

WIRELESS OPERATOR

by

Bob Baldwin & Max Kinnings

Cast list:

John – wireless operator

Voices of crew members:

Terry – pilot

Alf – navigator

Tim – engineer

Scotty – mid upper gunner

Dai – bomb aimer / front gunner

Spooky – rear gunner

Voices via radio:

German radio controller

Master bomber

Maude (Hazel Control WAAF)

Voices:

Kate

Kate's Mum

Introduction

Wireless Operator is a story in eleven scenes taking us through the trauma of a single eight and a half hour night-time bombing mission over Germany in 1945. Apart from the Wireless Operator, we will see no other crew member. We will only hear them.

Audio

This version of Wireless Operator is a sixty minute story taking us through the trauma of a single mission in which ethics and morality are explored, and the roots of PTSD are laid bare. The audio is vital, without it the story doesn't exist. The deep aural environment describes the Wireless Operator's audio environment but also the escalation of tension.

They are flying a jewel of engineering, a monstrous iron beast, fast, deadly, the most sophisticated plane ever built. But it's a machine and sounds of mechanical structural strain such as the opening of bomb doors are close and resonant: metal scraping on metal, some of it sonorous, most of it not.

Apart from the dialogue, the dominant sound throughout is engine noise and warfare. The Lancaster Bomber was driven by the Merlin engine, a rich vibrant and syncopated twelve piston Rolls Royce engine with 14,000 individual parts. It's audio components are dense and complex, making a very familiar and unique sound. And there are four of them.

The Wireless Operator's deep aural environment is complex. He is hyper-conscious, each sound of war and machine means something and it could be fatal. In moments when he is deafened by explosions, we share the cacophony of the 'silence' of his head. That too could be fatal.

Each scene also offers reflective interpretive moments.

The script is eleven scenes of a single eight hour mission. Each of the eleven scenes offers a different sonic landscape and have its own narrative demands such as engine changes during manoeuvres like diving, climbing, feathering the engines in and out of syncopation or when they lose one or enter cloud etc.

Beyond the four Merlin engines, the wind whistling through the bullet holes in the fuselage, the electric fizz of St Elmo's fire and being 'bracketed' by flak, we hear the sound of ice falling from the wings, other bombers close by, and from 10,000 feet below, huge bombs exploding as a city burns...

The body of the sound track will include subliminal Sub Sonic frequencies to reinforce the tension. The final mix should feel LOUD and disturbing but quiet enough that we can hear our Wireless Operator and also the sharp cracks of close exploding flack that cut through everything...

SCENE 1: "TAKE OFF"

Evening birdsong.

Across the aerodrome, the engines of several Lancaster are starting. Some are moving into position and some are on the runway becoming airborne.

Approaching male voices and footsteps. The momentary sound of trickling water as we hear the crew of seven men taking up their positions on board the Lancaster.

NOTE: All characters apart from The Wireless Operator, John, are voices off over the intercom.

Lights up as John clammers over the main spar to his position, sits behind the desk and takes out two square batteries from his bag. The dry battery and accumulator for the intercom fit on the top of the desk between the w/op and nav's position.

John puts on his mask and plugs into the intercom.

NOTE: every time John plugs or unplugs from the intercom, his sound changes.

TERRY

OK chaps intercom check and roll call. Bomb Aimer?

DAI (BOMB AIMER)

(Welsh)

Present and correct Skip.

TERRY

Engineer?

TIM

Right beside you, Skip.

TERRY

Navigator.

ALF (NAVIGATOR)

(West Midlands)

'Ere Skip.

John takes his position behind the radio desk. On the desk are a morse key, a radar screen, three colored lights, a transmitter and a receiver. To the side of him is an intercom switch.

There is a small window with a curtain across it adjacent to the desk and a perspex dome above.

John begins to stow his kit, starting with the parachute. He takes a sandwich box and stows it under the desk lid then takes out a notebook a radio log and a thicker code book from a bag that he carried onto the aircraft and puts them on the desk.

TERRY

Wireless Operator?

NOTE: John raises his mask to his mouth to speak as required.

JOHN

(Londoner)

I'm right here Skip.

TERRY

Mid-upper Gunner?

SCOTT (MID-UPPER GUNNER)

(Scottish)

Aye Skip.

TERRY

Rear Gunner?

SPOOKY (REAR GUNNER)

(Geordie)

Here Skipper.

John takes out a flying ration tin, opens, it, takes a barley sugar from it, unwraps it and pops it in his mouth.

John checks that the lid of the thermos is tight and stows it by his desk.

John takes a can of soup from his bag and puts it on a receiver dropper resistor under the desk.

Soup's on, lads.

JOHN

Gyro? Clutch in, cock out.

TERRY

John gives a nervous chuckle at the familiar joke.

Compass set and locked down.

TIM

OK.

TERRY

John takes out a bar of chocolate from a top pocket. He looks at it with affection.

Chocolate, worth staying alive for. I'll see you later.

JOHN

John replaces the chocolate and pats his pocket.

While the sound of a nearby Lancaster is heard accelerating down the strip, John looks out of the window to well-wishers and ground crew on the runway. He gives them a thumbs-up.

There goes Henry's kite. We're next...

TERRY

The engine noise from Henry's Lancaster as it takes off ahead of them. A pause while we hear the crew's nervous breathing over the intercom.

Mid-upper gunner, I saw you piss on the wheel, right?

TERRY (CONT'D)

That's right, Skip.

SCOTT

Maybe try standing upwind next time?

JOHN

There won't be a next time. Wireless Operator, have you kissed Rita Hayworth?

TERRY

Doing it now, Skip.

JOHN

John takes out a small framed picture of Rita Hayworth from his desk. He kisses it then goes to replace it.

TERRY

Twice?

John kisses it again.

JOHN

All kissed and correct, Skip.

TERRY

(heavy breathing)

Good to go then.

John climbs up into the dome. A green light reflects from the control box at the end of the runway.

JOHN

(impatient)

There's your green, Skipper.

TERRY

(heavy breathing)

Yes, thank you, Wireless Operator, I did notice that.

The green light goes out. John climbs down from the dome and with a grim expression gives a brief, final wave to the well-wishers and ground crew through the window before he closes the curtain.

The plane sets off, rumbling down the runway.

A long pause.

TERRY (CONT'D)

OK, rolling, good luck everybody.

(pause)

Especially you Scotty, it's your round.

SCOTT

Who says?

TERRY

Call speeds engineer.

TIM

Got it, Skip.

John bends forward, holding his stomach.

NOTE: from here on, all John's moments of reflection are addressed directly to the audience.

JOHN

Here we go again. I could do without this.

(pause)

Especially now. I haven't slept a wink.

(pause)

Everything's changed. Everything's different.

TERRY

It's eight minutes to midnight, Navigator.

ALF

Noted, Skip.

John reaches for a paper bag in his pocket and opens it, holding it to his face.

DAI

Oh, I know what I meant to say: you did put sugar in the coffee, didn't you John? You forgot last time. You know how much I hate that.

JOHN

Com'on Dai, that was once.

John retches...

TERRY

Quiet everybody! You've got your honk bag, John?

JOHN

Yes thanks Terry

John holds his mask to his face as he speaks.

John lets the mask fall to one side as another dry heave convulses his body and he spits into the bag.

SPOOKY

Aye lad, I saw you do it.

TERRY

I said, quiet!

John's posture changes with the forward surge of the aircraft. John moves his shoulder to his ear - the beginnings of the nervous tic that will deteriorate...

As they pick up speed, the delicate radio equipment starts vibrating and John reaches out automatically to try and steady it.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Engineer, call speeds.

TIM

(continues in the background)

Ninety-five, one zero zero, one zero five, one ten, one one five, one twenty...

The tone of the engines changes as the Lancaster lifts into the sky. The heavy vibrations cease; John takes his arms from around the equipment.

He retches again. John unwraps the barley sugar and pops it in his mouth.

TERRY

Set climb power.

JOHN

(John's mood darkens)
Last bloody mission. Thirty-five trips.
Wasn't supposed to make it to ten let alone
twenty or even thirty.

TIM

Climb power fourteen inches set. One
thirty.

John puts his hand up into his flying helmet and rubs his ear, wincing and swallowing hard.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Then it went up to thirty-five. They
promise this is the last one. If we make it.

TERRY

Breaks on-off, Wheels up.

JOHN (CONT'D)

You'd get better odds sticking a gun to
your head and playing Russian Roulette.

TIM

Wheels up, lights out.

A grinding sound as the flaps slide back into the wings. John puts his fingers to his head (like a gun) and pulls the trigger.

JOHN (CONT'D)

TERRY

Click.

Flaps up?

(flinches)

Oh... That was scary. Sorry love.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I feel bad about what happened earlier Kate. Of course I'm happy. How could I not be? But the thing is, seeing as what's likely to happen...

TIM

Flaps up, selector neutral

(pause)

Cruising power two hundred and ten.

John holds his nose, swallowing hard again.

JOHN

Leaves you in the lurch. Like I haven't done enough already. Who will look after you?

TERRY

Now turning on zero six five degrees.

Terry alters their position. This changes their forward speed with a jerk and the roar of the engines to a lower tone.

John's posture changes again as they bank away, moving through cloud as the Lancaster levels out and there are glimpses of other Lancaster through the dome, rising up out of the clouds, building into a co-ordinated wave.

ALF

Mablethorpe in one minute. Danish coast four hundred miles ETA zero two one six.

(louder)

Time over target: zero four zero five Zebra.

JOHN

(in desperation)

Oh god...

(sighs, pulls himself together)

Talking to myself already. Got to watch that. They'll have me down the loony bin.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 2: "FIXING THE RADIO"

Lights up on John as he agitatedly checks on the wireless equipment.

TERRY

How long before we set course Navigator?

JOHN

Oh no... Oh god. What?! Oh bloody hell.

ALF

Five minutes, set course one seven five magnetic at zero two one six.

John holds radio mask to his face.

JOHN

Wireless Operator to Pilot.

TERRY

What is it Wireless Operator?

JOHN

We've got a problem, Skip. The R eleven fifty-five has gone dead.

TERRY

We can't scrub the mission now. It wouldn't count towards our tour. Think you can fix it?

JOHN

I'll do what I can.

(to himself)

Last bloody mission. You're dead right I'll do what I can.

John powers down his set.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I'd quite like not to have to do all this again. Enough IS enough.

(pause)

OK, let's just...

He takes out his screw driver and starts furiously removing the four screws on each corner of the radio and pulls out the radio like a drawer.

JOHN (CONT'D)

(looks inside the receiver at the valves)

And there you are you little buggers. OK V4.... The magic eye is lit so it must be the V4 mixer valve gone down.

As the plane hits turbulence, he removes a first glass valve carefully.

JOHN (CONT'D)

And... as sure as nuts is nuts...

TERRY

Fuel flow?

JOHN (CONT'D)

I'll stand on my head...

TIM

OK.

JOHN (CONT'D)

And shout Yaroo...

TERRY

Give it some full rich.

JOHN (CONT'D)

It IS you... you are completely bugged...

TIM

I already have.

*

John finds the valve and takes it out. John inspects the valve, holding it up to the light.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Lucky I've got a spare.

TERRY

Good boy.

John replaces the valve with a spare.

TIM

Temperature looks OK now.

John chuckles to himself as he starts to screw the drawer back into place.

The engines, appreciative of the rich diet, roar into full power.

JOHN

(repeated as though learned by rote)

Both receiver and transmitter are powered by two rotary transformer power supplies...

TERRY

Carburettor icing?

The sound of the engines changes tone.

JOHN (CONT'D)

...driven by the aircraft's electrical system of twelve Volts or twenty-four Volts. Even I know that. And I'm a bleedin' carpenter.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Do you know why it's doing that? Is the oil too cold. Can you sync them again?

We hear the engines go back into sync and return to their regular harmonised roar.

TIM

That's better.

TERRY

Well done.

John replaces the drawer with the four screws. He then powers it up again and all the lights come on.

JOHN

Bingo! All sorted Skip! We're back on.

John's tic - he moves his shoulder to his ear again.

John puts on his mask as the familiar sound of Morse Code comes through his headphones (which we hear) and he starts scribbling down the letters in blocks on a pad. John then decodes via the day's codes in a code book.

TERRY

Thanks Wireless Operator, well done. We're at eight thousand feet everybody. Oxygen on please Engineer.

TIM

Eh up Skip. Oxygen on.

JOHN

Navigator, we've got new winds. It's now northerly at thirty five miles an hour at ten thousand feet.

John reaches for the Barley Sugar again, shakes his head...

ALF

Got it Northerly at thirty five. Thanks John.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 3: "ST ELMO'S FIRE"

Lights up on John in the dome, looking out. He sees something.

JOHN

Hey Skip, have you seen the vapour trail coming in starboard?

TERRY

That's a V2. Note the time, location and direction, Navigator. They might need someone to go and sort out the launch site later.

(pause)

If they haven't seen the error of their ways.

ALF

Will do, Skip.

JOHN

It's heading your way, Kate. All the way to London. And you won't hear a thing.

(pause)

I'm doing it again.

SCOTT

Permission to test the guns, Skip?

TERRY

Yes Mid Upper. And you too, Rear Gunner and Bomb Aimer.

DAI

OK, Skip.

SPOOKY

Aye, Skipper.

The diabolical sound of bullets being spat from the deathly machinery RATTLES the fuselage. The radio shudders and John instinctively reaches out to protect it.

John breathes in deeply, smelling the air.

JOHN

Smells like those fireworks Dad used to get from his mate Den. Dread to think where Den got 'em... Still loved 'em. Well, kids do don't they?

John climbs up into the dome and looks out.

JOHN (CONT'D)

St Elmo's Fire! It's beautiful.

DAI

Bomb Aimer to Navigator. We're coming up to the coast of Denmark... Now.

ALF

Thanks Bomb Aimer. Navigator to Pilot: when you're over the markers, turn to a new course of one six five degrees. The wind's veering northerly and strengthening.

JOHN

It's like a thousand dancing snakes of electricity. They're all over the plane...

John moves around in the dome for better angles of the St Elmo's Fire...

TERRY

One six five magnetic, Navigator. Turning... now.

JOHN

(childlike wonder)

They're all over the propellers...

ALF

And, Skip, can you bring the airspeed back by ten? We've got a ground speed of two thirty and it's going to make us early.

JOHN

...going round and round like Catherine Wheels... only a lot better than Den's Cheapskate.

TERRY

Roger that. Watch out for fighters, chaps. Searchlights ahead, Navigator. Can you give me a bearing around them?

John moves position again.

ALF

Turn onto two thirty.

TERRY

Will let you know when it's on the port beam.

ALF

Wilco.

JOHN

They're dancing between the gun turrets... Den's didn't even go round sometimes.

TERRY

OK chaps, roll call. Bomb aimer?

JOHN

Bugger me, it's beautiful.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Sometimes I forget that somebody's trying to kill me... and I'm only here to kill...

Here Skip.

DAI

JOHN (CONT'D)

Sometimes I forget that somebody's trying to kill me... and I'm only here to kill...

Engineer?

TERRY

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JOHN (CONT'D)

When the moon's in the clear sky above the clouds, all this seems a bit daft. We all live under the same moon, even the Nazis. People should look up more... I wish you could see this, Kate. Better than any fireworks I've ever seen.

Here, Skip.

TIM

23

23

JOHN (CONT'D)

Maybe people won't want to see fireworks after all this. But kids will - they always do, don't they? Kids...

Navigator?

TERRY

ALF

'Ere Skip.

(pause)

TERRY

Wireless Operator?

JOHN

(holds his mask to his face)

All good Skip...

The moonlight flashes through the dome.

FADE OUT.

SCENE 4: "ENGINE FIRE"

Lights up. The sound of the engines has changed - it's muffled by cloud.

Morse code comes in and John decodes it, scribbling in a notebook.

JOHN

Update on weather conditions, Navigator. Wind speed increased by five, now northerly at forty miles an hour at fifteen thousand feet.

John takes a look at the radar then goes into the dome which is enclosed in cloud.

ALF

Roger that - wind now northerly at Forty at fifteen thousand.

JOHN

(re: the cloud)

Sodding hell! Well if we can't see them, they can't see us. That Met fella said the cloud tops at ten thousand feet. It's still ten-tenths.

A sudden EXPLOSION throws John to the floor, cracking his head. He let's our an involuntary YELP. Shrapnel peppers the fuselage.

John returns to his desk, rubbing his head.

TERRY

You OK, Wireless Operator?

JOHN

Yes, Tel - er sorry Skip - I'm fine. Bit of a shock, that's all.

(pause and then to himself)

I bloody volunteered for this. I had a choice. I could be at my bench down the Arsenal, sharpening my chisels, earning a living.

(pause)

You can't do nothing without a sharp chisel.

TIM

Fire in the starboard inner engine, Skip!

JOHN

(to himself)

Oh god...

John braces himself in readiness for what is to come.

TERRY

OK, diving now and deploy gravelator.

TIM

Fire extinguisher deployed.

TERRY

Cut fuel to inner starboard engine, engineer.

TIM

Already done, Skip.

The sound of the engines changes as the plane goes into a steep dive, rising in pitch...

TERRY

Hold on everybody...

(pause)

Diving.

The sound of the engines rises yet further. The fuselage creaks with the stress of the dive.

John braces himself on the scaffolding.

His pencil rises up off the desk and he grabs it. His position changes with the angle of the plane as it dives more steeply and the engines roar. John holds on...

JOHN

(hyperventilating)

Bloody hell! I should have been dead twenty missions ago. Maybe it would have been better that way. You wouldn't have to deal with this. You wouldn't have to deal with any of this...

(pause)

They'll take it away from you, just because I'm dead...

More creaks and metallic stress sounds from the plane. John's shoulder grinds up to his ear.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I'm going to die.

TIM

Looks like it's working...

TERRY

How's it look to you, Mid Upper?

SCOTT

Nearly there, Skip...

The plane is shuddering with exertion as the engines roar and John forces himself up into the dome to get a view.

SCOTT (CONT'D)

Yes, I think you've got it Skip.

JOHN

Yeah, it's out now.

(pained with nausea)

Straighten out now... Please, Skip...

The sound of stressed metal eases as the engines return to their cruising tone.

TERRY

OK, well we're one engine down now, chaps.

(joshing)

And I guess we blame Tim for that one. Should have bloody well checked it before take-off.

TIM

(chuckles)

Sorry about that Skip. Bloody Rolls Royce. I'll have words...

TERRY

Quite right.

John returns to his desk, takes off his radio mask and retches.

JOHN

Always gets me, Kate. The first flak. Even after thirty-four missions. I never wanted to die but things have changed now. Things are different. It's not just about you and me anymore.

(pause)

Why now? Why did this have to happen now? We're at war. It's cruel. We're all bloody cruel.

(angrily putting his mask back on)

I thought you knew where the ack-ack banks were, Alf.

ALF

Sorry John, that must have been a stray. I'll make a note of it.

John takes off his mask, shaking his head. He retches again.

JOHN

This is bigger than us... This is the future. I didn't think there was one.

(pause)

Bloody hell...

(beating the odds)

And I'm still not dead...

John stares out of the dome.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 5: "GETTING LOST"

Morse code comes through. Lights up as John finishes decoding it and scribbles it in his notebook.

John scans the dial on the radio. Amidst the sound of static and whining there comes the sound of a GERMAN RADIO CONTROLLER's voice.

GERMAN CONTROLLER

(extremely agitated)

Feindliche Kraft, Abschnitt 5, 10.000 Fuß, Nordost-Ost...

JOHN

Ah, found you! Have a little listen to this...

John flicks a switch and the sound of the engine roars over the radio. He flicks the switch again and it cuts off.

GERMAN CONTROLLER

Fick es!

JOHN

Loud enough for you? Oh you've gone. Don't worry, I'll find you.

John works the dial again.

GERMAN CONTROLLER

Hast du diese Nachricht erhalten? Junker 88? Abschnitt 5

JOHN

Gotchya!

He flicks the switch and the sound of the engine roars over the radio once more. He climbs back into the dome.

JOHN (CONT'D)

(impersonating Colonel Blimp)

Clean fighting, honest soldiering have won...

(to himself)

No one ever said.

ALF

Update on our position, Skip. Bear left on to one six two degrees to parallel track.

TERRY

OK Navigator steady one six two to parallel track.

(pause)

Hold on a minute, this can't be right. This compass must be bugged. It doesn't compare with the magnetic. Navigator, what's your reading?

ALF

Oh bloody hell! Oh no, I'm not sure if my compass is working either. Hold on a sec...

(pause)

No, no, there's something wrong. My calculations don't make sense. Oh for Christ's sake!

JOHN

Meant to be the most sophisticated plane ever built and they can't get a decent compass.

ALF

(stressed)

I bet even Walter Raleigh had a better bleedin' compass than this.

TERRY

After today, we'll never have to look at another compass again, Alf.

ALF

Maybe... Maybe I'll never look at anything again.

TERRY

Come on Alf, hold it together.

JOHN

Don't forget, Alf, it's Scotty's round tonight. You wouldn't want to miss that, would you?

ALF

What's it to you, John? You don't even drink.

JOHN

Cheer up you miserable sod.

TERRY

Isn't there something you should be doing, Wireless Operator!

ALF

Do something useful, John. Go back and check on the master compass.

JOHN

All right, Alf.

John unplugs from the intercom, plugs in his tank of oxygen and goes into a low position of the scaffolding to check the compass.

ALF

No... no... there's definitely something not right here, Skip.

John returns to his desk and plugs into the intercom and the oxygen again.

JOHN

Do you want the good news or the bad news?

ALF

Get on with it, John.

JOHN

The good news is the master compass is working fine, the bad news is... so are yours.

DAI

Er Skip... SKIP!

The sound of another Lancaster as it ROARS past them VERY CLOSE - moving in the opposite direction.

JOHN

We're going in the...
(pause)
...wrong direction.

SPOOKY ET AL

Bloody hell... Oh my god...

ALF

Oh for Christ's sake! I don't believe it... It must have happened when we were putting out the engine. How long ago was that, Tim?

SPOOKY

Bloody rear gunner waved at me Skip!

TIM

Hold on... it was... twenty-eight minutes ago.

ALF

Jesus, we'll be nearly an hour out--

TERRY

Well, does someone want to tell me where the hell we are?

ALF

Hold on, hold on. Oh Christ! Give me a minute. The H2S is still making no sense!

TERRY

We haven't got a minute, Alf. We're flying straight at them. I can see a town dead ahead. Searchlights everywhere. John can you help?

JOHN

I'd have to break radio silence and use the HF Skip, to contact Group.

TERRY

We're dead if we break it and dead if we don't. Better we don't but we'll be a sitting target for the fighters and the ack-ack.

ALF

OK, so just let me try to work this out.

John reaches for his code book and starts to refer to the day's secret codes.

ALF (CONT'D)

OK, all right, leave me to--

TERRY

I'm not chancing my arm. Give me a route out.

(pause)

Now?

ALF

(tense, rattled)

What was the last wind speed, John?

JOHN

Windspeed increased northerly at forty.

ALF

Northerly?

John looks up from the code book and reaches for his notebook to check it.

JOHN

Yeah, northerly. I've got it written down here.

ALF

(panicking)

That could be Leipzig!

TERRY

Come on Alf, I'm taking evasive action... Turning twenty degrees east...

(pause)

Now...

ALF

Twenty degrees east. Got it.
(pause)

Oh Jesus.

(under his breath)

Where the... So, it was... We turned one six five degrees ...

TERRY

Keep a look-out, Wireless Operator.

JOHN

Will do, Skip.

John climbs up into the dome.

TERRY

How are we doing, Alf?

ALF

I don't know... I'm working on it...

SPOOKY

Come on Alf.

ALF

(flustered)

Hang on... Hang on!

DAI

Come on Alf, boy, concentrate--

JOHN

(listening for response)

Let him do his job.

TERRY

Quite right, John. Quiet everybody.

ALF

This doesn't make sense...

(pause)

Oh Jesus!

SPOOKY ET AL

(muttered voices)

Oh god... come on... what?!

TERRY

QUIET! I am still--

ALF

(pained)

Look, either shut up while I try to sort this out or we all go home! Which ain't a bad idea, actually. That's got my vote.

(pause)

Why not just drop the buggers and go home? There must be some secondary targets. Anything. I mean, what is the bleeding point? I've had enough. I've really really had enough.

Silence from the crew as they all take this in and the engines roar. John climbs back into the dome.

JOHN

Come on Alf.

TERRY

I thought we sorted this out last time.

SCOTT

Would it still count as our thirty-fifth mission if we turn back?

A long tense pause. John climbs down from the dome.

ALF

What are we bombing today anyway?

JOHN

You were in the briefing too, Alf.

ALF

Yeah, exactly...

(Pause)

DAI

It'll still count if we've jettisoned the bombs, won't it?

TERRY

Not without a bloody good reason, Dai. They're not stupid. They know what we're thinking. Which is why we're here... and they're not.

TIM

If we say nothing, they'll be none the wiser.

JOHN
The photograph?

TIM
Well, that may take some explaining--

ALF
(voice rising)
Well we're one engine down! Isn't that enough?

TERRY
No!

DAI
God wouldn't mind. I think he'd appreciate us not killing anyone today.

JOHN
Don't start singing, Dai--

Spooky chuckles. Morse code starts coming through.

ALF
It's not funny! I'm serious.

SCOTTY
We can't turn back now.

TERRY
Correct.

SPOOKY
Right, Scotty.

TIM
I think we lost quite a bit of fuel when the engine went down.

TERRY
We'll have enough to complete the mission. We'll go home in a straight line.

JOHN
(to himself)
Oh great. Just gets better and better.

ALF
Well I vote we go home.

TERRY

You're not thinking. They'll brand us all as "Low Moral Fibre". I don't know about you but I want a job when I'm done with this... and the last thirty-four missions would mean nothing.

SCOTT

John, it looks like you're the deciding vote.

Pause.

JOHN

Me?

Pause.

John is frozen with indecision until he grinds his shoulder again and runs his fingers around the inside of his collar. He is about to respond, when...

TERRY

It doesn't matter what John thinks. There is no vote. This conversation never happened. The job has to be done. Might as well get on with it.

John looks momentarily relieved before his expression hardens once more.

ALF

Hold on... Hold on! I've got it. Turn two six five now. If we're lucky, we'll join the tail end of the stream and time over target still good.

TERRY

Well done, Alf. We're back on everybody. Turning two six five now.

JOHN

Well I'm glad you sorted it out Alf. There's nothing on the quarters from Group. We're on our own.

A long pause. He looks to the audience.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Low moral fibre...

John chuckles, shaking his head.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 6: "UNDER ATTACK"

Lights up on John. He tunes the radio and Morse Code comes through loud and clear. He scribbles it down in his notebook. Then he flicks through his codebook, decoding it.

JOHN

Can't blame them wanting to go home. I'm done with this and all.

(to Kate)

I'm sure you are too. It's all so different now. If only I'd known then what I know now. I'd never have enlisted. I'd still be there at the Woolwich Arsenal finishing my apprenticeship... I miss making things with old Bert. Good old Bert, he told me not to.

(pause as he thinks)

When he retired, he gave me all his tools. Beautiful shooting plane. Fabulous moulding plane and all his cutters. Worth more than money. Much more. Rare some of them too. Given half a chance, I could make the linen-fold moldings for the House of Lords!

The flak starts up again – orange flashes outside the window and the dome.

TERRY

Hold on chaps, they're shooting at us now. They know we're here. I'm going to try to get above it. Through the gate, engineer.

TIM

Yes Skip.

The tone of the engines changes as they ascend. The plane yaws and rolls to dodge the flak amidst the columns of searchlights.

JOHN

(to Kate)

I've got so much more to lose now. And it's worse for you. I've just got to die. You've got to live. You've got to face your parents, the neighbours, the church, the shame... the future... alone.

Standing in the dome, John runs his fingers around his collar. Momentarily, they are caught in the beam of a searchlight, the light illuminating the inside of the fuselage as though it is daylight. The flak is getting closer.

TERRY

Fire into the light!

JOHN

Lady Luck can't protect us forever. But maybe this is our fate. And our little 'un is here to take my place. Maybe that means I'm dead already.

SCOTT

Turn more! I'm full traverse and I can't reach.

John braces himself in the fuselage as the plane tips on its side. The sound of the MACHINE GUNS FIRING.

TERRY

This isn't working! They're still with us. I'm going down.

DAI

Doesn't feel right Skip but you might as well try.

TERRY

Diving starboard! And thanks for that Dai! Glad you approve.

EXPLOSIONS all around. It's like being punched by a series of large fists. A final LOUD EXPLOSION makes John wince with extreme anxiety as he grabs the frame of the fuselage.

All engine noise ceases and there is absolute SILENCE.

TERRY (CONT'D)

(in the very far distance)

Diving... Diving!

JOHN

Terry's right. We've got to do this. Just a few more hours and it could be done with. It could be over. It could be all right. I might yet be a dad.

(pause)

I wonder if it's a boy or a girl?

(pause)

To lose it all now... that would be so cruel. Worse than if we'd bought it on day one.

John is thrown around as the plane bucks again and he screams but no noise comes out as the plane dives into a corkscrew.

John floats in the silence with crazy colored flashes and fizzes all around.

A LOUD BANG awakens him from his hellish reverie and now the engine noise is loud again – VERY LOUD.

John rips off his mask.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Oh god, just get on with it, I'm dead already... You'll be all alone... Unmarried... They'll try to take the baby away from you. Don't let them. Keep it, love it, protect it. Never let it know this...

Two more EXPLOSIONS throw him from side to side as the plane rocks and yaws. The air rushes through a gaping hole in the fuselage.

SILENCE.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Was THAT it?

TERRY

Diving!

SOUND RETURNS.

JOHN

No, not yet. Why can't it be that easy?

The G force from the violent corkscrew sticks John to the wall.

John reaches inside his helmet and his hand comes away dripping with blood.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Aaaargh! My god! My ear!

EXPLOSIONS ring out from the flak all around.

TERRY

Oh Christ! It's a goner.

John pulls himself up into the dome as an engine, its propeller still spinning and on fire flashes past, lighting up the interior of the fuselage.

JOHN

It wasn't me, it was them.

TERRY

Didn't stand a chance.

SCOTT

They wouldn't have known a thing.

SPOOKY

Poor sods.

DAI

Into your hands oh Lord.

SPOOKY

You've lost them, Skip. Good flying.

TERRY

Thanks Spooky. Climbing now. Did anybody get the number?

JOHN

I did, skip. It was an LE. One of ours.

TERRY

Wonder who it was?

SPOOKY

NX600. That's Reg isn't it John?

JOHN

Yeah... it's Reg.

ALF

When we're over the markers, turn to a new course to target two twenty five degrees, the winds up and veering a bit and still strengthening.

TERRY

Give it a bit more rich, Engineer. Let's try to get above all that muck.

JOHN

It was good sparring with you, Reg...

(pause)

I could tell you were pulling your punches.

(pause)

I suppose I'll get my bike back now.

John pulls the curtain aside and looks out of the window.
The engines drone on.

SPOOKY

Reg had a canny bike, mind. Tell you what, I'll start the bidding at two shillings.

SCOTT

You mercenary bastard.

SPOOKY

You not interested John?

JOHN

(a blank expression)

I'll raise you two bob.

TERRY

Roger. Two twenty five magnetic, keep it down chaps.

(pause)

I'll raise you three shillings. I'm sure his missus could do with it.

JOHN

I'll go eight shillings.

(pause)

TERRY

No more bids?

(pause)

Looks like it's yours, John.

JOHN

Marvellous.

(to himself)

Just bought my own bike. Thanks Reg.

ALF

And take the speed up by ten or we're going to be even later.

TERRY

Through the gate, engineer.

JOHN

(sarcastic to himself)

Yeah, hurry up or there'll be no one left to kill.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 7: "THE BOMBING RUN"

INTENSE FLAK all around; the plane is being buffeted from all sides. Shrapnel peppers the side of the fuselage.

A voice - MASTER BOMBER - comes over the Wireless.

Lights up on John writing down the message in a notebook.

MASTER BOMBER

(matter-of-fact, as though commentating a cricket match on a sunny Sunday afternoon)

Bomb the red TIs, Bomber Stream.

JOHN

Looking for red Target Indicators, Bomb Aimer.

John puts down his pencil, looks terrified. He retches with fear. He grabs hold of the pencil and notebook as they slide around on the desk.

DAI

Got that, Wireless Operator. Red TIs it is.

TERRY

Don't bomb or mark out of sequence, Dai, or they'll send some poor sods back to do the job properly next week. So let's get the reds and mark it accurately.

John starts to recalibrate the receiver for the next broadcast.

ALF

Navigator to Pilot. Turn on to one five eight, time is zero four one five.

TERRY

Turning to one five eight.

(pause)

Course out, Navigator?

ALF

Route home: three one zero, repeat three one zero magnetic

John turns away from the wireless, stands up and goes into the dome.

TERRY

Roger that, three one zero.

DAI

I can see the aiming point, Skipper.

As the plane is rocked by flak, John loses his footing momentarily and ducks down just as a piece of shrapnel passes straight through the plastic of the dome at what would have been head height - his head.

Wind noise emanates from the holes and continues throughout. John does a double take and puts his fist through one hole and then through the other directly opposite.

TERRY

OK, your plane, Bomb Aimer.

DAI

OK, Skip, my plane now.

TERRY

Good luck everybody.

JOHN

I think we got that one skip..

There is a LOUD EXPLOSION followed by a metallic flapping sound from a section of torn fuselage and John holds his ear for a moment, deafened. Then he moves down from the dome, takes off his mask and stands at the front of the stage.

All sound drops away.

MASTER BOMBER

(in the far distance)

Calling Tiger Force, bomb the centre of the red TIs. Repeat, bomb the centre of the red TIs.

JOHN

(excitedly distracted)

Kate, Kate? Did I ever tell you about that time when I was ten years old and we used to play football in the street?

DAI

Bomb doors open please Skip.

TERRY

Bomb doors open.

MASTER BOMBER

Calling Tiger Force, bomb the centre of the red TIs. Repeat, bomb the centre of the red TIs.

JOHN

We didn't have a real ball so we made it out of paper and string. We'd roll up the newspaper and tie the string around it. I scored a cracker and this kid, Nigel, from the next street didn't like it one bit. Thought I was off-side! In a street football match. He just wouldn't have it.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Anyway, so one thing led to another and the next thing you know, he's got me on the floor and he's knocking seven bells out of me. Twice the size of me he was. Arrogant bastard.

DAI

Steady... Steady... Left a bit, left a bit...

JOHN (CONT'D)

Local bully he was. He had it in for kids in our street. So I gave him a wide berth, always kept my head down when he was around.

DAI (CONT'D)

Left! More! More!

JOHN (CONT'D)

Then one day, must have been around Bonfire Night, I'm walking back from school and I see Nigel on the other side of the street and it looks like he's waiting for me.

DAI (CONT'D)

Left! Left! OK... OK...

JOHN (CONT'D)

He's got a smile on his face. Horrible it was. I knew it spelt trouble. So I tried not to catch his eye. The next thing I know, he's thrown something at me. Didn't know what it was at first. Then there's one almighty bang.

DAI (CONT'D)

More... left!

DAI (CONT'D)

Left! Left!

TERRY

I'm doing my best, Dai.

MASTER BOMBER

Calling Tiger Force, bomb the centre of the red TIs. Repeat, bomb the centre of the red TIs.

DAI

LEFT! LEFT! Or we're not going to make it

JOHN

He'd only gone and thrown a banger at me. It hit me on the side of the head and went off. It was like being cut in half by the noise. Terrifying it was. I think of him sometimes, up here. He's dead now. Got caught in the Blitz. I hated him at the time. But it all seems a bit silly now, over a bloody off-side. Poor sod. He was right though, it was offside.

(pause)

His old man died down the docks. Maybe that's what made him the way he was.

The sound of HEAVY FLAK shakes John from his reverie. Explosions and ear-piercing cracks are followed by shrapnel clattering against the fuselage. John returns to the dome, puts his mask back on and rubs his injured ear, making the sound cut in and out in intensity.

DAI

We're not going to make it. No, we're not going to make it. Dummy run, sorry. Close bomb doors, Skip. We're going to have to go round again.

JOHN

Oh bloody hell!

Tortured breathing from the crew into their radio masks. John moves his shoulder up to his ear involuntarily.

TERRY

All right, chaps, we've made it this far. Not to worry.

(a personal catch phrase)

I've done this before.

SPOOKY

(an audible sigh)

You have. I remember.

TERRY

Just watch...

JOHN

Watching Tel, we're all eyes.

(to himself)

Here we go. Russian Roulette again. Only with even more bullets in the chamber.

John closes his eyes and slumps.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 8: "SECOND BOMBING RUN"

Lights up on John as Morse Code comes through and the flak rages once more. We hear muttered profanities and heavy breathing from the crew over the intercom.

JOHN

Still looking for the red TIs, Bomb Aimer.

DAI

Thanks Wireless Operator. Looking for the red TIs. The target is coming down the drift wires nicely.

TERRY

Tell me when you're ready.

JOHN

(to Kate)

If it's a boy, will you name him after your dad or mine? If it's my dad, it's John. If it's your dad... what is your dad's name?

(thinks, shoulder twitches)

God, what's he going to say? He's not a violent type is he?

TERRY

Your plane, Bomb Aimer. Good luck everybody.

DAI

OK, Skip, my plane now. Bomb doors open.

John, restless, searching for something to connect with, takes out the framed picture of Rita Hayworth. He looks at the frame, turning it around in his hand, admiring the wood.

JOHN

Nice frame... oak. Never noticed that before.

(pause)

If it's a girl, my mum's called Beatrice. Your mum's called Agnes. Oh... it'll be your choice anyway. Doesn't really matter.

DAI

We'll start our run in. About ten degrees starboard, Skip.

TERRY

Ten degrees starboard.

John wipes the dust off the frame.

JOHN

Could do with a new coat of varnish.

DAI

Coming around nicely now. Steady.

(pause)

Left, left!

MASTER BOMBER

Calling Tiger Force, bomb the centre of the red TIs. Repeat, bomb the centre of the red TIs.

John tenderly stows away the frame.

SPOOKY

Searchlights on our tail!

TERRY

There's nothing I can do about it.

John sits terrified in his seat, holding onto his desk as a bright light fills the interior.

JOHN

Bloody hell...

DAI

Steady...

(pause)

Steady...

(pause)

Steady...

(pause)

Left a little.

John looks up to the dome - sees something and quickly climbs into it.

JOHN

Terry! Above! Twelve o'clock! There's a kite above us with bomb doors open! First ones away! We're being bombed!

John cowers and winces, holds his head in his hands. He looks up.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Oh my god! They missed! Where did that come from? Didn't you see that Scott - or Spooky!? What are you doing?! I could read what was bleedin' written on it!

TERRY

Calm down John.

(very uncalm)

What were you doing Spooky?!

SPOOKY

I can't see a thing, Skip.

SCOTT

Me neither.

JOHN

We're at the right bombing altitude, right Skip?

TERRY

Yes John! And if everybody else was, that wouldn't happen.

JOHN

Did you see what was written on it?

(still angry)

You'd have thought Hitler's mum would have been past it by now.

Random cackles from the crew.

The flak becomes louder still.

DAI

I'm as blind as a bat up here too. Can't see a bloody thing! Oh hold on! Oh no, that's better, I can see the red TIs Skip, through the clouds. Hard left Terry! Hard left!

The flak is DEAFENING and very close. The shockwaves rock the plane and shrapnel peppers the thin skin.

DAI (CONT'D)

Left a bit Skip! Hold it! Hold it!

(pause)

Left! Left!

Search lights light up the cabin. John returns from the dome. All sound becomes muted as he walks out into the sky to stand in a sea of light. Beneath him is the burning city as he speaks to us.

JOHN

They're down there now. Sitting there, waiting. Cowering under tables or in shelters. Fat lot of use they'll be. They know we're coming.

DAI

OK, hold it there!

JOHN

They can hear us, a thousand Lancaster at ten thousand feet. It's shaking the crockery from ten miles away. The kids are crying. Mum, Nan, Grandad...

DAI

Left, left again!

JOHN

It's not nice. I've been down there, on the Isle of Dogs. I know.

(pause)

I don't want to meet the men... clever men... better than me... who sit in rooms calmly planning how to slaughter us.

DAI (CONT'D)

Steady!

JOHN (CONT'D)

Who decided this was a good idea? Not me or anyone I know, that's for sure.

(pause)

Maybe those clever bastards should see this.

DAI (CONT'D)

Steady!

John gestures towards the raging inferno down below.

JOHN (CONT'D)

They sat there in a nice safe war office somewhere discussing the old timber-framed buildings.

(schoolmasterly)

"So first of all, you blow the roofs off with the first barrage and then they're nice and open for the incendiaries to be dropped inside to set light to the net curtains and the mediaeval woodwork."

(normal voice)

In our house, it was the bedding that got it. But it was a direct hit next door. Joy was pregnant. They dragged her out but she miscarried in the street. Dead it was. Half-born. Joy died soon after.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Takes a lot of thought working out how to burn people alive.

Steady!

DAI

The bomb release mechanism makes a metallic sound sending a shudder through the floor as the bombs are released from beneath John's feet.

Bombs away!

DAI (CONT'D)

SILENCE.

As the plane rises fast due to the sudden weight reduction, John bends at the knees and his arms rise involuntarily.

Bombs still going.

DAI (CONT'D)

There it is...

JOHN

Bombs gone! Close bomb doors.

DAI

Pause.

It's as easy as that...

JOHN

Hold it for the photo flash.

DAI

JOHN

Oh Jesus... Another one for the family album. Just to prove we were here. Yet again. What do we still need to prove? This is the fourth time we've been here. There can't be anything left.

A long pause while they wait for the flash.

JOHN (CONT'D)

(mumbling)

Come on... Come on... It's got to be thirty seconds by now...

Hold it steady... Just a little longer...

DAI

JOHN

Oh Jesus...

There is a blinding flash through the window and dome as the SOUND RETURNS and flak rages all around, buffeting them and peppering the fuselage.

TERRY

OK, thanks Dai. My plane, let's get the hell out of here.

(pause)

Turning three one zero... now.

There is a HUGE EXPLOSION from below - deeper, more all-consuming than anything we've heard before. John turns to face it.

JOHN

Streets... houses... libraries... hospitals... factories... children... children... incinerated... flesh falling from their bones as it cooks.

TERRY

Log that explosion, Navigator, it must have been something important.

ALF

Roger that, Skip. ETA Mablethorpe, eight fifteen zebra and a nice cup of tea by nine.

JOHN

Old women, burning where they sit. Families trying to run for it, sucked through the air back to the flames, still holding hands. Just like in the Mile End.

TERRY

Keep 'em peeled for fighters, they'll be waiting for us now we're out of the flak.

John stands bereft as the interminable horror show rages all around.

JOHN

(strained, emotional)

Right now, beneath my feet, babies half-born, burning with their mothers. Just like Joy.

We hear the sound from 10,000 feet below as huge bombs explode and a city burns...

BANG! Flak explodes very nearby. John flinches.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I don't want to die and nor do they.

(pause)

Filthy...

(pause)

Disgusting...

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

(pause)

I can't...

John holds his head in his hands and crumples into the sea of flame.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 9: "SCOTTY DIES"

Lights up on John sitting at his desk as he finishes taking a Morse message. Weaving shafts of blue searchlights flash through the window as the plane encounters a heavy burst of flak.

	TERRY
Roll call!	
	(pause)
Bomb Aimer?	
	DAI
I'm OK Skip, I think.	
	TERRY
I can see you're OK, engineer.	
	TIM
Yup, Skip.	
	TERRY
Navigator?	
	ALF
As long as we're where I think we are, I'm fine.	
	TERRY
Wireless Operator?	
	JOHN
I'm OK Skip.	
	TERRY
Mid-upper Gunner?	
	SCOTT
Never better.	
	TERRY
Rear Gunner?	
	No response.
	TERRY (CONT'D)
Rear Gunner, can you hear me?	

Nothing.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Spooky? Spooky? John, can you go back and check on him? Take him some coffee while you're at it and take your chute too.

JOHN

Will do, OK Skip, going off intercom now.

SCOTT

Don't forget me.

JOHN

No problem, Scotty. I couldn't forget you.

John clambers from behind his desk, unplugs the tube from his mask and plugs it into a bottle of oxygen. He takes the flask of coffee and crawls up one level and down another.

NOTE: the following conversation between John and Scott is SHOUTED.

SCOTT

If you've got any soup, I'll have that instead.

JOHN

It's tomato but it's still not hot yet. Don't you want coffee?

SCOTT

Tomato's my favourite.

JOHN

Whats wrong with my coffee?

SCOTT

I don't want your coffee. I want soup.

SPOOKY

(breathless)

You can keep your coffee, John, but I'll have some of that soup when it's ready.

JOHN

Marvellous.

SPOOKY

I'm OK Skip. My intercom got all iced up. Had to snap off icicles. The longest ones yet. I'm back with you now.

TERRY

Good to have you back Spooky.

SCOTTY

When you're ready.

JOHN

You just put your feet up, Scotty. Don't mind me.

SCOTT

Not every day you get to be a best man and an uncle all at once.

JOHN

Write your speech while you're up there. It'd better be funny!

SCOTT

It's OK... I've got a spare one... My mate, Ronnie, bought it on D-Day... Poor bastard... I just have to change the names.

More FLAK EXPLODES close by – then closer still – louder, and more vibrantly penetrating, until an explosion throws John to the floor by his desk where he lies in a fetal position with his hands over his ears as blood sprays down upon him from above. Engine noise drops away leaving the sound of the wind and distant comms, random voices, almost casual chatter from the crew.

As wind rushes in through a hole in the floor, he clammers to his feet and looks at his hands to check he's still there.

TERRY

Bloody hell! Is everyone OK?

John pulls himself up and plugs into the intercom.

JOHN

I'm alright, I'll check on Scotty.

TERRY

Scott? Scott are you there?

No response from Scott. John looks up into the mid-upper gunner position and winces.

Oh god...
JOHN

What is it, John?
TERRY

Oh Jesus.
JOHN

John stares up into the mid upper turret, mouth open, eyes wide, silent, and we go into John's unnaturally calm sense of shock.

John walks away from his desk as an otherworldly breeze blows and the light changes to a gentle hue.

SOUND MONTAGE: distant, dream-like sounds of "back home": a big band, a burst of a comedy radio programme, laughter, the whistle of a kettle, the sound of teaspoons on china...

JOHN'S MUM
Fancy a cuppa, dear? I've kept some back from our ration for you.
(pause)
You're very quiet dear...

John? John?!
TERRY

JOHN'S MUM
You can't take chances with your health...
(pause)
That programme you like's on the wireless later...

John, can you hear me?
TERRY

JOHN'S MUM
How's that friend of yours? You asked him to be your Best Man yet? What's his name?
Scotty isn't it?

JOHN
(staring at what's left of Scotty)
Yes.

Pause.

JOHN'S MUM

TERRY

Shame you can't get hitched in Ethel's old church. It's just a bloody big hole now. The mission's got a chapel. Maybe you could do it there.

JOHN'S MUM (CONT'D)

Oh there's your dad now. Seeing you will put him in a better mood.

TERRY

John? John? Can you help him?

The sound of aerial battle comes CRASHING BACK in. John snaps out of his reverie and walks back to the pool of blood.

JOHN

(sickened, traumatised)

There's only half of him left...

TIM

Oh no, not Scotty.

ALF

It was his twentieth birthday last week.

Silence from the crew while they take this in.

DAI

Oh Jesus, we've got a stuck bomb!

TIM

Open the bomb doors Terry. Quick! It's primed. It could go off.

Intakes of breath and mutterings from the crew.

TERRY

Oh wizard. Bomb doors open.

JOHN

The flak that killed Scotty punched a hole in the deck. It's a mess. Let me take a look.

John looks through the hole through which the wind rages.

JOHN (CONT'D)

It's iced up. I think I can reach it with the axe.

Understood.

TERRY

John unplugs from the intercom, grabs the axe and leans through the hole. He comes face to face with the orange inferno below. He grimaces at the painful intensity; his expression one of disgust and horror. A moment while he takes this in, before...

He takes a swing and the axe strikes metal: CLANG...

TERRY (CONT'D)

Are you watching this, Dai?

DAI

Wish I wasn't.

TERRY

How's it looking?

DAI

Like he's hitting a live bomb with an axe... Skip.

John readjusts his position and takes another swing...

JOHN

This IS it.

CLANG. Nothing happens.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Now?

CLANG. Still nothing.

JOHN (CONT'D)

You sod!

John chips away at the ice. A resonant metallic sound of something being released and the bomb drops away.

DAI

Bomb gone, Skip. You can close the bomb doors. What's left of them.

John looks around momentarily to inspect the damage then pulls himself out of the hole and slumps onto his back. He drags himself to his feet, makes his way to the desk and plugs into the intercom again.

JOHN

Back on Skip.

TERRY

Well done John. Did you see any damage to the hydraulics?

JOHN

It's a bit of a mess but I don't think so.

TERRY

I guess we'll have to wait and see if the undercarriage stays down when we land.

John disconnects his mask.

JOHN

(to himself)

I guess we will. It's not over.

(pause)

Thirty-four missions, even more bomb runs. I've always just been part of the machine but I didn't get to pull the trigger.

Realising he's still holding the axe, he drops it.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Now that's all changed. This is who I am now. I, am a killer...

(pause, thinks)

And I'm a father. How do I live with that?

(pause)

Can I live with that? Can one person be both? I don't know how they can.

(pause)

I don't like it. It's never going to go away. How can it go anywhere? Where can it go? It's in me... It's me.

(pause)

Oh bugger.

John goes back to his desk and sits slumped and dejected.

The Boozer warning light on his desk comes on.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Boozer light's on skip. They're on us.

SPOOKY

(sound breaking up)

Fighter! Fighter!

JOHN

Corkscrew starboard now

OK. TERRY

His words are drowned out by the sound of machine guns. The plane drops into a vertical bank like a slate; the change in angle of the sheet of light denotes the change in the plane's orientation.

Bullets pass through the fuselage as the ME 109s wail towards the Lancaster.

Diving! TERRY (CONT'D)

The plane is pushed to the very limits of its physical endurance. The sky (sheet of light) moves to denote the change of perspective. As they achieve negative G-force, John's pencil becomes weightless again, as does he. He grabs as it goes past, his face stretched into a scream.

TIM
Christ Terry! Pull out! The bloody wings are coming off.

All is chaos as the sounds of air battle reach a crescendo until suddenly, for a moment, all sound ceases, leaving John screaming in a horrified unaccompanied solo.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 10: "THE VOICE OF GOD"

Lights up on John - his mask off now - sitting at the radio, decoding a message.

The plane has leveled out and the sound has returned back to the familiar syncopated throb of the engines.

TERRY

OK John, have you found us somewhere to land in France?

JOHN

No. Is it a Mayday?

TERRY

Not yet. But if we don't find somewhere quick, we'll have to make a run for it and we might end up ditching in the sea.

John works the radio, scanning frequencies, searching for a friendly response.

SPOOKY

No sign of those fighters now, Skip. We seem to have lost them.

TERRY

Maybe they've gone to find easier prey. But keep your eyes open, it might be a trap. I'll find some cloud to hide in.

TIM

Bit worried about the fuel levels to get us home. It's going to be tight, even if we haven't been hit.

JOHN

Dead as a kipper out there, Skip, no bases are broadcasting as far as I can tell.

TERRY

Right, we're going to have to take our chances then but I don't want to spend the next three days in a dinghy. I'm going dancing.

JOHN

You taking Olive?

TERRY

Might be.

(pause)

Sun's up, Navigator, and we're approaching the French coast. Does that sound right to you?

ALF

Certainly does, Skip, let me know when we cross.

TERRY

Coming up.

(pause)

Over it... now.

ALF

Oh good, pretty well on track.

TERRY

Taking us down to sea level, save us some fuel. Speed two ten, Navigator. Keep your eyes peeled for ships, Bomb Aimer. The last thing we need is to hit a mast. Friendly or not.

John is tuning the radio and the sound of a big band fades into his headphones. He patches it through on the intercom.

JOHN

Here's some Tommy Dorsey, he's on at the Boston Town Hall next week, isn't he?

John leaves the desk and walks on the sky.

JOHN (CONT'D)

We danced to this, didn't we, the night I popped the question? If you call what I was doing dancing.

He makes a couple of dance moves; his hands around his imaginary partner.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Would have been a long bus journey home if you'd turned me down. Didn't expect it to be quite so soon though. Would have rather finished the tour first just to make sure I'd be there. Wouldn't work with just one of us.

The sun starts to shine through the window and the dome.

TERRY

Hello Hazel Control. This is G for George. Over.

JOHN

I love this sort of music. Reminds me of our nights together at the Palais.

MAUDE (WAAF)

Hello G for George. This is Hazel Control. Nice to have you back.

JOHN

It's solid this music. It's honest, it's truthful.

TERRY

We're not back yet.

JOHN

(hums for a moment)

Music isn't an illusion. It's real. It can't lie. It is what it is.

MAUDE

What's your condition?

TERRY

Undercarriage shaky, one fatality. One engine down and no fuel. Have ambulance and fire engines standing by, over.

MAUDE

Will do G for George. Ambulance on its way. Good luck. Call funnels.

JOHN

It's beautiful. It's like the oak. It has no motive, no side. It's pure. It isn't trying to kill anyone. Unlike me.

TERRY

Calling funnels now.

MAUDE

Wilco G for George.

JOHN

Maude... I'm glad it's her.

(pause)

I wonder if she knows the truth of what we've just done?

(his shoulder twitches)

I hope she knows and still forgives me.

ALF

OK, Skip, fifteen minutes from base.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 11: "LANDING"

Lights up on John as he finishes winding the handle adjacent to his desk.

TERRY

Don't forget the trailing aerial, John.

JOHN

Beat you to it Skip.

ALF

Altitude five hundred.

TIM

Airspeed one-thirty five.

TERRY

Wheels down, Engineer. Flap 40. How's the fuel looking?

TIM

Flying on fumes.

TERRY

Lovely. Rudder trim neutral.

(pause)

Flaps! Call airspeeds and altitude engineer.

TIM

Flaps down.

(pause)

Problem, Skip, I can't get the wheels down.

TERRY

OK, John, man the crank. You're going to have wind them down. Like double-quick! We're too low to bail out unless anyone wants to take their chances. Now's the time to say.

John quickly grabs a crank handle and starts turning it near his desk.

ALF

Altitude: two-fifty.

TIM

Airspeed: one thirty five.

John struggles with the handle, heaving on it with all his strength, muttering and swearing to himself.

ALF

Altitude: two hundred.

TIM

Airspeed: one thirty.

John keeps winding the handle.

ALF

Altitude: one-fifty.

TIM

Airspeed: one twenty five.

TERRY

How's it going, John?

JOHN

Nearly there, Skip.

ALF

Altitude: one hundred.

TIM

Airspeed: one twenty.

JOHN

Wheels down, Skip, but I don't know if they've locked.

TERRY

Bloody hope so.

John removes the handle and takes a brace position.

Long pause - no one speaks - as the engines start to sputter through lack of fuel. One stops altogether.

TIM

Now on two engines, Skip.

TERRY

Well that's better than none. Brace position gunners. I'm taking us down.

Altitude: fifty

ALF

Airspeed: one hundred.

TIM

John takes out his RAF issue miniature bible and kisses it.

Altitude: forty

ALF

Airspeed: ninety.

TIM

John looks perplexed at The Bible.

JOHN

Don't know why I'm kissing you. Whose side are you on anyway?

(pause as he turns some pages)

But you're the first book I ever owned. The king gave you to me so I thought I'd better take a gander. I managed Genesis but then you got a bit boring to be honest.

The tone of engines changes again as another one dies.

One engine Skip.

TIM

TERRY

Well let's see what we can do with that then. Good luck everybody and don't worry, chaps, this is G for George.

John puts away the bible. His shoulder grinds as he goes into a brace position.

The tone of the engine changes as the wheels bump onto the tarmac. Lots of heavy breathing and muttering through the intercom.

Speed: ninety...

TIM

Our father which art in heaven...

DAI

Eighty...

TIM(CONT'D)

Please don't let the tyres be buggered.

JOHN

The tyres BOUNCE against the tarmac with a LOUD SCREECHING THUD which morphs into a musical chord.

John turns away from the wireless and focuses in the middle distance.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Kate!

SOUND MONTAGE: return to the distant, dream-like sounds of "back home"...

KATE

Are you going to talk to Dad this weekend?

JOHN

Well if he's sober and in the same room as your mum, it'd help.

KATE

Well you know where he'll be.

JOHN

Yeah, but there's a lot of pubs in Stepney.

(sigh)

Better get there as early as possible then. You sure you don't know where he's getting his head down?

KATE

You could have a chat with Mum about it on Saturday.

JOHN

Will she have me?

KATE

Course she will.

JOHN

She always brings it up again when she sees me.

KATE

She'll get over it.

JOHN

But she's right. It's women and children. I'm killing women and children.

KATE

You didn't ask to and she knows that. So please come.

JOHN

If I'm still alive in three seconds time, then OK, yes...

The tyres BOUNCE again - another VIOLENT THUD - and another musical chord...

KATE

You haven't said a dickie bird John. Are you OK?

JOHN

(wounded, emotional, childlike)

No.

The tyres BOUNCE a third time - a final VIOLENT THUD before the wheels roll down the Tarmac. The sound of the wing flaps going up and the engine changes tone.

TERRY

(through gritted teeth)

Come on! Stay down! DOWN!

TIM

So far so good.

ALF

The tyres could still go.

SPOOKY

Thanks Alf.

JOHN

(eyes squeezed tight shut)

So close... so bloody close...

Metal creaks and rattles as the plane hurtles down the runway. John twists slowly as he tries to release the tension in his shoulder.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I wish I believed, cos now'd be the time to pray.

John shakes his head as the brakes scream and screech as the plane decelerates.

JOHN (CONT'D)

On our own runway... On our last mission... Now that would NOT be fair.

Torn sheet metal from the damaged fuselage flaps against the side like a demented seal.

The final engine cuts out.

TERRY

There goes the last of the fuel. Told you we had plenty.

The Lancaster finally comes to a halt with a metallic sigh.

Pause. Relieved breathing on the intercom.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Well done everybody.

John uncurls from the brace position.

SPOOKY

Hello? Can someone tell me that I'm still alive.

ALF

I'm checking but I think so.

TIM

If you are, I am.

John stands up and goes back to sit at his desk.

SPOOKY

Dai, don't start singing.

TERRY

Save it for later, Dai. I might need a drink before that.

John starts to gather his things together: log books, code books, coffee flask, soup can, bag...

ALF

Do we get double rum tots as it's the last mission?

TERRY

I doubt it but we can try. We'll drink one for Scotty.

The sounds of the crew as they disconnect from the intercom system, collect their kit and disembark from the plane.

NOTE: the remaining dialogue is unfiltered through the intercom system as they shout to one another down the fuselage.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Let's leave Scotty undisturbed and go out the escape hatch.

Birdsong. The distant sound of boots dropping onto Tarmac and footsteps as they walk away from the plane. Dai starts whistling: "We'll keep a welcome..."

SPOOKY ET AL

No Dai!

ALF

Whistling Dai... it's the same...

John smiles to himself as other planes land in the background.

JOHN

If ever they deserved their rum it's now. They can have mine too. And Scotty's.

He wipes his hand across one of the covers of the log books to clean it and it comes away with blood on it. He stares at the blood.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I'm alive. Maybe that's enough for now.

(pause)

I still don't hate anyone. Who's to hate? I should be the one who's hated.

(pause)

How would I know?

(pause)

It has to end somewhere. But I can't see how it can.

John takes out his bar of chocolate and starts to unwrap it.

JOHN (CONT'D)

So that's it.

(pause)

I'm alive.

John stands up.

JOHN (CONT'D)

The last operation. Jesus, I've been dead for ages and now... I'm alive. I'm not dead. This isn't it.

(pause)

I'm here, right HERE...

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

(pause while John gesticulates to the space
immediately around him)

I was still Centre Forward for Mile End FC when I signed up. Four years. Feels like forty. I wonder if they'd have me back? I could take the little 'un - even if it's a girl. Maybe take Kate. I don't even know if she likes football!

(pause)

We could go hop picking in the summer. That'd be nice. Elma and Louis will like her. I could make our furniture. Maybe build a house one day...

His expression darkens.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Those people who chose their curtains to go with their woodwork felt the same...

His face is drained. He starts to take off his harness.

JOHN (CONT'D)

How would they not?

(pause)

I see their faces in my dreams. I see the faces of all of them. In the flames. Even if I don't know them.

(pause)

I see the faces of friends and crew in the empty beds in the billet. I see the faces in the rubble of the Isle of Dogs. I can even see Nigel's face - and Joy's. I can even see her baby's face. Poor little bugger. I can see them all.

John takes off his flying jacket and puts on his dress jacket.

JOHN (CONT'D)

How close to death can you get and still be alive? I'm alive. I should be dead, but I'm here... taking up THIS space. THIS space that should be empty, but I'm in it... Why?

(pause)

...it's not over. It'll never be over.

(pause)

How will I bring a child into this? How will I explain?

(pause)

No one can ever make sense of this. How will I tell a child what I've done?

(pause)

I won't be able to face their judgement.

(pause)

I can never tell them.

(pause)

That would kill me, again. It ends here. It has to.

(pause)

Nothing can scare me now, but a child's judgement would kill me again... and again...

(pause)

But I'm alive.

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)

(pause)

Sitting in THIS space.

John snaps to attention and salutes.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Bloody hell. I'm alive.

John curls up, emotional, broken.

BLACKOUT

THE END