteorological section.

Vincent Farlow came to the door marked 'Met' and frowned, undecided. His indecision did not seem to arise from nervousness. He was tall and blond and his blue eyes had a twinkle as frank as a puppy's tail-wag; there was no trace of nervousness in him. His pause was more a serious, deliberate reckoning to decide the right move. He gave three firm raps on the word 'Met' and entered confidently.

His glance took in the Waafs sitting at two plotting tables, the met officer leaning against the teleprinter, and came to rest on a

squadron leader with pilot's wings who sat on the desk, dangling his legs and grinning at a joke he was recounting.

Vincent saluted and, because he was the only one not laughing, waited awkwardly until the squadron leader finished speaking. Then, still smiling, the met officer asked: 'Can I help you, Flight?'

'Yessir. I was told if I asked in flying control you could direct me to B Flight.'

The squadron leader hopped down off the table. 'I'm going to B Flight now,' he said. 'Whom do you want?'

'The Flight Commander, sir. I'm his new navigator.'

'Well, you clot, why didn't you say so?' The pilot seized Vincent's hand heartily. 'That makes me your skipper. Parke's the name. Really delighted to see you.'

By the time the two men reached B Flight Vincent had warmed to the idea of having Parke as his pilot. Patrick Parke looked a reassuring genealogical paradox with almost prehistoric features: broad, jutting forehead, full lips, heavy jaw and strong, prominent teeth, but with a strength of purpose and sense of humour in his manner that made him as modern as tomorrow. Here would be a jolly, roistering companion, loud and lovable; or an enemy dark-lowering and fierce as the jungles from which he seemed to have sprung.

As they entered Parke's office seven men who had been waiting hurried to attention. Parke's eye sought the wearer of pilot's wings. 'Hello, who are you chaps?'

'A new crew, sir. My name's Buckley.'²

'Ah, Buckley. I expected you earlier.' Parke moved across and sat on the corner of his desk.

Vincent watched approvingly. Here was an easy-mannered leader. Yet nothing in Parke's manner suggested that he would brook a breath of disrespect. Here was perfect informality. Even his brusque 'I expected you earlier' combined unquestionable authority with a nice friendliness.

'Look out the windows at those Lancs,' Parke said, waving towards the aerodrome. 'See anything strange about 'em?'

Vincent had been curious about the additional antennae which

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made the 101 Squadron Lancasters differ from any Lanc he had previously seen.³

Parke looked quickly at Buckley's silent crew and continued: 'They've got extra radio. Lots of it. This squadron is the RAF counter to German night-fighter radar. The Germans are too short of radar to mount sets in individual night-fighters as we do.⁴ Instead they have giant radar sets called Wurtzburgs on the ground. They work in pairs, one Wurtzburg tracking a German fighter while the other searches for our bods. When they find us they plot our position and radio a course to the fighter so that he can intercept us. Now do you see why we carry extra radio? So that we can intercept those messages and counter them. We carry an extra wireless-operator, too, who speaks German as well as the Germans themselves. In fact, many of our chaps *are* Germans. These Specials, as we call them, have a receiver and a transmitter. As soon as they pick up a radio-message they tune their transmitters to the German frequency and, before the German on the ground can tell the fighter what course to fly, they transmit from a microphone in one of our engines all the clatter of a Rolls-Royce Merlin on the wavelength that the poor bloody German is trying to listen to.'⁵

Vincent laughed and Parke gave a grim grin in reply.

'That's not all. Our Special then eases off his jamming and, using the call-sign he's just overheard, gives the fighter false directions. Often there's a ginormous flap between the German on the ground and the German fighter in the air, with the German-speaking Special in our plane stirring it all he can. By this time the bomber and the fighter are so far apart that the Wurtzburg boys downstairs have to start all over again and we have frustrated another interception.'

Parke looked around. 'Of course,' he continued, 'we also do the work of a normal bomber: full bomb-loads, usual targets, the lot. You chaps hardly know you've got a Special with you.'

Parke paused again and Vincent said quickly, 'But we must constantly break radio silence. They could pick up 101 Squadron aircraft using ordinary radio-direction sets.'

'Yes,' said Parke calmly. 'That's why this squadron wants very

good gunners. In protecting the bomber force as a whole, we attract fighters on to ourselves. Any questions?’

Nobody spoke. Each man was repeating mentally: *We attract fighters on to ourselves.*⁶

‘Well, that’s the story, chaps,’ Parke finished breezily. ‘Do your job, stay alive, and we’ll all be very happy. Welcome to 101 Squadron and the best of luck.’

The interview was over. Parked moved into his chair. ‘Take your crew to dispersals, Buckley. Introduce yourselves to Chiefy Mitchell the mechanic and ask to look over a Lanc. Touch nothing but learn all you can. Be here again at 1400. Farlow, wait here.’

Buckley saluted and left smartly with his crew.

‘Well, Farlow,’ said Parke, lolling back and resting his size-ten shoes on the desk, ‘sit down and tell me about yourself. First of all, what’s your Christian name?’

Flight Sergeant Joe Trinket, a lanky, wiry, grey-eyed gunner, nimble of body and wit, murmured ‘Grog’s the shot!’ and drank half a pint at a gulp. There was silence between the three men for a moment until Joe said, ‘Well, will we talk about it now or just wait till it crops up?’⁷

‘No, we won’t talk about it,’ said the oldest of the three, a tubby, clumsy little man whose balding head contrasted with the youthful faces around him. Sergeant Bill Graham was a Yorkshireman, blunt and direct. ‘We’ll talk about this new nav. How’ll we recognize him?’

‘Skipper says he’s tall and fair with an ‘O’ wing, and he’s got a BEM.’⁸

‘How’d he get that?’

‘Dunno, mate,’ said Joe Trinket, his accent leaving no doubt that he was Australian. ‘He wouldn’t talk about it and the documents just say he got it in Crete – no details.’⁹

Joe gulped his drink then turned to the trio’s third member and said, ‘Your shout, Yarpi.’

‘Hell, man,’ protested Yarpi, raising his pale eyebrows so high that his long, thin face looked even thinner. ‘Why my shout? It’s

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only our second drink, man.' His voice was shrill and indignant.

'Because if it's Bill's turn to buy the last drink then we know we'll get a last drink.'

Yarpi flushed, ordered the drinks, and got back onto a safer subject. 'This chap's got the luck of a Parke navigator anyway. I hear he wandered into the mess, asked a chap to play him table-tennis, and who did he pick but the squadron champion.'

'And got trounced, eh?'

'Well no, man. I heard he won.'

Joe pointed to the door. 'Then ask him. This looks like him coming in now.'

Joe presented himself to Vincent and introduced Yarpi and Bill. Then he asked: 'Ready for a night out?'

Vincent wasn't sure. 'Really, I should do some work.'

'Work! Work is the downfall of the drinking classes. Besides you've gotta meet the crew here. Skipper's orders. The only other NCO member is Roger North the engineer. Attractive chap, Roger.'

'Attractive?' echoed Vincent. 'Then doubtless you call him 'Magnetic' North.'

The group groaned and Joe continued: 'Call him a nice chap then. He's now with the bloke who usually flies Special with us: young Johnnie Muller. They're in Grimtown.'

'Grimtown?'

'Grimsby; our leave town. Roger's trying to put Johnnie on to a popsie.'

'Why can't Johnnie find his own popsie?'

Joe smiled and said: 'Johnnie loves poppies but poppies don't love Johnnie. I've put him on to some of the surest things in Lincolnshire and still he's missed out. I've even lingered until I felt it was indiscreet to stay another instant. But Johnnie seems doomed to be a sexual sprog forever. But still we keep trying and Roger's trying tonight.'

Joe drained his drink. 'The other guy,' he finished, 'is Krink. Krink Krynkiwski, our wireless operator.¹⁰ A Flying Officer and, as you may recognize from the old Ukrainian name, an American. He and the skipper are due here any minute.'

The pub was crowded by the time it fell Vincent's turn to buy drinks. While he waited for bar-service he eyed his crew. Krink proved to be stockily built with a round, baby face and curly hair. Krink said little but sat quietly in a corner entangled with a lithe blonde night-fighter.

Roger, who had arrived with the news that Johnnie was fixed up with a reliable popsie old enough to be his mother, had slight, aquiline features. About thirty, he did not seem old in the way Bill did. To these youngsters any flyer nearing thirty was old.

Vincent eyed Joe calculatingly; 'Noisy, yes; but not shallow. Yarp van Rijn the South African: hmmm. Doubtful. Seems sly. Sloppy mouth and shifty eyes. I'll watch him. But Parke was the salt of the earth. Probably just a good-natured nobody back in Ireland but a man who thrived during war. Permanent RAF; a born leader and, he'd vouch, a sound pilot. All the regulars were. Bill Graham was a contradiction. Rock-like in some ways, yet he seemed nervous. Flak-happy?'¹¹ Perhaps. This crew had just had a dicey do; the navigator he was replacing had been killed.'

Vincent picked up the tankards and headed back. In front of their table a giggling girl blocked his way. 'Excuse me,' he said, but she did not move, whereupon Parke seized her around the waist, and lifted her bodily aside.

'Hey!' she protested. 'You've got a hide!'

'But of course,' said Vincent, distributing drinks. 'Squadron Leader Parke has all the hide of the entire Parke family. That's why they call him 'Hyde Parke'.¹²

The pun was appreciated. There was immediate approval and it was suggested that Parke should be known as 'Hyde' hereafter. He seemed delighted, and proposed that Roger might also accept renaming at Vincent's hand, and be called 'Magnetic'.

'Grab 'em, you blokes!' shouted Joe. 'Here's a rag! We're gonna christen Roger and the skip!'

The table rocked as the men struggled to restrain their two crew-mates. Parke and Roger were soon secured in their seats, laughing with some misgivings at their imminent christening. Their caps were found, part-filled with beer, and plunked squarely

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on their heads to cries of 'I dub thee 'Magnetic' and 'Arise, Sir Hyde, sir,' while the foamy beer ran down their faces and trickled stickily under their collars.

There was a great deal of noise and it was not until the rumpus was subsiding that Vincent noticed a short, swarthy sergeant standing watching them, not only unamused but positively miserable. Johnnie Muller said a sad and serious 'hello'.

'Johnnie,' Magnetic said. 'You haven't missed out again? Not with Bag Bertha!'

Johnnie nodded and glanced floorwards. His big eyes, sad and shy as a newborn heifer's, were actually misty. 'She slapped my face,' he whispered.

'Bag Bertha! Slapped your face? Are you sure you didn't faint and she was trying to revive you?'

Magnetic looked sidelong at Johnnie. 'There's something mysterious about you, chum. Why, Bag Bertha wouldn't take offence at Jack the Ripper.'

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There were a few shuffles, a few coughs, then expectant silence. The entire end wall was covered by curtains. The Wingco¹ pulled a cord, the curtains parted from the centre to reveal a map, and the tightly-stretched red cord which snaked deep into Germany.

'Leipzig', said the Wingco.²

One hundred and ninety-six lips made one hundred and ninety-six low moans. No target is ever received with silence. One voice was heard to suggest an improbable feat that the Wingco might perform with Leipzig, and there was a general nervous titter.

The Wing Commander generalised on the attack. A red-haired Waaf officer Vincent had seen in Met told the weather story. Gunnery leader, wireless leader, bombing leader, engines leader, Specials leader the Hon. Holbrook-Hardwicke; all gave directions to their own particular charges.³ Orders, tips, advice, a word of encouragement and a wish of good luck. The navigation leader, his own section busy elsewhere plotting winds and tracks, came

to advise on navigational hopes and hazards and to synchronise watches.⁴

Then the Wingco summed up. 'It's a 4 Group bash tonight.⁵ But they want Wurtzburg cover, so we fly too. One more point: this squadron, or rather our anti-Wurtzburg function, is to have a name. We are to be known as the XYZ squadron. Command say it stands for X-ray Your Zebra. Doesn't make sense to me but there you are, security measure I suppose. But I want you to take it as your title. I'm coming with you again tonight. Make me proud of XYZ.'

Dusk and the perpetual mist quickly hid Ludford Magna behind and England, fading below, became more misty than a dream. Her fields were drifting haze, her rivers imagery, her towns merest mirage. All that was behind seemed misleading memory; only this hurtling, roaring life in the air was real. The dream that was behind could not be true. There was no fireside calm, no bar-room warmth, no friends, no sympathy. The earth below was nothing but a platform for guns and a launching-ground for fighters. The flyers looked down with loathing at the wrinkled sea and hostile coast that crept towards them.

They were to cross between Boulogne and Calais: both defended.

'Flak port bow high,' said Yarpi in mid-upper.⁶

'Calais,' said Vincent.

'Flak starb'd bow level,' said Bill in the nose.

'Boulogne,' said Vincent. 'Good. We're between them.'

'Here's a perfect pinpoint, nav,' said Joe. 'When I give the word we're crossing the coast slap over Cap Gris-Nez. Dead over it – now!'

'Then we're bang on time,' said Vincent. 'Thanks, rear gunner.'

Looking down over the port nose Hyde smiled to himself. They seemed to have settled down to work smoothly together. Farlow was starting well, anyway. Cap Gris-Nez was dead on track.

'Nav to skipper. At 2002 alter course four degrees port to 092 compass, and reduce airspeed five knots to 210 indicated. That'll make groundspeed 257 and ETA point F: 2018.'⁷

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'Is that early or late, nav?'

'Bang on time, skip. If it's right.'

'Won't a port alteration bring us into the Ruhr?'⁸

'No, skip. We were slightly south, away from the Ruhr. We are now converging on point F.'

Five miles away on the port bow, flak confirmed the position of the Ruhr. Suddenly, amid the dancing flashes, a larger fireball flared, glowed, for an instant lighting the countryside for miles around; then darkened.

Somebody's bombload hit by flak.

Unsatiated, the flak flickered on; delicate flashes as fast as sight, every twinkle a white-hot thunderbolt scattering death like a grindstone scatters sparks. They burst in threes, triangles of tragedy, each group representing a battery on the ground, each battery directed by a Wurtzburg.⁹

Listening amidships, Johnnie Muller could not outwit these saboteurs of sheltering night. The wind-fleet shells sped unalterably upwards.

It would be the same with the fighters, too – open season for hunters and every fox painted white – were it not for 101's twenty-eight Specials rallying at the German 'Tally-ho', turning the tantalizing scent into an infuriating stink. Twenty-eight nightingales, not killing enemies but saving airmen's lives.

The flak was dead abeam now. Coming up from Bonn, Vincent took a bearing, plotted a reciprocal position line from the city on his chart and checked his ground speed. Treacherous even to its maker, flak betrayed the homes it defended, providing navigation facts that sped the bombers on to Leipzig.

The flyers watched the flak drifting behind under their port wing, almost mesmerized by its fatal beauty. A blossoming ribbon of flame unfurled across the sky, lighting the Halifax that fed it.¹⁰ Another flourished suddenly nearby; another plane, another crew, another fiery finger pointing home. Then, as if they had rehearsed twin suicide, both planes fell away gracefully in arcs of fire.

The crew of Q-Queenie did not speak.¹¹ To them it was a log entry: '2006, two Halifaxes and one unidentified aircraft destroyed

over Bonn 3 miles port', wrote Vincent. Three miles. Less than a minute's flying, and those three crews had strayed just fifty seconds too near to death.

Turning northwards now, around the Ruhr for a spoof attack, the force would head straight for a German city. German defences, it was hoped, would muster their fighters to protect the spoof target, only to see the attackers veer around and fly by just out of range. This forced fighters into the air too soon, wasted their petrol and, RAF planners hoped, caused them to land and refuel just when the real attack opened.

Johnnie Muller confirmed it. 'Special to crew. Increased fighter activity.'

'Muck 'em about, Johnnie!'

It always delighted the 101 Squadron aviators to picture the consternation they caused. Fighters anxiously airborne, waiting for orders that never got through. Guns, chock loaded and hot for the fray, but always pointing into empty air.

Over Eastern France and around the Ruhr the weather had been fairer than forecast. But now, as they flew deeper into Germany, it was growing worse. They had seen nothing but cloud below them for a hundred miles. No pinpoints here. Nothing but stars to point the way.¹²

Suddenly: 'Rear-gunner to crew. Bandit! Port quarter up.'

'What is it?'

'Me 110, skip. Six hundred yards on parallel course. I don't think he's seen us but prepare to corkscrew port.'¹³

Seconds dragged by. No sound save the drum of five-thousand horsepower and the rushing, two-hundred-mile-an-hour wind.

'Where is he, gunner?'

'Still there, skip. Five hundred yards.'

'Mid-upper. Search starb'd.'

It was not unknown for one German fighter to fly where it could be seen, even with all its lights on, while a second fighter attacked from the other side hoping that preoccupation with the first fighter would leave the prey a sitting shot.¹⁴

'Still there. Four hundred yards.'

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It was not RAF policy to open fire. A single burst of tracer lighting up the sky would bring every bloodhound from fifty miles around, barking at their presence and calling the pack to destroy them.

‘Nav to skipper. We have time to spare to fly a dog-leg.’

This was a manoeuvre designed for wasting time if flying ahead of schedule. The aircraft would alter course 60 degrees starboard then, after a minute, 120 degrees back again, flying two sides of an equilateral triangle. In this way it took two minutes to fly to a point which would otherwise be reached in one minute. To do it successfully now would place the fighter three miles in front; more comfortable than having him 400 yards behind.

Danger accompanied the move, however; should the fighter see them and attack while they were turning they would be left at a tactical disadvantage. Hyde weighed the wisdom of evasion against the mortal risks of either altering course away or remaining close to combat.

‘Okay, nav. We’ll try it. Rear-gunner! Shout if he starts a curve of pursuit and I’ll dive hard port.’¹⁵

The big bomber slid around quietly onto the new course. The fighter quickly dwindled into the darkness. All eyes strained to see through the night that hid them.

Nothing.

They altered course back towards track and, a minute later, swung again towards the target.

‘Nav to skipper. Better speed up a bit and regain some of that lost minute. New airspeed 215 indicated.’

‘Engineer to skipper. We’ll eat petrol at that speed. Should we alter boost?’

The engines settled on to a new, higher note. The crew returned to routine work. The German fighter, still concentrating perhaps on nothing but his prankish radio which Johnnie could beguile, flew on unheeding three dark miles away.

Below them, now, the cloud was thicker and darker than before. Above, the stars rocked gently with the movement of the aircraft, quietly defying the sextants down below to shoot them with that

arrow through the heart which gives the perfect fix. Vincent's aerial sextant, marking horizontal with only a dancing, spirit-level bubble, took sixty separate sights and reduced them to a single average. Yet still the reading could not be trusted nearer than a few wide miles: the difference in bombing between a direct hit and a wild miss.

Bright stars above. Thick cloud below. And all around more than two hundred aircraft. But nothing to be seen, not a damned thing. Were they on track? Q-Queenie still hit occasional slipstreams indicating they were in some sort of concentration.¹⁶ But the night that hid them from attack concealed their target too.

The met forecast had misplaced the area of good visibility. They should have bombed south-east of the Ruhr. Visibility over Coblenz was perfect. They could have bombed successfully there and been half-way home by now.

'Five minutes to TOT,' said Vincent. Time-on-target in five minutes and not a sign of action. Not a flare, not a few early bomb-flashes, not even any flak. Too often it was like this. War by guesswork.

'H-Hour!' announced Vincent at last. 'The attack should open now.'

Ahead of Q-Queenie the leading bombers released their loads, bombing blind on ETA.¹⁷ A dull glow showed under a wide expanse of cloud, and instantly the night went wild with flak. Preferring not to shoot at first rather than betray their position, the Huns had nothing to lose now and opened fire. Q-Queenie lurched from the blast wave of a nearby flak burst.

Hyde dropped the nose a few degrees. A shallow dive through the target got clear of danger faster. The ASI showed 240 knots; with the following wind they would be tracking over the target with a groundspeed well over 300 mph.

'Five, four, three, two, one, *now!*' counted Vincent. Bill Graham pressed the tit. 'Bombs away!'

Another thirty seconds Hyde held her, dead ahead, hurtling in that shallow dive. The sky around and behind them bubbling with molten shrapnel and dotted with burning aircraft.