

Bomber Ferry - continued

The four motors rev up, the bomber hurtles down the field. The buildings stream past, the boundaries flash below it. It holds on into the west, inching up into the sky, then begins a wide careful turn which brings it on course, heading out over the Atlantic.

In the aircraft the pilot and copilot are busy with retraction gear, stabilizers, fuel adjustments, a dozen things that must be done at once. The radio operator begins to take bearings on known radio beacons. An hour later, Captain Lilly takes his sheet and compares it with the navigator's chart. He is on his course.

"Radio silence."

From now on the operator will send only pre-arranged signals, at intervals so the Canadian base may follow their progress. Sometime during the night a station on the British Isles will take them over. Sometimes the captain will ask for bearings. He will not ask unless he needs them, for other people are listening too. An enemy station intercepted a request for bearings and obligingly gave them—false ones, which brought the bomber over the coast of France before she discovered her position.

The three great menaces of the North Atlantic are bad weather, icing conditions and carburetor icing. The pilots watch unceasingly the temperature of the outside air. If it changes before the weather map predicts a change, then there has been a change of front, a change in the wind. Probably a storm is blowing up. Sometimes ice will form so quickly that the de-icers cannot break it off. One bomber got back to Newfoundland with 6,000 pounds of ice on it.

Flight LX 12 is flying between layers of overcast now. The stars have disappeared, there is nothing but darkness above and below. There comes a sibilant crackling against the windows, the windshield turns grey and shimmering.

"Frost crystals. We'd better go up."

As the aircraft climbs, the pilots watch the gauges which measure the temperature of the carburetors. A drop might mean condensation and ice which would stop the motors.

"Temperature falling."

Captain Lilly increases the manifold pressure which increases the heat around the carburetors. The pilots keep an eye on the wings. There is a sheen on them, some rime is forming. The bomber slants upward to the higher, drier air. In spite of the cabin heaters, it is getting cold. At 12,000 feet the captain orders oxygen masks for everybody.

At first pilots were not always

careful about using oxygen—but not after they saw some experiments in the McGill laboratories which showed them what the lack of it would do. The captain tells the co-pilot to take over and slips from his seat. He stops beside each one of the crew, talks for a moment. It is part of his job to know if they are alert—or if the altitude is taking too great a toll.

He remembers a thing that happened on a bomber. One of the crew left his place to go to the toilet in the tail, the aircraft ran into icing conditions and had to climb. Some time later the crew member was found unconscious on the floor with one hand against the skin of the aircraft. Part of his hand had to be amputated for it was frozen.

Flight LX 12 breaks through the overcast. The captain gets to work with the bubble sextant. This is the "astro" check. These shots taken from a moving aircraft thousands of feet above sea level will give him bearings correct to within twentyfive miles. With these he checks their position on the navigator's chart.

No Turning Back

NOW THEY are approaching the famous “point of no return.” Four hours and a few minutes—depending on the wind—off the coast lies the critical meridian for the Lockheed Hudsons. Once across this line they must go on, no matter what storms or mishaps they encounter, because they have not enough gas to get back. The line is less definite for the Liberators with their greater range, but for every loaded bomber somewhere over the empty ocean there is still a point of no return.

They are well over halfway now, the weather is good and the air dry. LX12 drops down to 9,000 feet. The crew take off their oxygen masks, i They relax, talk, drink mugs of hot coffee. The radio operator tells of an incident of the last trip. They had a passenger aboard and they had put him to bed in a cot in the tail. Later they had to climb to escape icing conditions, and afterward strange noises began to issue from the tail. They found their passenger sitting up, singing and trying to get up. In his sleep the oxygen mask had slipped off, now he showed all the symptoms of a happy drunk. They had to tie him down until he recovered.

The crew see they are flying over a floor of white cloud—and cloud is a very handy thing to have around when you are coming into the patrol area. The tail wind has pushed them steadily. They are nearing the coast ahead of schedule. The crew members act as lookouts. There is little danger of interception by enemy fighters—they are too far north— but there is one chance in ten thousand of being spotted by one of the big Focke Wulfe Kuriers (German patrol bombers).

“Aircraft on the starboard beam!” Everyone has a look. It is a long way off, it is not much more than a black dot, but it suggests the hornet look of a fighter.

“Might be one of ours. Might be a German weather plane . . .” The Germans send out fighters stripped to the last essential, even of their guns, to collect data for their weather maps . . . “Guess we’ll go downstairs anyway. It’s time we were getting under this ceiling.”

They find a hole and LX12 drops through. Now they are in the clear with wisps of mist about them. There is a land below them, grey-green from their height, with the grey water all around it.

The new members of the crew crowd the windows, they can’t see enough of it. They fly on toward a line on the horizon.

The line on the horizon is Britain. One of the crew stands ready with the Aldis lamp. They are challenged off the coast and reply with the signal of the day. They are in a prescribed area protected by anti-aircraft batteries and balloon barrages, and they must fly strictly according to orders. Movable balloon barrages, with the balloons hidden in the clouds, put beads of sweat on a pilot’s brow. They see the patchwork of an old civilization, houses and church spires and meadows and clear winding roads. There is a field below them so well-hidden that they do not recognize it until they are right over it. The faithful motors change their note as they are throttled back. LX12, her long flight over, lets down. Bumbledy-bumbledy-bumbledy go her three wheels on the runway.

Another bomber for Britain.