

THE R. C. A. F. BOMBER GROUP IN ACTION

AN ADDRESS BY AIR COMMODORE J. E. FAUQUIER, D.S.O.,(Two Bars), D.F.C.

Chairman: The First Vice-President, Colonel F. F. Arnoldi, D.S.O.

Thursday, November 22, 1945

COLONEL ARNOLDI: Gentlemen of the Empire Club of Canada, we are privileged today to have as our, guest speaker one of that group of men whom Mr. Churchill referred to as, 'the few to whom so many owe so much.'

Our guest of honour, prior to the war, was engaged in commercial flying, operating out of Noranda. Shortly after the beginning of the war he joined up in the R.C.A.F. being posted to Trenton.

Rather than use my own words to tell of his accomplishments in the Air Force, I will read you the biographical sketch supplied by the R.C.A.F. Headquarters in Ottawa:

'Air Commodore Fauquier's brilliant record in Bomber Command is well known to all and requires no elaboration, except to say that in the opinion of the undersigned, the decorations awarded to this officer, the D.S.O. and 2 Bars and the D.F.C., are a part measure only of the outstanding contributions which he has made to the war effort in general and to the R.C.A.F. effort in particular.

Following a period of duty in Canada as flying instructor and staff officer in the training plan at the war's beginning, he was posted overseas where he rose to command the first R.C.A.F. bomber squadron in the R.A.F.—No. 405 Squadron. During this first splendid operational tour he was awarded the D.F.C. Then followed a non-operational tour as operations staff officer during the formation and early life of No. 6 R.C.A.F. Bomber Group, the success of which organization was in large measure due to Fauquier's exceptional ability and efforts.

At his urgent request, he returned promptly for a second tour of operations in command of No. 405 Squadron, this time as the R.C.A.F. Pathfinder Squadron in the Pathfinder Group of Bomber Command. Under Fauquier's fine leadership and command, this newest pathfinder squadron rapidly rose to a leading position in this outstanding Bomber Group. Fauquier was awarded the D.S.O. and Bar during this operational tour.

Followed another non-operational tour with No. 6 Group, first as Station Commander, then Base Commander, then Operations Officer at Group Headquarters and finally as Senior Air Staff Officer in the rank of Air Commodore. His contribution to the R.C.A.F. Bomber Group during these most hectic periods of the great bombing offensive was, to say the least, unsurpassed. Continuation of his excellent staff work would doubtless have led him to even greater heights, but he chose instead to take a reduction in rank to Group Captain in order to return for a third tour of operations, this time in command of the most famous squadron in Bomber Command, No. 617 Bomber Squadron. Fauquier led this extraordinary fine squadron for the five closing months of the war and his leadership in its ten-ton bomb attacks is already legendary. For this third operational tour he was awarded another bar to the D.S.O.

Fauquier's all round ability, keenness leadership, and courage have soundly earned for him the distinction of being the most outstanding member of the R.C.A.F. in Bomber Command.'

It is superfluous for me to add further words to such a citation.

Gentlemen: I have great pleasure in presenting to you: Air Commodore J. E. Fauquier, D.S.O. and 2 Bars, D.F.C.

AIR COMMODORE J. E. FAUQUIER: My introduction by your Chairman today has done nothing to spare my blushes.

You have been informed that I am going to talk to you of the exploits of Royal Canadian Air Force Bomber Group, but I am sure you will permit me to tell you something of the larger organization—Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force—of which the Canadian Bomber Group was so vital a part. Equally vital was the part played by the R.C.A.F. air crew who, apart from those in the Canadian Group, were spread throughout the other Bomber Groups of R.A.F. Bomber Command.

Perhaps the best way in which I can explain Bomber Command's contribution in this war is to give you, a short history of this great organization and tell you how it operated.

There are very few people, for instance, who realize that this one branch of the Royal Air Force was approximately equivalent in numbers to the entire Canadian Army Overseas.

Bomber Command at the beginning of the war started in a modest way. It grew from a handful of brave men in very indifferent aircraft, as we know them today—mostly Whitley's and Wellington 1-C's—and it might amuse you to know that at the outset of the war these few original members of the Command were ordered to drop paper propaganda leaflets on such heavily defended German cities as Essen, Duisberg, Cologne, etc., but no bombs were to be carried. In fact, strict orders were issued to make sure that the propaganda bundles were packed loosely, as it would never do to have a bundle drop on a German's head and hurt him. From these modest beginnings, the Command grew, under the brilliant leadership of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, to a weapon of such size and might that by its achievements it undoubtedly saved countless thousands of casualties for our Army and shortened the war by many months—in fact, years.

Let there be no mistake about this: the strategic bombing of Germany contributed more than any other factor to her defeat; one has only to see the devastation in Germany to realize that no country could put up a prolonged defence under such a hammering as she received. Evidence of this is the statement of Field Marshal Kesserling, probably Germany's most outstanding soldier in this war, who stated that the strategic bombing of Germany was probably more responsible for her defeat than any other factor.

Few people today are aware of the price that the Bomber crews paid for this. In killed and missing alone, not wounded, the casualties amounted to fifty per cent of Air Crews engaged on operations. This figure is by far the highest of any fighting force of comparable size. They also indicate the frantic efforts that the enemy made to stop the avalanche of bombs. His defences against those raids grew in size and effectiveness throughout the years of war. His night-fighter organization, for example, was his only fighting arm which grew stronger towards the end of the war and it was only by really brilliant radio counter measures and strategy that our Air Forces escaped as lightly as they did in the closing months of the war.

It is perhaps not generally appreciated by Canadians that the leadership provided by the Royal Air Force in Bomber Command operational planning was of the highest order and contributed greatly to the success of our raids.

When one considers that the enemy employed over one million men and women to halt these raids, it can be seen that a high standard of strategy was necessary.

It is always surprising to me to meet the number of people who imagine that a raid consisted of merely telling some air crew to raid, say, Berlin -when you stop to realize that a good-sized bomber raid is the equivalent of an army division launched against a heavily defended target, you will readily see that the raid becomes a battle and, therefore, required co-ordination and planning. For instance, feints were made, fake raids on nearby towns put on to draw off fighters from the vicinity of the actual target; radio curtains were thrown up to screen the approach of the main force; our own Bomber Command Intruder aircraft were sent in to shoot up and bomb enemy night-fighter aerodromes to keep their fighters grounded; our own bomber command night-fighters engaged the enemy's fighters wherever they could be found-all this and more had to be co-ordinated and planned to seconds; and this was done at the headquarters of Bomber Command.

Before I explain to you in detail how a raid was planned and executed, perhaps it is necessary for you to know how different bomb loads were chosen for different cities. There was in Air Ministry a special committee composed of experts on bombs and explosives and it was this committee's task to decide which was the most effective type of bomb for each individual target.

To give you a simple example-when we were attacking Turin, Italy, which was built, as you probably know, almost entirely of stone and marble, it would have been silly for us to carry incendiaries, and therefore our load consisted almost entirely of almost 100 per cent high explosive bombs. The type of bomb employed was mostly 1,000 pounders, 2,000 pounders and 4,000 pounders, with a sprinkling of 8,000 pounders. Conversely, when we were attacking the medieval Hanseatic trading ports of Germany, like Lubeck, Rostock and Dresden incendiaries were the order of the day, as nearly all the buildings in these cities were made of wood and would burn fiercely. This information was passed to Bomber Command and was used by them as a guide when they were detailing bomb loads to the various groups.

The actual planning of an air raid began with another special committee who chose all targets we were to attack and gave each one of them a priority. The priorities were decided according to their importance of the moment. For example, when the submarine menace was at its peak, it was not only necessary for us to sink them at sea, we had to strike at their very source where they were manufactured. In this case, we would be ordered to attack such towns as Hamburg, Kiel, Bremen, or some of the Ruhr cities, where the sub parts were made. All these priorities were then examined by the Commander-in-Chief at Bomber Command, and were attacked in order, provided, that is, that the weather allowed us to take off, reach our target, see it and return. The Commander-in-Chief, after consultation with the meteorological experts, decided what target was to be attacked and how many planes were necessary to do the job. The actual plan of attack was made out by his operational staff advisors and presented to him for his approval, after which it was passed to the various groups in Bomber Command. There were actually twelve groups in the Command -four were training groups, one a daylight bombing group, one a radio counter measure group, and six night-bombing groups, one of the largest of which was our own Royal Canadian Air Force Bomber Group. Of these six fighting groups, each one consisted of anywhere from 250 to 350 four-engine bombers; the population of each group was approximately 25,000 to 30,000, all ranks. Thus it can be seen that our Canadian Bomber Group was approximately the equivalent of two army divisions.

The six groups would be advised that they were to attack a certain city and the bomb load each was to carry. In addition, a 'Zero Hour' was chosen and each group given a different time on

target, as it would be impossible to have over one thousand heavy bombers over one spot at one time and so if, for example, No. 6 Group was detailed for the attack, they might be given the middle part of the raid for their time of attack and if the raid was to last twenty minutes, they would be allotted a zero hour of Z plus 8 to Z plus 13—that would mean that all our bombers would have to drop their bombs and be off the target between eight and thirteen minutes after the attack opened. In addition, all groups would be advised of what method the Pathfinders would use to mark and illuminate the target.

Immediately on receipt of this information, the operational planning staff of each group headquarters would then figure in the minutest detail all phases of the proposed attack and allot different times for bombing to each squadron in their respective groups.

When the plans were complete, they were then passed to the Squadron Commander, who, after studying them, gathered his men together in what was known as the Briefing Room and briefed them, or, in other words, told them exactly what to do from the time they took off until they returned. Such information as the air speed they were to use, the height they were to be at predetermined points on the route to the target and on the way back, what they could expect when they reached the target in the way of markers from Pathfinders, what colours the markers would be, the methods the Pathfinders were going to use to illuminate after they had dropped their markers.

While the briefing was on the Ground Crews would be frantically checking and rechecking engines, air frames, cameras, radio equipment, radar, instruments, guns, ammunition, electrical apparatus, oxygen and, of course, putting the bomb load on.

As soon as the briefing was over the aircraft signed out as serviceable by the Ground Crews, the pilots would marshal their aircraft. That is they would line them up nose to tail near the end of the runway to be used that night.

Then began the wait which was so hard on the nerves. This probably was the most trying time of the whole raid. The time would come eventually, however, for the crews to get into their flying clothes which consisted of heavy fleece-lined boots, heavy sweaters, electrically heated outer clothes for the gunners, electrically heated shoes and gloves for the gunners, check their helmets to insure that the oxygen and inter-communication system was serviceable; and finally, collect their parachutes and then into an air crew bus and out to their respective aircraft.

Approximately ten minutes before the time of takeoff you would hear as many as 160 engines come to life and roar up to full revolutions as the pilots gave them their final check before take-off. It literally used to shake the earth. Finally, the aircraft would start rolling heavily toward the runways. You couldn't taxi quickly because the aircraft weighed at that time before take-off, somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000 pounds. They were difficult to handle when they were that heavy, so we had to be very careful. You drove slowly up to the end of the runway and when it was your turn to take off you turned slowly into wind on the runway and on receipt of a green light flashed at you by the Aerodrome Control Pilot or starter, you pushed your throttles forward and were away. From that time until you returned you were entirely on your own. Unlike fighting on the ground or daylight bombing, when you could see what your pals are doing, at night you are entirely alone.

Then began the long haul, climbing as fast as possible in order to be at the correct height as ordered at briefing by the time you reached the enemy coast. The enemy coast will gradually appear before you and you would see searchlights snapped on very much as a flashlight would

appear to you across a field at night, except that the silver and light blue beams, as thin as pencils, reached up far above your height. At the same time, orange bursts were fired from heavy aircraft shells at approximately your height would tell you the battle was about to commence. You would watch the searchlights very closely and avoid large concentrations of them if it was at all possible. To be caught in their beams and coned was to ask for trouble, as the German wisely considered a bird in the hand worth two in the bush and would throw everything within range at the illuminated aircraft. Unless you got out of this cone fairly soon, in approximately 30 to 40 seconds, your chances of survival were rapidly approaching the zero mark.

To be illuminated by a large number of searchlights at night gives one the most conspicuous feeling imaginable. In fact, you could not feel more conspicuous if you were to walk down Yonge Street without your trousers. It makes you feel as if every German in Germany were looking at you personally, and rubbing his hands and saying, "We've got you this time, Boy".

However, by altering course slightly and diving and gathering a little speed it was usually easy enough to get out of the view of the coastal defences and start again your long trip to the target. From the moment the enemy coast was sighted every eye in the aircraft was straining and searching for enemy night fighters-and that meant seven pairs of very alert eyes. You probably know that a bomber crew consisted of pilot, navigator, bomb aimer, flight engineer, wireless operator, mid-upper gunner and tail gunner.

If you saw the fighter in time, you took avoiding action. If not, you were usually listed as « Missing », as things happened pretty quickly in the air and especially at night, so very little warning was ever given of the approach of this type of danger. From time to time before reaching your target it was necessary to pass over or near ground defences which never failed to salute you with a barrage of heavy flak. This would continue until you neared your goal, when far ahead, sometimes 40 or 50 miles, you would see that the Pathfinders were on their job by the target markers which they would drop to mark the main point in the target that you were about to attack. Immediately after, hundreds of flares would be dropped also by the Pathfinders to illuminate the city beneath. We were usually then about 20,00 feet in the air. Of course, the enemy defences here were more concentrated and the display of fireworks would put your Toronto Exhibition to shame-searchlights by the thousands, guns both heavy and light, firing different coloured shells, the burst of heavy anti-aircraft shells all around you and, unfortunately, too often you would see the exchange of tracer bullets followed by a long thin stream of fire hurtling vertically towards the earth. This would be one of our own bombers on fire. It would be followed by a crash, by a large red fiery mushroom shaped explosion which seemed to blossom out and stay exposed for two or three seconds, then die out leaving a few glowing embers. Occasionally, you would see a tremendous midair explosion which would light the sky for many miles around. That would be one of the poor chaps who received a direct hit, usually in a petrol tank, and exploded in mid-air.

Various forms of anti-aircraft shells were used by the enemy. Some of the more spectacular ones would rocket into the air, leaving a trail of sparks behind them and on bursting, three other rockets would shoot out at different angles until they too, exploded.

On the ground was a bubbling mass of brilliant white light, which looked exactly like boiling solder in a plumber's fire pot. These white lights were the incendiaries fiercely burning, and when they set buildings on fire the white light would turn into a deep orange. Occasionally, when we raided towns where there were chemical factories we would see flames of every colour of the rainbow-blue, green, yellow and pink. All the time, the flashes from the gun muzzles of

heavy flak batteries could be seen as the guns fired—then came the wait of a few seconds, approximately 12 to 17 seconds, and finally the thud and blast of air as the shell exploded near you. Often you could smell the fumes from the shell explosions as you flew through the spot where the explosion took place a second before.

It is very hard to explain all the details but it was rather a pretty sight, even if we were playing for keeps. Throughout all that time only the gunners were able to keep a lookout for enemy fighters as the rest of the crew had, a special job to do. The bombing run was usually a tense few moments, when the bomb aimer guided you to your aiming point. Eventually the time would come when he would yell 'bombs gone', and you could feel the aircraft jump as each heavy bomb left its station. You usually kept on a steady course for approximately thirty seconds, in order to allow the camera to take a picture of the actual spot where your bombs landed. Immediately after this you set a course for home and I can assure you it was a really wonderful feeling.

However, all danger was not yet over, as all the way back you had to be on the lookout for night fighters, as you were on the way in. If you saw one a running fight would ensue, until he either got you or you lost him. Sooner or later, however, the English coast would appear, and then your own aerodrome. You then wait your turn to land and after landing be interrogated.

Sometimes these trips took as much as nine or twelve hours. That, with the relaxation of the tension after landing brought on extreme fatigue and that is why most air crews received such liberal leave.

I think that now is a good time to tell you something of the history and methods of Pathfinders. In the beginning of the war you will recall the Royal Air Force had won renown for the battle of Britain. Shortly after this, fighters found it very difficult to come to grips with the enemy and it was from this point on that Bomber Command took the spotlight. In those days, the equipment used by Bomber Command was such that only approximately three percent of our bombs were hitting the aiming point and unfortunately it was at this precise time that the submarine menace grew to its peak. This situation encouraged certain people to believe the time had come to disband Bomber Command, splitting it up between Coastal Command and various other branches of the services. Thus, it will be noted that some indication of the might of the heavy bomber had to be given to the public. With this in mind, the first one thousand aircraft raid was planned and turned out to be a very successful raid indeed. It was originally planned for Hamburg but the weather made it impossible for us to carry it out on Hamburg, so two days later we attacked Cologne, and at one time I can assure you the whole city, without exception, was on fire. I was there and I know. This spectacular raid once again convinced the powers that be that separate air force and especially a bombing force could be very useful indeed, but at the same time it was realized that greater accuracy in bombing was absolutely essential.

Shortly after this, several Squadron Commanders were detailed to report to Air Ministry, of which I was one, where we discussed the formation of a corps d'elite who would consist of all our best crews in the Command and who would lead all raids in the hope that their example and incendiary fires would act as markers for the more inexperienced crews following them. This name was later changed to the Fire Raising Force and finally named the Pathfinders. The man who was to head this force is probably well known to you -he is Air Vice-Marshal Bennett -no doubt one of the world's best navigators.

Under his leadership, the Force rapidly grew in effectiveness due to an extensive and concentrated training programme, into a full-sized group in Bomber Command which was not

only capable of marking and illuminating very accurately, but could, in addition carry a heavy load of bombs.

The technique used was roughly as follows: In the case of targets at close range, Mosquito Aircraft were sent out, –flying very high, with a bomb load of target indicators; these were bombs filled with 'Roman Candles', with a barometric fuse. When the bomb dropped as it descended through the rarefied air and got into heavier air the barometric fuse was ignited or detonated which in turn would detonate a small explosive charge which lighted the bomb off and lighted the Roman Candles and out would shower some different coloured stars. It was rather interesting to know that one of the methods by which these Mosquitoes was controlled was by radar from England, enabling them to drop their target indicators with an accuracy of approximately 100 yards from their aiming point when the pilot couldn't even see the target. In fact, the signal to drop was given from England.

Immediately after the Mosquito had dropped his indicator, Lancaster aircraft of Pathfinders followed up by dropping different coloured target indicators on top of the first ones, in order to keep the target continually marked throughout the attack and in case the high explosive bombs blew the original markers out. In case of longer range targets, we were forced to use aircraft carrying their own radar and these aircraft would fly over the target by means of this radar equipment and drop their target indicators. There would be as many as 10 or 15 aircraft so equipped doing this work. The accuracy on this type of target was not so great as in the close raid targets, but with fifteen aircraft dropping their markers at the same time, the main force crews following obviously would average out the error if they aimed at the center of all the markers visible. In other cases, the target was first located by radar, an indicator dropped, immediately followed by a straight line of flares dropped at intervals for a distance of about five miles, and by the light of these flares a special crew would go as low as was safe in view of the defences and visually bomb a particular building or aiming point in the city beneath.

Now, a word about a Special Duty Squadron which I was fortunate enough to command in the closing stages of the war.

This Squadron was formed primarily with the idea of breaching the Mohne, the Eder and Sorpe dams. The Officer chosen to train and lead this Squadron was Wing Commander Gibson, of whom you all know. His success on this raid is now history. As this Squadron was so successful in this initial task it was decided that it should continue performing special duties of this nature, and, with this in mind, they were provided with streamlined 12,000 pound bombs, primarily for attacking large battleships and reinforced concrete submarine pens, which the Germans used to repair and refit their submarines and still be safe from the ordinary bomb. Toward the end of the war we received the news that a new bomb was going to be sent to us, weighing 22,500 pounds. In order to give you a rough idea of the size of this bomb, I assure you, you could drive a good sized Buick up to the side of it and the bomb was bigger in diameter from the distance from the top of the hood of the Buick to the ground. It was considerably longer than the largest Cadillac. As great accuracy was required in order not to waste these bombs, the Squadron was provided with special bomb-sights. The accuracy of these bombs and the crews dropping them can best be judged by the fact that when we raided the viaduct at Arnsberg in Germany, the greatest error was 100 yards from the aiming point and when one considers that these bombs shift approximately 10,000 tons of earth when they explode, it can be seen that it wouldn't have been too safe to have been on that viaduct. It might interest you to know that these bombs penetrate into the ground 110 feet and go forward about 65 feet.

Now, a word about the men on the ground who kept the aircraft serviced and made all this possible by tremendous work, in rain, snow, freezing cold. They were always ready to carry on 24 hours a day, day after day, to see that the aircraft were not just fit enough, but perfect in every detail.

I would like to say a few words about the men who did the bombing—your men. In any combat unit where casualties are high, morale is subjected to great stress. It is depressing to see the empty places at the mess table the next day. It is equally depressing for the new replacements coming in to have to occupy these places, but never for a moment did a crack appear. The will to do the job thoroughly never faltered.

Recently a public statement was made by a prominent Canadian over the radio, that these young men flew by the seat of their pants and took longer to train for Civil Air Line flying than men without previous flying experience.

Well, I agree that comparisons are odious, but I cannot let this statement pass unchallenged. How can this gentleman reconcile this statement with the facts, when you consider these same young men, your sons, brothers and friends, have taken off in really appalling weather, flown 1,000 miles through icing conditions, which have to be experienced to be believed, harried by night fighters throughout, shot at by heavy guns, yet arrived at their targets on the second. And I mean on the second, not to the minute, but by the second. And then repeated the procedure on the homeward trip to arrive back at base and be forced to execute a landing on a radio beam with their aircraft as often as not badly shot up, in weather conditions when Civil Air Lines wouldn't wheel their aircraft out of the hangar, let alone fly them.

No, this statement was unworthy, to say the least, and even if this gentleman had thought it true, it had better be left unsaid.

Finally, may I add a few words regarding something I mentioned earlier, concerning the saving of army casualties by the strategic bombing of Germany. Does anyone here seriously think that the war would be over now if Germany had been able to maintain her oil and gasoline plants intact, her iron and steel empire working full blast; her internal rail and road communications unimpaired; her canals filled with water and fit for navigation; her factories standing and producing war materials and her colossal army of civilian workers well housed and organized?

No! The war would be on today, and the casualties on D-Day would have been far higher. So, to those of you who suffered losses and to those who happened to be more fortunate and escaped, to all of you I say, 'Remember those of Bomber Command who gave their lives so others might live.'