

BOMBED TO FREEDOM

An Episode In Air Force History

"SIT down here, make yourselves comfortable, and I'll have the record you want played over to you," said a member of the staff of 2YA to a party of three men, two women, and a baby the other afternoon. No one would have guessed by looking at them that one of the party, a Flying-Officer, was the man who had made the record and who had taken part, on February 18, 1944, in one of the most dramatic episodes in the experience of the Air Force.

The party consisted of Flying-Officer M. N. Sparks, his parents, and two friends, and they had come to listen to the story of how part of the Second



FLYING-OFFICER SPARKS
Looks back with satisfaction

Tactical Air Force flew from England to Amiens to liberate 100 French patriots who had been imprisoned by the Germans and who were condemned to death.

Flying-Officer Sparks, who is 24 years of age, and who before the war was employed by a firm of lacquer manufacturers in Auckland, told *The Listener* in an interview that at the moment he is enjoying a period of leave and, when asked what his plans might be, replied that he had no idea where he would be sent. "It must not be forgotten," he said, "that the Japs have to be beaten yet."

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Japanese soldier is to be taken prisoner, whether by surrender or by seizure. None could ever hope to return to his home. His own family would repudiate him. He might very likely be stoned to death. Like the ancient Spartan he is supposed to come back victor, or not at all. If he is not the victor his ashes alone may return honourably.

That is the kind of foe we are fighting, and you may be sure the battle will be long and hard for some time to come.

His story, which was contained, in part, in the recording made by the NBS from a BBC broadcast, gives details of a remarkable secret bombing operation.

It was early on an English winter morning when Flying-Officer Sparks and others were told that they were wanted. They shivered, pulled their clothes on, and were shown a model of a building. The plan of a task was unfolded.

In the building—a gaol—were 100 men of the French resistance movement awaiting death. The job was to set them free by attack from the air.

Making a "Break"

"Our idea," Flying-Officer Sparks told us, "was to use bombs to break open the prison and give the prisoners a chance to get out. The prison was in the shape of a cross, with walls 20ft. high and three feet thick. We had to kill as many of the guards as possible, and tossed up for who was to go first. It became the privilege of New Zealanders and Australians to lead the attack. In charge of the particular operation was the late Group-Captain P. C. Pickard, who appeared as 'F for Freddy' in the film *Target for To-night*, and his preliminary description of the operation was that it was a 'death or glory show.'

"We warmed up our engines and off we went, one after the other, starting at 11 a.m. with the idea of hitting the prison while the guards were at lunch. Near the coast the weather was clear and we split up for the attack. My job was to blast an opening in the eastern wall. I had to fly at an angle so as to keep the wing of my Mosquito aircraft from hitting the poplars. But soon the trees petered out, and we were over the prison.

A "Pin-Pointing" Task

"Then came the task of 'pin-pointing' the prison from a height of about ten feet. Suddenly we heard Group-Captain Pickard's voice—"Don't bomb, don't bomb!"—and we knew the task had been a success. Those words from Pickard were actually a farewell, as he was shot down. We learned later that a high proportion of the French prisoners had got away. That is a battle I look back upon with satisfaction."

We asked Flying-Officer Sparks how it was possible to bomb a prison without killing some, or most, of the inmates.

That danger was present, of course, he replied, but an English squadron was standing by to destroy the prison, and the prisoners preferred to die at the hands of the R.A.F. rather than remain in the gaol and await death from the Germans.

Actually the whole show was led by Wing-Commander I. S. Smith, of Auckland, and with Flying-Officer Sparks were Flying-Officers M. Darrell, of Auckland, F. Stevenson, of Auckland, R. Fowler, of Arrowtown, and Ted Gabites, who was attached to the English section.

A newsreel was made of this celebrated operation and eventually shown in England.

Before returning to duty, Flying-Officer Sparks is enjoying a spell in Wellington with friends at Hataitai

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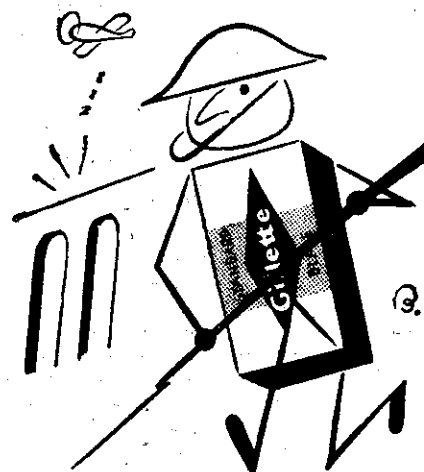
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