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Air Ministry News Service

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ON FIRE OVER MILAN

While over Milan on the night of February 14, one of our aircraft was attacked by an enemy fighter. The fighter's gunfire exploded some incendiary bombs, and the fuselage of the bomber became a mass of flames. Members of the crew have now been decorated for "courage, fortitude and devotion to duty," one of them with the D.S.O. and the others with the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal.

"The pilot did a first-class job of work on that trip," said Pilot Officer F. A. Gates, wireless operator, who receives the D.S.O. "He made three vital decisions in quick succession. When he saw the fire raging in the aircraft he decided that we should bale out. But on finding that the rear-gunner was badly wounded he decided to try to make a forced landing. Then, after we got the fire under control, he made up his mind to try to reach home. When we landed we congratulated him, but he maintained that if the rest of the crew had not done their share he would never have been able to reach England."

Pilot Officer Gates, whose home is at 218, Mulgrave Road, Cheam, Surrey, was making his sixth operational trip.

"After we were hit and set alight by the fighter", he said, "the pilot put the aircraft into a spiral dive and pulled out about 800 feet from the ground. Bullets had hit incendiary bombs that were not released from our aircraft. We heard an explosion and in fifteen seconds the fire was burning fiercely. Very soon there was a raging fire below the mid-upper turret. Smoke poured into the front cabin and for a time the pilot could scarcely see his instruments. Air rushed through the bomb doors as they hung open and through the main door which we had to open to let out the smoke".

Pilot Officer Gates, the navigator, and the mid-upper gunner fought the flames with extinguishers until the fire was out. They threw pieces of burning metal and fabric through the main door.

Flight Sergeant G. F. Dove, D.F.M. who was awarded the G.C.M., is twenty-one and has made thirty-six war flights. His home is at 79 Westfield Way, Redcar, York. W/Sgt Dove who was the mid-upper gunner in the Lancaster, said:-

"I first saw the fighter thirty yards astern after we had left the target. Its first burst hit the petrol tanks and the rear-turret, and also wounded the rear-gunner.

"Another burst set the incendiaries alight. The rear-gunner replied and set the enemy aircraft on fire. Then I gave it a burst and saw it fall away blazing. While I was firing, flames and smoke rolled into the turret. My window was burned and ammunition began to explode. The smoke was so thick that I could scarcely see the fighter when I got him in my sights. Only one gun was working properly".

"I scrambled down and picked the rear-gunner out of his turret. But owing to the fire and a hole blown in the bottom of the aircraft by the explosion, I couldn't carry him forward to the bed, and I had to prop him up near his turret."

F/Sgt. Dove was burnt about the face.

Two petrol tanks had been holed, one engine was out of action, the rear and mid-upper turrets were useless, the flaps were damaged, and the intercomm. was weak.

The aircraft had to climb over the Alps on three engines, but the pilot got the most out of them, steered the aircraft between Alpine peaks, and by careful navigation reached England.

"He estimated things so neatly," F/Sgt. Dove said, "that when we landed we had just about enough petrol left in the tanks for two minutes more flying. But we made it!"

Since the awards of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal were approved two of the recipients, Sergeant Ivan Henry Hazard and Sergeant James Fortune Bain, have been killed in a flying accident, and a third, Sergeant W.E. Williams, was injured.

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