

During the the third week of May 42 the air at RAF Cottesmore was electric with all manner of rumours abounding throughout the entire station, "latrine" and otherwise. In general the main story that was being widely circulated concerned the fact that a large raid of sorts was definitely in the offing, and the OTU would be involved, a precedent never before contemplated. Excitement became rife, and all types of ranks from the NAAFI upwards amalgamated in their own small groups, tongues commenced wagging with inventive stories becoming ever more numerous in their different contexts. In the levelling out process it seemed that the "Hamburg" story was the most prolific, and being so popular was the odds on favourite. However on Sunday 24th May things came to a head, officially that is, when a secret briefing session was held by the higher echelon in the Station Headquarters building. In consequence it was later announced that thirty four man crews would be made up consisting in the main of ex-operational types (Instructors) with senior course trainees as bottom gunners. Several senior course trainee pilots, and navigators would also be taking part. Apart from the information concerning the crew list nothing else was mentioned, but it was obvious to everybody that something extraordinary was being or had been planned by Bomber Command Headquarters if OTU aircraft, and crews were to be used together with the Main Force. All the 14 OTU Hampdens had previously seen plenty of operational service with No. 5 Group squadrons, but after constant training unit activities some were pretty well clapped out for further operational use. In view of this it was ordered that the entire force of OTU Hampdens be brought up to squadron operational standards as quickly as possible. There was no doubt that this would be a really big job to achieve in so short a time, and meant hours of hard work for the fitters, and all the associated ground staff connected, nevertheless it was carried out in exemplary fashion with great verve and enthusiasm. By the following day thirty crews had been formed, and the subsequent list containing one hundred and twenty names was eagerly perused by all and sundry, more especially by the senior course trainees, some of whom found their names amongst the made up crews. These lucky ones, I think they were in this instance, seemed quite pleased at their involvement. I was crewed up with P/O "Jack" Donald as pilot, I knew him as a Sergeant Pilot during my Finningley days in early 41. Our other two crew members were both trainees nearing the end of their OTU course, an Aussie Sergeant Observer, and a Sgt Wop/Ag as bottom gunner, I am afraid I cannot recall their names, The Hampden allocated to our crew was AE 155, lettered S 2 with the 14 OTU code letters being "G L". After a forty eight hour period of nonstop sweat and toil the hard pressed ground staff lads, and lasses had most of the unit's Hampdens in real fighting trim, including our kite so without further ado Jack and I piled aboard, and carried out an air test. AE 155 handled perfectly as Jack put it through all the various manoeuvres, while I was very happy with the Marconi W/T set, and so after we had landed it was smiles all around.

The following day Wednesday 27th May saw our makeshift foursome grouped together in flying kit about to crawl aboard AE 155 to fly a long cross country exercise across to the Isle of Man, and the back to base. During the time we were airborne we got to know each other, and it was no trouble at all we worked well together, it was ^{all} good practice. The ground crew had accomplished a first class job on the kite, the engines ran sweetly, ^{and} from my angle the Marconi set worked like a charm. Jock Donald, our skipper, was also satisfied with all aspects of the practice trip, and after being airborne for three and a half hours we were skimming across the Cottesmore grass airfield to "pancake".

The intended target, and its implications was still a well kept secret, and we were literally on stand by on both the 28th and 29th May, when all the crews performed night flying tests on both these days without being briefed, on each occasion the projected raid was scrubbed due to inclement weather on the continent. The target and the size of the operation was still not known, and at this late hour the strongest "buzz" was still heavily in favour of Hamburg, especially around the NAAFI. After yet another N.F.T. on Saturday 30th May it was finally announced over the Tannoy that the main briefing would be held in at 6 pm in the Station H.Q.. After almost a week the waiting was finally over with everybody eagerly anticipating what the briefing would disclose.

Thirty crews jostled around the room, and in the midst of a hubbub of raised voices found seats, and tables, an air of general excitement prevailed throughout. After the Station C.O.'s preliminary address the briefing started in earnest, and the air was now thick with cigarette smoke as many lit up. When it was announced that 1050 aircraft would bomb COLOGNE inside a time of ninety minutes, expressions of amazement flittered across one hundred and twenty faces, for a fleeting second there was absolute silence as the immenseness of the operation began to infiltrate that number of minds. This was immediately followed by a crescendo of cheers, colourful exclamations, and "adjectives", the place was in a real uproar with the reactions being spontaneous, and these lads were for the most part experienced "old lags". For a few minutes the noise was impossible to suppress, and until it eventually subsided the briefing processes were temporarily held up. Little did we realise this raid would prove to be a truly historical event in the annals of Bomber Command. It was emphasised that varying bombing heights would be allocated to each Group, and these would have to be strictly adhered to to obviate the dangers of collision over the target area. Our thirty Hampdens would each carry a bomb load of 2500 lbs. This consisted of four S.B.C.'s (small bomb containers) each container held five hundred lbs. made up of 125 4 lb incendiary bombs. Additionally two at 250 lb High Explosive bombs made up the load, one of these under each wing. The briefing continued with navigators busily putting pencil to paper as each specialist, Navigation, Signals, Intelligence, Met (weather man) etc. spoke his piece to the now very attentive audience.

We were told that our bombing height would be ten thousand feet which had to be strictly adhered to, and our take off was timed at 2230 hours. After the main briefing it was the Sergeants Mess for me, and a modicum of relaxation in one of the many comfortable armchairs, but I was unduly optimistic, the noisy atmosphere precluded my intentions, it was impossible to nod off. The only topic being discussed was the raid when all aspects of the impending event were being vociferously debated, even the anticipated collision rate. Night flying supper was eventually taken, some enjoyed the meal, and it was eaten with great gusto, while others just pecked at it, and played around the edges.

It was soon time for all to make our way up to the various crew rooms, and noisily change into the various garbs of flying clothing, find their crew mates, and wait for the transport to take them out to the different dispersal points, and their waiting aircraft. Since the warly morning in this newly found atmosphere No. 14 OTU Cottesmore had indeed been a hive of activity. The day had been a very long one for all trades of ground staff, and almost everybody on the station had been involved in the proceedings one way or another which went on well into the late evening. Petrol bowsers mingled among the Hampdens topping up the tanks, while armourers and tractors scurried around dispersals pulling trains of trolleys carrying H.E. bombs, and canisters of incendiaries as thirty empty bomb bays were eventually loaded up.

Jack, myself, and our two course trainees were on the ball, and presented ourselves at our dispersal well before time. We clambered aboard our kite AE 155 stowed our gear, and made a last minute check to ensure that everything was in order, before nipping out for a last smoke, and a talk with the ground crew lads. After drowning the proximity of the tail wheel I agreed with Jack that it was time we re-entered the Hampden to take up our crew positions. Our skipper then tested each engine in turn up to full throttle, and after he had concluded all his checks we were ready for the off. It was thumbs up, and checks away to commence taxiing slowly

out of dispersal and on to the perimeter track, with rudders swinging we meandered in sedate fashion towards the take off point. History was in the process of being made, and as far as I was concerned it was a never to be forgotten occasion as practically the entire personnel of the station had turned out to witness the take off, and give all the crews a remarkable send off. One side of the flare path was thronged with hand waving, cheering lads and lassies of all ranks, and trades who responded marvellously as each kite moved off down the flare path. All the Wop/Ag's in their top gun positions with perspex cupola lids pushed back reciprocated with a wave of the hand as each Hampden sped off down the grass take off lane. It proved to be an exceptional take off, and with the great majority being experienced ex-operational pilots they carried out what we Hampden old hands termed in 1941 as a "Scampton" take off. I can only describe this as a collectively quick line astern take off with a fairly close nose to tail departure, and tail up shortly after moving off. Indeed the thirty Hampdens were away and airborne inside a time of thirtyfive minutes, an efficient performance.

Our kite was airborne at 2300 hours, and after circling the drome we set course, ~~xxxx~~ to then climb steadily through cloud where I felt several air bumps as we

encountered several slip streams of other kites, but soon after we broke through the cloud. A marvellous sight then enfolded, we were flying above a blanket of cotton wool like cloud, and I could see aircraft dotted about all over the sky in the fading light.

Our course to the target area was uneventful after we had crossed the Dutch coast just south of Rotterdam. About seventy miles from Cologne the cloud had cleared completely, the sky was now clear with bright moonlight conditions persisting. Approaching Munchen Gladbach the sky was now hostile being punctuated with innumerable red and black bursts of heavy flak, assisted by the many crossed stalks of the searchlight units, and while a number of our bombers were heavily engaged we managed to slip by unmolested. We followed the line of the River Rhine down to Cologne, and arrived over the target area at five minutes past one am. In the bright moonlight visibility I kept an alert watch for other friendly aircraft because of the ever present risk of collision, in this now heavily populated air space, kites now seemed to be converging from all directions. Besides keeping an all round lookout it was also necessary to give an occasional glance upwards, with aircraft having varying homing

heights another danger was falling bombs so we did not want to find ourselves immediately below one of our kites with its bomb doors open.

We then prepared to make our run over the city, our aiming point was just south of the Neumarkt in the centre of Cologne. Three different aiming marks had been designated in order to spread the devastation over the whole area of the city. Cologne was one of the most heavily protected cities in the Reich, being surrounded by hundreds of light, and heavy flak guns supported by many batteries of searchlights, but our large force confirmed the belief that the saturation effect would prove to be overwhelming. This in fact did happen as, in my opinion, as an experienced participant, the many searchlights seemed to be switching about aimlessly no doubt finding it difficult to catch single aircraft, and there was no great

concentration of flak as we made our run in to bomb. This we achieved successfully from our allocated height of ten thousand feet. Below me the city seemed to be one huge mass of flames, and hundreds of small fires were merging into one terrific conflagration, it was an awesome, unforgettable sight. Immense clouds of smoke from the burning city were rising to many thousands of feet, the attack had been in progress for only thirty minutes, and the majority of the four engined heavies had not yet arrived on the scene being at the rear end of the schedule. The spectacle surpassed by far anything I, and the other aircrews had experienced in any other previous operations, we were in fact witnessing history in the making on this particular occasion, the forerunner of future saturation raids on the cities of Germany. It was also my sixth trip over Cologne, and I marvel as to how the Cathedral emerged unscathed after such an attack especially as it was so near to one of the three aiming points. The mind boggles even more so when one realises that at the end of the war Cologne Cathedral looked to be the only building which remained intact amidst the devastation of that whole area, which was really amazing to say the least. From my unparalleled vantage point at the upper rear of the Hampden I saw many of our aircraft over the target, some were shot down, but we were not unduly troubled as Jock Donald, keeping a constant watchful vigil in the process, skilfully weaved his way out of the well lit up air space above the burning city, while I kept my usual keen look out for enemy night fighters, and encroaching bombing aircraft.

We headed south out of Cologne for some miles towards EUSWIRCHEN at which point we turned to set a parallel course, but further south than our inward leg, which meant we flew back across Northern Belgium. Leaving the target area Jock had climbed steadily until our Hampden had reached a height of fifteen thousand feet to finally pass over the Dutch island of Schouwen, plenty of visual pinpoints for our navigator around this area. Prior to our arrival at this point the burning city of Cologne was still clearly visible, a remarkable and fascinating sight from such a distance. With my back to the engines in my mid upper position I had a marvellous grand-stand view all the way back to the Dutch coastline, and I could not help but enthuse, to Jock and our navigator up front, on the awesome, gigantic fire that was Cologne. Not to be outdone Jock banked the Hampden, and circled so that he and the Observer could take a last look at the spectacle before turning back on course for home.

Very soon after leaving the Dutch coastline German night fighters, inconspicuous over the target area, were now very active. All around me at this point I could see the unmistakable signs of air combats taking place on both port, and starboard sides, but more particularly so at my rear as returning bombers were being waylaid, and attacked. Very heavy exchanges of machine gun, and cannon fire were observed about a thousand yards to my rear, although I could not ascertain whether anybody was shot down or not innumerable lines of tracer fire seemed to encompass the various dark silhouettes as several bombers were attacked. We seemed to be in the centre of all the action, and every second I expected it would be our turn. I continued to give my skipper a running commentary on the situation behind, at the same time keeping my eyes peeled, and my hands ready to swing the ready cocked twin Vickers guns if need be, but we appeared to lead a charmed life as we left the area to continue on our way unmolested across the "drink" towards the Suffolk coast. The I.F.F. had been switched on, and approaching our coastline we had been steadily losing height down to below two thousand feet, the clear weather was now well behind us, it was now very cloudy. The cloud base was about two thousand five hundred feet, and underneath it proved to be a very dark night indeed, I should say early morning, as we headed over Suffolk on a straight heading for our base at Cottesmore. We managed to find our station beacon without undue difficulty and landed safely at 0415 hours after being airborne for five and a quarter hours.

Thus ended a memorable trip, the first ever major bomber battle. Our two pupil members of the crew had performed very well, especially our Aussie Observer who never put a foot wrong throughout, all I did was to keep a good look out, apart from periodically listening out on my W/T set.

With our Hampden now marshalled, and the engines silent I crawled out of the bottom door of the "Tin" to take a couple of strides, straighten out my stiff, tired frame, and breathe in a few lungfuls of the very fresh morning air. On this special occasion for No. 14 OTU many of the Station personnel seemed to be on hand having gone without sleep in order to welcome returning crews. In our case, amidst the early morning gloom, I was suddenly confronted by a tall shadowy figure who slapped me very enthusiastically on my back, and then proceeded to shout some endearing remarks. Despite the dim light I had no trouble recognising him as the Station Padre, who then thrust a large mug into my unresisting hands. Thinking it was a welcome cup of hot tea, and at the same time mentally commending the "Austin Reed" service, I swigged the contents straight down, or endeavoured to. Although I was in dire need of some throat lubrication I did not expect to be taken by surprise, phew; the mug's contents made me cough, and splutter, it was not bloody tea at all, being neat rum.

I must say the hastily absorbed beverage brought a hot flush to the old cheeks, and made my tired eyes take on a brilliant lustre.

After disposing of most of our flying kit, parachute and harness in the locker room our job had not quite ended, we had yet to provide information on the sortie. The debriefing session held in the Station Headquarters proved to be quite an hectic affair as a steady stream of crews arrived for interrogation to add to the general din. Amidst a thick haze of cigarette smoke Intelligence officers at the various tables were hard at it collating all the information offered by the respective crews in response to the many questions asked, concerning all aspects of that crew's part in the attack. Each Intelligence officer had quite a detailed questionnaire to work through, but each crew interrogation was usually carried out fairly quickly, and efficiently. Tired but excited crews awaiting

their turn at the tables stood around in groups busily ^{ENGAGED} in conversation whilst drinking cups of either tea or coffee, or maybe it was neat rum. In the happy go lucky atmosphere it certainly looked as if everybody was quite pleased with their night's effort, it would soon be the usual meal of bacon and egg, and then off to kip.

So ended the first Thousand bomber raid, code named "Operation Millenium", a momentous, and historical occasion which would always be remembered by participants who survived the war. On this supreme maximum effort Bomber Command had accumulated a total of 1046 aircraft, of which approximately one third had been provided by the bomber OTU's. Over fifty airfields had been involved, and the aircraft concerned in the attack were comprised of Lancasters, Halifax's, Stirlings, Manchesters, Wellingtons, Hampdens, and Whitleys. A total of forty one aircraft failed to return. The statistical aftermath of the raid revealed that there were two collisions over the target area so I guess the buffins were about right in their pre trip predictions.

Out of the thirty Hampdens taking part from my unit No.14 OTU, RAF Cottesmore three aircraft and crews were lost. Subsequently I learnt that another of our Hampdens skippered by Squadron Leader "Uncle" Falconer, ex 49 Squadron, had collided with a four engined Halifax whilst descending through cloud somewhere over Cambridgeshire on his return journey from Cologne. S/L Falconer somehow managed to bale out, but unfortunately the other three crew members were killed when the Hampden crashed into the ground. I knew both the pilot, and the first Wop/Ag, Sgt. Knowling pretty well, and prior to their "screening" duties at No.14 OTU had flown together to complete a tour of Ops at RAF, Scampton on Hampdens.

While the whole bomber force was more or less intact "Bomber" Harris decided to strike again, and two nights later on the night of 1/2 June we were on the job again. The target this time was ESSEN, and bearing in mind the previous losses twenty seven Hampdens was the maximum available from our unit No.14 OTU with more or less the same crews taking part, once again. We flew in the same Hampden AE 155, and were part of a total force of 956 medium and heavy bombers that were despatched that night. This time the four engined heavies were in the first wave with the medium bombers, amongst which were all the OTU crews, following up to bomb the fires already started. Cloudy conditions were experienced all the way to the Ruhr, and the raid was not a success owing to the thick industrial haze in the area plus extensive cloud at a lower height which made it impossible to identify the target. Consequently bombs were scattered far and wide in the murk though the attack was sufficiently concentrated to once again saturate the defences. The Ruhr valley was habitually covered in industrial haze, and was extremely heavily defended with considerable searchlight glare adding to our difficulties. Many large fires were in evidence, but they seemed to be scattered all over the Ruhr valley, and it was evident that the attack lacked the intense concentrated bombing pattern of the Cologne raid. The flak was intense, and we could not identify Essen through the lower layer of cloud, and the murk so we bombed fires already started. As far as No.14 OTU was concerned it was a good trip as all our twenty seven Hampdens returned safely, but out of the total Command force thirty one of our aircraft were shot down. The third Thousand raid of 1942 was carried out later on in the month on the 25th June during the moon period when the port of BREMEN was attacked. For the first time Coastal Command took a hand in the proceedings to contribute about a hundred aircraft, mostly Hudsons, towards the main force of 1006 sent out on this raid. My unit No.14 OTU was yet again involved with twenty two Hampden crews taking part. Once again the weather proved to be unfavourable with most of the town and port being covered by cloud.

Because of the adverse weather conditions the bombing, once again, could not be concentrated, and although considerable damage was caused, it was well scattered. Our unit, No 14 O.T.U. lost one aircraft on this raid, and the force as a whole lost a total of forty nine bombers. The now historical Cologne raid took pride of place as the only big success of the first three Thousand saturation attacks during that period of 1942.