

RAF Bomber Command Squadron Profiles

# 83 Squadron

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RAF Bomber Command Squadron Profiles

# 83 Squadron



by Chris Ward

Bomber Command Books

from



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## Contents

Introduction .....	9
Section One: Narrative WWII History .....	11
Early Days and 1939 .....	13
1940 First Quarter .....	15
April 1940 .....	16
May 1940.....	19
June 1940.....	21
July 1940 .....	25
August 1940 .....	28
September 1940.....	32
October 1940 .....	38
November 1940 .....	41
December 1940.....	44
January 1941 .....	47
February 1941.....	50
March 1941 .....	53
April 1941 .....	56
May 1941.....	59
June 1941.....	62
July 1941 .....	65
August 1941 .....	70
September 1941.....	76
October 1941 .....	80
November 1941 .....	82
December 1941.....	84
January 1942 .....	88
February 1942.....	91
March 1942 .....	94
April 1942 .....	99
May 1942.....	102
June 1942.....	106
July 1942 .....	110
August 1942 .....	116
September 1942.....	121
October 1942 .....	125
November 1942 .....	128
December 1942.....	132
January 1943 .....	135
February 1943.....	139
March 1943 .....	144
April 1943 .....	151
May 1943.....	158
June 1943.....	162
July 1943 .....	167

August 1943 .....	173
September 1943.....	181
October 1943 .....	188
November 1943 .....	194
December 1943.....	199
January 1944 .....	203
February 1944.....	211
March 1944 .....	215
April 1944 .....	220
May 1944.....	227
June 1944.....	234
July 1944 .....	240
August 1944 .....	245
September 1944.....	253
October 1944 .....	258
December 1944.....	265
January 1945 .....	270
February 1945.....	273
March 1945 .....	278
April 1945 .....	282
Section Two: Key Facts about 106 Squadron .....	287
Stations .....	287
Commanding Officers .....	287
Aircraft .....	287
Operational Record .....	288
Aircraft Histories.....	290
Key to Abbreviations .....	299

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# Introduction

RAF Bomber Command Squadron Profiles first appeared in the late nineties, and proved to be very popular with enthusiasts of RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War. They became a useful research tool, particularly for those whose family members had served and were no longer around. The original purpose was to provide a point of reference for all of the gallant men and women who had fought the war, either in the air, or on the ground in a support capacity, and for whom no written history of their unit or station existed. I wanted to provide them with something they could hold up, point to and say, "This was my unit, this is what I did in the war". Many veterans were reticent to talk about their time on bombers, partly because of modesty, but perhaps mostly because the majority of those with whom they came into contact had no notion of what it was to be a "Bomber Boy", to face the prospect of death every time they took to the air, whether during training or on operations. Only those who shared the experience really understood what it was to go to war in bombers, which is why reunions were so important. As they approached the end of their lives, many veterans began to speak openly for the first time about their life in wartime Bomber Command, and most were hurt by the callous treatment they received at the hands of successive governments with regard to the lack of recognition of their contribution to victory. It is sad that this recognition in the form of a national memorial and the granting of a campaign medal came too late for the majority. Now this inspirational, noble generation, the like of which will probably never grace this earth again, has all but departed from us, and the world will be a poorer place as a result.

RAF Bomber Command Squadron Profiles are back. The basic format remains, but, where needed, additional information has been provided. Squadron Profiles do not claim to be comprehensive histories, but rather detailed overviews of the activities of the squadron. There is insufficient space to mention as many names as one would like, but all aircraft losses are accompanied by the name of the pilot. Fundamentally, the narrative section is an account of Bomber Command's war from the perspective of the bomber group under which the individual squadron served, and the deeds of the squadron are interwoven into this story. Information has been drawn from official records, such as group, squadron and station ORBs, and from the many, like myself, amateur enthusiasts, who dedicate much of their time to researching individual units, and become unrivalled authorities on them. I am grateful for their generous contributions, and their names will appear in the appropriate Profiles. The statistics quoted in this series are taken from The Bomber Command War Diaries that indispensable tome written by Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, and I am indebted to Martin for his kind permission to use them.

Finally, let me apologise in advance for the inevitable errors, for no matter how hard I and other authors try to write "nothing but the truth", there is no such thing as a definitive account of history, and there will always be room for disagreement and debate. Official records are notoriously unreliable tools, and yet we have little choice but to put our faith in them. It is not my intention to misrepresent any person or RAF unit, and I ask my readers to understand the enormity of the task I have undertaken. It is relatively

easy to become an authority on single units or even a bomber group, but I chose to write about them all, idiot that I am, which means 128 squadrons serving operationally in Bomber Command at some time between the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1939 and the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1945. I am dealing with eight bomber groups, in which some 120,000 airmen served, and I am juggling around 28,000 aircraft serial numbers, code letters and details of provenance and fate. I ask not for your sympathy, it was, after all, my choice, but rather your understanding if you should find something with which you disagree. My thanks to you, my readers, for making the original series of RAF Bomber Command Squadron Profiles so popular, and I hope you receive this new incarnation equally enthusiastically.

The photographs in this publication have come from a number of sources; the Scampton archive, for which thanks are due to the head guide, Tom Evans; Stephen Murray, John Ward, Harry Holmes and, of course, gang member in chief, Andreas Wachtel, and I am grateful to all of them for their input. My thanks also, as always, to my other gang members, Steve Smith and Greg Korcz, for their additional support. Finally, my appreciation to my publisher, Simon Hepworth of Mention the War Publications, for his belief in my work and untiring efforts to promote it.

Chris Ward, Lutterworth, December 2016.

## Section One: Narrative WWII History



### 83 Squadron

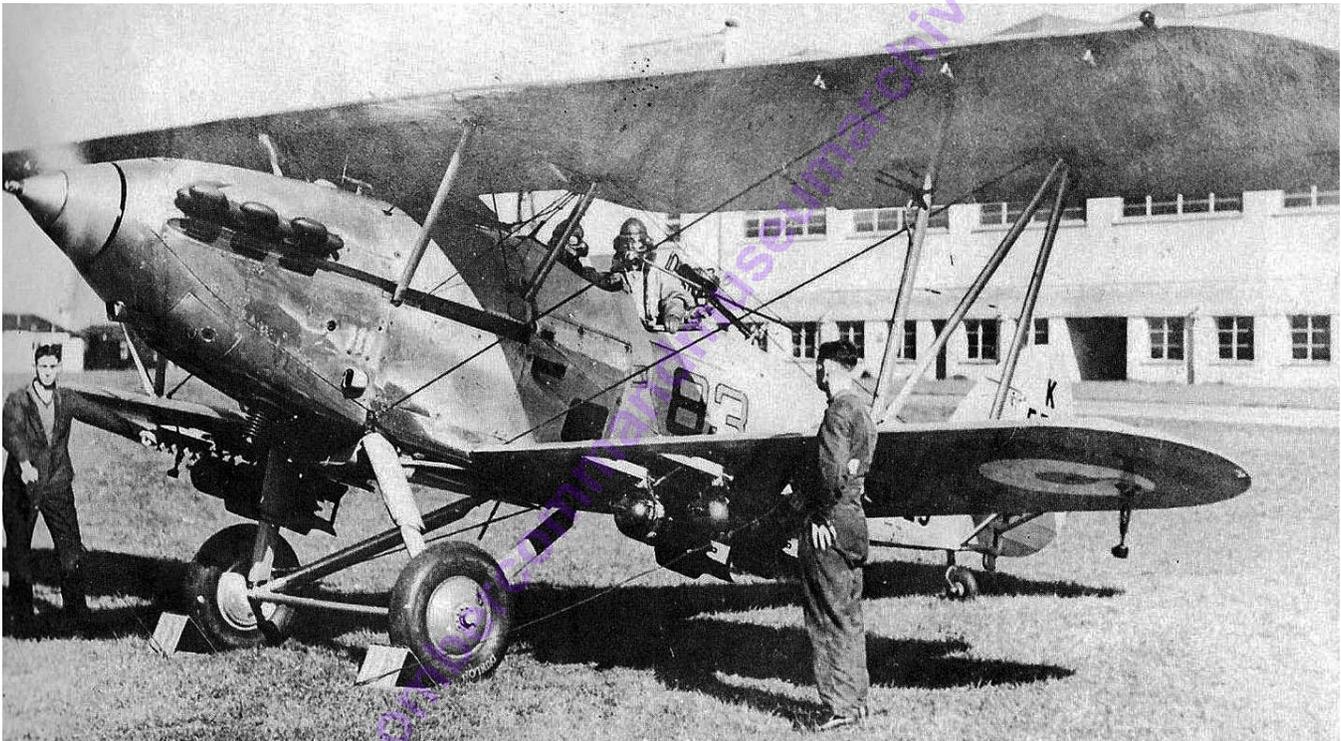
Motto: **STRIKE TO DEFEND**

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## Early Days and 1939

First formed within the Royal Flying Corps on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1917, 83 Squadron eventually moved to France in March 1918, to assume a night bombing and reconnaissance role. Disbandment followed on the last day of 1919, and it was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1936 that the squadron was reformed as a day bomber unit. In March 1938, the squadron took up residence at Scampton, four miles north of Lincoln, to become part of 5 Group, and re-equipping with the Handley Page Hampden began on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. By the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1939 a full complement of the type was on charge, and this aircraft would be the one to carry the squadron into the Second World War, during which it would distinguish itself as one of Bomber Command's finest units.



*A Hawker Hind bomber at Turnhouse in 1937.*

The squadron had been commanded for two years by S/L Snaith, when W/C Jordan arrived to take over on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, but Snaith remained, and took part in the first offensive operation to be launched by the Command on the evening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, just hours after the declaration of war. In fact, nine Hampdens had been standing by at one hour's readiness since 05.30, even before war had been declared. There were two possible actions ahead of them, Scheme B1, to attack the enemy fleet at sea, and Scheme B2, to attack the enemy fleet in port. Finally, at 18.15, the first section of three A Flight Hampdens took off from Scampton, led by S/L Snaith, and they were followed three minutes later by a further three from B Flight, led by F/L Joe Collier. They were to join others from the group to carry out Scheme B1, a low-level attack on elements of the German *Kriegsmarine* moored in the Schillig Roads



*Officers of 83 Sqn pose in Mess dress in this 1937 photograph. P/O Guy Gibson is seated second from right. Behind him is S/L Dermot Boyle, Commanding Officer, who would return to command the squadron as a Wing Commander in the war.*

off Wilhelmshaven. One of the A Flight pilots setting off was a young, brash P/O Guy Gibson, whose star would rise spectacularly over the ensuing three and a half years, leading to fame and a Victoria Cross as the leader of the Dambusters. His operational career began slowly, however, and once returned from the Schillig Roads after failing to locate the enemy in unfavourable weather conditions and darkness, he carried out no further operations for six months, as what the Americans dubbed the "Phoney War" took hold. This was a period when the bombing of private property was considered provocative, if not illegal, and neither combatant sanctioned attacks on the other's homeland for fear of reprisals. This meant that only ships at sea could be considered legitimate targets, and, as a result, the war took on a stagnant and strange air of sabre-rattling and little else.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of October W/C Snaith assumed command of the squadron once more, when W/C Jordan was posted to command 144 Squadron, a fellow Hampden unit at Hemswell. Jordan would remain in this post until May 1940, and would later fulfil a similar role at 214 Squadron between March and August 1941. Other pilots serving with the squadron during these early days included some, who would return for a second tour in 1941, among them P/Os Kynoch, Svendsen and Mills, and Sgts Ollason and Lyster. Some would survive, others not, and a number would find themselves on extended leave in PoW camps, but all would display a level of courage and fortitude in keeping with the finest traditions of the service. Training occupied the Command for most of the remainder of the year, and on into 1940. S/L Hawkins was posted in from Finningley to fulfil the role of A Flight commander, but he was in post only until the 24<sup>th</sup>, when he returned from whence he came, and F/L Oscar Bridgman was promoted as his successor. B Flight was commanded at this time by S/L Threapleton. Three 83 Squadron crews joined others from 44 and 49 Squadrons on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> of December, to search for the pocket battleship Deutschland, which was reported to be off the Norwegian coast. No contact was made with the vessel, however, and on arrival back over the Northumberland coast, two of the 44 Squadron aircraft were shot down into the sea by Spitfires, and one crewman was killed.

## 1940 First Quarter

The winter of 1939/40 was particularly harsh, and seemed to deepen as the year progressed, keeping the aircraft on the ground for long periods. There were no operational sorties for 83 Squadron during January, and the final week of the month saw no flying activity of any kind in the face of heavy snow falls and ice. The first thirteen days of February passed in similar fashion, and it was only towards the end of the month that winter's grip began to loosen. Orders were received during this period that the squadron was to move to Lossiemouth in Scotland to support Coastal Command. A ground party departed Scampton on the 19<sup>th</sup> to prepare the way, and nine Hampdens followed on the 21<sup>st</sup>, with three more joining them two days later. The squadron was to carry out patrol duties over the North Sea, and the first of these was by seven aircraft led by W/C Snaith on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Among the participating pilots were future



*F/O Guy Gibson and an unnamed crew member stand alongside their Hampden, Admiral Foo Bang.*

5 Group stars, F/L Collier, F/O Kynoch and the recently promoted F/O Guy Gibson, and all returned safely without having sighted the enemy. Eight aircraft from the squadron, including Gibson again, carried out a similar sweep on the 29<sup>th</sup>, during which, a bomb was dropped on an unidentified submarine, which turned out to belong to the Royal Navy. No results were observed, and the identity of the bomb-dropper was not revealed in the ORB, but the talk suggested S/L Sam Threapleton had a hand in it.

There were no further operational sorties out of Lossiemouth, and the squadron returned to Scampton on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March to continue night flying training and the patrolling of enemy seaplane bases. The first actual bombing of enemy territory had, by then, already taken place on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> of March, while 83 Squadron was preparing to return from Lossiemouth. It was in retaliation for the inadvertent slaying of a civilian on the island of Hoy by a stray German bomb, during a Luftwaffe attack on naval units at Scapa Flow on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>. Thirty 4 Group Whitleys led the attack on the seaplane base at Hörnum on the island of Sylt, and these were followed by twenty Hampdens, the whole operation spanning a six-hour period. Returning crews were enthusiastic in their claims of the damage inflicted, and the success of the operation made headline news, but sadly, photographic reconnaissance carried out on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April would fail to detect any evidence to support the euphoria. Unrealistic claims would continue to blight the Command for some time to come, and be highlighted in the damning Butt Report in August 1941.

## April 1940



*F/O Guy Gibson poses with his Hampden at Scampton in 1940*

On the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> of April the two flight commanders, S/Ls Bridgman and Threapleton, carried out a security patrol over seaplane bases from Borkum to Sylt, and Bridgman repeated the exercise in company with Sgt Jenkins on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>. On the following night 83 Squadron suffered the first of its many losses to come, after dispatching F/Os Kynoch and Ross and P/O Roberts on another security patrol over the North Sea. L4054 ran out of fuel after nine hours in the air, and was abandoned over Whitley Bay by P/O Roberts and his crew. The aircraft was seen to crash on the shore at around 04.15, and the bodies of the pilot and two others were recovered from the sea later in the day. The German offensive in Scandinavia began on the 9<sup>th</sup>, when airborne troops took Stavanger airfield, and other forces marched unopposed into Denmark. The Command was unable directly to support the ill-fated British and French response at Narvik in the north, lying as it did beyond the safe operating range of the available aircraft, and instead, operations were conducted against the southern airfields of Stavanger and Oslo.

S/L Threapleton carried out a special reconnaissance of the Danish coast on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, and eight crews were involved in another security patrol twenty-four hours later in the Frederika-Middelfart-Little Belt-Kattegat region off Denmark's eastern coast. They took off over a period of an hour either side of 23.00, led by S/L Bridgman, and Gibson also took part. F/Os Mulligan and Haydon were back within the hour with technical problems, but the others completed their patrol and arrived home safely after 06.00. On the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, Waddington dispatched aircraft from 44 and 50 Squadrons to attack shipping in Kristiansand, and one from 50 Squadron ditched 120 miles off the Northumberland coast. F/O Kynoch and Sgt Jenkins took off at 07.30 on the 13<sup>th</sup> to conduct a sea search, and Kynoch

eventually spotted a dinghy being shadowed by a Hudson. Sadly, the dinghy became lost to sight, and the crew perished. The first minelaying operation of the war, a task to which the Hampden was to prove itself eminently suited, took place on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup> of April. This type of operation was referred to as “gardening”, the mines were termed vegetables, and the gardens mostly carried horticultural/botanical code names.

When 83 Squadron launched its first four gardening sorties on the following night it was to the “carrots” region, Middelfart-Little Belt-Kattegat. S/L Threapleton, F/O Gibson and P/O Lyster were airborne shortly before 19.00, but it was forty-five minutes later before F/O Sylvester and crew took off in L4152. The others returned between 01.50 and 02.35, with only Gibson reporting a successful trip, and meanwhile, L4152 was using Manston as a homing beacon. It is believed that this aircraft passed close to Manston, but was not seen, and a distress call was picked up by the station at 04.00, upon which, a lifeboat was dispatched. Sadly, nothing was found, and F/O Sylvester and crew were posted missing, “believed killed in action”. The squadron sent five aircraft gardening in the Little Belt on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, led by S/L Bridgman, who took off at 19.25. He and F/O Ross planted their vegetables in the briefed location near Aalborg, and carried out a reconnaissance of the aerodrome before returning safely home. P/O Cook was also successful, but F/Os Kynoch and Mulligan failed to locate their drop zones.

S/L Bridgman and F/Os Ross and Gibson were briefed to bomb the aerodrome at Aalborg on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, in an operation referred to as “ploughing”, a euphemism for bombing, and they took off between 23.10 and 23.55 to fly independently to the target area. Bridgman and Ross dropped incendiaries and general purpose (GP) bombs onto the airfield in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire, but Gibson was unable to identify it before daylight arrived, and he no doubt made a disgruntled return to Lossiemouth. The trio returned to Scampton later in the day, in time to wave off seven Hampdens on their way to mine the waters off Drogden Lighthouse on the northern tip of Jutland. These took off either side of 19.00, with W/C Snaith the senior pilot on duty, and S/L Threapleton, F/L Collier and the newly-promoted F/L Pitcairn-Hill among the supporting cast. Four successfully located their drop zones, while two failed in that regard, and all made it home in one piece, although only just. Sgt Ollason was crossing Sylt on his way home when four anti-aircraft shells ripped through his wings, fortunately without hitting anything important. He landed safely, whereupon his observer, Sgt Dewhurst, reported to sickbay to have a number of metal splinters removed. Seven gardeners were out again on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>, to deliver their vegetables to the Daffodils area, in the Sound region south of Oslo. They took off between 18.45 and 19.30 with S/L Bridgman the senior pilot on duty and supported by F/L Pitcairn-Hill. Gibson was also involved in this operation, and was one of four to complete his sortie successfully, before landing at Manston, while the others put down at a variety of stations. Two nights later S/L Threapleton and F/O Ross failed to locate their “Lettuce” target area, (the Kiel Canal), in the face of bad weather, and this proved to be the last operational activity of the month. During the course of the month the squadron took part in eleven operations, and dispatched forty-four sorties for the loss of two aircraft and crews.



*Sea mining, known popularly as 'gardening', was a routine operation for 83 Sqn throughout the war, as Allied forces sought to deny the Kriegsmarine the freedom to roam the seas around Western Europe. This sequence shows a mine being lifted onto a trolley, fused by a Royal Navy armorer and then prepared for loading onto an aircraft. A Hampden waits patiently in the background for its consignment of these effective but unsung weapons.*



## May 1940

The Norwegian campaign was effectively over before it began, but events much nearer to home would grab the world's attention in early May, and bring an abrupt end to the shadow boxing and pretence characterizing proceedings thus far. Before that, however, Sgt Ollason failed to find his garden area in bad weather on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>, and F/L Collier led a force of five aircraft to the Nasturtium and Forget-me-not areas at the northern end of the Sound and Kiel harbour on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>. Similar operations were carried out by four, six and two aircraft on the nights of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> respectively to include the Broccoli and Asparagus regions in the southern Great Belt, and Hollyhocks off Travemünde, north-east of Lübeck. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, German forces began advancing into Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium, pitching the French based Battle and Blenheim squadrons of the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF), and the home based Blenheims of 2 Group into an unequal fight against murderous ground fire and marauding fighters. While these were being hacked from the skies in huge numbers in a vain attempt to stem the irresistible German tide, Bomber Command directed its efforts at communications targets over the border in Germany, principally in the Ruhr.

F/L Collier and F/O Gibson failed to locate their Lettuce mining area on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, but Gibson and F/L Pitcairn-Hill returned on the following night to successfully plant their vegetables. Also on this night, while five other crews from the squadron were mining in the Pumpkin area in the Great Belt, S/L Threapleton, F/O Johnson and P/O Lyster conducted the squadron's second "ploughing" or bombing operation. The target was a section of the Rotterdam to Breda road, for which they began to depart Scampton shortly after 22.00. Two of the returning crews claimed success, but, sadly, F/O Johnson and his crew were not at debriefing, after L4069 crashed near Louth shortly after 02.00, and all on board were killed. On the following night, 83 Squadron contributed five aircraft to the eighty dispatched to carry out pinprick attacks on sixteen Ruhr targets. S/L Bridgman took off at 21.00 to attack marshalling yards in Düsseldorf, while F/L Pitcairn-Hill departed sixty-five minutes later to bomb an aerodrome near Duisburg. F/L Collier took off even later, at 22.50, also bound for Duisburg, where he was to attack an electricity works. This demonstrated the disorganised approach to bombing in the early stages of the war, which allowed squadrons and even crews to determine for themselves the details of their sorties in regard to timings, routes and method of attack. This practice would not be fully eradicated until the current A-O-C 5 Group, AVM Sir Arthur Harris, ascended the throne as C-in-C Bomber Command in February 1942. On this night, all returned safely, but the aircraft of S/L Bridgman and F/L Pitcairn-Hill bore a little battle damage.

Forty-eight Hampdens were despatched to Hamburg on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, to attack oil refineries, and among them were five from 83 Squadron, including Gibson. While diving onto his target, Gibson's starboard wing hit a balloon cable causing damage to the slat, but he landed safely at Abingdon as a diversion airfield because of fog at Scampton. F/O Hayden was attacked by an enemy night fighter at the mouth of the River Elbe, as he was homing in on the target, and was dissuaded from continuing. He evaded further unwanted attention and brought his bombs home. The others also returned safely, to report dropping their bombs on the target. Oil, road and railway targets in Germany, France and Belgium would provide the main focus for operations for the remainder of the month. S/L Threapleton was posted from the squadron on the 20<sup>th</sup> to take up duties at Cottesmore, and F/L Collier took over as temporary flight commander until the arrival of S/L Field. That night six 83 Squadron crews set off to attack a road

bridge over the Oise at D'Origney. S/L Bridgman was first away at 20.30, and it was an hour later before P/O Cook brought up the rear. All but P/O Lyster reported bombing as briefed, and F/L Collier claimed a direct hit, which caused the bridge to collapse.

Thirty-five Hampdens were committed to a particularly long range objective on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup>, an oil refinery at Leuna, near Merseburg, a little to the west of Leipzig in eastern Germany. In the event, worsening weather conditions at home forced a recall. Meanwhile, 83 Squadron contributed six aircraft to attacks on road and railway targets in Holland, Belgium and Germany, led by S/L Field, who was undertaking his first operation with the squadron. He took off at 21.20, and returned after a sortie lasting five hours and ten minutes to report attacking and destroying two trains in Geldern station, on the Dutch/German border west of Duisburg. F/L Collier bombed a train near Emmerich, also on the border on the east bank of the Rhine, and dropped another on an aerodrome believed to be Ypenburg in Holland. P/O Lyster scored a direct hit on a goods train near Hasselt in Belgium, and F/O Bird attacked two trains on the line between Neuss and Grevenbroich south-west of Düsseldorf. Gibson's target was a bridge over the Schelde-Maas canal, which, after landing safely at Stradishall, he claimed as destroyed. Sadly, Sgt Jenkins and his crew were all killed when L4055 struck high ground near Holmfirth in Yorkshire on return. Bombing operations on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup> involved five crews from 83 Squadron, but there were early returns, and only F/O Mulligan scored hits on a train near Schuld, some fifteen miles south-west of the Ruhr town of Neuss. There were six 83 Squadron participants in operations against communications targets between Germany and the battle front on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup>, and five returned to claim successful sorties.

Seven crews were briefed for roving commission sorties on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, and took off between 21.30 and 22.00 with S/L Bridgman the senior pilot on duty. He found an oil store north of Flushing to bomb, as did F/O Bird, while Gibson returned to report bombing the entrance to a railway tunnel, presumably the one at Namur specified by other returnees. F/O Ross attacked a large factory at an unspecified location, but F/O Mulligan failed to identify anything suitable because of darkness and low cloud.

His Majesty King George VI visited Scampton on the 27<sup>th</sup> to decorate a number of 5 Group airmen, and W/C Snaith led the parade. Operations resumed that night, when S/L Field carried out his second operation with the squadron as one of six crews in action. The target was an oil refinery in the Altona district of Hamburg, situated on the northern bank of the Elbe to the west of the city centre. S/L Field was the only one to locate and carry out an attack in the face of low cloud, while the others failed, and either bombed alternative objectives or brought their bombs back home. P/O Cook dropped his bombs near Flushing aerodrome, and F/O Kynoch aimed at a canal bank near Ijmuiden harbour. Three Hampdens were collected from 61 Squadron at Hemswell on the 29<sup>th</sup>, as replacements for those damaged by ground fire in recent operations. The month ended with six aircraft conducting bombing operations in north-western Germany on the night of the 30/31<sup>st</sup>. S/Ls Field and Bridgman were the senior pilots on duty, but Gibson was the first away from Scampton at 21.10, with the others in fairly close pursuit. The targets were oil storage facilities in Bremen, but none could identify their specified objective, and S/L Field bombed a flare-path ten miles north of Brunsbüttel, as did F/L Collier, although not necessarily the same one, and P/O Lyster attacked the Frisian island of Wangerooge. The others, including Gibson, brought their bombs home. The squadron conducted seventeen operations during the month, dispatching seventy-five sorties for the loss of two aircraft and crews.



On 27<sup>th</sup> May 1940, 49 and 83 Sqns, resident at RAF Scampton, received a visit from His Majesty King George VI, who was accompanied by G/C Charles Whitworth, station commander of RAF Scampton at that time. Amongst the awards was that of a DFC to F/L Nelles Timmerman of 49 Sqn (above). Timmerman later returned to Scampton as 'A' Flight Commander in 83 Sqn.

## June 1940

June began with the award of DFCs to S/L Bridgman and F/O Ross for the Aalborg operation, and their performance generally since the start of hostilities. A dozen crews were put on standby for operations on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, but this was cancelled and reinstated on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. That night brought the largest effort to date by the Command, when 142 aircraft were dispatched to targets ranging from Frankfurt in the south to Hamburg in the north. The twelve 83 Squadron aircraft were detailed for operations in the Frankfurt area led by W/C Snaith, with S/Ls Bridgman and Field in support. They got away from Scampton between 21.10 and 21.25, and set out for the long journey to southern Germany, but Sgt Harpham returned early with intercom problems. S/L Field bombed the briefed aiming point from 4,000 feet, and S/L Bridgman did likewise, but was unable to determine the results because of darkness, haze and searchlight activity. F/L Pitcairn-Hill was one among the majority, who were unable to find the target, and he bombed an alternative, attracting some anti-aircraft fire for his pains, which holed his inner fuel tank. Others, including W/C Snaith, brought their bombs home if no suitable alternative target presented itself, and eleven were safely back on the ground by 04.25. Absent was P1178 with the crew of F/O Haydon, and news would eventually come through that they had crashed near Aachen with fatal consequences.

Two nights later the squadron sent another dozen Hampdens to bomb an oil refinery at Hamburg. They took off either side of 21.30 led by S/Ls Bridgman and Field, and the former and three others identified and bombed their assigned aiming point, while the latter was seen by some members of the squadron to go down in flames over the target. P1348 had been hit by flak, and crashed on the west bank of the Elbe, killing all on board. Meanwhile, F/L Collier and three others found their briefed aiming point, and delivered their bombs without observing any results. S/L Field would be succeeded as B Flight commander by the soon-to-be-promoted F/L Collier. The night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> saw eight 83 Squadron aircraft set off for an oil refinery at Misburg near Hanover. F/L Collier was the senior pilot on duty as they began departing Scampton at 21.30, and all seem to have arrived in the target area to begin searching for the aiming point. F/Sgt Ollason experienced bomb-release problems, and dropped only incendiaries, which caused a fire in a factory four hundred yards from the refinery, while Sgt Harpham bombed a railway junction at Burgdorf, north-east of Hanover. All but one of the others reported bombing as briefed, and F/O Bird dropped his load on Nordeney aerodrome in the Frisians on the way home. All landed safely at diversion airfields rather than fogbound Scampton.

On the 9<sup>th</sup>, W/C Snaith was posted out to take up an appointment at Kinloss, and he was replaced by W/C Sisson, an officer with a great appetite for leading his men into battle. That night, F/L Collier led six aircraft to the Wallflowers garden in Kiel Bay to continue the mining campaign, while three others, led by F/O Kynoch, were sent against railway installations at Aachen, a town sitting right on the frontiers of Holland and Belgium. They set off either side of 22.00, and while the gardeners enjoyed a successful night, not one of the Aachen contingent hit the target. F/O Bird experienced technical problems, which delayed the bomb release, Sgt Harpham was hit by anti-aircraft fire, causing a premature release, and F/O Kynoch was unable to identify the marshalling yards, so bombed a section of track instead. The crews of Sgt Sewell and P/O Svendsen were the only ones from 83 Squadron on operations on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, when a railway junction at Bertrix in Belgium was the objective. They took off at 22.00, and returned five hours later to report successful sorties. A road and rail bridge at Givet, on the Franco-Belgian border, provided the target for a number of 83 Squadron crews on the following night, while others were briefed for a petrol and munitions dump at Libramont in Belgium. In all, nine aircraft were



*Propaganda shot of S/L Joe Collier briefing 49 Squadron crews.*

dispatched and safely airborne by 22.00, but few were successful in the face of intense darkness and haze, and some bombed aerodromes or brought their ordnance home. Only F/O Kynoch and P/O Lyster claimed to have attacked the munitions dump, while Gibson bombed Flushing aerodrome on the island of Walcheren, and Pitcairn-Hill the one at Haamstede on Schouwen, both at the mouth of the Scheldt. A dozen crews were briefed for operations on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, with road and rail bridges at Hirson as the targets. They got away either side of 22.00 with S/L Bridgman the senior pilot on duty, supported by F/L Pitcairn-Hill. Situated in north-eastern France close to the border with Belgium, the targets were difficult to locate as darkness and haze again compromised the operation, but seven crews returned to report bombing in the target area, while others, including Gibson, bombed alternative targets.

While the rest of the squadron stood down on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>, F/L Collier joined elements from the Hemswell units to attack a railway target at Soest, a small town just north of the Möhne Dam. His bombs overshot and landed in the town, where a fire was started. A further twelve aircraft were dispatched after 21.00 on the 17<sup>th</sup>, six to plant mines in the Eglantine area, the approaches to Heligoland, led by the newly promoted S/L Collier, and six to join forces with 130 other aircraft to carry out widespread bombing operations in northern Germany and the Ruhr. P1354 was hit by anti-aircraft fire from a flak ship while mining, and the navigator, P/O Kitson, sustained severe head and arm wounds. P/O Svendsen made a safe landing at Waddington, where the injured man was transported to sick bay.

S/L Bridgman led the bombing contingent, and all returned to claim a successful attack on A3, which reconnaissance apparently confirmed as destroyed. The squadron effort was again divided into two sections of six on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, one assigned to the Forget-Me-Not mining area, the Kiel Canal, and the other to bomb a railway junction at Euskirchen, south-west of Cologne, and another at Düren, east of Aachen. W/C Sisson was leading the bombing section on his first sortie since taking command, with S/Ls Collier and Bridgman in support, and all became airborne either side of 21.30. Two of the gardeners were unsuccessful, but the bombing brigade, including Gibson, all returned to report carrying out their assigned tasks. An ambitious operation on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup> required a relatively deep penetration raid into Germany by a dozen 83 Squadron Hampdens to attack either the Henschel or Fieseler aircraft factory at Kassel, a city east of the Ruhr. S/L Collier led them away at 21.30, with S/L Bridgman and Gibson among the other participants, and half of them identified the factory and bombed in its general area. The others failed to locate the target, and bombed alternatives instead, including a factory near Korbach, railway junctions and the aerodrome at Antwerp.

The squadron sent five Hampdens to Wismar on the Baltic coast on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup> to join others from the group to attack the Dornier Werke aircraft factory. F/L Pitcairn-Hill was the senior pilot on duty as they departed Scampton either side of 21.00, and Gibson was first back at 04.10 to report, as did the others, bombing the target in adverse weather conditions. On the following night, S/L Bridgman led a section of six aircraft from the squadron to lay mines in the Yams area, off Heligoland. They took off at 21.15, and returned safely between 02.50 and 04.00, all but P/O Withers to report successful sorties. He found the target area and would have been successful, but for release-mechanism problems, which caused his mine to hang up. The busy month of operations continued on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, with seven aircraft taking off to bomb a variety of targets. The senior pilot on duty was S/L Collier, with F/L Pitcairn-Hill in support, but it was Gibson and P/O Cook who were first away at 21.40. The others followed at 22.00 briefed to attack unspecified objectives, which are believed to be oil and railway-related, and all returned safely, six of them to report bombing either their assigned target or an alternative.

The squadron sent eleven aircraft back to the Dornier aircraft factory at Wismar on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, led by S/Ls Bridgman and Collier. They returned between 03.45 and 04.50 after at least seven hours in the air, and all claimed successful attacks. According to Gibson's account in *Enemy Coast Ahead*, the attacks at Wismar were conducted at low level, and the bombing was followed by strafing attacks across the aerodrome. Later on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command, Air Marshal Portal, visited the station, and that night, P/Os Withers and Lister successfully bombed an unspecified aerodrome in Holland. The night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup> was devoted to mining and bombing, and S/L Bridgman led the gardening section away first shortly before 21.30, before heading for the Radish area of Kiel Bay. They were followed away at 22.00 by a further six led by F/L Pitcairn-Hill, and they were assigned to bomb a variety of targets in Germany and Holland, probably mostly railway-related. The gardeners were all successful, while the bombers enjoyed mixed fortunes, all but one bombing something, if not their briefed targets, and Gibson brought back a little flak damage. During the month the squadron undertook twenty-two separate operations, and dispatched 144 sorties, 119 for bombing and twenty-five for mining, all for the loss of two aircraft and crews.

## July 1940



*An 83 Sqn Hampden over Lincolnshire on a daylight exercise in 1940.*

The Command's July account opened on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> with seventy-three aircraft out and about, their crews briefed to attack Osnabrück and Kiel or to lay mines. 83 Squadron contributed a dozen Hampdens led by W/C Sisson to attack the German cruiser Scharnhorst, moored in the floating dock at Kiel. They took off between 21.15 and 22.00, with Gibson carrying the first 2,000lb bomb to be dropped in anger, and he made a number of shallow dive approaches before releasing the weapon, which overshot the vessel and exploded in the town. Eleven aircraft returned, and their crews reported observing bomb blasts close to the target, but there were no claims of a direct hit. P/O Redmayne and his crew failed to return, having all been killed when P1171 crashed in the target area. Two nights later three crews were sent out with a specific target in mind, almost certainly marshalling yards, but a roving commission should they be unable to locate it. P/O Svendsen was first away at 22.00, and he returned a little over six hours later with his bombs still on board, having failed to find either the primary or a suitable target of opportunity. The other two were also unable to locate the briefed objective, but F/O Bird bombed an aerodrome at Aachen, while Sgt Sewell attacked a similar target at De Kooy on the Den Helder peninsular. F/Ls Pitcairn-Hill and Mulligan were the senior pilots on duty, when eleven aircraft from the squadron took off after 21.00, to return to Kiel for another crack at the Scharnhorst on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>. Gibson's bomb again found the town rather than the cruiser, and most of the other crews reported bombing in the target area, without being able to observe the results.

Following a few nights off the Order of Battle, the squadron dispatched nine aircraft to the Frankfurt area on the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, to attack an oil refinery at Offenbach, situated on the southern bank of the River Main opposite Frankfurt. S/L Collier led them away at 21.30, although it was after 22.00 before the last participant left the ground. Some crews located the target in generally poor weather conditions, and dropped their bombs, while others abandoned their sorties or found alternative targets on the way home, like the aerodromes at Brussels and Rotterdam. L4066 made it back as far as the English coast, but crashed near Clacton, killing P/O Launder and two of his crew outright, the fourth member succumbing to his injuries soon afterwards. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, F/O Guy Gibson and F/L Pitcairn-Hill were awarded a DFC, and Gibson celebrated that night by flying to Wilhelmshaven, to attack the Tirpitz as one of five participants from the squadron. They took off at 22.15 led by F/L Mulligan, and all made runs across the relevant basin, but were unable to determine the accuracy of their attacks. The ORB is ambiguous concerning operations on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, recording seven crews as being assigned to attack an aluminium factory at Ludwigshafen, on the west bank of the Rhine opposite Mannheim in southern Germany. This is supported by the 5 Group ORB, but the 83 Squadron record lists only six crews, led by S/Ls Bridgman and Collier. It has them taking off either side of 21.30, and reports in the summary section that only one crew located and bombed the primary target, while the remainder attacked alternatives or returned with their bombs. However, the individual account entered against each of the six crews identified as having taken part, records all having failed to locate the target in conditions of low cloud. One must assume that the successful crew was the seventh one, which has been omitted from the official record. F/L Pitcairn-Hill bombed Rotterdam aerodrome and picked up a little flak damage for his pains, and S/L Collier attacked a large factory building near Strasbourg.

The Daffodil garden area off Denmark's east coast was the destination for nine Hampdens from the squadron on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, led away by S/L Bridgman at 21.15. All but one carried out their sorties as briefed, but Pitcairn-Hill found his bomb doors would not open, and he had to bring his mine home. On the following night, seven crews were briefed to attack an aircraft park at Paderborn, situated east of the Ruhr, for which they began taking off at 21.10. Unfavourable weather conditions hampered efforts to locate the target, and most sought out alternatives on the way home. Only P/O Lyster found the primary target, and he carried out an attack without being able to assess the results. S/L Collier bombed the marshalling yards at Hamm as he headed home towards the west, while P/Os Clayton and Little bombed aerodromes at De Kooy and Nordeney respectively. Gibson found something to bomb four miles north-east of Dortmund, and P/O Tweddle attacked a blast furnace north-east of Hamborn, causing an intense fire. All returned safely, although most landed at Abingdon because of bad weather at Scampton.

Marshalling yards at Cologne was the destination for three 83 Squadron crews, when operations resumed on the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup>. F/O Bird and F/L Mulligan took off shortly before 22.00, but P/O Cook was delayed for an hour, and he would return with his bombs after failing to locate the objective. In fact, only F/O Bird did manage to find it, but he was prevented from making an attack by a spirited flak and searchlight defence. He bombed the nearby Bickendorf aerodrome instead, and F/L Mulligan tried his luck on a railway bridge on Walcheren in the Scheldt Estuary. On the following night, S/L Bridgman led a section of eight 83 Squadron Hampdens to Wilhelmshaven in search of the battleship Tirpitz and cruiser Admiral Scheer. They took off either side of 22.30, and all returned safely to report identifying and attacking the targets, but not observing results. On the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, S/L Collier was the senior pilot on duty as six 83 Squadron Hampdens took off at 20.45 to make another attack on the

Dornier Werke aircraft factory at Wismar. While over Kiel harbour outbound, S/L Collier's observer, P/O Bowman, either jumped or fell out of P4392, and was posted missing on the aircraft's return. All crews reported carrying out an attack, two of them observing bomb bursts on the aerodrome. No senior officers were present among seven Hampden crews sent by the squadron to Wenzendorf, a district of Harburg, just to the south of Hamburg, on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>. The specific target was the Blohm and Voss aircraft plant and aerodrome, which a number of crews identified, while others attacked the docks at Wilhelmshaven and De Kooy aerodrome as alternatives.

The night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup> was a busy one for 5 Group, in which forty-one aircraft from Hemswell, Waddington and Hatfield Woodhouse, near Doncaster, and later to be called Lindholme, were sent to attack oil refineries in the Ruhr, while S/L Bridgman led a force of nine aircraft from 83 Squadron in company with an equal number from 49 Squadron to bomb the Dortmund-Ems Canal. This was an important component in the German communications system, through which, raw materials were imported into the industrial Ruhr, and finished products exported to assist the war effort. The section of the canal just south of Ladbergen, close to the frontier with Holland, consisted of a twin aqueduct section, which carried the waterway over the low-lying land, before being replaced by raised banks further to the south. This construction made the canal extremely vulnerable to bombing, and the target would develop a close association with 5 Group, and continue to be a target for the remainder of the war. The 83 Squadron element departed Scampton either side of 21.30, and when F/O Kynoch, P/O Mills and Sgt Harpham arrived in the target area, they flew around to make a nuisance of themselves and create a diversion, before attacking searchlights, flak positions and railway installations. The others attacked the aqueducts, although F/L Mulligan reported bombing on the west side of a canal bridge south of Recke, which put him over the Mittelland Canal, some dozen miles or more to the north-east of where he should have been. All but one of the other crews returned to report bomb bursts close to the structures, but no results could be confirmed. L4094 failed to return, having crashed near Wesel on the Rhine, and although P/O Tweddle and two of his crew died, Sgt Toynton survived as a PoW, the first to prevail from a downed 83 Squadron aircraft.

On the following night it was the turn of the Scampton squadrons to attack oil refineries at Nantes and St Nazaire. S/L Collier was the senior pilot on duty as the 83 Squadron element of nine Hampdens began taking off at 21.15 for Nantes, situated on the Loire, inland from St Nazaire. Only P/O Little failed to identify the target, but he returned safely along with the others, who reported bomb bursts and large fires in the vicinity of the aiming point. W/C Sisson was at the head of an 83 Squadron element of a dozen Hampdens on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, which took off either side of 21.00 to carry out mining operations in the Pumpkin and Quince areas of the Great Belt between Denmark and Sweden, and Kiel Bay. Only one failed to locate the drop zone, and all returned safely home. The month's operational activities for 83 Squadron ended on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, when a dozen 83 Squadron Hampdens accompanied others from 49 Squadron to attack oil storage tanks in Frankfurt. S/L Collier appears to have been the senior pilot on duty, as they departed Scampton either side of 22.00, but he turned back at the enemy coast because of communications problems. As for the others, the squadron ORB lists only Gibson and Sgt Sewell, and the 5 Group ORB simply states that all returned safely. During the course of the month the squadron undertook fourteen operations, and dispatched ninety-nine bombing and twenty-one mining sorties for the loss of three aircraft and crews.

## August 1940

The first activity of August for 83 Squadron was participation in a sea search on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, arising out of a 5 Group operation on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of July. S/L Bridgman, F/L Mulligan, P/O Stanion and Sgt Roscoe were called upon to look for a 50 Squadron crew, who had ditched forty or so miles off Flamborough Head near Bridlington, and had been found by a search aircraft and then lost again. Sadly, this and all subsequent searches were in vain. That night eleven of the squadron's Hampdens were sent to northern waters to plant vegetables in the Nasturtium and Hollyhocks gardens, which were the Sound and off Travemünde, and they were led away at 20.30 by P/O Clayton, with S/L Collier the senior pilot on duty. They all completed their sorties as briefed, and returned safely home. Meanwhile, Sgt Harpham and crew had set off at 21.45 to attack marshalling yards at Soest, a town to the north of the Möhnesee, but they were forced to return early with a failed engine. P4376 crashed four miles east of the airfield, killing two of the crew, but the pilot and one other survived with injuries. There were no operations on the next two nights, before nine crews were briefed to join forces with a similar number from Hatfield Woodhouse on the 5/6<sup>th</sup> to attack the battleship Bismarck, believed to be at berth in Hamburg. S/L Bridgman led the 83 Squadron element away at 21.30, but none of them was able to identify the target, and they either bombed the docks or alternative targets on the way home. The night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup> saw a dozen 83 Squadron aircraft dispatched to Oppau, a suburb of Ludwigshafen, to attack the IG Farben synthetic oil plant. They departed Scampton shortly after 21.00, with F/L Pitcairn-Hill the senior pilot on duty, but he was forced back early with engine trouble. L4053 crashed in the target area, but P/O Muir and his crew survived to be taken prisoner. Confusion in communications led to P/O Clayton's second pilot/navigator, Sgt Newton, abandoning L4051, also in the target area, after which the Hampden returned safely. Only F/O Ross and P/O Lyster claimed to have bombed near the target, while Sgt Noble dropped his load on a flare path near Liege on the way home.

One of a number of "war-winning" ideas to be tried out was Razzle, an incendiary device designed to set fire to forest areas. Nine aircraft from the squadron were involved in operations on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, to set fire to forests in the Cologne-Fredeburg-Herborn area, and to bomb an oil refinery in Dortmund. S/L Bridgman was the senior pilot on duty, and he was first away from Scampton at 21.00. The Razzling seemed to go well, but not so the bombing, as just one crew returned to report a successful attack on the briefed refinery, which resulted in a large explosion and fire. S/L Bridgman was among those unable to locate the primary target, and he dropped his bombs on the nearby oil town of Wanne-Eickel. Others also attacked targets of opportunity or brought their bombs home. Ultimately, Razzle was discontinued and consigned to the "It was worth a try" file.

This was the first of seven consecutive nights of operations involving 83 Squadron, and on the following night, thirty Hampdens were aloft from Scampton, Waddington and Hatfield Woodhouse with a variety of objectives. 83 Squadron sent five aircraft to the Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen in company with six from 49 Squadron, to attack the twin aqueduct section from low level. S/L Collier was the senior pilot on duty as they got away from Scampton between 20.40 and 20.50, and his brief was to create a diversion by bombing lock gates on a stretch of water near Münster. The other participating crews were those of F/Ls Pitcairn-Hill and Mulligan, F/O Ross and Sgt Sewell. Sewell's part in the operation was also diversionary, and involved flying up and down the canal shooting at anything that presented itself. During the course of the attack P4340 was brought down by light flak. It contained the crew of Gibson's good friend F/L Mulligan, who survived with one other on board. Mulligan and his fellow Australian,

F/O Ross, were inseparable, and it was perhaps fitting that both should go missing on the same operation. Sadly, Ross and his crew failed to survive the demise of P4410, which was lost without trace, presumably also the victim of the murderous defences surrounding this important waterway. F/L Learoyd of 49 Squadron was awarded the VC for his part in this operation. The 12<sup>th</sup> was Gibson's birthday, and he was on leave with his future wife, Eve, on the north coast of Cornwall when this operation took place. When he eventually returned to Scampton, he would describe it as a different place.

Operations continued on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, with five 83 Squadron crews briefed to attack an airframe factory in Dessau, a city situated some forty miles south-east of Magdeburg and eighty miles south-west of Berlin in eastern Germany. This was one of five objectives in Germany for the Hampden and Wellington brigades, while a force of Whitleys headed for Italy. P/O Clayton was first off at 20.45, and he, alone, claimed to have attacked the briefed target, causing a large explosion and fires, while others either bombed on e.t.a., or attacked airfields at Magdeburg and De Kooy. Six of the squadron's crews took part in operations on the following night, five to attack target Z161, while P/O Snooke was to bomb and photograph a marshalling yards in the Ruhr. He was ultimately unsuccessful, and attacked an unspecified aerodrome south-east of the Zuider Zee as an alternative. Based on the eight-hour duration of the main operation, and the fact that three oil refineries in the Gironde Estuary were attracting attention at this time, it is believed that Z161 was at Pauillac, situated on the west bank, some twenty-five miles north of Bordeaux. P/Os Cooke, Svendsen and Harwood and Sgts Howard and Noble took off either side of 21.00, and all returned safely to report bombing as briefed.

Only P/O Little and Sgt Sewell and their crews were called into action on the night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, to attack the Nordstern oil refinery at Gelsenkirchen in the Ruhr. They took off at 21.18 and 21.24 respectively, and both returned safely to report attacking as briefed. W/C Sisson was the senior pilot on duty on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, when a squadron contingent of eleven Hampdens took off between 20.25 and 21.14, to take part in widespread operations, conducted by a total of 150 aircraft of various types, over the Ruhr in the west to Jena in the east and Augsburg in the south. The objective for the 83 Squadron element was an oil refinery at Leuna near Merseburg in eastern Germany. W/C Sisson was one of a number who failed to find the target, and he bombed De Kooy airfield on the way home. S/L Bridgman and F/L Pitcairn-Hill were also participating, and both reported attacking the primary target. S/L Collier led the squadron effort on the following night, when just four Hampdens took off shortly after 21.00 to bomb target E8, believed to be the Krupp works at Essen. Once again it was the senior officer who failed to identify the objective, and he bombed buildings near a factory at Emmerich on the Rhine as an alternative.

A busy night on the 19/20<sup>th</sup> saw 120 aircraft dispatched to a variety of targets in Germany, France and the Low Countries. S/L Collier was again on duty, and was first away at 20.25 to lead seven Hampdens from Scampton to attack an oil storage depot at Ambes, situated on the Dordogne River, just north of Bordeaux. S/L Collier carried out his attack from 100 feet, and created large fires, and P/O Snooke bombed a different part of the site from 300 feet to complete the job. Others reported hitting the cracking plant, and all returned safely to claim a successful outcome. Two nights later, lifting locks on the Mittelland Canal at Rothensee and Hohenwarthe were the target for elements of 5 Group from Scampton and Hemswell. The double lifting lock at the latter, situated north-east of Magdeburg, was assigned to five crews from 83 Squadron, who took off at 20.30 with F/L Bird the senior pilot on duty. Only P/O

Clayton was able to identify the aiming point, and he returned to claim a direct hit on the south-western end of the lift. F/L Bird bombed a train on a line between Verden and Nienburg on the way home south of Bremen.

The night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup> was devoted to mining operations in the Jellyfish area off Brest, for which 83 Squadron contributed thirteen aircraft. They departed Scampton between 22.05 and 23.08, each carrying wing bombs as well as a mine, and S/L Bridgman, the senior officer on duty, reported bombing the port's harbour wall, while P/Os Svendsen and Snooke attacked a nearby seaplane base, where barges were hit. It was similar fare on the following night for six crews from 83 Squadron, who were sent to lay mines off the port of St Nazaire and bomb an unspecified target, although the 5 Group ORB makes no mention of bombing, while the squadron ORB specifies Z159, which is believed to be the oil refinery at Ambes, much further south near Bordeaux. They took off shortly after 23.00 led by F/Ls Pitcairn-Hill and Bird, and Gibson was also back on the Order of Battle for the first time since his spell of leave in Cornwall. The mining was carried out successfully, and P/O Withers attacked an undisclosed aerodrome, observing his bombs to fall onto hangars and the southern end of the airfield.

A mini disaster afflicted the squadron on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, the consequences of which could have been much more serious than they turned out. The first raid of the war on Berlin was launched on this night, and was in response to German attacks on London and other cities on the previous night. A force of around fifty Hampdens and Wellingtons was made ready, including eleven from 83 Squadron, which took off over a thirty-five-minute period from 20.35, led by S/L Collier. Two returned early with technical problems, while the remainder pressed on to find the Capital under low cloud, which obscured the ground, as a result of which, most of the bombs fell into farmland south of the city. One bomb, however, did find and destroy a wooden summer house. The 83 Squadron element had been briefed to attack a power station, but this proved to be impossible in the prevailing conditions, and only three crews, those of P/Os Mills, Snooke, and Sgt Howard, reported making an attack. S/L Collier bombed Furstenwald aerodrome from 800 feet, and observed bomb bursts on buildings adjoining a large hangar, Sgt Noble aimed at a railway line south of the target, and P/O Little went for a viaduct at Westerhausen in north-central Germany. Berlin was at the absolute limit of the Hampdens' range, and two from 83 Squadron were among three to ditch in the North Sea on the way home, having run out of fuel. P1354 came down off Cromer without injury to F/O Svendsen and his crew, who were picked up by HMS Pintail. P4380 landed in the sea off Grimsby, from where P/O Mills and his crew were also rescued by a high speed launch after seven hours in their dinghy. The other squadron casualty was X2895, which crashed in County Durham while trying to land at Usworth, after almost eight hours aloft. P/O Bunker DFC sustained serious injury, and another member of his crew was also hurt.

On the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, the squadron contributed six Hampdens to mining and bombing operations in the Artichokes area off Lorient and Port-Louis, the latter situated opposite the port on the southern side of the Blavet Estuary. There was a late take-off, beginning with Gibson at 23.00, and all found the target area without difficulty, where the gardening aspect was executed successfully. Afterwards, Gibson landed a bomb within twenty-five yards of an E-Boot, before shooting up another and extinguishing a searchlight. S/L Bridgman bombed a dockyard installation at Lorient, and was last back, where he claimed to have shot down a Dornier 17. In the uncensored edition of *Enemy Coast Ahead*, Gibson claims credit for downing the Do17, describing it as passing him in the opposite direction near Cherbourg. He describes giving chase and attacking it, whereupon, it dived towards the ground with an

engine on fire. He then observed it being engaged by its own flak over Lorient, before crashing behind trees. On return, he put in a claim for a probable, which, he says, was granted. Gibson gained a reputation for "line-shooting" during his first tour of operations, and this was clearly an example. The distance from Cherbourg to Lorient is approximately 150 miles, and one wonders if even Gibson would add an extra three hundred miles to his round trip just to chase an enemy bomber. Not only that, according to his landing time, he still managed to arrive home forty minutes ahead of S/L Bridgman.

The squadron contributed six Hampdens on the following night, the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, to attack a Siemens aircraft component factory in Berlin. F/L Pitcairn-Hill was the senior pilot on duty as they began taking off at 21.00, but Sgt Noble was forced to turn back after about two hours with engine failure. F/O Barker was the only one to identify and bomb the target as briefed, claiming bomb bursts on the western side of the factory and a large fire, while P/O Little reported bombing and destroying a vessel in a lake to the west. The long range took its toll again, as another crew ended up in the sea as a result of fuel shortage. F/L Pitcairn-Hill ditched X2897 alongside a mine-sweeper off Skegness, and the crew was put ashore at Grimsby none the worse for their experience. P/O Clayton force-landed P4392 on a beach on the Norfolk coast, and he and his crew walked away uninjured. After a night's rest, eight 83 Squadron Hampdens began taking off shortly after 20.30, to attack an oil refinery at Magdeburg. S/L Collier was the senior pilot on duty, but he came home early with engine trouble, to find a red alert had blacked out the aerodrome. He had no choice but to attempt to land unaided, and misjudged his approach slightly, hitting a ground obstacle with his undercarriage, and ending up in a much mangled Hampden. He was knocked out by a blow to the head, but a member of his crew bravely dragged him clear of the wreckage, in which there was a full fuel and bomb load. P/O Connor was another to turn back, and only P/Os Lyster and Withers claimed to have attacked as briefed. P/O Snooke bombed an aerodrome south of Brunswick on the way home, and Sgt Maybury found a similar alternative target near Krefeld in the Ruhr. F/O Price dropped his bombs on light vessels in Amsterdam harbour, and P/O Harwood found an unspecified target of opportunity for his ironware.

F/L Collier was in hospital at Rauceby, when the same target was laid on for the following night, and his time with 83 Squadron was now over after thirty-five operations. He was promoted to squadron leader rank, and, in February 1941, received a DFC from the hand of King George VI. In March he would be posted to 44 Squadron at Waddington as a flight commander, and in December he would be given command of the newly-formed 420 Squadron RCAF. His operational career would end as commanding officer of 97 Squadron, which he took over at the end of March 1942, and, afterwards, his vast experience would be put to good use as an operations planner. F/L Bird was the senior pilot on duty among five 83 Squadron participants returning to Magdeburg. They were all safely off the ground by 21.00, but none was able to identify the target in conditions of nine-tenths low cloud, and alternative recipients were found for the bomb loads as the crews made their way home. F/L Bird attacked Leeuwarden aerodrome in northern Holland, the famed Wespennest (wasps nest) that was home to a number of Luftwaffe night fighter units. Sgt Howard bombed an aerodrome at Delmenhorst, west of Bremen, and F/O Barker may well have delivered his load onto the same location, which he reported as south-west of Bremen. He then crash-landed X2899 at Marham, while Sgt Noble jettisoned his bombs into the sea before force-landing X2905 near Spilsby, and both crews walked away unscathed. During the course of the month the squadron carried out twenty-one operations, dispatching 141 sorties for the loss of twelve aircraft and five crews.

## September 1940

With the Battle of Britain gaining momentum overhead, and the threat of invasion becoming more real by the day, the Command had devoted much of August to attacks on enemy airfields in the occupied countries. In September, the emphasis would shift to the build-up of invasion craft in the Channel and North Sea ports. The new month began for 83 Squadron with a pair of Hampdens dispatched to the marshalling yards at Mannheim on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>. The crews of F/O Gibson and P/O Little were those called upon, and they were airborne shortly after 20.00. Both reached and identified the target, the former returning to report a successful attack, while the latter experienced bomb release problems, and ultimately bombed a nearby factory. On the following night, six crews were briefed for the first of many future raids on U-Boot bases, on this occasion, the one being established at Lorient. Take-off began with P/O Lyster and P/O Clayton at 20.10, and F/O Price brought up the rear fifty minutes later. They were briefed to bomb the U-Boats themselves rather than the constructional works, and all from the squadron returned safely to report that they had bombed as briefed, but had been unable to determine results. The squadron ORB claims that five of the eight U-Boats were seriously damaged. Operations on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup> were launched from Feltwell, and involved five of the squadron's Hampdens taking off in mid-evening, bound for a power station on the outskirts of Berlin, probably at Spandau. P/O Snooke returned early with engine trouble, and Sgt Howard turned back with similar difficulties, bombing De Kooy airfield on the Den Helder peninsular on his way home. Only Sgt Noble was able to identify and attack the briefed objective, while F/O Barker bombed a large factory west of Spandau, and F/L Bird dropped his load on an aerodrome near Bremen.

Another long range operation was laid on for five crews twenty-four hours later, when an oil refinery near Stettin, probably Politz, was the target. It was launched from Mildenhall, and take-off was completed by 20.20, with F/O Withers the senior pilot on duty. All identified the target in favourable weather conditions and good visibility, and carried out attacks causing explosions and fires. P/O Clayton described bomb bursts and fires still visible for half an hour into the return journey. The squadron ORB is contradictory and confusing at this point, the summary section showing nothing for the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, while the detail section lists five crews taking off from Marham in mid-evening to return to target A104, the oil refinery near Stettin. F/L Pitcairn-Hill is shown as the senior pilot on duty, and he was one of two to fail to identify the target in conditions of haze and extreme darkness. He brought his bombs home, while Sgt Maybury attacked an aerodrome at Husum on the western edge of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular. F/O Price, P/O Lyster and Sgt Howard carried out an attack on the briefed target, but no results were observed. Gibson, meanwhile, took off from Scampton to go alone to what he described as the Brunsbüttel area, in the mouth of the Elbe, to bomb the battleship Bismarck. He could not positively identify his quarry, and carried out a dive-bombing attack on an unidentified ship moored in the Elbe.

The night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup> brought an attack on an oil refinery at Dortmund, for which 83 Squadron provided four of twelve Hampdens. They took off either side of 19.40, and only P/O Mills of the 83 Squadron contingent identified and bombed the target, before dropping some Razzles on the way home. F/O Svendsen attacked an aerodrome in the area of the Zuider Zee, and P/O Connor bombed another, probably Hansdorf, near Münster, while Sgt Loveluck found a blast furnace to target near Bochum. The anti-invasion campaign continued on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, with operations against concentrations of barges. Five 83 Squadron Hampdens were among twenty-nine of the type sent to Ostend, and they got

away safely from Scampton shortly after 20.00, with F/L Bird the senior pilot on duty. All reported attacking as briefed, and bomb bursts and sparks were observed, but no accurate assessment of the results could be made.

The second week of September began with a major operation by 5 Group, to bomb the important Blohm & Voss shipyard in Hamburg on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>. The 83 Squadron contingent of nine Hampdens was led by F/L Pitcairn-Hill, with F/O Gibson also in attendance, and they took off either side of 20.00 as part of an overall force from Scampton, Hemswell, Waddington and Lindholme of forty-nine aircraft. All of the Scampton crews reached and identified the target, and returned safely with claims of a successful outcome. A further nine from 83 Squadron returned to Hamburg twenty-four hours later as part of a 5 Group effort of twenty-one aircraft, this time led by S/L Oscar Bridgman. They got away from Scampton either side of 20.30, and all but one identified and attack as briefed, before returning safely home to report observing bomb bursts. F/O Barker failed to identify the primary target, and delivered his bombs onto the docks at Cuxhaven, a port on the southern bank of the Elbe Estuary. He observed bomb bursts, and saw his incendiaries start eight small fires.

A welcome night off preceded the next operations, which was mounted on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>. The squadron contributed five Hampdens to a mining effort in the Eglantine area, which was off the north German coast around Wilhelmshaven, and four others to continue the assault on Hamburg's dockland. The first to take off for Hamburg was Sgt Whitehead at 19.00, with the others close behind, but Sgt Loveluck was forced to return with engine trouble, and eventually took off again in a spare aircraft at 22.30. The gardeners got away within twenty-five minutes of each other either side of 20.00, but Gibson returned early with engine failure. The remainder pressed on, and Oscar Bridgman delivered his mine successfully, before dropping his wing bombs on the harbour at Wilhelmshaven. F/O Svendsen also planted his vegetable in the required location, before selecting a flak battery somewhere near the Scheldt Estuary to receive his bombs. Of the Hamburg element, only P/O Mundy failed to locate the primary target, and he bombed an unspecified alternative.

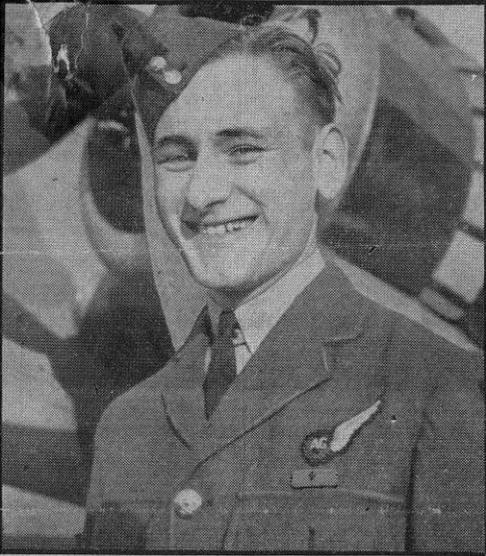
The Battle of Britain reached its peak on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and later that night, Bomber Command's second Victoria Cross of the war was won by 83 Squadron's Sgt Hannah, who was flying as wireless operator with P/O Connor, during an operation against invasion barges at Antwerp. His was one of a creditable fifteen aircraft dispatched by the squadron over a period of an hour between 21.20 and 22.22, with F/L Bird the senior pilot on duty. There were mixed fortunes for the participants, but eight returned home to report bombing the primary target, while F/O Svendsen admitted that his bombs had fallen on the town after a map-reading error. Of the others, two bombed Flushing and another attacked a ship in Dunkerque Roads as alternatives, and three crews were unable to carry out an attack for various reasons. Gibson delivered his bombs from 800 feet, and described two terrific explosions and several smaller ones. In Enemy Coast Ahead, Gibson describes flying alongside a Hampden on fire, and recognising it as belonging to 83 Squadron. P1355 had been hit by flak during the run-up to the target, and a fire had erupted amidships. Two crew members took to their parachutes, Gibson observing one to land in a river, while eighteen-year-old Sgt Hannah fought the fire alone with his bare hands. His heroic actions enabled P/O Connor to bring the badly damaged Hampden home to a safe landing, for which Connor was awarded a DFC.

By this time, only Bridgman, Pitcairn-Hill and Gibson remained of the 83 Squadron that had set out on the quest to defeat Hitler. Pitcairn-Hill had just been promoted to acting squadron leader rank to succeed the tour-expired S/L Collier as B Flight commander. After a few nights' rest the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup> saw Bridgman and Pitcairn-Hill lead nine crews from the squadron to attack invasion barges in the port of le Havre, while five others flew north to lay mines in the Eglantine region off Wilhelmshaven. The mining element took off first, and were all safely airborne by 20.00, before S/L Bridgman led the bombing brigade away at 20.15. The latter arrived in the target area to encounter a spirited defence from the port itself and flak ships, and P2097 was hit in the main-plane and navigator's compartment, forcing Sgt Maybury to jettison his bombs and turn for home. Sgt Sewell attacked from 800 feet, scoring direct hits and starting fires in four ships, and P/O Cook straddled the quayside with his bombs from 2,000 feet. S/L Bridgman also reported direct hits on two merchant vessels, while Sgt Dawkins got his bombs away before flak took out his hydraulics system. On return, his crew baled out, and he carried out a belly-landing with the wing bombs still attached. One Hampden was seen to crash in flames into the Seine Estuary, and, when P1183 failed to arrive back with the others, the awful truth dawned that the recently-promoted S/L Pitcairn-Hill DSO, DFC was gone. It was established later that he and his crew had all lost their lives. It was unquestionably a bitter blow to the squadron to lose such a character, and it was a stark reminder that no one was beyond the clutches of death.

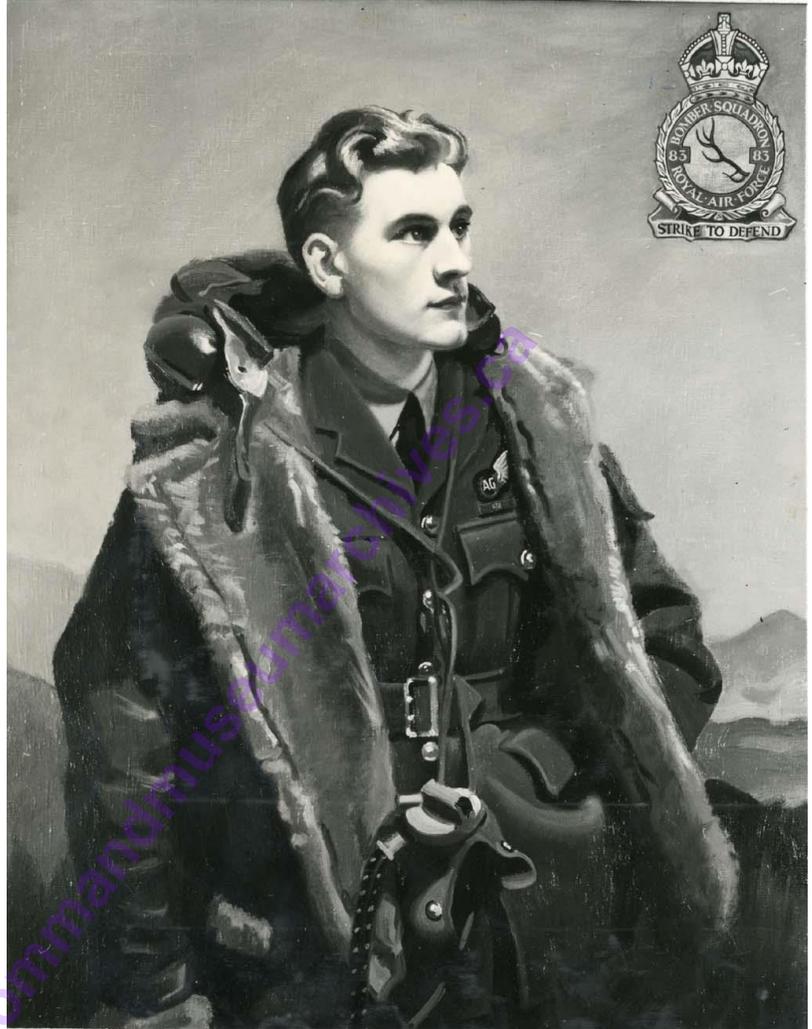
Two nights later, what would become a long-running association with the Dortmund-Ems Canal, just south of Ladbergen, continued with an assault by six Hampdens from the squadron. This section carried the waterway over the low-lying farmland by means of two aqueducts, one old and the other new. This night's operation was an attempt to take out the latter, and while it was in progress, half a dozen other aircraft from the squadron targeted invasion barges at Dunkerque. These actually departed first from Scampton, either side of 23.00, with P/Os Mundy and Connor the senior pilots, the former bombing Haamstede aerodrome as an alternative after failing to locate the primary. The others found and attacked the port, but could not assess the effectiveness of their efforts. Gibson led the Dortmund-Ems Canal contingent away between 23.20 and 00.37, and during his first pass over the target, a heavy shell passed through the cockpit close to the rudder bar, and severed radio communication, forcing him to go round again and release the bombs himself. P/O Snooke could not identify the aiming point, but found a train travelling on a track ten miles to the north-east of Münster. His attack was accurate, and the train was blown to bits in a mass of explosions and fire. P/O Arnold was another to attack an alternative target, and he chose De Kooy aerodrome near Den Helder. On the following night the squadron sent four aircraft to Ostend, in the continuing campaign against invasion craft. They got away in a fifteen minute slot from 23.00, and all identified the target and carried out an attack. F/O Svendsen scored a direct hit on dock 4, before smoke obscured the ground to prevent an accurate assessment of results.

Berlin dominated the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>, when 129 Hampdens, Wellingtons and Whitleys were dispatched to eighteen specific targets within the city. The eleven 83 Squadron Hampden crews were briefed to bomb a power station, for which they departed Scampton between 19.30 and 20.05, with S/L Bridgman the senior pilot on duty. They encountered testing weather conditions outbound, which persuaded the majority either to bomb alternative targets, mostly marshalling yards, or simply turn back. Just two crews found and attacked the target area, P/O Snooke and Sgt Sewell, while Gibson, who was undertaking his final operation before being rested, bombed the railway station at Potsdam. The return to Scampton of Oscar Bridgman, probably more than anyone, Gibson's guide and mentor during the first year of the war, was awaited in vain. A distress message was received at Group HQ at 01.10 from close

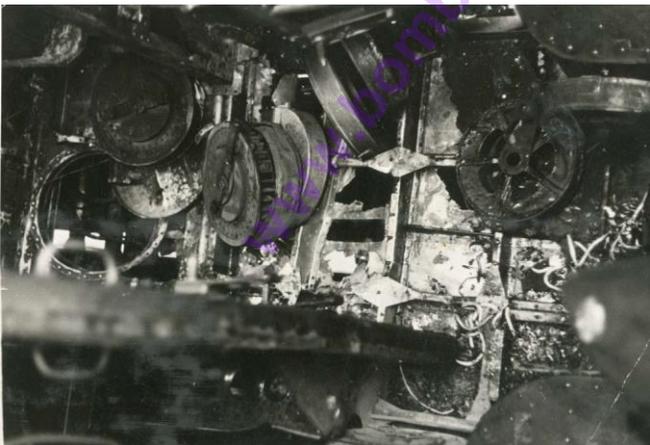
**Hannah, V.C., back on the job**



SERGEANT JOHN HANNAH, of Glasgow, winner of the Victoria Cross for his heroism in beating out fire in a bomber, has now recovered from his burns and is back on duty again. Here he is wearing his VC ribbon, and (below) behind the guns again.



*The gallant actions of Sgt. John Hannah led to the award of Bomber Command's second Victoria Cross of the war.*



*(Above) Two photographs showing some of the damage to Sgt. John Hannah's Hampden.*

R.A.F. Form 96.  
S 575 (Naval)

MESSAGE FORM.

Office Serial No. ....

Call IN  
and:—  
Preface OUT

Received by phone. 23.35 hrs. 30<sup>th</sup> Sept 40.  
Cpl. Emlyson W<sup>m</sup> Wardmaster. R.A. Hosp. Rauceby

No. of Groups  
GR

Office Date Stamp.

TO\*

(Above this line is for Signals use only)

Sgt. JOHN HANNAH. V.C. R.A.F. HOSPITAL. RAUCEBY. Lincs.

FROM\*

GLASGOW

Originator's Number

Date

In Reply to Number and Date

GLASGOW SENDS ITS HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS ON HAVING  
WON THE GREATEST OF ALL HONOURS. THE CITY IS PROUD THAT  
ONE OF ITS YOUNGEST SONS HAS GAINED THE FIRST V.C. TO  
COME TO SCOTLAND. YOUR EXAMPLE SHOULD ENCOURAGE  
ALL OF US TO DO THAT LITTLE BIT EXTRA ESSENTIAL FOR  
VICTORY. LORD PROVOST. DOLLAN. GLASGOW.

This message must be sent AS WRITTEN  
and may:.....be sent by W/T.  
Signature

This message must be sent IN CYPHER  
and may:.....be sent by W/T.  
Signature

Originator's Instructions.\* Degree of Priority.\*

Time of Origin.

† Originator to insert "NOT" if message is not to go by W/T over any part of the route.

(Below this line is for Signals use only.)

System in	Time in	Reader	Sender	System out	Time out	Reader	Sender	System out	Time out	Reader	Sender
		AR.	£								

T.O.R. 23.35

T.H.I. 30/9

\* The Signal Department is responsible that these details are transposed to the appropriate portion of the message form and that all possibility of compromising distinguishing signals, etc., by omitting to remove their signification from the address, etc., is avoided. Before delivery of the message these details are to be re-inserted in P/L.

Sgt. Hannah's exploits brought him deserved recognition, including this telegram from the Lord Provost of Glasgow. 'The first VC to come to Scotland' refers to the Second World War, as several such awards were made to Scots in earlier conflicts, including the First World War

to Oldenburg, to the effect that the port engine had been hit, and it was assumed that the crew had abandoned the aircraft. In fact, only Bridgman survived, and his three crewmen, P/O Watson DFC, Sgt Gorwood DFM and Sgt Blatch, died in the wreckage near Bethen in north-western Germany. With Gibson's departure to an O.T.U as an instructor, and the loss of Bridgman and Pitcairn-Hill, the old guard at 83 Squadron was now gone. In fact, Gibson would wangle himself a posting to 29 Squadron at Digby to fly night fighters for a year, before returning to Bomber Command in March 1942, first as commanding officer of 106 Squadron, and twelve months later of 617 Squadron.

S/L Cooper was posted to the squadron to assume command of A Flight, while the newly-promoted S/L Bird filled the void as B Flight commander, following the loss of Pitcairn-Hill. Neither was involved when a hundred aircraft took part in attacks on Channel ports on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron contributed six Hampdens, which took off after midnight to attack the harbour lock at le Havre. All found and bombed the target as briefed, but only Sgt Baxter observed bomb bursts. P/O Connor was carrying a night camera, but there is no mention as to its performance. Three nights later the squadron sent a dozen aircraft to bomb shipping at Lorient, and this time S/L Cooper was the senior officer on duty. They all got away by 19.00, but Sgt Forster landed at Upper Heyford, after a gunner became too ill to continue. A replacement gunner was found, and they took off again at 21.55 to complete the operation. Sgt Baxter turned back at Cherbourg with an overheating engine, but the others reached the target to carry out an attack, and fires were reported in dockside buildings. On return, P/O Snooke was

unable to locate Scampton, and, with fuel running low, he ordered his crew to take to their parachutes. They landed safely, but it is believed that Snooke's parachute became entangled with P4392's tail plane, and he was dragged to his death when it crashed in Lincoln.

Just three of the squadron's crews operated on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, P/O Cook and F/O Barker targeting the important marshalling yards in Hamm, while Sgt Jackson joined an element from 49 Squadron at le Havre. It was well after midnight before they took off, and two were successful, F/O Barker reporting a large fire at Hamm. P/O Cook failed to identify the primary target, and had not found an alternative, before the arrival of dawn compelled him to bring his bombs home. The last night of another busy month saw a mixed force head for Berlin to single out the Air Ministry building in Leipzig Strasse. There were eight participants from 83 Squadron, P/O Clayton leading the majority away from Scampton at 19.15. P/O Mundy and Sgt Baxter didn't take off until 21.35 and 21.50 respectively, and the latter bombed a marshalling yards at Wittenberg as an alternative because of dwindling fuel supplies. On return, four crews claimed to have identified and attacked the target as briefed, while two others bombed in the general area on e.t.a., and another dropped his load on Schiphol aerodrome. The month had brought the end of an era for 83 Squadron, but a long and distinguished wartime career lay ahead. During the course of the month twenty-three operations had been carried out, involving 145 sorties, for the loss of four aircraft and two crews



*The main gate and guardroom at RAF Scampton.*

## October 1940

The focus of operations would remain unchanged until mid-October, by which time the threat of invasion had begun to recede. Ninety aircraft were aloft on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>, of which three were 83 Squadron Hampdens, their crews briefed to attack a coastal oil refinery. They were airborne by 19.30, and two reached the target to carry out an attack. S/L Cooper experienced release-gear problems during his first two runs across the target, and his bombs fell out into the sea as he was about to begin his third. Sgt Forster had better luck, delivering his bombs from 10,000 feet in a glide, and observing them to burst in the target area. Sgt Dawkins was unable to identify the primary objective, and dropped his bombs in a stick across the docks at Flushing on the island of Walcheren. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, Sir Charles Portal relinquished his post as Commander-in-Chief at Bomber Command, and took up his appointment as Chief of the Air Staff. He was replaced by ACM Sir Richard Peirse, whose tenure was to be dogged by the inadequacies of the equipment available to him, and the increasing and often unrealistic demands from on high. That night, a dozen 83 Squadron Hampdens were sent to bomb the Nordstern Oil refinery at Gelsenkirchen, for which destination they departed Scampton either side of 18.30. They encountered very poor weather conditions, which allowed just four to reach and attack the target, while three turned back, three others bombed aerodromes and one attacked the Krupp works at Essen. Sgt Hawkes was one of those to turn back as a result of severe icing, and during his attempt to land at Hemswell, X2977 crashed, killing the navigator, Sgt Sherwood.

The Admiralty was acutely conscious of the threat posed by Germany's mighty battleships Bismarck and Tirpitz, and there was a constant pressure on Bomber Command to deal with them. Accordingly, ten 83 Squadron Hampdens set out in the early evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> in company with seven others from the group, all bound for Wilhelmshaven. Two from 83 Squadron turned back early, but seven positively identified the Tirpitz and carried out an attack, although without observing results. S/L Cooper was the senior pilot on duty, and he abandoned his first run at the target because of a curtain of flak. He released his bombs on the second pass, and saw them burst without being able to determine the results. P/O Stamer carried out a shallow dive approach from 10,000 to 7,000 feet, and observed two bomb bursts near the southern edge of the basin. He was then followed out of the target area by an enemy aircraft, as was P/O Connor, who had two in attendance for twenty minutes. F/L Barker thought he saw hits in the dock next to the one occupied by the Tirpitz.

On the following night, a 5 Group effort by twenty Hampdens, four of them from 83 Squadron, was directed at the highly important Krupp armaments works at Essen. The weather conditions were unfavourable as the Scampton crews became airborne at 18.30, and most of the force failed to find the target under a blanket of thick, low cloud. Only Sgt Fox of the 83 Squadron contingent bombed in the target area, and that was on e.t.a, while the others attacked De Kooy aerodrome, and another unidentified one south of Emmerich, on the way home. The squadron sent nine aircraft mining in the Forget-me-not region in the Kiel Canal on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, for which they began taking off at 18.30. P/O Clayton was the senior pilot on duty, but, in the face of continuing poor weather conditions of low cloud, he jettisoned his mine and turned back when about thirty miles out from Vlieland. F/O Barker and P/Os Connor and Stamer also failed to locate their drop zones, and two of them dropped their 250lb bombs onto flak positions somewhere near Kiel. Five other crews were successful, however, and Sgts Baxter and Dawkins used their wing bombs against aerodromes on the way home.

It was a similar story on the following night, when S/L Cooper led a squadron element of five Hampdens to attack an aircraft components factory at Herringen, a south-western suburb of Hamm, just north-east of the Ruhr. They took off either side of 18.30, but Sgt Bucknell turned back early with communications problems, and P/O Harwood bombed a power station as an alternative target, but overshot, and damaged a pipeline leading to a reservoir. Only Sgt Fox eventually found the aiming point after searching for some time, and, after releasing his bombs from 900 feet, he observed four explosions and intense fires. He was attacked by a night fighter on the way home, but avoided damage and landed safely. S/L Cooper led the squadron contingent of five to Wilhelmshaven on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, in company with thirty others from the group for another crack at the Tirpitz. They departed Scampton either side of 19.30, and, on reaching the target area, found the cloud base down to 1,000 feet, and only Sgt Bucknell of the 83 Squadron participants delivered his bombs in the general area of the docks.

After a night's rest a dozen 83 Squadron aircraft set out in the early evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> for the four-hour outward leg to Magdeburg, where an oil refinery awaited their attention. They took off between 18.00 and 18.30, with S/L Cooper the senior pilot on duty, backed up by F/L Barker. Five crews identified the target and carried out an attack, Sgt Garwell from 1,500 feet and Sgt Forster from 7,000 feet after a glide, but there was no realistic chance of observing results. The remainder found alternatives in Germany and Belgium on the way home, including a couple of railway junctions. F/L Barker attacked a line of barges on the Dortmund-Ems Canal south of Münster, and then experienced engine trouble, which was probably due to a shortage of fuel after more than seven and a half hours in the air. Having reached the Suffolk coast he put X2901 down on the beach at Southwold, and all on board emerged unscathed.

There was no operational flying on the next two nights, allowing a dozen aircraft to be made available for a visit to the Bismarck at Hamburg on the 18/19<sup>th</sup>, in company with others from Lindholme. They took off either side of 21.30, and despite encountering cloud over the target, four crews, those of P/Os Connor and Arnold and Sgts Garwell and Baxter, positively identified Bismarck and carried out an attack. Sgt Loveluck couldn't find Bismarck, so turned his attention instead upon the Scharnhorst, which he attacked from 3,500 feet with four 500lb SAP bombs. Others bombed the general area of the docks or sought out alternatives, and all arrived back safely<sup>1</sup>. Despite luck forming part of the pilot's name, this crew had little time left.

Eight 83 Squadron crews were due to return to Hamburg on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, but it was cancelled because of the weather. Two nights later, five set out for the same oil refinery at Magdeburg that had been the target eight nights earlier. There was a late take-off, either side of 00.30, but conditions proved too testing, and complete cloud cover thwarted all attempts to locate the objective. A variety of alternative targets of opportunity received the bombs, including a factory at Petershagen, between Hanover and Münster, a train near Neuenkirchen, on the western side of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular, and De Kooy airfield. Twenty-four hours later it was an oil refinery at Hanover, probably Misburg that was the destination for five of the squadron's Hampdens, which took off just before 01.00 on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Only P/O Arnold carried out an attack, and he observed a large red glow beneath the clouds

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<sup>1</sup> In *Bomber Command Losses 1939/40* by Bill Chorley, page 120 states that L4104 ran out of fuel on return and was successfully abandoned over Yorkshire by Sgt Loveluck and crew. There is no mention of this in either the 83 Squadron or 5 Group ORB, but there is also no mention of this aircraft in the ORB afterwards, so I conclude that Bill is correct!

as he left the target area. Sgt Dawkins hit De Kooy aerodrome as he crossed the Den Helder peninsular on the way home, and Sgt Forster aimed his bombs at warehouses in the docks at Emden.

Ten of the squadron's crews were called into action on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, according to the squadron ORB, seven to attack targets in Berlin, believed to be the Air Ministry building and marshalling yards, and three to lay mines in the Deodars region, which was the Gironde Estuary. However, the entries are confusing, as are the departure times, and it is possible that the split was six-four or even five-five. Take-off for Berlin began shortly after 18.00, but S/L Cooper and P/O Lyster are shown as departing Scampton at 23.00, the same time as the first of the mining trio, P/O Rainford, suggesting, perhaps, two shifts for the bombing element, or a clerical error. According to the individual crew reports, not one located the Berlin aiming points, but S/L Cooper and Sgt Jackson bombed alternatives within the city, Sgt Bucknell attacked a factory in Potsdam, P/O Lyster a factory in Bremen, while P/O Stamer bombed the airfield at Haamstede after getting lost and back-tracking. It became a sad night for 83 Squadron, after the failure to return of X2990 with the crew of Sgt Loveluck, and no clue to their fate was ever found. As far as the mining element was concerned, Sgt Baxter returned early with a faulty engine, and only Sgt Garwell completed his sortie as briefed. It was another hugely disappointing night for C-in-C Peirse. This was the final operation for P/O Dennis Lyster, who had now completed thirty-nine sorties, and had been awarded the DFC in September. He would return to the squadron in due time, but during the interim he would attend a specialist navigation course.

The penultimate operation of the month for the squadron was a trip to Hamburg by seven aircraft on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>. Take-off was safely accomplished by 17.15, but poor weather conditions outbound caused problems, and P/O Stamer returned early because of severe icing. Searchlight activity in the target area added to the difficulties, and made identification of the briefed aiming point, the docks, almost impossible. Five crews reported bombing in the general area of the docks, including P/O Arnold, who carried out a glide approach from 14,000 down to 9,000 feet, but was unable to assess results. F/O Kendall observed bomb bursts, but the others could add no useful information at debriefing, and a local authority report recorded no fires. The night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup> saw a force of thirty Hampdens and Wellingtons take off around teatime, before heading for Berlin. Seven of the Hampdens contained 83 Squadron crews, of which the senior pilot on duty was F/L Barker, who had just been appointed temporary B Flight commander, while F/O Clayton, who stayed at home on this night, had been put in charge of A Flight, pending the arrival of a more senior officer. In company with the others, they contended with the unfavourable weather conditions in an attempt to reach the target, and only Sgt Baxter was able to report bombing Berlin, which he did from 7,000 feet, his rear gunner witnessing a large explosion. F/L Barker bombed a heavy flak battery at Nienburg, and his rear gunner shot out a searchlight. A number of crews, who were unable to identify the briefed target, reported bombing Bremen docks and a railway siding in Hamburg on the way home. There were awards during the month of a DFC to S/L Bird and P/O Mills, and a DFM to Sgts Sewell, Banham and Hayes. During the course of the month the squadron took part in fifteen operations, dispatching 106 sorties for the loss of three aircraft and one crew.

## November 1940



*83 Sqn crews watch a Hampden fly past the flight line at Scampton in 1940.*

A new and lengthy Air Ministry directive, issued to Peirse in late October, reconfirmed oil as the priority target, but other industries were also cited, along with railways, mine-laying and a continuation of attacks on Channel ports, to discourage any thoughts by the enemy of resurrecting its ideas on an invasion. Two training accidents marked the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, the first of them involving P4381, which clipped trees and crashed near Lincoln, although without injury to the crew of Sgt Garwell<sup>2</sup>. Half an hour after his crash, X2978 came down near the Nottinghamshire border with Lincolnshire, killing Sgt Redgrove and two others of his crew. That night six 83 Squadron crews joined others from the group to attack dockyard installations at Kiel. They were all airborne by 01.30, but L4093 lost an engine to flak, presumably at the enemy coast, and P/O Connor, mentioned earlier as the pilot of Sgt Hannah VC, turned back towards the English coast. Sadly, he was unable to make landfall before coming down in the sea off Spurn Head at 05.00, some three and a half hours after taking off. There were no survivors, and the bodies of P/O Connor and one of his crew were recovered later from the sea by HMS Puffin. Weather conditions were unfavourable, and only Sgts Jackson, Forster and Fox carried out an attack on the primary target, adopting a glide approach from 6,000 to 8,000 feet to do so, but there was no assessment of results. P/O Harwood flew home over Wilhelmshaven at 2,800 feet, and found a military objective upon which to drop his bombs.

Shortly after midnight on the 6<sup>th</sup>, five 83 Squadron crews took off from Scampton to undertake the long flight to Magdeburg, where the previously visited oil refinery was the objective. F/O Kendall was the senior pilot on duty, and only he returned to claim carrying out an attack, the weather and technical difficulties thwarting the best efforts of the others. Sgt Garwell was unable to release his flares, and could not, therefore, pick out the primary target, but found a warehouse and railway to bomb, while P/O

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<sup>2</sup> Eighteen months hence, and by then commissioned, F/O Garwell would captain one of six 44 Squadron Lancasters to take part in the epic daylight raid on the M.A.N. diesel engine works at Augsburg in company with 97 Squadron. He was destined to crash just beyond the city having delivered his bombs, and spend the remainder of the war as a guest of the Reich.

Royle dropped his load on a flare-path on Borkum. Ninety minutes before this element took off, P/O Mundy had departed for the port of Sassnitz in the Baltic to lay mines, but he was unable to pinpoint the dropping zone and brought his ordnance home. The giant Krupp complex at Essen was the target for over sixty aircraft on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, for which 83 Squadron contributed seven Hampdens. They took off between 20.10 and 21.19, and four returned to claim bombing in the target area, while three others found alternatives. The Ruhr had been cloud-covered, and it is known that decoy fire sites were in operation on this night, which makes it highly unlikely that Essen sustained any meaningful damage. F/O Kendall and P/O Mundy were in the two 83 Squadron Hampdens, among more than twenty from the group, dispatched to Munich on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup> to bomb marshalling yards and engine sheds. On return from his successful sortie, P/O Mundy failed to raise the Scampton controller, and, desperately short of fuel, ordered his crew to abandon P4402. This they did safely, and the Hampden came down near Louth in Lincolnshire.

Tragedy struck as Sgt Garwell took off around 01.30 on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, as one of three crews briefed to attack U-Boats sheltering at Lorient. The Hampden swung off the runway and careered into a Nissen hut, killing three occupants and injuring a fourth. X2964 caught fire, but the crew scrambled clear with just cuts and bruises. P/O Rainford and Sgt Jackson pressed on to the target, and carried out attacks from 1,200 and 1,500 feet respectively, the latter observing green flashes from what he believed to be a power station. Meanwhile, four other 83 Squadron crews were on their way to Mannheim in doubtful weather conditions to bomb the inland docks, but, in the event, only Sgt Blanks arrived in the target area to find it clear of cloud, and he carried out an attack from 9,000 feet, reporting on his return that the target was “nearly hit”. On the following night, the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, the squadron sent five aircraft back to Mannheim, this time to hit the marshalling yards, while two others undertook the long journey to the Baltic port of Danzig, to attack military objectives and deliver leaflets in celebration of Polish Independence Day. Neither of the latter element reached the target, having been defeated by the weather and technical difficulties, but Sgts Blank and Wilkins managed to deliver an attack at Mannheim. L4095 did not return after crashing off the Dutch coast, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/O Kendall. Hamburg was one of a number of destinations in Germany for small forces of Hampdens, Wellingtons and Whitleys on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron dispatched six crews either side of 01.00, to bomb one of the city’s marshalling yards, but all were defeated by the weather conditions, and two attacked alternative targets on the way home.

Fifty aircraft set out for Berlin on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, among them two Hampdens from 83 Squadron, which took off shortly after midnight. Only twenty-five aircraft reached the target, and ten aircraft were missing from all the night's operations, the heaviest loss in a single night to date. Both of the 83 Squadron participants failed to return, P/O Arnold and his crew in L4051, which crashed in Germany without survivors, and Sgt Bucknell and his crew, who were lost without trace in L4057. Also on this night, the squadron sent two other crews to attack an oil target in Hamburg, and Sgts Wilkins and James returned safely to report bombing as briefed from 8,000 and 6,500 feet respectively. The night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup> brought a two wave attack on Hamburg separated by eight hours. The twenty-five-strong Hampden element took off after midnight in the second phase, and among them were five from 83 Squadron. Weather conditions over the target were good, and many fires were reported by the local authorities, and substantial damage was inflicted on the Blohm & Voss shipyard. The operation was repeated on the following night, when another late take-off was scheduled, which saw the eight 83 Squadron participants depart Scampton between 01.25 and 01.55. The weather conditions were less kind

on this occasion, and not one of the 83 Squadron contingent reached the target area. Sgt James tried to bomb the island of Nordeney, but missed, and Sgt Jackson delivered his load onto a flak concentration on the Kiel Canal. Sgt Blanks found a ship some ten miles south of Heligoland, and believed he scored a hit.

S/L Learoyd VC was posted across the tarmac from 49 Squadron on the 18<sup>th</sup> to fulfil the role of A Flight commander, and F/L Forsythe DFC took over B Flight at about the same time. Forty-three aircraft set off for the Ruhr city of Duisburg late on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and among them were eight Hampdens from 83 Squadron. Their target was a marshalling yards at Ruhrort, part of the main inland docks area on the east bank of the Rhine, and all bombed as briefed to leave large fires burning. What is clearly evident from the post operation reports, is the complete lack of organisation inherent in a Bomber Command attack at this stage of the war. Later in the war, the details of every sortie would be meticulously planned, particularly in terms of bombing altitude, but on this night P/O Rainford bombed from 1,700 feet, F/O Harwood from 4,000 feet and Sgt Jackson from 10,000 feet. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, AVM Harris completed his period of tenure as A-O-C 5 Group, and was appointed as second deputy to the Chief of the Air Staff, but his return to the Command fifteen months hence would be a matter of great significance. The night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup> brought wide-ranging operations over Germany, Italy and France, for which five 83 Squadron Hampdens were made ready. They took off in the late afternoon, to join in an attack on the Nordstern oil plant at Gelsenkirchen, where F/O Anderson and Sgt Wilkins alone positively identified the target and attacked as briefed. F/O Harwood searched for more than three hours, before giving up and bombing Eindhoven aerodrome on the way home, while Sgt Baxter aimed at the Krupp works in Essen. Sgt Blanks jettisoned his bombs after being attacked by a BF109 and a BF110, and returned safely. Meanwhile, three other crews flew north to plant mines in the Eglantine region, which was the mouth of the River Elbe, and all were successful. F/L Barker then dropped his wing bombs on a small ship from 2,000 feet, claiming a hit, and P/O Rainford delivered his from a similar height onto a building in Wilhelmshaven.

P2125 failed to reach Cologne on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, coming to rest in a field near Scampton, after clipping a hedge on take-off, but Sgt Baxter and his crew were able to walk away. Five others from the squadron did get away safely shortly before 03.00, having been briefed to attack either a power station or the Hohenzollern Bridge across the Rhine. All returned safely, P/O Royle and Sgt Fox having bombed the power station as briefed, the latter pin-pointing on the Rhine and making a dummy run before letting his load go from 8,300 feet. Sgt Dawkins was prevented by low cloud from going for his primary target, the bridge, and he bombed a railway junction to the east of the Rhine, before shooting up the aerodrome at Eindhoven on the way home. This was to have been the first night of the "Specials", which were Hampdens sent aloft without bombs, but with an extra gunner and ammunition to patrol the provincial towns at set altitudes and perform the role of night fighters. In the event, they were not called into action on this night. Just three 83 Squadron aircraft were called upon on the following night, and they were sent to lay mines in the Jellyfish region off Brest. They took off between 02.00 and 02.50, and F/O Anderson and P/O Bugler were successful, while Sgt Blanks was not, but all returned safely, from what proved to be the last operational activity of the month. Eighteen operations were undertaken, for which seventy-seven sorties were dispatched for the loss of nine aircraft and five crews. Among awards to squadron personnel were a DFC each for F/O Withers and P/O Little.

December 1940



*Hampden OL-D is the backdrop to this gathering of aircrew some time in 1940.*

Scampton was the only 5 Group station to launch aircraft on the first night of December, five Hampdens each from 83 and 49 Squadron heading north to attack shipyards in the port of Wilhelmshaven. P/O Mundy was first away of the 83 Squadron element, at 02.46, but it was approaching 03.30 before the remainder set off, and they encountered poor weather conditions. P/O Mundy ran into a fierce flak barrage as he passed over Emden, and, failing to find a way out, he dropped his bombs on the town and turned back. Sgt Garwell could not locate the target, and delivered his bombs onto a flak position three miles north-west of Wilhelmshaven, observing a number of flashes, and noting that the guns stopped firing. Sgts Wilkins and Blanks and P/O Rainford all completed their assigned tasks, the last-mentioned descending to 2,500 feet, from where he observed five bomb blasts among dockside buildings. Local authorities made no mention of an attack. W/C Sisson left the squadron on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and was succeeded by W/C Boyle, who was posted in from Bomber Command HQ. Like W/C Snaith, the squadron's second wartime commanding officer, Boyle had commanded the squadron pre-war in the rank of squadron leader. 5 Group dispatched twenty Hampdens to Düsseldorf in the early hours of the 4<sup>th</sup>, but most found

the weather conditions to be too challenging. Of five crews from 83 Squadron, only P/O Bugler positively identified the target, and another bombed on e.t.a. The crews who had been standing-by for offensive patrols over English cities in the manner of night fighters, at last got their opportunity on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when twenty were sent to Bristol. Of the four representing 83 Squadron, P/O Royle returned early after being unable to maintain the briefed height of 19,500 feet, and only P/O Lyster had sight of an unidentified twin-engine aircraft as he entered the patrol area, but lost it after four minutes.

The squadron was next called into action on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, when six crews took off in mid-evening and headed to Mannheim, where marshalling yards were the objective. F/L Barker was the senior pilot on duty, and he encountered unfavourable weather conditions, which prevented him from locating his aiming point. He dropped his bombs on a railway junction as an alternative, and this he claimed as successful. In fact, a combination of low cloud, severe icing and technical problems prevented any crews from fulfilling their brief. The following night brought offensive patrols for seven 83 Squadron crews, who took off in the early evening for Birmingham. They reported seeing other Hampdens and unidentified aircraft, but only Sgt Blanks positively identified any enemy aircraft, and he encountered three, each of which was quickly lost from sight in cloud. Thirty 5 Group aircraft were sent to Berlin on the night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, eleven of them provided by 83 Squadron. There were no senior officers involved as they took off either side of midnight, their crews given the Air Ministry building in Leipzig Strasse as their aiming point. Sgt Fox turned back early, but the others pressed on, and all but P/O Bugler claimed to have reached and bombed the city, in what some described as perfect weather conditions. F/O Mundy hit the railway station, and Sgt Dawkins the marshalling yards, while the others just reported a successful attack.

The month's most notable operation took place on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, and was one of a retaliatory nature, which came in response to recent heavy Luftwaffe raids on English cities, in particular, the long-running assault on London, and the decimation of the centre of Coventry in November. 134 aircraft set off for Mannheim, and this represented the largest force yet sent to a single target. Included in this figure were twenty-nine Hampdens, of which, it is believed, ten represented 83 Squadron<sup>3</sup>. The crews had been briefed to aim their bombs at the city centre, in a forerunner of the area bombing policy that would become standard practice from 1942 onwards. Although moderately successful for the period, the operation did not achieve its aims, and the 240 buildings damaged or destroyed were not predominantly in the centre.

Three operations remained for 83 Squadron before year's end, and the first of these took fourteen aircraft to bomb a synthetic oil plant at Cologne, possibly Wesseling, on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>. They took off either side of 17.00, and reached the target area to find thick cloud and impenetrable darkness hampering any attempt to identify ground features. F/O Harwood descended through cloud to 4,000 feet, and searched for an hour, but could find only dummy targets and a dummy aerodrome. Sgt Jackson attacked marshalling yards as an alternative, while F/O Mundy believed that his bombs fell on Düsseldorf, and only five claimed to have found the approximate location of the intended objective. According to the summary section of the 83 Squadron ORB, ten crews took off either side of 22.00 on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, and set course for target B1, a power station at Halle, north-west of Leipzig. The detail section, however, records seven crews for BI and five others for B81, which appears to be in the Magdeburg

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<sup>3</sup> The 83 Squadron ORB makes no mention of this operation. The 5 Group ORB states that Scampton dispatched twenty Hampdens, and ten of these are known to have belonged to 49 Squadron.

area, further north. A number of crews reported bombing alternatives in this region, but also near Dessau, a city roughly between Leipzig and Magdeburg. No crew was able to locate its assigned aiming point in conditions of thick, low cloud, and a variety of other widespread alternatives received bombs. P/O Rainford was searching at 1,100 feet, when flak wounded the rear gunner, so he turned back and bombed the docks at Dersam, situated between Rotterdam and the Hoek van Holland. Sgt Dawkins bombed an autobahn and a railway junction in the target area, while F/O Royle attacked a flak concentration in Brandenburg near Berlin. Sgt James went for a railway junction near Osnabrück, and Sgt Garwell found himself over Emden, where he relieved himself of his bomb load. On return both engines cut, probably as the result of fuel starvation after nine hours aloft, and he landed in a small field, without damage to aircraft or crew. It must be assumed that clerical errors occurred in the recording of this night in the ORB, and that twelve, and not ten, aircraft were dispatched to target B1.



*A place of quiet reflection and contemplation. The wartime chapel at RAF Scampton.*

The final operation of the year for 83 Squadron took place on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, when nine crews were briefed to attack hangars on Merignac airfield in the Gironde region of western France, while three others laid mines in the Lettuce garden region of the Kiel Canal. They bombing brigade took off between 00.30 and 01.20, and only Sgt Fox of the airfield contingent found and bombed the target, in difficult visibility that thwarted the others. A number of coastal targets were bombed as alternatives at Lorient and Bordeaux, and also two aerodromes. It was Sgt Jackson and crew who had attacked Lorient, and it was probably here that flak mortally wounded the navigator. The rear

gunner, Sgt Turner, took over the task of navigating the Hampden home, where a landing was made at Boscombe Down. There would be an immediate award of the DFM for Sgt Jackson and Sgt Turner. There was no report from F/L Rooney and crew, who had been briefed for Merignac, but were still on board P2097, when it crashed with fatal consequences near Abingdon in Berkshire<sup>4</sup> at 01.25 on return. P/Os Petty and Simpson of the gardening brigade successfully planted their vegetables, but P/O Strong was beaten by the weather. There were DFCs during the month for F/L Barker, F/O Clayton and P/O Cook. During the course of the month the squadron took part in eleven operations, and dispatched eighty-three sorties without loss.

After a year of backs-to-the-wall struggle, during which, the principal achievement of Bomber Command had been to present a defiant and belligerent face to an, as yet, all-conquering enemy, the coming twelve months would see no major change in fortunes. Despite the appearance of the first four-engine types, whose introduction into service would be painfully slow, the problems and inadequacies of the old year would remain, and it would be a case of treading water for the foreseeable future.

<sup>4</sup> At the time, Abingdon was the county town of Berkshire, but became part of Oxfordshire in 1974.

## January 1941



A second successive severe winter restricted operations at the start of the year, when most of the effort was directed at French and German ports. Bremen was the principal destination for the first few nights of the New Year, and the attack on New Year's night produced some accurate bombing on the Focke-Wulf factory in a southern suburb, and some residential property was also destroyed as the bombing spread further into the city. 83 Squadron was not involved in this operation, or in the follow-up twenty-four hours later, when only around fifteen bomb loads found the city. The squadron operated for the first time in the year on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, when Bremen was again the target, this time for a force of seventy-one aircraft, including a record sixteen Hampdens from 83 Squadron. There was a six-inch blanket of snow on the ground, which hindered, but did not unduly affect the take-off procedure. W/C Boyle led the squadron for the first time since assuming Command, and he was first off the ground at 17.10. It took a further seventy-five minutes to launch the others, but, once over the North Sea, the skies cleared and ideal weather conditions persisted all the way to the target. Three crews turned back early, but the remainder pushed on to the target, where ground features were easily identified. P/O Rainford attacked from 11,000 feet, and saw bomb bursts within the town east of the River Weser, while F/O Harwood hit the gas works from 10,000 feet, and photographed the event with a photo-flash bomb. All of the others were also successful, and returned to report being able to see Bremen burning from fifty miles away. Earlier on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the new bomber station at Coningsby had been declared open on a Care & Maintenance basis, and would shortly welcome its first resident unit. In time, it would also be home to a much changed and vastly more effective 83 Squadron.

Wilhelmshaven was another target in northern German to receive more than its fair share of attention during the month, and it hosted the first of its six raids of varying sizes on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron sat this one out, and remained at home until the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, when a force of thirty-five Hampdens and Wellingtons headed for the port with the intention of bombing the Tirpitz. The Scampton squadrons put up eight aircraft each, with F/Ls Barker and Anderson the senior representatives among the 83 Squadron contingent. They began taking off at 02.10, but it was 03.00 before P/O Royle brought

up the rear. Weather conditions outbound were poor, with ten-tenths cloud down at 5,000 feet, and this persisted over the target itself, although P/O Petty approached via the coast, where he found it to be clear. He bombed the briefed target in the face of a heavy flak barrage, but was unable to observe his bomb bursts. P/O Bugler was able to identify the aiming point, and he attacked from 3,500 feet, observing his bombs to fall just south of the vessel and explode on the dockside. More typical was the experience of P/O Royle, who flew as far as the Frisians at 2,000 feet, before climbing above the cloud. He searched for fifteen minutes, before giving up and bombing Wangerooge on the way home. On e.t.a F/L Barker descended to 3,000 feet, but he was unable to find a pinpoint, and bombed a flak concentration. Two others bombed the secondary target of Bremerhaven, while Sgt Blanks believed he had put a flak battery out of action with a 2,000 pounder. On the following night the oil town of Gelsenkirchen became one of the few non-coastal targets to be visited, but 83 Squadron stayed at home.

The squadron put up five Hampdens on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, and they began taking off at 03.15 to lay mines off Lorient, and then to bomb the aerodrome at Vannes, further to the east. Weather conditions at home were poor, but they improved during the outward flight, and there were clear skies in the target area. All successfully sowed their vegetables, after which, P/O Mundy and Sgt Garwell attacked the aerodrome as briefed, the former from 1,500 feet and the latter from 5,500 feet, while two others were distracted by flak ships, and decided to go for them instead. One recorded a near miss and the other straddled his target, and, meanwhile, P/O Rainford attacked and missed two unidentified ships near the Ile de Groix. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, a new Air Ministry directive had landed on the C-in-C's desk, which suggested that Germany's oil industry would be passing through a critical period over the next six months. A concerted effort by the Command against seventeen oil production sites, the top nine of which represented 80% of Germany's total output, would, it was believed, have a detrimental effect on the enemy's war effort. In the light of the major offensive against oil related targets in 1944 by massive forces of four engine types, this was a wildly optimistic assessment, but Peirse would do his best to carry out his orders. In the event it would be February before this policy could be put into effect, and, anyway, he would continue with his one major operation per month against an important industrial city.

The most effective raid of the month took place against Wilhelmshaven on the night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, when much damage was inflicted, and many fires were left burning. 83 Squadron was absent, but committed eight Hampdens to a follow-up operation twenty-four hours later, when the Tirpitz was specified as the aiming point. P/O Rainford and Sgt James were airborne a little before 03.00, and it was 04.20 when Sgt Jackson brought up the rear. This operation was considerably less successful than the previous night's, in the face of inhospitable weather conditions, and of the 83 Squadron element, two returned early with heating problems and another one a little later on with engine failure. P/O Rainford saw flak where he might have expected it on e.t.a., but the cloud was too low, and he decided to seek out the port of Emden, which was under clear skies, and he observed two bomb bursts. Sgt Blanks map-read from a point on the coast south of Nordeney, and bombed through cloud on e.t.a, observing the reflected flash of bursts. Sgt James descended through cloud to 4,000 feet, and searched for an hour and fifty minutes, before eventually bombing a railway bridge in Holland. Sgt Jackson had his port propeller go suddenly into fine pitch, and after failing to find a suitable recipient for his bombs, he jettisoned them into the sea. AD731 failed to return with the crew of P/O Strong, and it was established later that it had crashed into the North Sea some eighty miles out from the Norfolk coast.



*An iconic image of an 83 Sqn Hampden crew with their aircraft.*

Brest, as a haven for enemy warships, was the month's other principal target, and this would increase in significance as the year progressed. For 5 Group, however, there would be no further operations for twelve consecutive nights as a period of foul weather, characterised by heavy snow and thick fog, kept it on the ground. During the course of the month the squadron participated in just four operations, dispatching thirty-seven sorties for the loss on a single aircraft and crew.

## February 1941



*Hampdens prepare to depart from Scampton in this undated photograph.*

Just like the preceding month, February would bring limited and sporadic operational activity for 83 Squadron, against a backdrop of inclement weather. The first week and a half would bring a continuation of small scale attacks against predominantly coastal targets, but the first offensive outing for 83 Squadron was against the Ruhr city of Düsseldorf on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>. Over 130 aircraft were involved in operations on this night, in an effort to catch up lost ground, before the moon period joined forces with the weather to keep the Command on the ground. A feature of this night was the assigning of individual targets to specific groups, and of the thirty Hampdens heading to Düsseldorf, a dozen belonged to 83 Squadron, led by W/C Boyle. There was an early take-off, either side of 18.00, and they climbed away into six to eight-tenths cloud, which would decrease to localized cloud and haze in the target area, but would not be of sufficient quantity to hamper the operation. AD734 lost its heating system ten minutes short of the Dutch coast, and F/O Thompson searched for twenty minutes in vain for Haamstede aerodrome as an alternative target. Ultimately, he jettisoned his wing bombs before returning home. Two others returned early with technical problems, but the remainder managed to identify the target and deliver their bombs. W/C Boyle found a large fire already burning when he arrived, and he was able to deliver a stick of bombs right across the aiming point. P/O Royle stoged around the target for forty-five minutes trying to identify the aiming point, and eventually bombed the marshalling yards from 6,000 feet.

W/C Boyle again led from the front on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, when thirteen 83 Squadron Hampdens joined ten others from the Group, to bomb what was described as a specified area in Wilhelmshaven. It was a late take-off, either side of 01.30, and, once airborne, they began to encounter unfavourable weather conditions, particularly ten-tenths thick cloud between 500 and 18,000 feet over the North Sea, extending beyond the intended aiming point, which was most likely shipyards or the Tirpitz. Sgt Garwell descended to 3,000 feet east of Emden, and hugged the eastern coastline of Wilhelmshaven Bay just below the cloud base, by which means he reached the target to deliver his 1,900 pounder and other bombs. He was unable to pinpoint the bursts because of flak, but he was the only one from the squadron to positively identify the aiming point. The others bombed on e.t.a or flak concentrations, while F/O Rainsford, after dropping incendiaries over Wilhelmshaven as a guide for others, located and bombed oil tanks at Nordenham, on the west bank of the Weser opposite Bremerhaven.

The first major operation of the month, the “Big” one, was undertaken on the following night, and involved a new record of 222 aircraft, whose crews were briefed to bomb industrial targets in Hanover in northern Germany. 83 Squadron was not required to take part, but of those that did, 183 crews claimed to have bombed their primaries as briefed, while thirty-two others attacked alternatives. Reaching and identifying a target over Germany at night was still a major problem at this stage of the war, just as the infamous Butt Report would eventually point out, and only twenty-seven crews from a total of seventy-nine despatched, claimed to have bombed Bremen on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron was involved in this one, and dispatched ten Hampdens in a fifteen-minute slot from 18.10, to attack the Focke-Wulf factory in the south of the city. F/L Barker was the senior pilot on duty, supported by F/L Anderson, and it would prove to be a traumatic night for both crews. It was one of those occasions, when the weather was more menacing than the defences, and ten-tenths cloud rendered identification of the aiming point impossible. Sgt James was the only one from 83 Squadron to find the target, a feat he achieved by following the River Weser at 700 feet, right into the heart of the city, where he found six bunches of incendiaries burning, but only one accurately placed. F/L Anderson came down to 2,000 feet, but was still enveloped in cloud, and ultimately bombed a flak concentration on e.t.a. P/O Royle bombed marshalling yards from 1,500 feet, after descending to beneath the cloud base, while P/O Rainford gave up and headed for the Ruhr, where weather conditions were forecast to be kinder. He found a large industrial plant to bomb, which he believed to be in Essen. The others either bombed on e.t.a., or stogged around in the murk searching, in the case of P/O Petty, for fifty minutes, before bombing flak concentrations. Weather conditions in the Scampton area deteriorated at 23.30 to reduce visibility, and it was decided to divert all returning aircraft. Sadly, twenty-two aircraft crashed or were abandoned on return, among them AD722, which hit a building while trying to land at Finningley, killing F/L Barker and his crew. F/L Anderson and his crew safely abandoned AD734, after striking a balloon cable over Birmingham. It is believed that the Hampden continued to fly on until running out of fuel and crashing into the Irish Sea.

The night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup> was devoted to oil targets in the Ruhr, at Sterkrade, a district of Oberhausen, and Homberg, north-west of Duisburg, with the Hampden element assigned to the latter along with a contingent of Blenheims. 83 Squadron contributed nine aircraft to the operation, which departed Scampton either side of 18.00, with F/O Mundy the senior pilot on duty. Darkness and heavy searchlight activity made it difficult for crews to pinpoint the target, but Sgt Garwell made a DR (dead-reckoning) run from a bend in the River Rhine, and one of many flares lit up the aiming point, which he bombed from 6,000 feet. P/O Wilkins carried out a similar attack, and Sgt Jackson also benefitted from someone

else's flare to deliver his bombs. The others bombed alternative targets, principally Düsseldorf. Later on the 16<sup>th</sup>, the squadron welcomed W/C Stainthorpe as the new commanding officer on the departure of W/C Dermot Boyle to non-operational duties. Sadly, the period of tenure for the new boss would be brief.

Small-scale operations against Channel and North Sea ports occupied the following week, as low cloud and rain kept Scampton effectively closed for business. It had been planned to send a minelaying force to Brest on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, with the intention of sinking a Hipper-class cruiser, should it try to venture out into open water. In the event, the operation was cancelled, but nine 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing on the afternoon of the 21<sup>st</sup>, to be told that it was on again for that night, and that they were to join thirty-three others from the group. Take-off began at 18.10, and it was 19.00 before Sgt Harpham and crew brought up the rear. Weather conditions in the target area were good, and, in the absence of a single early return, all of the squadron's participants delivered their mines onto the briefed location from around 400 feet, before returning safely to diversion airfields, mostly Brackley.

Eighty crews were dispatched to Düsseldorf on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, and sixty-four of them claimed to have bombed, causing slight superficial damage. 83 Squadron remained at home on this night, but briefed nine crews on the following afternoon for an operation that night to Cologne. They were to be



*W/C Roderick 'Babe' Learoyd VC received his award for his heroism whilst attacking the Dortmund-Ems Canal with 49 Sqn.*

part of an overall force of 126 aircraft, and would be led for the first time by the new commanding officer, W/C Stainthorpe. The recently-commissioned P/O Jackson was the last to depart Scampton at 19.52, but he was soon back in the circuit after his port engine failed over the Wash. The others from the squadron reached the target area, and bombed from between 8,000 and 10,000 feet in good conditions, before returning to report bomb bursts and many fires, and, on the face of it, a successful operation. An effective raid was not borne out by local authority reports, however, which recorded only incendiaries and ten high explosive bombs falling in the city. W/C Stainthorpe was on his way home, when X3124 struck high ground in Staffordshire, and he and his crew were killed, the first of a number of the squadron's commanding officers to die in action. This was the first of a series of two major raids and one moderate one on the Rhineland capital spanning the turn of the month. It was also the final operational activity of a month, which had seen the squadron operate on six occasions, dispatching sixty-two sorties for the loss of three aircraft and two crews. The new Commanding Officer was W/C Learoyd VC, and he took up his post on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

## March 1941

Operations against ports would dominate the first week and a half of March, but the new month began for 83 Squadron with an attack on Rhine dock installations in the city of Cologne on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>. 136 aircraft were detailed, including fifty Hampdens, but six became bogged down in muddy conditions while taxiing to take-off, and had to be cancelled. Three of these belonged to 83 Squadron, and this left eight available for the operation. They took off either side of 20.30, and all but one reached the target area, P/O Sells having to turn back after his aircraft became afflicted with severe icing problems. The others were able to identify ground detail, and reported bombing within the city and observing large fires. The Cologne authorities confirmed that the attack had achieved its aims, and substantial damage was inflicted upon storage facilities, industrial premises and river craft, along with nearby housing.

The commitment to maritime-related objectives was confirmed by a new Air Ministry directive issued on the 9<sup>th</sup>, which shifted the main focus of attention from oil to the U-Boot menace, in the face of mounting losses of Allied shipping in the Atlantic. For the next four months the U-Boot and its comrade-in-arms, the Focke-Wulf Kondor long range reconnaissance bomber, were to be attacked where-ever they could be found, at sea, in their bases, in the shipyards and the assembly lines and in the component factories. A whole new list of priority targets was drawn up, which included all of the main U-Boot yards at Kiel, Hamburg, Bremen and Vegesack, diesel engine plants at Mannheim and Augsburg, aircraft factories at Dessau and Bremen, and of course, the U-Boot bases at Lorient, St Nazaire and Bordeaux. When opportunity allowed, Peirse was still to target oil, but another distraction would appear at the end of the month, which would prove to be a major thorn in the Command's flesh, and keep a sizeable proportion of its resources occupied for a long period.

The U-Boot campaign began at Hamburg on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, when 5 Group contributed forty Hampdens to an overall force of eighty-eight aircraft. Of these, seven were provided by 83 Squadron, and they got away from Scampton between 19.25 and 19.45 with P/Os Fox, Reynolds and Sells the senior pilots on duty. Also present on this operation were the first Manchesters and Halifaxes to be engaged at a German target. All found the target without difficulty, and returned safely to report a successful attack and many fires. The effectiveness of the operation was confirmed by local reports, which spoke of substantial damage inflicted upon the Blohm & Voss yards, where offices and slipways had been hit, and four other shipyards had also been afflicted. Meanwhile, on this night, two other operations of similar size were in progress, one by Wellingtons and Blenheims against the Focke-Wulf factory and city centre at Bremen, and the other at Berlin, where an additional thirty 5 Group Hampdens were involved, among them four from 83 Squadron, led by F/L Anderson. They departed Scampton later than the Hamburg contingent, between 21.40 and 21.55, and all reached the target area in ideal weather conditions to bomb one of two specific objectives, although P/O Petty was unable to pick out his briefed aiming point, and attacked a large factory to the south-west instead. This operation was scattered, mostly across southern districts, and around sixty buildings sustained damage.

Over a hundred assorted aircraft returned to Hamburg on the following night, 83 Squadron contributing five Hampdens among the thirty-nine detailed for the operation by 5 Group. They departed Scampton at around 19.45, led by the new A Flight commander, S/L Nelles Timmerman, a Canadian, who had joined the RAF in 1936. He had flown his first operational sortie on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1940, while serving with

49 Squadron, and had earned a DFC for shooting down an Arado 196 seaplane during a mining operation on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> of May. Having completed his tour in July, he was posted as an instructor to Cottesmore, and returned to Scampton to join 83 Squadron as successor to the newly-promoted W/C Learoyd. F/L Thompson was forced to return early with engine failure, but the others pressed on, and three of them claimed to have bombed as briefed. P/O Jackson was unable to locate the aiming point, blaming the weather conditions, and he attacked the docks at Bremerhaven as an alternative. It was another successful operation, which again hit the Blohm & Voss yards and created over a hundred fires.

There was a return to oil on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, when the Hydriewerk Scholven plant at Gelsenkirchen was the target for a hundred aircraft, including eight from 83 Squadron. They took off from Scampton either side of 19.30, with F/L Thompson the senior pilot on duty, and made their way in good conditions to the target area, where haze hampered identification of ground detail. F/L Thompson was the only one from the squadron unable to locate the briefed aiming point, and he bombed a factory at Homberg instead. The others returned to report a successful operation, P/O Petty reporting that his bombs caused large fires. Reconnaissance confirmed that the plant had, indeed, sustained substantial damage, and production was halted for an unspecified period. After a two-night rest for the squadron, two crews joined in a successful attack on Bremen on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, which saw the first sorties by Stirlings over Germany. P/O Sells and Sgt James took off after midnight, and both returned safely to report bombing as briefed. On the following night, the squadron contributed ten Hampdens to a force of ninety-nine aircraft prepared for an attack on Kiel, where the Deutsche Werke U-Boot yard was the primary objective. They were all safely airborne from Scampton by 18.55, led by S/L Timmerman, but F/L Thompson was afflicted by engine failure for the second time in three operations, and was forced to turn back, as was Sgt Hanmer for the same reason. The others reached the target area to find reasonable weather conditions, but thick ground mist, which prevented some from identifying the briefed aiming point. Four crews returned to report bombing the target, but S/L Timmerman was thwarted by cloud, and bombed a flak concentration. Local reports confirmed Kiel's most destructive raid to date, with hits on the U-Boot yard, and substantial damage in the town's central districts.

Just two aircraft represented the squadron on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, when forty-two Hampdens were sent mining off the Brittany ports. P/O Petty and Sgt James took off from Scampton at 03.10, bound for the Jellyfish garden off Brest, and the former completed his sortie as briefed, before bringing AD740 home on one engine. X3132 was shot down onto French soil, at Morlaix, close to the Finistere coast, killing two of the crew, while a third evaded capture. The pilot, Sgt James, sustained serious injury to his left arm, and was soon in enemy hands. Ultimately the limb had to be amputated, but despite this, James escaped from captivity, and eventually arrived back in the UK in March 1942, to receive the Military Medal. Remarkably, having been fitted with a prosthetic arm, he returned to operational flying on night fighters with 245 Squadron, but lost his life on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1943. The night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup> brought further mining sorties for four 83 Squadron crews, this time in the Deodars garden off Bordeaux, while two others joined in an attack on U-Boots at Lorient. The latter, Sgt Garwell and P/O Reynolds, took off at 18.30, and encountered poor visibility in the target area, but returned safely to report successful sorties. The gardeners departed Scampton much later, either side of 23.00, and enjoyed mixed fortunes. Sgt Harpham delivered his mine into the briefed location, but P/O Rainford and F/L Anderson were unable to locate theirs. F/L Thompson was successful, but ran out of fuel as he neared home, and crash-landed AD794 three miles east of Boscombe Down.



*Revenge for Coventry: a Sergeant armourer writes a cheery greeting on a bomb destined for a German target.*

Two nights later, S/L Timmerman and P/Os Rainford, Reynolds and Petty took off shortly before 19.30, bound for Kiel to join others from the group in attacking the docks. P/O Petty again suffered engine trouble, which curtailed his part in the proceedings, but the remaining three found the target area, and contributed to a scattered and ineffective effort. There were no operations for the squadron during the ensuing five nights, before the final outing of the month took ten crews to mine the waters off Brest on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>. They took off either side of 01.30, and reached the target area to find cloud and intense darkness, which prevented seven crews from locating their drop zones. Only F/Ls Thompson and Anderson successfully planted their vegetables, while AD800 failed to return home, after coming down in the sea in mid Channel, and taking with it to their deaths the crew of P/O Reynolds. Earlier in the day, the German cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau had been reported to be off the port, and they took up residence there on the following day, thus beginning an eleven month-long saga, which would cost the Command dearly in effort and crews. During the course of the month, the squadron undertook eleven operations, and dispatched sixty-four sorties for the loss of two aircraft and crews.

## April 1941



*A sound mind in a sound body...the RAF believed that physical activity was a good antidote to the stresses of operational life. Sports Day at RAF Scampton.*

The presence of the two enemy cruisers at Brest occupied senior minds at the Admiralty, and pressure was put upon Bomber Command to deal immediately with the threat. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, six Hampdens each from 83 and 49 Squadrons departed Scampton for a forward base at St Eval in Cornwall, where they awaited orders to attack Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. The two vessels were dubbed in the British press Salmon & Gluckstein, in a comic reference to the country's largest tobacconist, established in 1873 by a German Jewish émigré and his English partner. At 09.00 on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Hampdens took off for Brest, led by S/L Timmerman, but were forced to return through lack of cloud cover. They tried again at 14.00, but the conditions remained unfavourable, and they returned to St Eval, before setting off back to Scampton. That night F/L Thompson and P/O Sells took off at 19.00 for gardening duties in the Cinnamon region off la Rochelle, and returning in the early hours of the 4<sup>th</sup>, AD748 crashed on Dartmoor, killing F/L Thompson and his crew. The spate of losses from mining activity continued on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when S/L Timmerman led seven 83 Squadron Hampdens away either side of 19.30, bound for the Jellyfish garden, the sea lanes off Brest. Six returned safely after successfully planting their vegetables, but X2899 was lost without trace with the crew of P/O Jackson DFM, and another highly experienced crew was gone.

The first of two successful raids against Kiel took place on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, when seven 83 Squadron Hampdens took part, led by S/L Timmerman. Over 220 aircraft were involved in the operation, which was spread over five hours, and 83 Squadron's participation began at 20.00, with the take-off of P/O Rainsford. P/O Royle was forced to return early with a dead starboard engine, but the others reached and bombed the target in ideal conditions of bright moonlight and perfect visibility. S/L Timmerman described his bombs causing a very large fire in the area of the naval arsenal, and reconnaissance confirmed that a large area of dockland lay in ruins, with severe damage and loss of production at two U-Boot yards. A smaller force returned twenty-four hours later in the absence of an 83 Squadron element, and this time it was the town itself that bore the brunt of the attack. A mixed force of eighty aircraft took off for Berlin on the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup>, among them eight Hampdens from 83 Squadron, led again by S/L Timmerman, backed up by F/L Anderson. They were all safely airborne by 21.00, and seven reached and bombed the target, without recording results, with only Sgt Hanmer failing to carry out an attack. This was just one of two crews from the 5 Group contingent of twenty-four to report being unsuccessful, and there were no losses. Also on this night, the freshman crews of Sgts Tompkins and Stephens planted mines in the Nectarines region off the Frisians, and returned safely.

One of the more successful attacks on Brest and its guests took place on the following night, when four hits were confirmed on the Gneisenau, which had already been damaged by a Coastal Command torpedo bomber in a suicidal attack on the 5<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron stayed at home on this night and on the following one, but provided five Hampdens for the continuing assault on the French port on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>. Four crews were briefed to lay mines, while P/O Petty's job was to bomb the warships. They took off between 00.30 and 01.55, but, in the event, only the newly-promoted F/L Rainford of the gardeners was able to locate the drop zone in conditions of low cloud, while the others, including P/O Petty, brought their stores home. The pattern was now set for the remainder of the month, in which Brest and Kiel would continue to be the principal objectives. Low cloud was again responsible for an ineffective attack at Brest on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, when the squadron contributed six aircraft to a force of over ninety. They were all on their way by 20.00, with S/L Timmerman taking the lead, and he bombed through ten-tenths cloud on estimated position. The others experienced similar difficulties, except for Sgt Blanks, it seems, who identified the river in four-tenths cloud, and dropped his bombs on the western bank in the docks area. Two nights later, five 83 Squadron Hampdens were among more than a hundred aircraft sent to attack shipyards in Bremen, while four others from the squadron mined the Nectarines region off the Frisians. The gardeners actually took off first, shortly after 20.00, and all but one of them successfully completed their sorties. They were well on their way home as the six members of the bombing contingent made their way to take-off at 23.30, at which point P/O Sells became bogged down, and his sortie was scrubbed. Both flight commanders, S/Ls Timmerman and the newly-appointed S/L Anderson, were on duty, the former bombing on estimated position, and the latter aiming at a flak concentration.

Over a hundred aircraft were called into action on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, when two aiming points in Berlin were the objectives. The six 83 Squadron crews had been briefed to attack the railway station, and took off shortly after 20.30, led by S/L Anderson. Once again the conditions intervened, this time in the form of intense darkness and ground haze, and bombs had to be delivered on estimated positions. S/L Anderson pinpointed on a lake, from which to make his DR run, and his rear gunner reported two bomb bursts. F/L Rainford believed he was over Berlin when he released his bombs, until the short duration of the return flight convinced him otherwise. A small-scale operation on Cologne was mounted on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, and involved sixty aircraft, four of which represented 83 Squadron. Before these took off at midnight, however, P/Os Crush and Heavens and Sgt Kay departed Scampton shortly after 20.30, to mine the waters off the Frisians, and two completed their assignments as briefed, while Sgt Kay was defeated by very low cloud. The Cologne contingent fared badly, beginning with P/O Sells losing an engine at the Dutch coast, where he jettisoned his bombs, before returning on one engine. Sgt Stephens was unable to locate the target in ten-tenths cloud, and delivered two 250 pounders onto a flare path on the way home. P/O Petty, alone, reported locating and bombing the target, while X3119 failed to return home, after being shot down over Belgium. The 5 Group ORB expressed the hope that F/Sgt Hanmer and his crew had baled out near Dunkerque, but this proved to be untrue, and all on board were killed.

The final week of the month began with a return to the waters around the Frisians, for the same three freshman crews on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>. They took off around 20.45, and this time all three successfully planted their vegetables. Sgt Kay and P/O Heavens then dropped two 250lb bombs each onto small cargo vessels, the former scoring a direct hit. On the following night, Sgt Slater-Eiggert and crew went alone to the same garden, and successfully delivered their mine. Fifty Hampdens and Wellingtons took off for Hamburg in the mid-evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>, among them nine from 83 Squadron,

headed by S/L Timmerman. Also on this operation were F/O Clayton DFC and P/O Lyster DFC, who had both returned to the squadron for a second tour. The weather again prevented all but a few from finding the target, and most bombed on estimated positions confirmed by flak concentrations. The squadron's AD796 was the night's sole loss, after crashing in northern Germany with no survivors from the crew of P/O Crush. A three-night break allowed the crews to rest, before eight were briefed for an operation against Kiel on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup>, in company with seventy others from 1, 3 and 4 Groups. P/O Heavens returned early with communications problems, but the remainder pressed on to reach the general area of the target. Only S/L Timmerman of the 83 Squadron contingent was able to report a successful attack, which caused an incendiary fire, while the others bombed on estimated positions based on flak concentrations. S/L Timmerman's prolific rate of operations was said to be prompted by a desire to complete a second bomber tour quickly, in the hope of getting to fly Beaufighters, but his importance to Bomber Command would dictate otherwise. The squadron managed seventy-one sorties during the month from seventeen operations, and lost four aircraft and crews. Sgt Garwell was one of four NCO airmen to receive the DFM.



*Pranged the target... S/L Nelles Timmerman and crew are debriefed on return to Scampton after an operation.*

## May 1941

May began in busy fashion, with major activity on most nights. Proceedings opened at Hamburg on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, which would turn out to be the first of five major operations against Germany's second city during the first week and a half. 83 Squadron was not involved in this operation, but sent three freshman crews to lay mines in the Nectarines region off the Frisians, and all returned safely, after successfully fulfilling their briefs. Cologne was the principal destination on the following night, but escaped serious damage as adverse weather conditions prevailed. S/L Anderson was the senior pilot on duty, as the nine 83 Squadron crews departed Scampton by 20.50, and joined forces with ninety others for the attack. Cloud prevented most from identifying the aiming point, and they delivered their bombs on estimated positions, again, based largely on flak concentrations. Only P/O Heavens claimed to have pinpointed the target from 4,000 feet, and observed a tremendous flash, while Sgt Blanks somehow identified a foundry on the south-western fringe of the city, and bombed there. Hits were claimed on the German cruisers at Brest on the on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, but were not confirmed, and an attack on Mannheim on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup> was a dismal failure. 83 Squadron sat out both of these operations, but was told to prepare for action on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup> for two operations, the first, another crack at Hamburg by an overall force of 115 aircraft, while others carried out gardening duties in Quiberon Bay, off the west coast of France near St Nazaire. The squadron ORB is contradictory concerning the numbers dispatched, but it seems that five crews were sent mining, and took off first at around 21.45, to be followed by the bombing brigade of nine between 22.09 and 23.00. Back with the squadron for a second tour, and operating on this night was F/O Mills DFC, who was part of the Hamburg contingent. Bad weather, in the form of heavy cloud and icing conditions, ruined any hope of an effective operation, and many crews bombed on estimated positions based on DR or flak concentrations, and only Sgt Stephens claimed to have bombed the primary target. P/O Heavens bombed Bremen as an alternative, Sgt Tompkins jettisoned his bombs in the target area because of icing, and P/O Lyster brought his back. The gardeners all carried out their sorties as briefed.

The next attack on Hamburg took place on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, and was attended by a new 5 Group record of ninety-one aircraft, out of an overall total of 188. Fourteen of the seventy-eight Hampdens were provided by 83 Squadron, and they got away safely in a forty-minute slot from 22.20. Eleven crews returned to report that they had successfully attacked the target, while two others bombed on estimated positions, and one failed to return. The attack was highly effective by recent standards, and left eighty-three fires burning, thirty-eight of them classed by the local authorities as large. The death toll of 185 people proved to be the highest to date at a German target. P/O Gill and his crew were on their way home in X3062, when they were pounced upon by an enemy intruder, and sent crashing into the sea off Mablethorpe with fatal consequences. Sitting astride the Rhine, the twin cities of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen suffered a moderately successful raid on the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, a night on which 83 Squadron stayed at home. 119 aircraft set off for Hamburg late on the 10<sup>th</sup>, among them a dozen Hampdens representing 83 Squadron, led by S/L Timmerman. The Scampton crews had been briefed to bomb the Altona power station, and all but Sgt Grainger, who returned early with intercom failure, reported a successful attack in perfect weather conditions. This time 128 fires resulted, and almost fifty of them were classified as large. The final raid in the series took place on the following night, while 83 Squadron remained at home, and it again produced much damage and many fires.



*Poignant photographs showing the respect accorded to a Luftwaffe crew shot down attacking Scampton. It is believed that the aircraft was a Ju88, F1 + BS of 9./KG76. Three crewmen were killed instantly and a fourth died in the arms of a woman who went to help the wounded airman. In the 1960s, the wreckage was recovered and a fifth body discovered. It is thought that this was a ground crew member who went along for the ride. When the aircraft failed to return he was, of course, missing but no one knew he had gone on the flight. The Luftwaffe assumed he had deserted.*

While two of the recent operations to Hamburg were taking place, Bremen was also raided to good effect, but the submarine yards and Focke-Wulf aircraft factory suffered only minor damage. The twin cities of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen were the objectives for a hundred aircraft on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, for which 83 Squadron dispatched thirteen Hampdens, led away at 22.05 by F/O Mills. With the return for a second tour of a few of the original crews, the Order of Battle was beginning to resemble that of the summer of 1940. P/O Lyster, F/Os Mills and Clayton, and now F/L Svendsen, were all holders of the DFC, and had all been tempered in the fires of war. The forty 5 Group crews were briefed to attack the I G Farben chemicals factory at Ludwigshafen, on the western bank of the Rhine, and, although some found the target area in good conditions, ground haze prevented positive identification, and bombing was sparse and scattered. Sgts Tomkins and Grainger were unable, for various reasons, to reach southern Germany, and found suitable targets in Cologne, where some limited but useful damage was achieved. The relatively hectic month continued at Hanover on the night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, where the telephone exchange was optimistically selected as the aiming point. 83 Squadron remained at home on this night, but put up a dozen Hampdens for Cologne twenty-four hours later. The senior pilots on duty were F/L Svendsen and the newly-promoted F/L Mills, and all were safely airborne by 23.00 with P/O Sells last off the ground. They encountered ground haze in the target area, which prevented the specific aiming points from being identified, but all believed they had bombed within the city, without any genuine clue as to the outcome. Local reports suggested that, in fact, the majority of bomb loads had missed the city, and just eleven houses were damaged.

83 Squadron would not operate again for a week, during which period, Cologne was the target again on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, and Kiel twenty-four hours later. Neither of these operations produced any meaningful damage, and a smaller-scale raid on Cologne on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup> was equally disappointing in the face of heavy cloud. A few days earlier on the 21<sup>st</sup>, AD898 had crashed during the short transit hop from Scampton to Dunholme Lodge, killing Sgt Stromberg and two ground crew passengers. 83 Squadron's unusually long period of inactivity came to an end late on the 25<sup>th</sup>, when eleven Hampdens were dispatched to mine the waters in the Jellyfish garden off the port of Brest. The purpose of the operation was to catch the battleship Bismarck, which, it was correctly believed, was racing for sanctuary in the port with the Royal Navy snapping at its heels, determined to avenge the shocking sinking of HMS Hood. F/Ls Svendsen and Mills were again the senior pilots on duty, as they departed Scampton either side of 22.30, but the weather proved to be extremely unhelpful, with the cloud base down to around 600 feet, and only three crews found the target area. In fact, the Bismarck would be crippled by a Fleet Air Arm torpedo during the 26<sup>th</sup>, and, surrounded by units of the Royal Navy, would be sunk on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>. This left its partner Prinz Eugen at large, and mining at Brest continued over the succeeding nights. 83 Squadron participated in this on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, when launching ten Hampdens from 22.30, led by F/L Svendsen, and this was the final operational activity of the month for 5 Group. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched ninety-eight sorties on ten operations, losing two aircraft and one complete crew. There was a DFC for the now tour-expired S/L Anderson, who would remain with the squadron until July.

## June 1941

The first ten days of the new month were blighted by thick fog, which pervaded the 5 Group stations, and prevented operations for most squadrons. Düsseldorf opened the June account on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, for which forty-three Hampdens did manage to get off the ground, although none from Scampton. Only two-thirds of the 150-strong force found the general target area in the face of heavy cloud, and damage was light and scattered. Operations were planned for 83 Squadron on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, but were cancelled because of the forecast weather conditions for returning aircraft. It was during this period that the Prinz Eugen slipped into Brest to join its comrades, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, and when thirteen 83 Squadron Hampdens finally took off either side of 23.00 on the 10<sup>th</sup>, to join ninety other aircraft, these warships were the intended objectives. S/L Timmerman was the senior pilot on duty, and he was one of those claiming to have attacked the target, without observing any bomb bursts. For most, the thick haze, and an effective smoke screen, rendered a precise identification impossible, and bombing took place on estimated positions. Some bombs exploded in the docks area, but all three ships escaped damage. While this operation was in progress, the freshman crew of Sgt Draper joined eight others for mining duties in the Gorse region in Quiberon Bay. Cologne received almost all of the bombs intended for Düsseldorf and Duisburg on the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, on a night, when 83 Squadron stayed on the ground.

The night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup> was a busy one for the Command, in which railway yards at four locations were each allotted to a group. 5 Group was given Soest as its target, a small town just to the north of the Möhne See, at the eastern end of the Ruhr valley. 83 Squadron's contribution to the operation was a dozen Hampdens, which departed Scampton either side of 23.00, led by F/Ls Svendsen and Mills. On arrival in the target area they encountered thick haze, and fewer than half of the ninety-one-strong force attacked the primary target. P/O Sells returned early with engine trouble, F/L Svendsen bombed what he believed to be Dortmund, while F/O Clayton and Sgt Slater-Eiggert attacked a town, which they thought was probably Hamm, which was already under attack from a force of Wellingtons. Sgt Stephens was among those able to identify the primary target, which he attacked from 1,500 feet, after which, the wireless operator and rear gunner fired eight hundred rounds at a train in the station. It was probably this action that prompted the immediate award to Sgt Stephens of the DFM.

On the following night, the squadron put up eleven Hampdens, ten for Brest, and the lone freshman crew of Sgt Wood to mine the waters off the Frisians. The freshers took off first at 22.45, to be followed from 23.00 by the bombing contingent, led by F/O Clayton. All but one of the Brest-bound crews returned to report bombing as briefed in good visibility, with just one failing to locate the target, because of haze and a smoke screen. A number of bomb bursts were observed, but the warships again escaped damage. This was a period of very poor results, and, on no less than nine nights from the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, Cologne and Düsseldorf featured in simultaneous attacks, none of which resulted in more than superficial damage. 83 Squadron next operated on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, when the 5 Group effort by forty-seven Hampdens, in an overall force of 105 aircraft, was directed at Cologne. The fourteen 83 Squadron participants took off either side of 23.00, with S/L Timmerman the senior pilot on duty, on what was his last operation with the squadron. Sgt Slater-Eiggert landed an unserviceable AD916 at Sutton Bridge forty minutes after take-off, and P/O Sells was another to abandon his sortie, in his case, while over enemy territory, because of an overheating engine. Most returning crews claimed to have bombed the city, and a number reported fires, but damage on the ground turned out to be scattered and not in proportion to the size of the attacking force.



*Acting F/O Jack Bousfield is congratulated by a police constable outside Buckingham Palace, after receiving a DFC on completion of his first tour. The story behind this photograph is not clear but there appears to be a physical resemblance between the two men; it is possible that they were brothers. Later promoted to Flight Lieutenant, Jack Bousfield joined 50 Squadron for a subsequent tour of operations. He was killed with two of his comrades by enemy fire when his Lancaster ED488 was attacked by a night fighter flown by Hptm. Streib, on a raid against Cologne on 2/3<sup>rd</sup> February 1943.*

Two nights later, Bremen was the destination for a hundred aircraft, including fourteen Hampdens from 83 Squadron. Leading on this occasion was W/C Harry Satterly, who had been posted in from his duties at the Directorate of Operational Training, to succeed W/C Learoyd as commanding officer. Learoyd would return to the operational scene in December, to take command of 44 Squadron. This was Satterly's first wartime operational command, and, it seems, his first ever operational sortie, having spent the entire war to date involved in training. It speaks volumes for his character that he took the first opportunity available to lead his men into battle. Take off from Scampton began at 22.30, and continued until 23.20, and on arrival in the target area, low cloud hampered all attempts to locate the primary target. Bombing by most took place on estimated positions, based on DR and flak concentrations, while a few crews found alternative recipients for their loads, W/C Satterly attacking Wilhelmshaven. It was at about this time that S/L Timmerman left the squadron, probably on leave, before taking up his appointment as the commanding officer of the newly-forming 408 Squadron RCAF at Lindholme on the 24<sup>th</sup>. By the time of his departure from Scampton, he had amassed a total of at least fifty operations.

The country was now basking in a spell of very hot weather, which had begun on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and continued through the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup> brought a return to Bremen dockyards by eighty aircraft, of which thirteen represented 83 Squadron. They took off either side of 23.00, with F/Ls Mills and Svendsen the senior pilots on duty, but the former returned early with engine trouble, and the recently-promoted F/O Lyster bombed Düsseldorf for an unspecified reason. The others pressed on to find the target concealed under a blanket of haze, despite which most reported bombing as briefed, although a number admitted being unable to positively identify the target, and bombed on estimated positions. P/O Heavens and his crew failed to return in AD969, and it was later established that it had crashed near Bevern, some hundred miles south-west of Bremen, without survivors.

Kiel dockyards was the target for a dozen 83 Squadron Hampdens on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>. They were part of an overall force of forty-seven Hampdens and Wellingtons, and took off either side of 22.00, with the newly-promoted S/L Svendsen the senior pilot on duty, having succeeded S/L Timmerman as A Flight commander. Pitt Clayton had also just been promoted to the rank of flight lieutenant, but both men were about to leave the squadron for different reasons. All but one of the crews arrived over the target to find slight ground haze, but most bombed as briefed and all returned safely. Sgt Wood attacked an alternative, after engine trouble curtailed his sortie. Attacks on dockyards continued, with an assault on the U-Boot construction yard at Vegesack, a north-western district of Bremen, on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, for which the squadron provided eight Hampdens, while two other crews went mining. The bombers took off first, and were all airborne by 23.00, with F/L Clayton the senior pilot on duty. X2969 was climbing out over Scampton, when the gunner's door blew off, and Sgt Wood brought the Hampden back for a safe landing fifteen minutes later. Sgt Kay and P/O Ollason were the only two to claim positively attacking the primary target in the face of thick haze, while most of the others delivered their bombs over the approximate position of Bremen. The gardeners, Sgts Dacey and McFarlane, took off either side of 23.30 for the Nectarines region off the Frisians, and both successfully planted their vegetables in the briefed location, before the latter dropped two 250 pounders on a searchlight and flak position in the target area.

On the following night the squadron dispatched four crews at 23.15, to mine the waters of the Elbe and off Heligoland, and all completed their sorties as briefed, the newly-promoted F/L Lyster also bombing a gun emplacement at the southern end of Sylt on the way home. The month's operations concluded with multiple targets in the Ruhr on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron sent ten Hampdens to bomb a railway station in Düsseldorf, and they took off either side of 23.00, with S/L Svendsen, and the newly-returned S/L Jock Kynoch, the senior pilots on duty. They encountered thick haze in the target area, despite which, all but one returned to claim that they had bombed as briefed. The absentees at debriefing were S/L Svendsen DFC and his crew, whose AD916 had been hit by flak and crashed near Düren, between Cologne and Aachen. Svendsen and two of his crew survived to fall into enemy hands, but his observer died in the wreckage. It was somewhat timely, therefore that S/L Jock Kynoch had just been posted back to the squadron for a second tour, having originally joined it late in 1937, when already in his mid-twenties. He was considered to be a good natured type, and something of an athlete, and was a solid choice to assume the role of flight commander. During the course of the month the squadron launched 115 sorties on thirteen operations, for the loss of two aircraft and crews.

## July 1941

5 Group managed to get thirty-nine Hampdens into the air on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when marshalling yards at Duisburg provided the target. The two Scampton squadrons were not required to operate on this occasion, but the station launched twenty-three aircraft on the following night, to join seventeen from Hemswell to attack shipyards at Bremen. 83 Squadron's contribution was eight aircraft, which took off either side of 23.00, led by the newly arrived S/L Newall, who had stepped into the shoes of the missing S/L Svendsen. Curiously, all sixteen of the Hemswell crews to make it back, reported carrying out an attack, mostly on Bremen city and the town area of nearby Bremerhaven, while fifteen crews from Scampton returned with their bombs, having been unable to see the ground and find something to aim at. It transpired that the Hemswell brigade had been searching at around 5,000 feet, while the Scampton crews had searched down to 11,000 feet. One 49 Squadron crew did descend to a thousand feet, identified Bremerhaven, and then lost it again. The U-Boot base at Lorient was the target for Hampdens and Wellingtons on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, while 83 Squadron remained on the ground. Scampton waved off twenty-two aircraft, beginning at around 23.00 on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, a dozen of them belonging to 83 Squadron, and all bound for the marshalling yards at Osnabrück. W/C Satterly led the 83 Squadron effort with S/L Jock Kynoch and F/Ls Clayton and Mills in support, but the commanding officer could not identify the yards, and bombed their estimated position. Pitt Clayton made five dummy runs before giving up on the primary target, and he also bombed the eastern side of the town, where the briefed aiming point was located. S/L Kynoch and six others positively identified the yards, and were able to report a successful attack. While this operation was in progress, the two freshman crews of Sgts Dacey and McLoughlin joined others to successfully lay mines in the Beeches garden off St Nazaire.

The following night brought a major effort by the group, to hit the enemy warships still sheltering in Brest. Eighty-eight Hampdens were joined by twenty-one Wellingtons, the eleven 83 Squadron crews led on this occasion by F/Ls Clayton and Mills. The take-off procedure began at 22.30, and all from the squadron reached and located the target with ease in perfect visibility. As always at this target, an effective smoke screen was in operation, which hid the vessels from view. It was, however, easy to estimate their position, and 5 Group alone delivered over three hundred bombs, ranging in size from 2,000lb down to 250lb, and in type from high explosive, through armour-piercing to semi-armour piercing. F/L Clayton pinpointed on the jetty, and made a run on the position of the Gneisenau, released his bombs and took a photograph. On the way out of the target, he was shadowed by an unidentified twin-engine enemy aircraft, which closed in to six hundred yards, but was driven off by the rear gunner. Returning crews reported that the bomb bursts were obscured by the smoke screen, and no hits could be confirmed. This was F/L Clayton's final operation with the squadron, and he was sent on leave before being posted away.



*Ofw. Paul Gildner accounted for at least two aircraft from 83 Sqn. He shot down Hampden X3139 on 8/9<sup>th</sup> July 1941 and Manchester R5779 on 8/9<sup>th</sup> March 1942.*



*Squadron Leader Freddie Newall*

On the 7<sup>th</sup> S/L Anderson DFC was finally posted from the squadron to take up instructor's duties at 16 O.T.U. Cologne was the main target on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, when the unusually effective and damaging attack was carried out by an all-Wellington force. Among the night's smaller operations was an all-5 Group effort at Mönchengladbach, for which the Scampton squadrons were not called into action. Hampdens were out in force again on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, when forty-five of the type joined a contingent of Whitleys, to bomb the marshalling yards in the important railway hub of Hamm, just to the north-east of the Ruhr. 83 Squadron contributed thirteen aircraft, which began taking off shortly after 22.30, with F/L Mills the senior pilot on duty. On return a number of crews would report flying through

electrical storms outbound, and it was at this stage that X3139 fell victim to a night fighter flown by Ofw Paul Gildner, and crashed into the sea off Vlieland at 00.56. Sgt Brutey was killed along with two members of his crew, and only one gunner survived to be taken into captivity. Visibility in the target area was good enough for some crews to identify the aiming point, despite ground haze, while others bombed the town or alternative targets on the way home. F/L Mills dropped a mixed load of bombs across the northern end of the marshalling yards, and observed a number of bomb bursts, and his incendiaries caused a series of small fires. Sgt Wood commented on the intensity of the light and heavy flak, which could always be guaranteed at Hamm, because of its importance to the communications in the region, and he also reported dummy fires fifty miles north-west of the target, which was almost certainly the raid by Wellingtons on Münster. Sgt Draper was intercepted by a night fighter shortly after crossing the Dutch coast, and after taking evasive action and losing his bearings, he headed for the fires at Münster, and dropped his bombs on the town from 5,000 feet.

Later on the 9<sup>th</sup>, a new Air Ministry directive highlighted the morale of the enemy's civilian population as a weakness, and stated this was to be exploited, particularly with regard to its workers. The inland transportation system was also considered to be vulnerable, but such precision targets would require fine weather conditions and moonlight. Consequently, during the moon period, attacks were to take place on the major railway centres ringing the Ruhr, while on moonless nights, the Rhine cities of Cologne, Düsseldorf and Duisburg would be easier to locate, and on nights with less favourable weather conditions, Peirse was to send his crews further afield to targets in northern, eastern and southern Germany. The first large raid of the war on Aachen brought highly encouraging results on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, with over fifteen hundred apartments and ninety commercial premises classed as damaged or destroyed. 5 Group contributed to the attack, but the Scampton squadrons stayed at home. This operation would prove to be the high point in another series of disappointing and ineffective performances by the Command during the month.

The night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup> brought an operation by 130 Wellingtons and Hampdens against Cologne, for which 83 Squadron contributed nine aircraft. They took off from Scampton in the minutes before 23.00, briefed to use a naval stores depot as the aiming point, and all reached the target to find thick haze concealing most of the ground detail. P/O Maybury managed to identify an area north of the Rhine, and

dropped his bombs there on a railway line close to the city centre. Sgt Wood glided down to 1,500 feet to deliver his bombs, and then shot up flak batteries from 600 feet. Sgts Grainger and Draper picked up pinpoints south of the city from which to make their approach in the face of heavy flak, and bomb bursts were observed. P/O Robertson searched for forty-five minutes for the aiming point, but eventually dropped his bombs on Koblenz, some sixty miles to the south-east, where he was joined by Sgt Kay. Debriefing established that only half of the crews claimed to have bombed in the Cologne area, and local reports mentioned only three high explosive bombs landing in the city, along with a few hundred incendiaries.

It was a similar story when thirty-six Hampdens were sent to Wilhelmshaven on the following night to bomb the railway station, although the Scampton squadrons seemed to be locked into a pattern of operating on alternate nights, and they stayed at home. F/L Clayton was posted to 408 Squadron on the 12<sup>th</sup>, where he would fulfil the role of flight commander under W/C Timmerman. F/L Cook DFC was posted in from 14 O.T.U on the same day to begin his second tour with the squadron, which was back on duty late that evening, when fifty Hampdens and Wellingtons were sent to dismantle the main railway station in Bremen. 83 Squadron dispatched eight aircraft, which took off in a fifteen minute slot, and were all safely airborne by 22.30. S/L Newall was the senior pilot on duty, and he arrived in the target area to find ground haze, along with intense flak and searchlight activity. Most crews were able to find the general area of the aiming point, and P/O Maybury saw his bombs burst close to it, twice being hit by flak in the process. S/L Newall searched for thirty minutes before bombing, and returned home safely with the others to report a modestly successful attack. At debriefings, a total of nineteen of the thirty-four Hampden crews reported locating the city and bombing on the estimated position of the aiming point, but there was no confirmation from reconnaissance or local reports.

5 Group rested its crews on the 13<sup>th</sup>, before sending forty-four Hampdens from Hemswell, Coningsby and Waddington to Hanover on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>. Haze continued to be a nuisance, preventing identification of the railway station, but the city received many bomb loads. While this operation was in progress, five 83 Squadron freshman crews were sent mining in the Nectarines region off the Frisians, and another carried out a similar sortie in the Eglantine garden in the mouth of the Elbe. All carried out their sorties as briefed, and returned safely. Scampton and Lindholme provided the thirty-two Hampdens detailed for an attack on the railway station in Hamburg on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, eight of them representing 83 Squadron. S/L Kynoch was the senior officer on duty, and he took off shortly after 22.00, arriving in the target area to encounter low cloud and intense flak. He bombed on estimated position, but was unable to observe any bomb bursts through the cloud. F/L Mills was thwarted by the conditions, and bombed a flak concentration in Bremerhaven instead, while Sgt McLoughlin found an aerodrome north of Hamburg. The others experienced similar difficulties, and Sgt Stephens gave up, according to the ORB bombing an aerodrome at Bordeaux as an alternative<sup>5</sup>. While this operation was in progress, five other crews from the squadron went back to the Frisians, and successfully delivered a few more mines. 83 Squadron now enjoyed three nights away from the action, as other elements of the group attacked Cologne marshalling yards on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, and carried out extensive mining operations in the Eglantine and Yams regions, in the mouths of the Elbe and Weser Rivers.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not possible, as they are some nine hundred miles apart, but it is representative of the sloppy recording of events in the ORB during the period. The number of aircraft dispatched on operations during mid-July is often greater in the summary section than the number listed in the daily reports, and could suggest that crews returning early were not mentioned.

Cologne again featured on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, for which the squadron put up eleven Hampdens, led by F/L Cook. They were off the ground by 22.55, as part of an overall force of 113 aircraft, and those arriving in the target area were met by cloud and haze, completely blotting out all ground detail. AD935 was held in searchlights over Holland, and attacked by two enemy night fighters, before becoming uncontrollable due to tail vibration, and the bombs were jettisoned south of Aachen. None of the thirty-nine Hampden crews was able to identify the aiming point, but twenty-seven found and bombed the city. Sgts Dennis and Slater-Eiggert bombed from 10,000 feet on DR, the former observing bomb bursts. F/L Cook dropped a 500 pounder on a flare path, and a 1,000 pounder on a fire, while P/O Sells aimed at another flare path, which he believed to be at Nivelles, to the south of Brussels. Where most of the bombs fell is uncertain, but reports from Cologne cited only minor damage. Frankfurt now began to attract attention, and the first of three operations against it on consecutive nights took place on the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>. 83 Squadron was not represented among the thirty-four participating Hampdens, and the operation by a total of seventy-one aircraft was ineffective. Sixty-three aircraft tried again on the following night with similar results, and an all-5 Group effort of thirty-three Hampdens completed the series on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>, when the main post office and telephone exchange were optimistically selected as the objectives. 83 Squadron joined in on this last occasion with four aircraft, led by S/L Kynoch, while W/C Satterly and seven others headed south-west to mine the waters off Brest, and P/O Leatham went alone to do likewise around the Frisians. The bombing element took off first, either side of 22.30, and all reached and bombed the city, without being able to identify the briefed aiming point. P/O Leatham followed close on their heels, and successfully delivered his mine into the correct location. The Brest brigade departed Scampton either side of 00.30, and they, too, all planted their vegetables as briefed, before returning safely.

A concerted effort against the German cruisers at Brest was scheduled for the 24<sup>th</sup>, under Operation Sunrise. The meticulously-prepared plan called for high-flying Fortress Is of 2 Group's 90 Squadron to approach the port at around 30,000 feet, in order to draw up the enemy fighters, while Spitfire-escorted Hampdens performed a similar role at a less rarefied level. The hope was that the main element of 1 and 3 Group Wellingtons and 4 Group Halifaxes would be able to take advantage of the distractions, to home in on the target before the fighters got to them. However, the details had to be changed at the last minute, when Scharnhorst was spotted at la Pallice, two hundred miles further south. It was decided to send the Halifax element to attend to her, while the original plan was put into action at Brest. The 5 Group contingent from Waddington, Coningsby and North Luffenham took off at 10.45, and proceeded to Predannack in Cornwall, where the 10 Group fighter escort was picked up. The attack began at 14.15, and sixty-one bombs were delivered by the Hampden element, all but two of them 500lb SAPs. A fierce flak and fighter defence was met both here and at la Pallice, resulting in ten Wellingtons and two Hampdens being lost, and all of the returning 5 Group aircraft showed battle damage. In return, there were six unconfirmed hits on the Gneisenau, and 5 Group crews claimed to have shot down five enemy fighters, with a sixth as a probable. The Halifaxes were more successful, although at great expense, and the Scharnhorst was forced to return to Brest to take advantage of the superior repair facilities on offer.

83 Squadron had been spared the excitement and stress of the 24<sup>th</sup>, and it was not until after 22.00 on the 25<sup>th</sup> that S/L Newall led off the squadron's ten Hampdens bound for Hanover. They were joined by twenty other Hampdens and twenty-five Whitleys, and most seemed to find the city, but were unable to identify the main post office and railway station. F/O Sells was one of those unable to even locate the city, after failing to find a pinpoint on the coast, and he dropped his bombs from 6,000 feet onto a



*Hampden crews await transport to their aircraft for an operation from Scampton.*

defended area south of Cuxhaven. AD835 was on its way home to Scampton, when it ran into a night fighter, flown by Lt Linke of II/NJG/I, off the Frisians. The Hampden went down into the sea near Schiermonnikoog, killing three of the crew, while the pilot, Sgt Draper, survived to fall into enemy hands. Later on the 26<sup>th</sup>, S/L Willcox arrived from 16 O.T.U to assume the duties of a flight commander. The month's operational activity for the squadron ended on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, when a dozen Hampdens joined twenty-nine others from the group to plant mines in the Raddish and Forget-me-not regions of Kiel Bay and the Kiel Canal. Weather conditions were difficult, and not all were successful, Sgt Slater-Eiggert finding an alternative garden in the Rosemary region, off Heligoland, before landing at Catfoss in east Yorkshire. He was not the only one to land away from Scampton as petrol reserves ran low, Sgt Hedley being forced to lob in at Montrose on Scotland's east coast, after eight and three-quarter hours aloft. Sgt Linacre was defeated by the conditions, and jettisoned his mine in a recorded position off Skegness, before landing in a field at Swineshead near Boston, as he exhausted his fuel supplies. During the course of the month the squadron launched 118 sorties on seventeen operations, and lost two aircraft and crews.

## August 1941



*A fine study of P/O Royle and crew returning from a flight in Hampden OL-Z. Left to right: F/L Jack Bousfield (gunner), P/O Royle (pilot), P/O Gill (navigator), P/O Weir (wireless operator).*

Hamburg, Berlin and Kiel provided the objectives for over 180 aircraft on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, as the new month's operations got under way. The 5 Group brief was to attack the shipbuilding yards at Kiel, for which fifty Hampdens were dispatched from Scampton and Coningsby. W/C Satterly led the thirteen-strong 83 Squadron element, which got away either side of 22.30, and mostly encountered low cloud that prevented them from pinpointing their positions at the German coast. Some found Kiel, while others abandoned the search and sought out alternative targets. W/C Satterly made four runs without ever being able to positively identify what lay beneath, and he eventually bombed a flak concentration. S/L Newall was unable to catch sight of land to provide a pinpoint, and abandoned the main task. He dropped his wing bombs on an aerodrome, before running out of fuel and losing both engines over the sea, while on his way home after eight and a half hours in the air. He ditched AE154 in the North Sea, well out from the Yorkshire coast at 07.10, and he and his crew took to the dinghy, which became their home until they were picked up by a high speed launch at 17.40 that afternoon. While this operation was in progress, Sgt

Grainger and P/O Maybury joined others to lay mines in the waters around Kiel, and both returned to report successful sorties.

The weather prevented operations from taking place on the following two nights, but the 5 Group stations were a hive of activity on the 5<sup>th</sup>, as preparations were put in hand for two operations that night. 83 Squadron made ready fourteen Hampdens, nine of them to join an overall mixed force of ninety-seven aircraft for an attack on railway workshops at Karlsruhe in southern Germany. S/L Kynoch was the senior pilot on duty, and S/L Willcox was also present to undertake his first operation since joining the squadron. Three other crews, those of P/O Sells and Sgts McLoughlin and Plaistowe, were to be part of a ninety-eight-strong force of Hampdens and Wellingtons being sent to the twin cities of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen some forty miles further north. The Hampden crews were briefed to attack the main railway station at Ludwigshafen, and while these two bombing operations were in progress, Sgt Dennis and crew were to take part in a mining effort in the Endive region, off Denmark's eastern coast, while Sgt Tiley and crew headed for the Melon region, the Kiel Canal. The latter mistakenly thought they had picked up a recall signal, and they came home early. Both bombing operations were conducted in favourable weather conditions, and considerable damage was inflicted at both locations. At Karlsruhe, S/L Kynoch bombed from 6,500 feet, and commented on the presence of light flak only. Sgt Linacre bombed the railway workshops from 7,000 feet, and F/L Lyster claimed his 1,900 pounder caused a large fire. S/L Willcox was defeated by the weather conditions, and was the only one to fail to deliver an attack. A third operation on this night targeted Frankfurt, and the following night would see a repeat of each, although with smaller forces.

While North Luffenham and Swinderby provided the aircraft for the return to Karlsruhe on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, 5 Group sent freshman crews to bomb the docks at Calais. 83 Squadron contributed five crews, who took off shortly before 22.30, and they all returned safely, three of them having successfully located and bombed the target. The main operation on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> was against Essen, where the coking ovens at the giant Krupp armaments works were the objectives. 83 Squadron dispatched fourteen Hampdens during a thirty minute slot between 23.20 and 23.50, and they were part of a hundred-strong force. F/Ls Cook, Lyster and Mills were the senior pilots on duty, and they seemed to experience different conditions in the target area. Visibility was described by most as better than might usually be expected over the Ruhr, but F/L Lyster reported that identification of the target was not possible, and he bombed the city from 12,000 feet. F/L Mills reported, "Target located and bombed. One burst observed at corner of large shed in target area". F/L Cook found the aiming point easily in the face of a spirited flak defence, but had a 500lb wing bomb hang up. Despite the confidence of returning crews, the operation had, in fact, proceeded in typical fashion for the Ruhr, with little damage occurring on the ground. The squadron's X3118 went into the sea off the Dutch coast during the course of the operation, and there were no survivors from the crew of recently-promoted F/Sgt Wood. Meanwhile, three freshman crews had been sent mining off the Frisians, and two carried out successful sorties.

The group targeted Kiel's shipyards on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, but 83 Squadron was beginning a three-night break from operations, and remained at home. Sgt Slater-Eiggert was commissioned on the 9<sup>th</sup>, but, sadly, he had little time left to enjoy his new status. The group mounted no operations on that night, or on the following one, but sent thirty freshman crews to Rotterdam docks on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, of which six represented 83 Squadron. Five of the crews were captained by officers, four of which brought their bombs home after failing to find the target, and the fifth bombed a Dutch airfield as an alternative.

M. S. I.	A/C No & LTR.	CAPTAIN	BOMB CALL LOAD SIGN	FIXES. BEARINGS	(1- BLUE 2- RED 3- YELLOW)	TIME OFF	E.T.R.	AIR
14/15 AUG. - 49 SQUADRON -								
FUR								
142	AE 224 Z	JENNINGS				2106	0405	0405
869	AD 266 L	WILLIAMS				2111	0411	0415
479	AE 132 U	WILLIAMS				2010	0350	0405
236	X 3007 J	BARNFIELD				2052	0352	0400
971	X 3138 R	BLACK				2052	0352	0400
345	AD 276 D	HILLES				2052	0352	0400
246	AD 267 H	NEWMAN				2048	0354	0405
687	AD 280 V	SCORER		HLFE 427	0344 H	2046	0344	0356
377	AD 271 O	PIATT				2058	0358	0407
728	AD 205 R	CORSE				2047	0347	0360
546	AL 240 P	HARVEY				2055	0355	0405
291	AD 744 Q	LATT		QDM 290		2058	0358	0405
746	AL 194 T	GILLIES				2051	0351	0400
918	AD 286 M	FRUIT		JQZH 4612	0331 P	2052	0352	0405
232	AD 273 W	ROBINSON				2045	0345	0350
352	AL 145 H	HOBBS				2054	0354	0400
767	AL 126 N	FISHER				2053	0353	0405
482	AD 133 B	HIGGINS				2053	0353	0404
177	AD 209 G	TROSCER				2057	0357	0405
618	AD 231 X	ROBINSON		QDM 010	0416	2058	0358	0405
412	AL 236 P	LITTON				2105	0405	0500
721	AL 203 E	FRAN				2102	0402	0435
434	AL 221 O	NATT				2100	0400	0430
512	AL 262 Y	OVEN		Had trouble landing		2101	0401	0420

M. S. I.	A/C No & LTR.	CAPTAIN	BOMB CALL LOAD SIGN	FIXES. BEARINGS	(1- BLUE 2- RED 3- YELLOW)	TIME OFF	E.T.R.	AIR
14/15 AUG. - 83 SQUADRON -								
KNB								
242	AL 251 B	NEWELL				2113	0413	0455
778	AD 271 C	COOK				2120	0420	0515
280	AD 265 T	ROBERTSON				2112	0412	0515
830	AL 154 A	SCARLE				2111	0411	0441
911	AL 257 E	LIMBIE		MEPD 0627	0413 H	2116	0416	0501
677	X 227 K	LIMBIE				2121	0421	0500
885	AD 244 M	STEELE				2108	0408	0504
989	AD 247 N	SCARLE		QDM 273	0412	2110	0410	0458
359	AL 137 L	KIMMIE				2105	0405	0510
752	X 311 G	HOLEY				2119	0419	0520
050	AL 211 M	DUNN				2123	0423	0426
796	AD 257 T	WELLS		QDM 012	0427	2114	0414	0453
123	AD 255 Q	BARBER				2130	0430	0538
309	AL 151 Z	PARKER				2104	0404	0440
459	AL 151 W	EMBERT				2107	0407	---
505	AD 212 Y	MORRISON				2109	0409	0511
462	X 3144 N	MORRISON				2118	0418	0544
186	AL 223 V	COOPER				2115	0415	0458
MISSING								
NECTARINE								
MYKST	AL 155 G	NEWELL				2154	0354	0427
96	X 3171 F	RILEY				2235	0435	0437

The Operations Boards for 49 Sqn (left) and 83 Sqn (right). They reflect the situation after the Brunswick raid of 14/15<sup>th</sup> August and show that AE131, OL-W, was posted missing with the crew of F/O Slater-Eiggert.

The only one to successfully complete its assigned task was the all-NCO crew of Sgt Reynolds, who bombed from 1,000 feet. The group also targeted Krefeld marshalling yards on this night, but with little effect.

Wide-ranging operations occupied more than two hundred assorted aircraft on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, with Berlin, Hanover, Magdeburg and Essen as the main focus. 5 Group sent Manchesters to the Capital, and Hampdens to Hanover and Magdeburg, and it was for the last-mentioned that six 83 Squadron crews set off either side of 21.00, briefed to aim for the main railway station. F/Ls Cook and Lyster were the senior pilots on duty, and they attacked Bremen and Emden respectively as alternatives, after finding the primary target under ten-tenths cloud. In the event, only Sgt McFarlane and P/O Robertson claimed to have bombed the primary, the latter from 14,000 feet. Night flying training cost the lives of P/O Davis and one other, when AD935 struck trees and crashed in Worcestershire shortly after midnight on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Hanover and Magdeburg were singled out for attention again on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, but the Hampden force was sent to attack the main railway station at Brunswick, some fifty miles to the east of Hanover. Eighty-one Hampdens were involved, and eighteen of these were provided by 83 Squadron, a new squadron record. S/L Newall led them away from Scampton between 21.05 and 21.33, and, remarkably, there were no early returns. Medium cloud in the target area prevented many crews from positively identifying Brunswick, and none was able to pick out the railway station. Some bombed the town, while others back-tracked to Hanover, where the visibility was better, and added to whatever damage was being inflicted there. After the Brunswick force had departed Scampton, two further 83 Squadron crews took off to join three others from the group to lay mines in the Nectarines region off the Frisians. The first of the night's returning crews landed shortly before 05.00, and, over the following



*The Officers' Mess provides the background for this group of 83 Sqn personnel in August 1941. Seated left is the Chaplain.*

sixty-five minutes, the remainder came home one-by-one, until just one was awaited. AE131 never made it home, having been brought down by flak south of Hanover, and the recently commissioned P/O Slater-Eiggert died alongside his NCO crew.

83 Squadron was not involved in the main operation against Düsseldorf on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, but dispatched a dozen Hampdens to Bremen on the following night, led by S/Ls Kynoch and Willcox. The precise aiming points for the dual attack, which was carried out in co-operation with a force of 4 Group Whitleys, were the main railway station and the Focke-Wulf factory. With the exception of F/L Cook, they took off either side of 22.30, but Cook was delayed for an unspecified reason, and it was 00.20 before he finally got away. It became clear after a time that to continue was futile, and he jettisoned his wing bombs before turning back. The other members of the Hampden brigade couldn't identify the target in hazy conditions, and bombed either the town or alternative targets. S/L Kynoch commented that very accurate and heavy flak prevented a precise bombing run, and he let his bombs go in the general target area, as, it appears, did S/L Willcox. Sgt Linacre's bomb release failed to work, and in trying to jettison his load, he pulled the emergency hydraulic release in error. This dropped his undercarriage and flaps, creating drag for the return journey, and AD837 finally ran out of fuel some ten miles off Holy Island on the Northumberland coast. Sgt Linacre pulled off a successful ditching, and he and his crew were rescued by a local patrol boat. While this operation was in progress, five other crews from the squadron were sent mining in the Carrots, Asparagus and Broccoli regions, in the Great Belt and Little Belt of the Baltic between Denmark and Sweden, and the Nectarines garden off the Frisians, although not all were able to plant their vegetables as briefed.

This was the day on which civil servant, Mr D M Butt, completed his analysis of recent Bomber Command operations, and presented his report to the highest authorities. Its disclosures were to send shock waves resounding around the Cabinet Room, the Air Ministry and Bomber Command HQ, and bring into question the viability of an independent bomber force. Having studied around four thousand photographs taken during a hundred night operations in June and July, Mr Butt concluded that only a fraction of bombs had fallen within miles of their intended targets, and the performance over the Ruhr

was even worse. This revelation was not only a bitter blow to the Command, but would also forever unjustly blight the period of tenure as C-in-C of Sir Richard Peirse.

The month's operations continued on the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup>, with an attempt to hit the main railway station in Cologne. 83 Squadron did not take part, and the operation failed to achieve its aims. The following night brought an operation against a railway junction in Kiel, for which the squadron put up eleven Hampdens, plus one more for mining duties in the Nectarines region. S/Ls Newall and Willcox were the senior officers on duty, and all but one got away from Scampton by 21.00. AD934 damaged a wing during taxiing in the hands of Sgt Plaistowe, and this was the first incident in an eventful night. Weather conditions outbound proved to be testing in the extreme, and no crews succeeded in identifying the aiming point. Many crews jettisoned their bombs over enemy territory, while others bombed in the general area of Kiel. S/L Newall was in AE155, which ran into an electrical storm, and he lost control temporarily. Navigator, P/O Gould, interpreted this as a signal to abandon ship, and he took to his parachute, it is believed, somewhere over Denmark. AD907 was homebound and just six miles off the Yorkshire coast at Bridlington, when it crashed into the sea, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Potts.

The weather closed in and prevented operations on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, but conditions allowed an attack to take place on Mannheim on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup>. The Scampton squadrons did not take part, and despite encouraging reports from returning crews, the operation failed to make any impact. The weather intervened again on the following night, but relented during the 24<sup>th</sup>, to allow an operation to Düsseldorf to take place that night. W/C Satterly led the 83 Squadron contingent of six Hampdens for the main operation, while three others carried out suppression sorties in the searchlight belt around Wesel to the west. They all got away safely either side of 20.30, the intruder element to bomb and strafe any searchlight holding a bomber in its beam, and, although W/C Satterly recorded on return that it seemed to have little effect, there is some evidence that the usually efficient searchlights became erratic, and some were extinguished. P/O Robertson carried out his patrol between 300 and 1,500 feet, and described the anti-aircraft fire as intense and accurate. He and his crew arrived home safely, but tragedy awaited some others, either on approach to Scampton, or even on the ground after landing. At 02.50, two of the Düsseldorf force, X3121 of 83 Squadron and AD967 of 49 Squadron, collided in the air as they joined the circuit, and both crashed onto farmland a couple of miles north-east of the airfield without survivors. This incident cost 83 Squadron the experienced F/L Mills DFC, who was a stalwart of the squadron, and well into his second tour. If this tragedy were not enough, AE223 exploded and burned out minutes after landing from the Wesel part of the operation, presumably through the detonation of a hung-up bomb. P/O Maybury and his crew were killed, along with four members of ground crew.

Another experienced pilot was lost to the squadron on the 26<sup>th</sup>, but happily it was because F/L Lyster DFC had completed his second tour of twenty-two operations, which gave him a total of sixty-one. He was posted for instructional duties at 16 O.T.U., and would shortly be awarded a DSO. He would spend the remainder of the war as an instructor, and, thereafter, enjoy a distinguished RAF career that would take him all over the world. He retired in January 1961 in the rank of group captain, having gained an AFC and bar, and died in 2010 at the grand old age of ninety-nine. On the evening of his departure from Scampton, Peirse sent ninety-nine aircraft to Cologne to attack the city centre and railway installations. Four of the participating Hampdens were provided by 83 Squadron, which were airborne by 22.55, and they returned safely, claiming to have bombed within the city. Meanwhile, six other Hampdens, two of

them representing 83 Squadron, carried out searchlight suppression sorties ten miles to the west, and they also came home to report a successful operation. Mannheim was the objective on the following night, but this operation did not require the participation of the Scampton units. Over a hundred aircraft went to Duisburg on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, to bomb railway installations, and among them were four Hampdens from 83 Squadron, which took off either side of 20.30. Unusually for the Ruhr, some found the target clear of ground haze, Sgt Dacey reporting seeing the target perfectly, and bombing from 7,000 feet. Searchlight suppression continued on this night in the Wesel area, and a single 83 Squadron crew took part. Sgt Hedley reported successfully bombing and strafing a searchlight concentration.

Over 140 aircraft took off in the mid-evening of the 29<sup>th</sup>, and began the long journey to Frankfurt in southern Germany. Hampdens made up half of the force, but only three of them, Sgts Riley, Reynolds and Plaistowe, belonged to 83 Squadron. The city was found to be cloud covered, and many crews bombed on estimated positions, creating little damage. There were no major operations on the following night, when 83 Squadron dispatched S/L Kynoch and F/O Ollason to lay mines in the Jasmine region off Warnemünde on the Baltic coast. Low cloud in the target area created difficulties, but both planted their vegetables in the briefed garden, and F/O Ollason dropped two 250lb bombs on Sylt on the way home.

Cologne was the principal destination on the last night of the month, when the main railway station was the briefed aiming point for the 5 Group element, among which were six 83 Squadron Hampdens, led by S/L Willcox. This time the Manchester element provided part of the searchlight suppression, along with two 83 Squadron Hampdens and four from 49 Squadron. The intruders, Sgts Dennis and Reynolds, took off first, shortly after 19.30, while the bombing element departed Scampton after 20.00. They arrived over Cologne to encounter poor weather conditions, which prevented an accurate attack from taking place, and most bombs missed the city. Sgt Hedley searched for fifty minutes to find a break in the cloud, but eventually gave up, and dropped his 250 pounders on a searchlight concentration on the way home. Sgts Dennis and Reynolds carried out their patrol along the searchlight belt between Sittard in Belgium and Venlo in Holland, and the latter reported bombing and strafing searchlights from 6,000 down to 1,000 feet, until his ammunition was exhausted. While this operation was in progress, two further 83 Squadron crews, P/O Hartley and Sgt Olliver, were sent mining off the Frisians and in Kiel Bay respectively. Both successfully planted their vegetables as briefed, and Sgt Olliver bombed and strafed searchlights on the eastern end of the island of Juist. It turned into a bad night for the squadron, after three aircraft failed to return, the highest to date in a single night. AD859 crashed in Belgium without survivors from the crew of Sgt Dacey, and AE187 was shot down by a night fighter over Holland, killing F/Sgt Plaistowe and his crew. AD912 also fell to a night fighter over Holland, but it seems that S/L Willcox stayed with the aircraft, while his crew took to their parachutes to fall into enemy hands, and he alone was killed. During the course of the month the squadron launched 148 sorties on twenty-nine operations<sup>6</sup>. Eleven aircraft were lost, but, more importantly, among the nine crews either killed in crashes or failing to return, were four, whose presence and experience would be particularly missed.

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<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this work, single mining sorties to different gardens represent separate operations, as do searchlight suppression sorties.

## September 1941

The weather was to play an important role in September, both restricting the number of nights on which operations could take place, and providing testing conditions for crews on those nights when operations were possible. Mixed fortunes attended the 83 Squadron crews operating on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when Frankfurt and Berlin were the principal targets. Over 120 aircraft were dispatched to southern Germany in mid-evening to attack railway installations, although, only P/O Seward represented 83 Squadron. Like the other participating crews, he encountered thick industrial haze, and was unable to identify the target. He dropped his 250lb bombs on an aerodrome south of the city, before heading for home. On arrival over Lincolnshire, he was diverted to Coningsby and then Waddington, but found visibility to be nil at both locations. He jettisoned his 500lb bomb "safe", and, after nine hours and forty minutes in the air, he successfully force-landed AE156 at Welton near Scampton. W/C Satterly led the squadron contingent of five to Berlin, with S/L Kynoch also present, but the commanding officer was unable to locate the precise target, and bombed a flak concentration and an aerodrome in the general area before returning home. He also encountered fog, and as his petrol reserves dwindled, he put AD978 down near King's Lynn in Norfolk, he and his crew sustaining in the process a few bruises. Heavy flak and searchlights prevented S/L Kynoch from identifying the primary target, but he attacked an alternative objective within the city, and returned safely. Sgt Dennis found his primary target and delivered his bombs, but he, too, was compelled by fog to carry out a forced landing on return. AE314 had been flying for ten hours and ten minutes when Dennis pulled off a safe touch-down near Coningsby, and all four occupants walked away unscathed.

One of the minor operations on this night involved sixteen 5 Group Hampdens, which were sent mining off the Danish coast and around the Frisians. 83 Squadron contributed four crews, two of whom, captained by P/Os Mackie and Hartley, returned home to report failing to locate the garden in the Nectarines region, because of fog or cloud stretching down beyond 300 feet. Sgt Allen and his crew were not at debriefing, and it was established later that X3144 must have crashed into the sea. The tidal pattern around the Frisians led to many bodies being washed ashore on Texel, and further north on the mainland near Harlingen, and this was the fate of two members of the crew, one at each location. AE315 also failed to return after hitting a sandbank and crashing, but Sgt Olliver and his crew all survived, and were picked up by the enemy. The fog that had caused so many problems, persisted over the succeeding few nights, and although the group contributed thirty-two aircraft for an operation against the enemy warships at Brest on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, a recall signal was sent out to 1, 4 and 5 Groups, and their effort was abandoned.

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, W/C Satterly concluded his tour as commanding officer, and was posted to a staff job at Swinderby. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1942, he would become a Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO) at 5 Group HQ, and would be heavily involved in the preparations for Operation Chastise between March and mid-May 1943. He was succeeded at 83 Squadron by W/C Stewart Owen Tudor, a thirty-five-year-old veteran with a high-pitched voice and a receding hairline, who had been commissioned back in 1926, and was a member of the Volunteer Reserve. He seems to have been known universally as "Mary" Tudor, although probably not to his face, and had been B Flight commander at 106 Squadron for a few weeks from the 16<sup>th</sup> of March. On the night of his appointment, the main operation was directed against a chemicals factory at Hüls, a location about three miles north-west of Krefeld on the western edge of the Ruhr, for which 5 Group put up eighteen Hampdens from Coningsby, as part of an eighty-strong force.



*An 83 Sqn Hampden at Scampton bearing code OL-D, but not otherwise clearly identifiable.*

While this operation was in progress, 83 Squadron sent four crews to Kinloss, as a forward base to launch mining sorties in the Onions garden off Oslo. They took off between 20.30 and 21.40 to encounter excellent weather conditions in the target area, which allowed two crews to plant their vegetables successfully, and drop their wing bombs on targets of opportunity. Sgt Linacre found a gun battery at Vestro, south-west of Oslo, and Sgt McFarlane spotted a 1,200 ton ship, which he hit with one bomb, and observed smoke emanating from it as he turned away. A third crew returned to Kinloss with instrument failure, and the fourth failed to return. Nothing was heard from AE319 after take-off, and news eventually filtered through that it had been shot down by flak in the target area, and that P/O Leetham and one of his gunners had survived to be taken into captivity.

On the following night, 197 aircraft took off for Berlin, among them three Hampdens from 83 Squadron. They departed Scampton either side of 21.00, and F/L Ollason was the only one from the squadron, who was among 137 crews claiming to have bombed as briefed, and the reports of good results were partially confirmed by the city authorities. P/O Robertson experienced technical difficulties, and bombed Wilhelmshaven as an alternative, while high fuel consumption persuaded Sgt Dennis to bomb the town of Büsum, on the western coast of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular. Under cover of this operation, fifty

aircraft went to Kiel to attack the Deutsche Werke U-Boot yards, and P/O Hartley was the sole 83 Squadron participant. P/O Mackie, meanwhile, joined in a small mining effort around the Frisians. Later on the 8<sup>th</sup>, S/L Rainford arrived from 14 O.T.U., to undertake his second tour with the squadron, and assume the role of flight commander. That night, railway installations and an armaments factory in Kassel were the objectives for over ninety aircraft, including five from 83 Squadron, all captained by sergeant pilots. They took off either side of 20.00, and three completed their sorties as briefed in good weather conditions, while two others had fuel issues that prevented them from reaching the target. Sgt Linacre's AE188 sprang a leak, and the bombs were jettisoned live over enemy territory. Linacre brought the Hampden back to Wiltshire, where a crash-landing was successfully carried out on approach to Boscombe Down, without injury to the occupants. This was his second incident in a month. Three freshman crews, meanwhile, were part of a small Hampden force laying mines in the Asparagus region off the Danish coast, and two were successful.



*Squadron Leader Reginald Otto Altmann (second from right) originally served with 106 Sqn. He went on to become a Wing Commander, receiving the DSO and sustaining wounds whilst flying a Dakota glider tug at Arnhem (Simon Sanders).*

Heavy cloud interfered with a predominantly Hampden raid on the Heinkel aircraft factory at Rostock on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron did not take part, but dispatched seven crews after midnight to mine the waters off the Frisians, and a singleton to the Rosemary garden in the Heligoland Bight. The main operation twenty-four hours later was to Frankfurt, where marshalling yards were the specific objective for a force of 130 aircraft. S/L Rainford was undertaking his first operation since returning to the squadron, and was the senior pilot on duty among seven departing Scampton either side of 22.30. Cloud over the target rendered any chance of precision unachievable, despite which, S/L Rainford reported seeing his bombs explode on buildings in the vicinity of the docks. Some

bombs fell into residential districts in Frankfurt and in nearby Offenbach, and Mainz also reported being hit. Two other crews from the squadron went mining in the Asparagus and Hollyhocks regions of the Baltic, the Great Belt (south) and Travemünde respectively, but one returned early with technical difficulties. Almost 170 crews were briefed on the 15<sup>th</sup> to attack railway stations and shipyards in Hamburg, for which 83 Squadron detailed eleven crews. Their target was the Blohm & Voss shipyards, for which they departed Scampton either side of 18.30, with S/L Kynoch taking the lead, and F/L Cook in support. S/L Kynoch reported bombing the town, after intense searchlight and anti-aircraft activity prevented him from identifying his briefed aiming point. His experiences were echoed by most returning crews, but they had contributed to a successful attack, which had inflicted some substantial damage on Germany's second city, at a cost of eight aircraft. The 83 Squadron contingent all arrived safely back in the skies over Lincolnshire, but AE362 came to grief on landing at Scampton, and P/O Bromiley and crew sustained slight injuries. Four freshman crews from the squadron joined forty others on this night, to take advantage of fine weather to bomb the docks at le Havre, which the Scampton contingent did before returning safely. A period of unsettled weather now restricted operations, and it would be almost

two weeks before 83 Squadron was called into offensive action again. Some operations were mounted by the Command, but recall signals went out to crews bound for Berlin and Frankfurt on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, and Cologne, Emden, Mannheim and Genoa on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>.

During this period of inactivity the station sports day was held on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and 83 Squadron was beaten into second place by 724 Ground Defence Squadron. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Trenchard paid Scampton a visit, when, in a speech to the assembled personnel, the main message was, to “keep the Jerries in their cellars”. Two days later, S/L Reg Altmann was posted in from Syerston, to replace S/L Newall as a flight commander. Altmann had previously served with 144 Squadron in 1940, and had spent 1941 thus far as an important and inspirational member of 106 Squadron, who frequently led the squadron into battle. He was Jewish, and his surname and middle name, Otto, hinted heavily at his German descent. It must have taken enormous courage to undertake operations in the sure and certain knowledge of the treatment he would receive at the hands of the Germans, should he be captured. S/L Newall, meanwhile, was on his way to Iraq to join 62 Squadron. On the evening of Altmann’s arrival, operations resumed for the squadron, when Frankfurt was the objective for a small force of Hampdens and Wellingtons. The main railway station was the briefed aiming point for the six 83 Squadron crews, who were led away at 22.45 by S/L Rainford. The others followed over an extended period, and it was 00.07 before P/O Mackie brought up the rear. All had difficulty in identifying the target in conditions of cloud and icing, and most bombed in the general area, with no clue as to the outcome. All returned safely, but five landed away from Scampton, two at Honington, and one each at Manston, Drifffield and Lympe.

Two major operations were mounted on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, the larger, by 139 aircraft, against Stettin on the Baltic coast, and the other, by ninety aircraft, to Hamburg. 83 Squadron sent six Hampdens to the latter, the crews briefed to aim at the Blohm & Voss aircraft factory. They got away between 18.10 and 19.10, but F/O Cumming returned early with technical problems, and P/O Allcock noticed falling oil pressure in his port engine, and decided to bomb Emden instead. However, the engine failed before reaching the port, and the bombs were jettisoned into the sea, upon which, the port engine picked up, and a safe return was made. The remainder encountered searchlight glare, which rendered identification difficult. Some fires were started, but there was no concentration or reports of specific damage. It was a similar story on the following night, when eighty aircraft set off for another crack at the Blohm & Voss works, with six Hampdens representing 83 Squadron. F/L Cook led them away either side of 18.00, and Sgt Riley was just ten minutes out from the English coast, when his intercom failed and forced him to turn back. As the others approached the German coast, cloud became the main problem, and recognising the probable futility of pressing on to the target, F/L Cook dropped his bombs on a vessel approaching Kiel Bay, but was unable to determine the outcome. Those reaching the target area bombed on estimated positions, and contributed to the creation of fourteen fires. While this operation was in progress, two of the squadron’s freshman crews joined thirty-nine others to bomb the docks at Cherbourg, and all returned safely. During the course of the month the squadron launched seventy-three sorties on nineteen operations, losing seven aircraft and three crews.

## October 1941

The weather for the remainder of the year would severely restrict Peirse's opportunities to use his bomber force effectively, and the events of the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> were a portent of things to come. 5 Group ordered forty-five Hampdens into the air between 18.30 and 19.00, among them five from 83 Squadron, and they set course for Karlsruhe. S/L Rainford had been detailed to lead the squadron contingent, but his sortie was cancelled, and, once it was decided that weather conditions for landing would be unfavourable, a recall signal was sent out at 21.00. By that time P/O Hartley was already on his way back with engine trouble, and he was fired upon by the anti-aircraft defences around Hull. Two others from the squadron responded to the recall, while P/O Mackie reached and bombed the target, and Sgt MacKenzie dropped his bombs on an unidentified town, before landing at Topcliffe after some eight and a quarter hours in the air.

The weather prevented any major operations thereafter until the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, when Essen and Cologne were the destinations for forces of seventy-eight and sixty-nine aircraft respectively. The first Hampdens to depart Scampton on this night, however, were five intruders, which took off at 23.30 to patrol the Bocholt section of the searchlight belt, north of the Ruhr and just inside Germany's frontier with Holland. The nine participants in the Essen operation, and Sgts Linacre and Dennis, who, according to the squadron ORB, were bound for Karlsruhe, took off either side of midnight, and were well on their way, when engine trouble forced P/O Hooper to turn back. AD964 was hit by flak, probably when closing on the target, and damage to an engine and instruments persuaded Sgt McFarlane to terminate his sortie. The Essen contingent had the Krupp works as its aiming point, but no crews were able to identify it in the cloudy conditions, and those reaching the target area bombed on estimated positions. AD911 failed to return to Scampton, having come down in the Waddensee off Harlingen, but Sgt Hedley and two of his crew survived as PoWs. There is no mention in the 5 Group ORB of Karlsruhe on this night, or of 5 Group aircraft being involved at Essen, and one must, therefore, conclude that the two above-mentioned Karlsruhe-bound crews were, in fact, among twenty-three sent to bomb the docks at Dunkerque. Of the five intruders, P/O Robertson found the patrol area to be eerily quiet, so he dropped two bombs in an attempt to stir them up, and let the rest of his load go over an unidentified aerodrome to the north. The other intruders bombed and strafed in accordance with instructions, and all returned safely. Having completed his second tour in the previous month, F/L Ollason DFC was posted on the 11<sup>th</sup> to RAF Station Watchfield in Wiltshire, which was a site for Beam Approach training.

152 aircraft set out for Nuremberg on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, but again, few found the mark, and bombs were reported to have fallen onto many towns and communities within a sixty mile radius of the intended target. The Hampden brigade was not involved in this operation, but went instead to Bremen, and once more to the synthetic rubber factory at Hüls. 83 Squadron contributed three aircraft to the Bremen raid, and there was an early start for them, either side of 19.00. Sgt Warren covered most of the distance out, before instrument failure forced him to abandon his sortie. F/O Cumming was unable to pinpoint on the enemy coast, and bombed a flak concentration believed to be at Wilhelmshaven. Sgt Mowat experienced similar difficulties, and returned his bombs to store. The Hüls contingent remained on the ground until being led away by S/L Kynoch at 00.20, the others following over the next forty-five minutes. They had been briefed to expect good visibility over the target, which, in the event, turned out to be ten-tenths low cloud, and S/L Kynoch brought his bombs back, while others dropped theirs on estimated positions or on alternative targets of opportunity on the way home. 5 Group targeted Cologne

on the following night with a force of Hampdens and Manchesters, but 83 Squadron did not take part, and sent just Sgt Thompson and crew to deliver mines to the sea lanes off the Frisians.

An attempt to hit marshalling yards in Duisburg involved ten 83 Squadron Hampdens on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>. They were part of an overall force of eighty-seven aircraft, and took off between 00.25 and 01.10, led by F/L Pimlott, who had been posted in from 16 O.T.U on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September. By the time they departed Scampton, two freshman crews had already been to Dunkerque and returned, both having failed to locate their target. The Ruhr was hidden by a blanket of cloud, and crews could only bomb on estimated positions. F/L Pimlott was coned by searchlights, and forced down to 1,000 feet, whereupon he dropped his bombs on a flare path, and believed he may have set an aircraft on fire. Meanwhile, Sgts MacKenzie and Riley joined in searchlight suppression activities in the Bocholt area, the former attacking searchlights with bombs, bottles and incendiaries, before dropping his last two 250 pounders on De Kooy aerodrome on the way home. Sgt Riley patrolled from 02.30 to 03.15, and attacked one searchlight.

A railway junction in Bremen was the briefed aiming point for thirteen 83 Squadron Hampdens on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>. They were part of an overall force of 153 aircraft, and were led away by S/L Rainford at 18.02, although it was 18.55, before the final squadron participant departed Scampton. S/L Rainford spent an hour and twenty minutes in the target area, but darkness and haze thwarted his efforts to pinpoint his objective. In contrast, eight of his squadron colleagues returned with claims of a successful attack, which created a number of large fires, although local reports described a small raid. The freshman crews of Sgts Markides and Price had taken off twenty minutes after the bombing brigade, to spend their evening laying mines off the Frisians, and both completed their sorties as briefed. Thick cloud and icing conditions made life difficult for the 123 crews bound for Mannheim in the early evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Seventeen 83 Squadron crews took part, taking off between 18.28 and 18.45. S/L Kynoch was forced to return after his giro failed, and he was not the only one to abort his sortie, as F/L Cook and P/O Cumming turned back as a result of severe icing, and Sgt Thompson with an unspecified technical problem. P/O Hartley was beset with icing difficulties when at 18,000 feet, and he was about thirty minutes out from the target, when he decided to abort his sortie, and, ultimately, released his bombs on a flare path. In all, only twelve from the squadron reached the target area, and some of those bombed from above cloud on estimated positions. A number of further operations were mounted by the Command during the final week of the month, but 83 Squadron's work was done. Sgt Fletcher did set off in the early evening of the 31<sup>st</sup> to plant some vegetables off the Frisians, but he was recalled. During the course of the month, DFCs were awarded to S/L Kynoch and to the recently-departed G/C Satterly, and the squadron launched 101 sorties on thirteen operations for the loss of a single aircraft and crew.

## November 1941

The new month began with a raid on the Deutsche Werke U-Boot yards at Kiel, for which 134 aircraft were dispatched. 83 Squadron contributed a dozen Hampdens led by S/L Rainford, while S/L Kynoch was on leave getting married to his fiancée Jean. The Scampton crews took off either side of 18.00, along with three others bound for a mining operation in Kiel Fjord. Finally, at 20.06, F/O Seward and P/O Mackie also left Scampton to carry out a shipping patrol off the Frisians. The main operation was a complete failure in the face of cloud so dense that searchlights were unable to penetrate it. Two of the 83 Squadron participants returned early, and the others bombed on estimated positions based on DR and flak concentrations. Only seventy crews reported reaching the target area, and, it seems that most, if not all of the bombs fell to the east of the town. Two of the gardeners successfully delivered their mines into the correct location, but AE358 failed to return with the crew of P/O Lloyd, and disappeared without trace. F/O Seward returned safely to report attacking two stationary ships off the Frisians, which he narrowly missed, while P/O Mackie claimed one direct hit from low level.

The squadron next operated on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, when sending ten aircraft back to Kiel Bay to carry out mining duties, and drop their wing bombs on targets of opportunity. F/Ls Cook and Campbell were the senior pilots on duty as they departed Scampton either side of 01.00, and they were followed two hours later by two freshman crews, who were bound for a small-scale 5 Group attack on the docks at Cherbourg. F/L Cook failed to locate the pinpoint, from which to make his run to the drop zone, and abandoned his sortie. The others were more successful in delivering their mines into the briefed



*The wreckage of AD850, OL-L, lies off the Danish coast after being shot down on 5/6<sup>th</sup> November 1941. F/O Stanley Hartley and his crew were lost (Kriegsmarine via ACR).*

locations, after which, Sgt Younger and F/L Campbell dropped their wing bombs on targets on Sylt, and Sgt Rogers on a train from 1,100 feet at an unspecified location. P/O Hooper was engaged by a flak ship, which damaged his starboard engine, but he delivered his mine, before returning safely after more than eight hours in the air. The return of P/O Hartley and crew in AD850 was awaited in vain, and a report from Denmark ultimately confirmed that the bodies of the pilot and a gunner had been washed ashore.

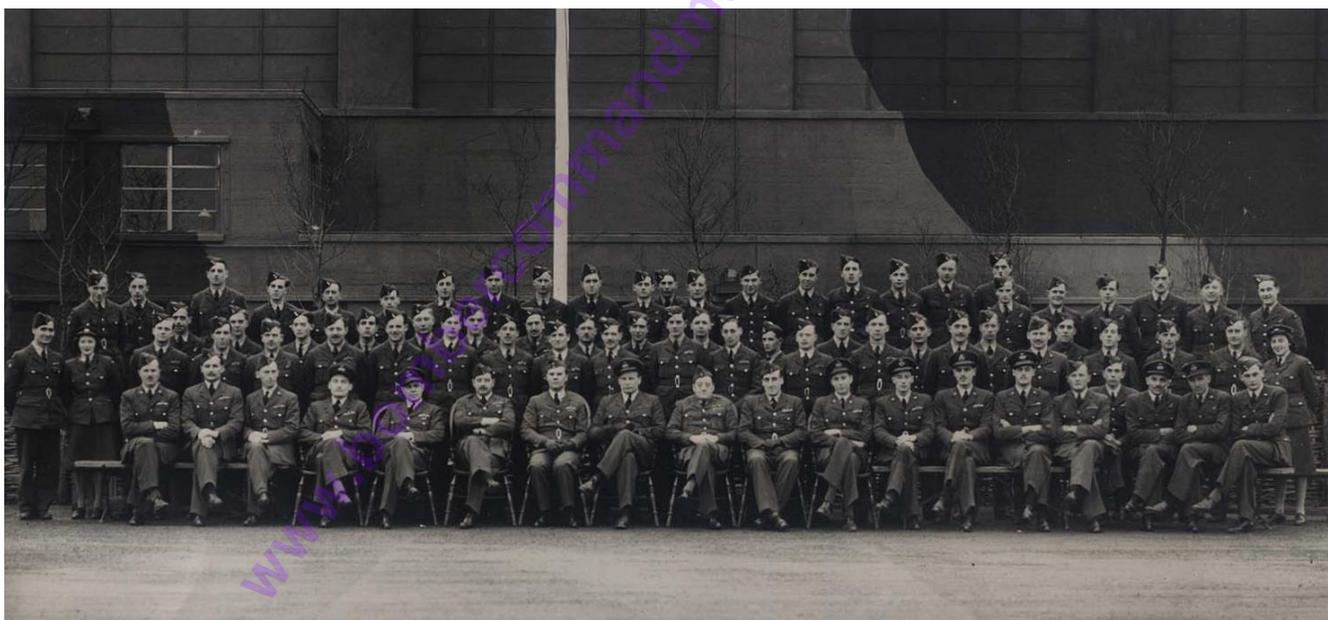
A massive night of operations was planned for the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, when Berlin was to be the main feature, involving over two hundred aircraft. After a frustrating spell of bad weather, the C-in-C was anxious to obtain some good results to bolster morale, but conditions were again doubtful on this night, to the extent that the 5 Group A-O-C, AVM Slessor, having expressed his disapproval, was allowed to withdraw his contribution, and send it instead to Cologne. A third force of fifty-three Wellingtons and two Stirlings was assigned to Mannheim, and together with the night's minor operations, a new record would be set of 392 sorties. Sadly, this massive effort would not be rewarded with success. 169 aircraft eventually took off for the Capital, while sixty-one Hampdens, fourteen of them representing 83 Squadron, and fourteen Manchesters, went to Cologne.

Take-off from Scampton covered a period between 18.24 and 19.49, and among those departing were two crews, who were tasked with attacking the power station at Knapsack, south-west of the city. Matters began to go awry very early on, with F/O Cumming's starboard engine catching fire immediately after take-off, and he was back on the ground within ten minutes. Sgts Warren and Markides returned after two-and-a-half hours with communications failures, while F/L Campbell curtailed his sortie after his electrical supply failed, and he bombed an aerodrome near Dunkerque on the way home. F/L Cook was another to bomb at Dunkerque after his heating system failed. S/L Rainford was the senior pilot on duty, and he was only able to report the belief that he had bombed the town area of Cologne, before returning to Scampton at low level. In similar vein, other returning crews reported delivering their bombs at Cologne, largely on estimated positions, but without any genuine conviction that they had been over the target city. P/O Mackie searched in vain for the Knapsack power station in poor conditions and extreme darkness, even descending to 500 feet. Sgt McFarlane had no better luck, and eventually bombed the town of Jülich, near Aachen, from 800 feet, before descending to 100 feet to strafe a nearby aerodrome. Local reports would claim that only eight high explosive bombs landed in the city, along with sixty incendiaries, and just two houses were destroyed.

Fewer than half of the Berlin force reached the general target area, where scattered bombing covered a wide area and destroyed fourteen houses. According to local reports, not a single bomb fell in Mannheim, despite what returning crews had to say. The overall losses for the night stood at a new record thirty-seven aircraft, which was more than twice the previous highest for a single night, and this was the final straw for the War Cabinet and the Air Ministry. Peirse would be summoned to an uncomfortable meeting with Churchill to make his explanations, as a result of which, further operations would be restricted, while the future of Bomber Command was considered at the highest level. In the meantime, fifty-four aircraft were sent to Essen on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup> to target the Krupp works, P/O Cumming and Sgt Markides and their crews representing 83 Squadron, while S/L Altmann, who was undertaking his first operation since joining the squadron, and Sgt Warren, took part in searchlight suppression, probably in the Bocholt area. All four took off either side of 17.30, and three of them completed their sorties as briefed, Altmann dropping four 250lb bombs on a searchlight battery, and

Warren seven. P/O Cumming was unable to locate the Krupp complex, and bombed an unspecified aerodrome on the way home.

For 83 Squadron, there would be no further offensive activity for almost three weeks, even though 5 Group contributed thirty Hampdens and six Manchesters to a largely ineffective raid at Hamburg on the following night, which targeted the Blohm & Voss shipyards. Five consecutive nights were lost to bad weather before the 15/16<sup>th</sup>, when the group supported an attack on the port of Emden. This was followed by a further week on the ground due to unfavourable weather, until the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>, when a force of Hampdens and Manchesters was sent to the U-Boot pens at Lorient. The group supported a return to Emden on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, and it was on the following night that the squadron finally returned to action as part of a mixed force of eighty-six aircraft, dispatched to Düsseldorf to target marshalling yards. There was an early take-off from Scampton, shortly after 16.30, and F/L Campbell was the senior pilot on duty. Most crews experienced difficulty in identifying the primary target in hazy conditions, but Sgt Mowat and P/O McFarlane claimed to have found it, the latter observing his bombs to burst half a mile to the west. The others attacked the general built-up area, or alternatives, and it seems that Cologne received more bombs than Düsseldorf. While this operation was in progress, three freshman crews were off the Frisians delivering mines into the busy shipping lanes. G/C Satterly and S/L Kynoch were awarded the DFC in November, during the course of which, the squadron managed to launch just sixty-one sorties on ten operations for the loss of two aircraft and crews.



*This 83 Squadron photograph is undated but was taken at Scampton before 1942.*

## December 1941

The tenor of the 83 Squadron ORB entries changed somewhat with the passage into the new month, as someone of laconic character took over the typewriter. The entry for the 1<sup>st</sup> announced “Duff weather”, followed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> by “Worse duff, in fact thick fog. No dice”. The 3<sup>rd</sup> said only, “As yesterday, in fact. No dice”, the 4<sup>th</sup> “Likewise”, and the 5<sup>th</sup> “Still duffish, but navigation loop tested”. It was the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> before the first operation could be mounted, and this was by 130 aircraft to Aachen, where the Nazi Party HQ was designated as the aiming point. 83 Squadron contributed nine aircraft, according to the 5 Group ORB, while the squadron record lists only five, led by F/L Cook, and they took off either side of 02.30. His report on return was echoed by the majority, in that he had been unsuccessful, and had bombed a secondary target. The problem had been towering cumulus cloud and a snow covered landscape, which, together, conspired to obscure the aiming point, and only a few crews were able to identify it. Sgt Warren was one who bombed the general area of the town, before his P5324 was hit by light flak over Knokke on the Belgian coast, wrecking his hydraulics. Only two aircraft failed to return, and one of them was 83 Squadron’s AE191, which ditched in the North Sea. By the time rescue came at the hands of the enemy, the navigator and a gunner had died and been committed to the sea. P/O Parsons and the other gunner managed to cling to life in the freezing conditions, until rescued by the enemy, and they would spend the remainder of the war as PoWs.

Someone in authority at Group now decided that it would be fun to carry out a few daylight operations, and five crews flew to Horsham-St-Faith as a forward base for whatever was planned for the 9<sup>th</sup>. In the event, operations were cancelled, but the ORB entry for the 10<sup>th</sup> states. “Hazy. Lads at Horsham visibly shaken. Reason day ops”. The five crews got away between 12.25 and 12.31, with S/L Kynoch last but one off, on what would prove to be his final operation with the squadron. They headed for the Frisian Islands, where they found their dropping zones without difficulty, planted their vegetables, and returned safely home in time for tea. The ORB entry for the 11<sup>th</sup> states; “Fair. Lots of formation flying, perhaps a repercussion of day ops: who knows? Ops by B and C Flts”. This last comment referred to an operation against Cologne by sixty aircraft, four of which belonged to 83 Squadron. F/O Cumming was the senior pilot on duty, as they began taking off shortly after 17.00, and he and Sgt Markides claimed to have attacked the primary target. They were the exceptions, as barely a third of the force reported bombing in the target area, and the local authorities made no mention of an attack.

The squadron ORB describes the 12<sup>th</sup> as a “Big day: Manchesters flown by A Flight, NFTs”. (Night flying tests). The squadron now became the fourth unit in the Command to receive the type, after 207, 97 and 61 Squadrons, but the operational career of this troubled aircraft had a comparatively short time left. The group mounted daylight operations again on this day, in the form of cloud cover forays over Germany by single aircraft, and a small-scale effort against the cruisers at Brest. This was just one of thirteen operations of varying sizes to the port during the month. Some damage was caused by the singletons for the loss of one of their number, and the Brest contingent turned back early through insufficient cloud cover. 83 Squadron was not involved in either operation, but three officer pilots, including S/L Rainford, headed for Brest shortly after lunch time on the 13<sup>th</sup> to lay mines. Lack of cloud cover seems to have thwarted two of them, but S/L Rainford was successful, and then shot up an enemy coastal gun site on his way home. Members of A Flight collected a Manchester from Waddington on the 14<sup>th</sup>, while elements of B and C Flights prepared for operations that night. Ten Hampdens began to taxi towards the threshold in the late evening, all bound for Brest, five to target the enemy cruisers, and the



*An early Christmas present, though the aircrew assigned to the Avro Manchesters probably later realised they should have been careful what they wished for.*

others to lay mines. Somehow, P5393 and AE374 collided, causing the mine on board the former to detonate and destroy both aircraft. The pilot, P/O the Honourable W Parker, was killed along with a member of his crew, but the remaining crewmen and those of AE374 survived, and this tragic incident registered the squadron's final casualties of the year. It also prevented all but two miners and one bomber from taking off, and, of these, just Sgt Markides was able to fulfil his brief, and deliver his mine into the assigned location in the face of difficult conditions.

The focus on Brest continued for 83 Squadron on the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup>, when five sergeant pilots and their crews joined others to lay mines off the port, while a second element tried to bomb the cruisers. Twenty-four hours later, roles were reversed, as four 83 Squadron crews with officer pilots took off in the early evening, as part of a force of 120 aircraft to bomb the warships. F/L Campbell was last away at 18.01, and he made a timed run to drop his bombs in the general target area. The others could also only report bombing in the docks area, without catching sight of the vessels. The squadron bade farewell to S/L Kynoch on the 20<sup>th</sup>, as he was posted to Coningsby to take command of 97 Squadron. After a break in operations caused by the weather, daylight operations resumed for 5 Group on the 21<sup>st</sup>, with a dozen sorties to targets in north-western Germany. None was completed as briefed because of a lack of cloud

cover, and one aircraft failed to return. 83 Squadron was not involved on this day, but was called into action on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, when Sgts Rogers and Markides and F/O Cumming took off either side of 10.30, to attack enemy fighter airfields at Schiphol, Soesterberg and Leeuwarden. The futility of these operations was demonstrated again, when all three returned early through the absence of cloud. Cologne again escaped damage on the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, when a force of sixty-eight aircraft failed to locate it through cloud. Seven 83 Squadron Hampdens took off in the fading late afternoon light, led by F/L Campbell, and four reported bombing the city on estimated position, while the others went for alternative or last resort objectives.



*83 Sqn crewmen making their way to their Hampdens.*

The third Christmas Day of the war came and went, but, according to the ORB, “you can’t stop those Manchester boys flying”. Operations resumed on the 27<sup>th</sup>, when the squadron contributed seven Hampdens to a force of 132 bound for Düsseldorf in the early evening. F/L Campbell was again the senior pilot on duty as they took to the air either side of 17.00, having been briefed to aim for the marshalling yards. P/O Allcock lost an engine outbound, and bombed an unspecified aerodrome on the Dutch coast, while the others contributed to another disappointing effort that caused only slight damage within the city. The final operation of the year for 83 Squadron began in the early evening of the 28<sup>th</sup>, when seven aircraft took off for the synthetic rubber plant at Hüls, as part of an eighty-one-strong all-Hampden force. S/L Rainford led the 83 Squadron element, and he was one of those claiming to have bombed the primary target. F/L Campbell made two runs, after a wing bomb failed to release first time round. Returning crews claimed a successful operation, and reported many fires and large amounts of smoke.

Operational sorties were down on recent months at fifty-three from twelve operations, but over 280 training sorties had taken place, reflecting the pace of the working up process on Manchesters, which would lead to the first operations on the type late in the following month. Three aircraft had been lost, along with one complete crew and a pilot. For the Command in general, a black cloud continued to hang over it after twelve months of poor performances. Neither the crews nor Peirse were to blame for the fact that the equipment was not up to the task. In the light of experiences in the coming years, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that the demands from on high were often unreasonable. A major disappointment had been the failure of the three new aircraft types to fulfil expectations, and each had spent long periods of grounding, undergoing essential modifications. Things would change in the coming year with the arrival of a new and dynamic leader, into whose hands would be placed a “shining sword”, which, even now, was undergoing trials in the hands of 5 Group’s 44 Squadron.

## January 1942

The coming year would be one of gradual change, but, initially, it was indistinguishable from the old one, as the dominant theme continued to be the port of Brest and its lodgers. Eleven operations would be mounted against this target during January, beginning on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, although the day's operations began with a number of daylight roving patrols, known as "moling" operations, for which 49 Squadron carried the Scampton banner. That evening, while other groups attended ineffectively to Brest, thirty-six Hampdens were sent mining off the Frisians and Biscay ports. 83 Squadron sent two aircraft each to the Cinnamon and Beeches regions (la Rochelle and St Nazaire), and three to Deodars (Bordeaux), while two freshman crews delivered nickels (leaflets) to the Rennes area. Most of the 83 Squadron crews were able to deliver their mines as briefed, from between 500 and 750 feet, but F/O Cumming was engaged by heavy and accurate flak at St Nazaire, while making for Bordeaux, and brought his mine home after being thrown off course. F/L Campbell's navigator made a small error in his calculations, and by the time it had been rectified, the captained decided that insufficient fuel remained to complete the sortie. The nickellers delivered what Harris referred to as "toilet paper" from 10,000 feet, and Sgt Oliver evaded the attentions of a stalking BF109 by diving into cloud. This was the final operational activity on Hampdens for B Flight, as, according to the ORB, it was about to be "Manchesterised". S/L Rainford was up for dual training in a Manchester under the supervision of S/L Altmann on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and, thereafter, the rest of B Flight would undergo intensive training.

The Manchester required a seven man crew, comprising a pilot, second pilot, navigator, bomb-aimer, wireless operator/gunner and two gunners, and this triggered a mass influx of personnel from the training units, principally 25 O.T.U., and the exodus of some crews to the remaining Hampden units, with 49, 50, 106, 144 and 420 Squadrons the main beneficiaries. This process was already in full swing by the end of the first week of January, and Scampton would seem like a transit camp until conversion was complete. The gunners were packed off to Gunnery Training Flights, to familiarize themselves with the rotating turrets that would be their new home from hence forth, and a sprinkling of experienced Manchester fitters and riggers assisted ground crews in learning the ways of their new charges. When the weather allowed, the Manchesters were in the air to facilitate crew training, while C Flight retained its Hampdens to fly the squadron flag on operations.

Moling operations continued on the 4<sup>th</sup>, before a major assault took place on the enemy warships and the docks at Brest on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, when an effective smoke screen cloaked the results. 83 Squadron was not involved in these operations, and it was the early hours of the 7<sup>th</sup> before it next went to war, when launching three sorties as part of Operation Scuttle A, a night moling effort to attack towns in small numbers. F/O Cumming was sent to Münster, Sgt Phillips to Aachen and Sgt Rogers to Dorsten, and they were all safely airborne by 03.30. They each bombed on estimated position from around 14,000 feet, and returned without incident. Another large raid on Brest, involving 150 aircraft, was mounted on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, for which 83 Squadron put up six Hampdens, each with a sergeant pilot, while a seventh went to Cherbourg to bomb the docks. The latter, Sgt Oliver, searched for thirty minutes, but eventually brought his bombs home, after failing to locate the target. The Brest contingent experienced the usual difficulties in identifying the aiming points, and some bombed on estimated positions, while others brought their bombs back. Sgt Price delivered his bomb load onto the docks, after cloud prevented him from catching a glimpse of the ships, but he then wrecked AT127 in an emergency landing near

Grantham on return, happily, without injury to the occupants. The 9<sup>th</sup> proved to be a lovely day, the first of the year, and full advantage was taken to get the Manchesters into the air. S/L Altmann had to feather an engine, but that was a common occurrence, as the Rolls-Royce Vulture engines continued to be troublesome. F/L Campbell was posted to 420 Squadron RCAF at Waddington on this day, following its formation on Hampdens a week before Christmas, and he was presumably to take up an appointment as a flight commander under the former 83 Squadron leading light, W/C Joe Collier.

The squadron sat out the next attack on Brest on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, but contributed five Hampdens on the following night, to an attack on the main railway station at Wilhelmshaven, while a sixth joined a raid on the docks at Emden. Sgt Oliver took off at 16.45, bound for the main target, and crossed the coast at Mablethorpe as he climbed to 10,000 feet. It was at this point that the fuel pressure to the port engine dropped off, and the heating failed. He turned back, and was diverted to Coningsby because of fog at Scampton, and, once on the ground, his wireless operator had to be treated for frostbite. The others bombed from between 12,000 and 15,000 feet either side of 20.00, and, likewise, were all diverted on return. This was to be the final operational outing of the Hampden in 83 Squadron hands, and it was particularly sad, therefore that AE133 crashed onto the island of Sylt after being hit by flak, and Sgt Fletcher and his observer were killed, while the two gunners survived to fall into enemy hands. Earlier on the 10<sup>th</sup>, Sgt McKenzie had force-landed an unspecified aircraft, presumably a Manchester, in North Wales, but as nothing further is mentioned of the incident, it must be assumed that the aircraft was recovered and returned to service, and that there were no crew casualties. There would be no further operations for the squadron for the next two-and-a-half weeks, as it worked towards operational readiness on the Manchester. As events were to prove, the type was entering the final six months of its troubled operational career, when many of its faults had become manageable, and, indeed, in the hands of 106 Squadron, under the command of the soon-to-be-promoted W/C Guy Gibson, late of 83 Squadron, it would achieve a much improved level of serviceability. One thing is certain, however, its spectacular failure had caused the development of the Lancaster, which would demonstrate itself to be by far the outstanding bomber of the war.

The weather closed in on the 14<sup>th</sup>, with heavy snow falls, and these conditions persisted until the 23<sup>rd</sup>, when rain and sleet presaged a gradual thaw. Although 83 Squadron was inactive during this period, the rest of the Command was kept busy, and 5 Group played its part by participating in operations against Hamburg, Bremen, Emden, Münster, Brest and Hanover, as well as continuing with its highly effective mining role. The 24<sup>th</sup> was described as an English spring day with haze, and by the 25<sup>th</sup> the snow was all but gone, but it was freezing again twenty-four hours later. The squadron's first Manchester operation was scheduled for the 27<sup>th</sup>, when the enemy warships at Brest were to be the target, but the squadron's participation was scrubbed. The Manchester debut was delayed for just twenty-four hours, however, and at 19.22 on the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup>, W/O Whitehead lifted L7423 into the air, as the first of a contingent of four from 83 Squadron, and set course for the port of Boulogne to bomb the docks. Five minutes later, S/L Rainford took off in L7427, with W/C Tudor as second pilot, and this was, in fact, the commanding officer's first operation since joining the squadron. The operation was completed without major incident, and bombing took place from 8,000 to 13,000 feet between 20.57 and 21.30, although W/O Whitehead had two 500 pounders hang up, and his hydraulics became unserviceable on the way home.

On the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup>, S/L Altmann led the way at 17.32, as six 83 Squadron Manchesters took part in an attack on the docks at St Nazaire. They arrived over the target to find ten-tenths cloud, and S/L



*An aerial view of Lincoln shows how prominent a landmark the Cathedral was to wartime aircrew. Scampton itself lies outside the top left corner of the photograph.*

Altmann made a circuit to see if the visibility might improve. It did not, and not only was he unable to bomb, a jammed photo flash in the flare chute prevented the delivery of leaflets. Only F/Sgt Mackenzie bombed as briefed, while F/O Smith dropped three 500 pounders from 8,000 feet onto a flare path east of Rennes at 21.40. He then jettisoned the rest into the Channel north of Guernsey, as the port fuel tank showed insufficient reserves to get home with a bomb load. F/L McClure bombed the docks at Cherbourg from 11,000 feet at 21.50 as an alternative, and observed bursts in docks 3 and 4. Others either jettisoned their bombs or brought them home. During the course of the month, the squadron managed forty-five operational sorties on thirteen operations, but over 180 training and test flights were completed. Two aircraft were lost, and one crew.

## February 1942

There was very little operational activity for most of the first fortnight of the new month. 83 Squadron dispatched F/L Cook in the late afternoon of the 4<sup>th</sup> to lay mines in the Frisians, but he was recalled soon afterwards. Three Manchesters took off just before lunch time on the 6<sup>th</sup> to repeat the attempt, led by F/L McClure, and this time two of them were able to deliver their vegetables from 800 feet, while F/O Mackie made it all the way to the drop zone, only to suffer a hang-up, which could not be fixed despite strenuous efforts. Shortly before 02.00 on the 11<sup>th</sup> four of the squadron's Manchesters took off to attack the marshalling yards at Bremen, as part of a force of fifty-five aircraft. The aiming point could not be identified under a blanket of snow, and F/Os Mackie and Hazelden bombed the general area of the town from 9,800 and 15,000 feet respectively, while W/O Whitehead experienced excessive fuel consumption, and dropped three 1,000 pounders on Emden. He was forced to jettison others on the way home to maintain height, and brought back a solitary 1,000lb bomb that had hung-up. P/O Morphett jettisoned two 1,000 pounders live on an unidentified position just west of the mouth of the River Weser, and brought the rest home.

The thorn represented by the German cruisers at Brest was finally plucked out of the flesh of Bomber Command, in what turned out to be something of a fiasco. For over ten months, the Command had been forced to carry out attacks against these unsuitable targets, usually in the face of a spirited defence, and many brave crews had lost their lives, or fallen into captivity as a result. Some useful damage had been inflicted on the ships, but such precision targets were generally beyond the ability of the crews at that time, and distracted them from being more profitably employed against strategic objectives. The campaign against the raiders had continued on the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when only a third of the sixty-strong Wellington and Stirling force had bombed through cloud. Another attempt was made by eighteen Wellingtons on the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup>, and this proved to be the final one. Vice Admiral Otto Cilliak, the Brest Group commander, whose flag was on Scharnhorst, put Operation Cerberus into action shortly afterwards, when, at 21.14, the Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen slipped anchor and headed into the English Channel, under an escort of destroyers and E-Boats. It was an audacious bid for freedom, covered by widespread jamming and meticulously planned support by the Kriegsmarine and the Luftwaffe, all of which had been practiced extensively during January. The planning, and a little good fortune, allowed the fleet to make undetected progress, until spotted off le Touquet by two Spitfires piloted by G/C Victor Beamish, the commanding officer of Kenley, and W/C Finlay Boyd, who maintained radio silence and did not report their find until landing at 10.42 on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>.

In anticipation of such an eventuality, a plan had been prepared under the codename, Operation Fuller, which was so secret that few of those at grass roots level had much idea of its requirements. By the time that the German fleet was spotted, only 5 Group was standing by at four hours readiness. Frantic efforts were made to get Bomber and Coastal Command aircraft into the air, but it was 13.30 hours before the first ones took off, and the squally conditions and very low cloud base made target location almost impossible. Although a number of attacks were made, and despite the largest daylight commitment to date, amounting to 242 sorties, no bombs found the mark, and the ships passed through the Straits of Dover into open sea, making good their escape. Scharnhorst and, possibly, Gneisenau, struck mines, which slowed their progress to an extent, but they reached German ports by the following morning to heap great embarrassment on Britain and its government. Despite heroism on the part of the aircrews taking part, it was another painful episode in the saga of these ships, which was compounded by the loss

of a further fifteen Bomber Command aircraft during the operation. 83 Squadron launched six Manchesters between 13.55 and 15.02, but only F/O Smith reported seeing the target and carrying out an attack. He was unable to observe the results, after taking evasive action to avoid enemy aircraft, but did assert that two Heinkels had been shot down. The ORB summary sheet mentions one of his gunners receiving wounds as a result of action on this day, and also that the rear gunner in F/O McFarlane's crew, Sgt Whibley, had died as a result of wounds he had sustained. McFarlane had been awarded a DFC during January, but, curiously, the Order of Battle page does not mention his participation in Operation Fuller. This is just one of many discrepancies, and demonstrates the unreliability of squadron and group ORBs for unwary historians!

Two days later, a new Air Ministry directive opened the way to the blatant area bombing of Germany, without the pretence of aiming for industrial and military objectives, and this reaffirmed the all-out assault on the morale of the enemy civilian population, particularly its workers. Many erroneously believe ACM Sir Arthur T Harris to be the architect of this policy. He was not, but he was among its fiercest advocates, and, as these events were taking place, he was departing America's eastern seaboard in the armed merchantman, Alcantara, heading for England, where, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, he would take up the post of Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command. In the meantime, W/O Whitehead and P/Os Morphett and Hazelden took off either side of 23.30 on the 12<sup>th</sup>, to mine the waters off the Frisians, but visibility was very poor, with a cloud base at 1,200 feet, and only P/O Morphett was able to positively identify the drop zone, after making a timed run at 800 feet. Two nights later, almost a hundred aircraft were sent to Mannheim, among them a single representative from 83 Squadron. R5831 took off at 18.18 carrying the crew of P/O Cooper, who were sitting on top of the first 4,000lb "cookie" to be borne to Germany by the squadron. It was duly delivered from 11,000 feet, and its burst observed, but the local authorities described only a light raid.

It was back to mining for the squadron on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, when four crews took off in the early evening to return to the Frisians, led by S/L Rainford. The target area was found by using D/F (direction finding) fixes, and despite a cloud base down to between 400 and 500 feet, three crews were able to report a successful operation, while P/O McFarlane was defeated by the conditions and a hydraulics failure. This operation was repeated by W/O Whitehead and F/O Smith on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, when the former found the allotted drop zone after a timed run at 700 feet, but the latter had to deliver his mine on estimated position from 1,000 feet because of poor visibility. Hours after the gardeners had returned home, S/L Rainford, F/L McClure and F/O Mackie took off either side of 04.00, to join in a diversionary operation to cover an attack by the Fleet Air Arm on the Prinz Eugen, which was sheltering in a Norwegian fjord. The operation, involving fifteen Manchesters, Halifaxes and Stirlings, targeted four Norwegian airfields, of which Sola at Stavanger was assigned to the 5 Group element. Of the 83 Squadron trio, only S/L Rainford, who had just been awarded a Bar to his DFC, found the target area. Sadly, L7522 was shot down into the sea close to the airfield, and all on board lost their lives. The bodies of S/L Rainford, second pilot, the recently commissioned P/O Warren, and navigator, P/O Smith, were recovered and buried in Sola churchyard, where they remain to this day. This was the first 83 Squadron Manchester to be lost on operations.

When Harris returned to Bomber Command to take up the reins, he did so with firm ideas already in place, on how to win the war by bombing alone. He recognized the need to overwhelm the defences, by concentrating the maximum number of aircraft across an aiming point in the shortest possible time, and



*An official and contemporaneous German photograph of Gneisenau.*

this would bring an end to the former practice, whereby squadrons, and even crews, determined for themselves the details of their sorties. It was the birth of the bomber stream, which would be the basis for all future major operations against strategic targets. Harris was also firmly of the opinion that urban areas are most efficiently destroyed by fire rather than blast, and it would not be long before the bomb loads carried by his aircraft reflected this thinking. For the remainder of the month, however, he maintained the small scale attacks on German ports, and Kiel became the object of his attention, largely because of the presence there of the cruiser Gneisenau. 83 Squadron contributed seven Manchesters to an attack on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, but only the newly-promoted F/L Mackie managed to identify the aiming point, which he bombed from 10,000 feet, in what he described as a very effective glide attack. Four others bombed the Deutsche Werke shipyards from between 11,000 and 15,000 feet as an alternative, and on this occasion, it seems, the Gneisenau escaped damage.

It was on the following night, when a force of Wellingtons, Halifaxes and Hampdens returned to Kiel, to attack the floating dock at which Gneisenau was berthed, that the war threw up one of its great ironies. Having endured eleven months of constant bombardment at Brest, and now supposedly in the safe haven of its home port, the Gneisenau sustained a direct hit on her bows. After an inspection, it was concluded that the damage was beyond repair, and her sea-going career was ended for good. Shortly thereafter, her main armament was removed for use as a shore battery. This information was, of course, not available to the British authorities, and yet another attack was scheduled for the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron provided five Manchesters, led by the newly promoted S/L McClure, who experienced severe icing, and jettisoned some of his bombs to increase speed and maintain height. He descended to 1,300 feet over the target to look for the aiming point, but found himself still enveloped in ten-tenths ice-bearing cloud. P/O Morphett turned back with hydraulics failure, and F/O Hazelden with engine trouble, while P/O Smith and F/O Mackenzie bombed on DR on flak concentrations, the former in a stick two miles long. No bombs fell within the town area of Kiel, and two of the Scampton Manchesters experienced technical problems. During the course of the month, the squadron dispatched thirty-one operational sorties on ten operations for the loss of one aircraft and crew.

## March 1942

The first sign of a new hand on the tiller, and a portent of what was to come, occurred on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, for which the largest force yet for a single target was assembled. The objective was the Renault lorry factory at Billancourt in Paris, for which a detailed and meticulous plan was prepared. The operation was to be conducted in three waves led by experienced crews, with extensive use of flares to provide good illumination. To aid accuracy and avoid casualties among French civilians, bombing would take place from low level, and be condensed into a two hour period. 83 Squadron responded with its largest Manchester effort to date of ten, which would have been eleven, had one not suffered instrument failure at the last minute. A total of 235 aircraft took to the air, six of the Scampton Manchesters departing either side of 17.45, and the remaining four more than an hour later. S/L McClure was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty, and he delivered all of his bombs onto the target from 2,000 feet. The others joined in from between 1,000 and 6,000 feet, and all returned in jubilant mood, to report leaving the target a mass of flames. In all, three hundred bombs fell into the factory complex, destroying 40% of its buildings, and halting production for four weeks with the loss of almost 2,300 vehicles. It was an outstanding success in the face of light defences, and was gained for the loss of just one Wellington. The satisfaction arising from this operation was marred only by the almost inevitable collateral damage to nearby residential districts, in which 367 civilians lost their lives. It was somewhat paradoxical that Harris, as a champion of the area bombing policy, should gain his first major success by way of a precision target.

Essen was always to feature prominently in Harris's plans, and a series of three raids on consecutive nights began on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, led for the first time by Gee-equipped aircraft. 83 Squadron put up ten Manchesters, led again by S/L McClure, and they got away from Scampton either side of 01.30 to join two hundred other aircraft. The aiming point, as in all attacks on Essen, was the Krupp works, but industrial haze rendered identification of such a precise target impossible, and Gee was only capable of leading the force to the general area of the city. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 8,600 to 13,000 feet on estimated positions, or knowingly on alternative Ruhr towns, and only a few bombs fell in the southern half of Essen. The operation was, therefore, a failure, at a cost of eight aircraft, two of which were from 83 Squadron. L7426 was shot down outbound by the ace, Oblt Ludwig Becker of 6.NJG/2, and crashed into the Ijsselmeer, killing P/O Frost and his crew. Frost had earned the coveted DFM while serving with 144 Squadron on Hampdens. R5779 was also on its way to the target, when intercepted by another ace, Ofw Paul Gildner of II.NJG/2, over Holland. F/O Cooper died with four of his crew, but both gunners managed to save themselves to fall into enemy hands.

The operation was repeated on the following night with 180 aircraft, of which six Manchesters represented 83 Squadron, led by F/Ls Cook and Mackie. They took off between 20.29 and 20.57, and arrived in the target area to find that the prevailing conditions rendered pinpointing an impossible dream. Bombing took place from 7,000 to 13,000 feet on estimated positions, confirmed largely by flak concentrations, although F/L Cook deliberately selected Duisburg, knowing that continuing on to Essen was pointless. The result was the same as on the previous night, and the city escaped damage. The third attack by 120 aircraft took place without a contribution from 83 Squadron, and damage was again negligible. On a brighter note, however, the two participating Lancasters from 44 Squadron marked the debut at a German target of the type, which would ultimately dominate Bomber Command, and bring misery to the enemy homeland.

The main operation on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup> was conducted by a modest force of Wellingtons at Kiel, under cover of which, 5 Group mounted a mining effort in the same area. 83 Squadron contributed a single Manchester, piloted by P/O Shields, but a severe oil leak developed as he headed for Heligoland, and the arrival of dawn sealed his decision to turn back. On the following night, 130 aircraft were detailed for an operation to Cologne, which was to be led by Gee-equipped aircraft, of which seven represented 83 Squadron. They took off either side of 19.30, but Sgt Markides lost power, and jettisoned his bombs safe almost within sight of the Belgian coast, before turning back. P/O McFarlane was finding it difficult to gain altitude, and jettisoned two 1,000 pounders live onto the coast between Dunkerque and Ostend, before continuing on to the target, where he delivered the rest of his bomb load from 12,000 feet. The second pilot, F/Sgt Partridge, was given control for the entire operation, and, according to the ORB, did a good job. The other squadron crews bombed the target from 10,000 to 13,000 feet, and all but one returned to report large fires. This attack proved to be the first genuinely successful Gee-led raid, which caused much damage to industrial and residential areas alike. Much of the industrial damage occurred in the Nippes district, to the north of the city centre, west of the river, which was also the location of a major marshalling yards with railway workshops. The single failure to return from the entire force was 83 Squadron's L7423, which crashed near Nijmegen in Holland. F/O Bromiley and his wireless operator were the only survivors, and they soon found themselves in enemy hands.

The weather closed in at this point, and the bulk of the Command was forced to kick its heels for the next six nights. 83 Squadron returned to action with the departure from Scampton of six Manchesters either side of 15.00 on the 20<sup>th</sup>. They were bound for the Frisian Islands to mine the sea lanes, but very unfavourable weather conditions of low cloud and mist led to four jettisoning their loads, and just two managed to accurately deliver their vegetables. Sgt Markides encountered a cloud base at around 800 feet, and estimated the visibility to be 1,500 yards, as he made his timed run at 600 feet on a due-north heading. P/O Lumb was similarly successful, but then got into a fight with a BF110, which resulted in both limping away to fight another day. The poor weather persisted, keeping the aircraft on the ground until the early evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, when P/O Horner and his crew cut a lone furrow to the waters off Lorient to deliver some mines. He found moderate visibility in the target area, with light haze, and dropped his mines from 500 feet on a due-south heading into the approximate briefed location.

The first major bombing operation for almost two weeks took place on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, when 250 aircraft set off for Essen, among them six Manchesters from 83 Squadron led by S/L McClure. They were all safely away from Scampton by 20.43, as part of the largest force to be dispatched to a single target. Once in the target area, the crews found no cloud, a half moon and good visibility, although the usual industrial haze. S/L McClure delivered his bombs from 13,500 feet, and saw them burst among existing fires. P/O Shields reported a failure of his bomb release system, and by the time the hardware fell away, it had overshot the aiming point. P/O Lumb had to dump a 1,000 pounder over the sea in order to climb, and the rest he dropped over the target from 11,000 feet. 180 returning crews reported bombing the city, many claiming hits on the Krupp works, but, in truth, a decoy fire site at Rheinberg probably attracted the majority of the effort, and Essen once again escaped serious damage. It was a bad night for the Manchester brigade, which lost five of the twenty dispatched, an unsustainable 25%. 83 Squadron's L7465 crashed east of Antwerp in Belgium, killing Sgt Markides and his crew. R5831 struck a balloon cable on arrival over Kent, and crashed onto the island of Sheppey, with no survivors from the crew of Sgt Price. On the following night, while a force of 115 Wellingtons and Stirlings returned to Essen only



*L7465, OL-H, was one of eight Avro Manchesters lost whilst flying with 83 Sqn. This aircraft failed to return from Essen on the night of 25/26<sup>th</sup> March 1942, with the loss of Sgt. Paul Markides and his crew.*

to receive a bloody nose for little return, 83 Squadron sent four aircraft to mine the approaches to the Gironde Estuary. They got away just before 19.00, with F/L Mackie the senior pilot on duty, and, after P/O Horner returned early with instrument failure, the others were able to plant their vegetables accurately from between 500 and 600 feet, in good visibility beneath thin cloud.

Following the failures at Essen, the balance was redressed to some extent on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, Palm Sunday, when the Baltic port of Lübeck was selected for attention. Lübeck was an historic city, and like Hamburg and Bremen, a Hansastadt (free trade city), with traditions going back centuries. For Harris, who had been wrestling with the nightmare of trying to locate targets over a blacked-out, usually cloud and haze-covered country at night, it offered the prospect of a spectacular success that would deal a blow to the enemy's morale. Harris was confident that if his crews could positively identify a city, they would deliver an accurate and devastating attack. Lübeck's coastal location provided the answer to the navigational questions, while its narrow streets and half-timbered buildings, not to mention the paucity of its defences, would offer the ideal testing ground for a fire-raising-based formula for future operations. The attack was to be conducted on similar lines to the successful raid at Billancourt at the start of the month, and would again be led by Gee-equipped aircraft.



*Sgt. Paul Markides and the crew of Manchester L7465. Above left: P/O Christopher Danielsen; above right: F/S Albert Woodcock. Below, left to right: Sgt. Paul Markides; F/O Donald McConachie, RAAF; Sgt. Thomas Miller.*





*Left: G/C Charles Whitworth (third from right) was appointed station commander at RAF Scampton on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1942. He remained in post until June 1943. Right: G/C Whitworth (centre, with four-legged friend), inspects Scampton's vegetable garden to ensure that the produce is pulling its weight.*

Seven 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing, and told that they would be part of an overall force of 234 aircraft attacking this virgin target. Take-off from Scampton began at 21.16, with S/L McClure last away at 21.36 in R5830, but he was attacked by an enemy night fighter when approaching the western coast of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular. Accepting that he would not reach the target, he dropped his four 500 pounders manually a short distance inland, south-east of Tönning, before turning for home. He would have liked to jettison his cookie as well to help maintain altitude, but it refused to release, and he was forced to bring it home, and sacrificed everything else on board that could be thrown out to save weight. The other squadron participants bombed from between 6,500 and 10,000 feet, and were among 191 crews to report bombing as briefed. Reconnaissance revealed over fourteen hundred buildings had been destroyed, while almost two thousand others were seriously damaged. This amounted to about 30% of the city's built-up area, and it was the first major success for the Command's area bombing policy. It was also notification to the enemy of what lay in store for it over the years ahead. The operation cost twelve aircraft, among which was 83 Squadron's R5781, which crashed in northern Germany, killing F/O Lumb and his crew. This was the only major attack of the war on Lübeck by the RAF, after an agreement was negotiated by the International Red Cross, which used the port to ship medical supplies.

At 19.12 on the following evening, F/Sgt Partridge and crew took off in R5780, with the intention of mining the waters off the Frisian Island of Terschelling. Eleven minutes later they were back on the ground with a burst oil cooler, as the cursed Vulture engine continued to frustrate. This was the last of sixty-three sorties launched by the squadron during the month. Later on the 29<sup>th</sup>, the squadron bade farewell to F/L Cook DFC, on his posting to the Physiological Laboratory at Farnborough at the conclusion of his second tour. During the course of the month, the squadron took part in eleven operations involving fifty-nine sorties, for the loss of six aircraft and crews. Among awards gazetted during the month was a Bar to the DFC for F/O Smith and P/O McFarlane.

## April 1942

There was a low-key start to the new month, and most of the effort over the first four nights was directed at targets in France. 83 Squadron opened its account on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>, with a single sortie by F/Sgt Partridge as part of a fifty-five-strong force sent to attack the docks and shipping at le Havre. He took off at 19.02, dropped his bombs along the inner dock from 11,000 feet, and returned safely to land at 23.48. The squadron was not involved in operational flying during the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, but training went ahead, as second pilots underwent conversion. The first major operation of the month was mounted on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, by a new record force of 263 aircraft, the majority of whose crews had been briefed to attack the Humboldt engineering works in Cologne's central district of Deutz, on the eastern bank of the Rhine. 83 Squadron contributed just three Manchesters, including R5837, which contained the crew of P/O Morphett, with the new commanding officer-in-waiting, W/C Crichton-Biggie, beside him as second pilot. They took off either side of 01.00, and reached the target area to find that flak and cloud prevented a positive identification of the aiming point. They bombed on built-up areas of the city from between 10,500 and 14,000 feet, after making DR runs from identified landmarks.

Despite his experiences at Essen thus far, Harris could not leave it alone, and sent 157 aircraft there on the night after Cologne. 83 Squadron put up three Manchesters again, led this time by S/L McClure, who had come close to disaster just a week earlier. There was another late take-off, shortly before 01.00, and they were soon engulfed in foul weather conditions, with severe storms and icing. Few crews reached the target area to bomb, and one of those failing to do so was the squadron's R5790, which was caught in the explosion of a flak shell over the Ruhr. S/L McClure received a severe leg wound from a splinter, and tried to remain at the controls with second pilot, Australian, F/Sgt Rayment, assisting as best he could by leaning over from his jump seat. The bomb load was jettisoned from 16,000 feet, and, in the immediate post-incident confusion, both gunners took to their parachutes, and presumably became PoWs. Ultimately, Rayment was compelled to take over the pilot's seat, and brought the Manchester home to a safe landing at Coltishall, whereupon he received the immediate award of a DFM, while McClure was admitted to Norwich and Norfolk hospital.

Two nights later, a new record force of 272 aircraft set off in the late evening to attack the Blohm & Voss shipyards in Hamburg. 83 Squadron was represented by five Manchesters, and, this time, W/C Crichton-Biggie flew as second pilot with F/O Hazelden in R7484. They were approaching the target area at 15,000 feet, when engaged by intense flak, which, it seems, caused some damage to an engine. The decision was taken to jettison the bombs live, and turn for home, but the damaged engine failed, and in the darkness of the cockpit, the good engine was feathered in error. The mistake was quickly rectified, but Hazelden suggested afterwards that the engine controls should be identified by a red and green light to prevent a similar, possibly fatal incident in the future. The Manchester was famed for its inability to maintain height on one engine, but R7484 defied the odds to remain airborne at 4,500 feet for ninety minutes, until Horsham St Faith was reached. Less fortunate were P/O Morphett and crew in L7427, who were outbound over northern Germany when the last contact was made with them at 00.10. At this time, the Manchester was some forty miles south-west of Bremen, and crashed shortly afterwards, north-east of Cloppenburg, without survivors. P/O Sproule had taken off in R5837 an hour before the bombing contingent, as one of two crews from the squadron intending to drop leaflets in the Paris area. Hit by flak over the coast on the outward journey, the Manchester lost the use of its starboard engine, and was ultimately ditched. The pilot, alone of the eight men on board, managed to find the dinghy, and he spent

almost the next fifteen hours in it, until being rescued by the Air Sea Rescue Service. The additional crew member had been P/O Dyer, the squadron intelligence officer, who was gaining an insight into the lot of an operational crew. On a brighter note, these would prove to be the final Manchester casualties to be suffered by the squadron.

The night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup> was devoted to another attempt to deliver a decisive blow against Essen, but the forecast clear conditions over the city failed to materialize, and the raid, by an initial 250 aircraft, was another major disappointment. 83 Squadron put up four Manchesters, which were led away by F/O Oakley at 22.00, and each crew reported bombing in the general target area from between 11,000 and 15,000 feet, after being unable to identify the briefed aiming point. Two nights later 251 aircraft set off for a return to Essen, in what would be the eighth raid on the city in the last five weeks. 83 Squadron put up three Manchesters containing the crews of P/Os Oakley and Shields and F/O Smith, who took off shortly after 22.00, for what became another disappointing effort. Each bombed from 12,000 feet over the general area of the city, rather than the briefed aiming point, which was probably the Krupp works. F/O Smith was forced into violent evasive action as a night fighter attacked. The rear gunner, F/Sgt Davidson, was killed during the engagement, and the Manchester sustained severe damage, which resulted in the loss of an engine at the Dutch coast. Despite this, R5838 remained airborne, and a safe landing was carried out at Coltishall. On the following night, the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, the squadron dispatched two Manchesters to mine the waters off Heligoland, but F/Sgt Partridge was soon back in the circuit with technical problems. In contrast, F/O Rowe completed his sortie in R5790, and landed back at Scampton at 01.47, after what he described as an uneventful trip.

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, W/C Tudor concluded his tour as commanding officer, and he was posted to 5 Group HQ. He would not command again in Bomber Command, but he would receive a Mentioned in Despatches on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1943. He was succeeded by the already-mentioned W/C Crichton-Biggie, who had been attached to Scampton in preparation for his appointment. He was a flying officer as far back as 1935, but having reached the rank of wing commander without being decorated, one must surmise that he had little or no operational experience. It would fall to him to oversee the imminent conversion from Manchester to Lancaster, and two days later, the first one arrived to register the squadron as the fourth to receive the new type. The squadron was stood down for the conversion period, and missed two dismally ineffective raids on Dortmund on the nights of the 14/15<sup>th</sup> and 15/16<sup>th</sup>, and a moderately useful one on Hamburg on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>. Earlier on the 17<sup>th</sup>, six Lancasters each from 44 and 97 Squadrons had announced themselves to the Germans, by means of the audacious low-level daylight attack on the Maschinenfabrik Augsburg Nuremberg (M.A.N.) diesel engine factory at Augsburg, deep in southern Germany. The 44 Squadron element was caught by BF109s over France on the way out, and four were hacked out of the sky, while a fifth was shot down at the target. Two of the 97 Squadron element were also lost to flak as they carried out their attacks, but enough bombs hit the factory to cause substantial damage. S/L Nettleton was the only one from 44 Squadron to make it home, and he was awarded a Victoria Cross.

Over at Scampton, meanwhile, there was much interest and hope for the future invested in the Lancaster, after the short but testing time spent on Manchesters. Indeed, there was even impatience, as the new arrival was put through maintenance before the crews could get their hands on it. It was the 19<sup>th</sup> before the first Lancaster reached the conversion flight to allow training to begin. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, S/L Elliott was posted in from 25 O.T.U as a flight commander, and he was just one of a large influx of personnel

during the week. Also on this day, a dozen pilots were selected for conversion, which they completed on the 25<sup>th</sup> without a single incident. All flying personnel were eager to get the “gen” on the Lancaster from the newly qualified pilots, each of whom expressed complete satisfaction with the performance of the four-engine beast that was to see the squadron through to war’s end.

By this time, a series of four operations on consecutive nights against the Baltic port of Rostock had begun on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>. Encouraged by the great success at Lübeck a month earlier, Harris had selected Rostock for the same reasons, but a nearby Heinkel aircraft factory provided an added attraction. A small 5 Group element of eighteen aircraft was directed specifically at this target, while the main force of 143 went for the Altstadt, in which the narrow streets and tightly packed buildings were vulnerable to a fire-raising attack. It turned out to be a generally disappointing opening to the campaign, in which the majority of bombs fell outside of the target area, and, despite claims, no damage was inflicted upon the factory. The following night brought heavy bombing of the town centre, but again no hits on the factory, and it was only during the third attack that W/C Guy Gibson and his 106 Squadron crews managed to land bombs on it. By the end of the fourth raid, on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, over seventeen hundred buildings had been destroyed, and this amounted to 60% of the town’s built-up area. Five more Lancasters were taken on squadron charge on the 28<sup>th</sup>, and two days later, F/O Rowe carried out the first official A Flight test flight. During the course of the month, the squadron launched just twenty-four operational sorties on eight operations, and lost two aircraft and one crew. 246 training flights were also undertaken, in the push to attain operational status on the new type.



*R5852, here bearing the code OL-Y, served with 207 and 83 Sqns before being 'retired' to a training unit, 1654 CU. She was written off after crashing on overshoot at Conover, a small airfield in Shropshire, on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1942.*

## May 1942

According to squadron records, the weather at the start of May was good, although the group records suggest that the conditions prevented operations from taking place on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>. Throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 83 Squadron launched training flights, with the accent on cross-countries on the latter occasion. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> there was fighter affiliation, followed by circuits and landings, and on the 4<sup>th</sup>, as new crews continued to be formed, second pilots were trained as Manchester captains, and bomb-aimers were put through their paces on the range. The first operational sorties of the month involved four Manchester freshman crews delivering leaflets to the Paris area on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, and two other crews repeated the operation twenty-four hours later.

In the meantime, as the squadron continued training in excellent weather conditions, the Command sent eighty aircraft to Hamburg on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, with just a token effort of five Hampdens representing 5 Group. Despite complete cloud cover, which forced bombing to be carried out on estimated positions, over a hundred fires were started, half of them classed as large. This was followed by a three-raid series on Stuttgart on consecutive nights, beginning on the 4/5<sup>th</sup>. 5 Group made a larger contribution to each, and sent Lancasters to target military barracks on this night, while the Hampden element aimed for the Bosch spark plug factory. Not one of the three attacks was successful in the face of complete cloud cover or haze, but, at least, there were no casualties among the 5 Group participants. Sadly, a disaster awaited a few days hence, when yet another Baltic port, Warnemünde, was the objective on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>. The Heinkel aircraft factory was the main attraction in the town for 190 aircraft, of which almost a third represented 5 Group. Nineteen aircraft failed to return from what turned out to be an ineffective raid, and 44 Squadron lost four Lancasters, each with an eight-man crew. Only a single gunner survived to be taken prisoner, and among those killed was the recently appointed commanding officer, W/C Lynch-Bloss.

The weather turned at this point, and mining became the main activity for the next ten nights. Training continued apace at Scampton when the weather allowed, and by the 18<sup>th</sup>, the crews were becoming bored and wishing they could return to operations. Searchlight co-operation exercises took place on the 19<sup>th</sup>, to provide much needed practice for the searchlight battery crews. The recently arrived S/L Ray Hilton was stooging around over Grantham, when his Lancaster collided with a Manchester and lost its starboard wing tip. The starboard-outer engine also failed, but he was able to bring the aircraft home to a safe landing. Meanwhile on this night, almost two hundred aircraft were involved in an attack on Mannheim, the first major operation since Warnemünde. 5 Group put up thirty-two aircraft for what was another disappointing effort, which largely missed the city. This was followed by another lull in operational activity, but there was a lot going on behind the scenes at Bomber Command HQ, as preparations were put in place for what could be a “make-or-break” operation for the future of RAF strategic bombing.

Ever since the publication of the damning Butt report in the previous August, loud voices in high places, principally in the Admiralty, had been calling for the dissolution of an independent bomber force, in favour of committing available resources to combatting the U-Boot menace in the Atlantic. Reversals in the Middle East were also making claims on bomber aircraft, and it was clear to Harris that he needed a success or two, and perhaps, a dose of symbolism, to silence the critics, and thereby guarantee the future of the Command. On taking up his post as C-in-C, he had suggested that he could win the war with four thousand aircraft, and whilst there was not the slightest chance of getting them, he needed to ensure that

those earmarked for him were not spirited away, to what he considered to be less deserving causes. Out of this was born the Thousand Plan, Operation Millennium, the commitment of a thousand aircraft in one night, to erase from the map an important German city. Harris did not have a thousand front-line aircraft, and in order to reach the magic figure, he would need the assistance of other Commands, principally Coastal and Flying Training, and this was forthcoming in letters received from them on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> respectively. Following an intervention by the Admiralty, however, Coastal Command underwent a change of heart, and withdrew its support, and offered, instead, a handful of navigators to help out. Undaunted, Harris, or more likely his able deputy, Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, scraped together every airframe capable of achieving some semblance of controlled flight, and pulled in the screened crews from their instructional duties. In this way, come the night, not only would the figure of one thousand aircraft be reached, it would be comfortably surpassed.

The arrival at bomber stations from Yorkshire to East Anglia of a motley collection of aircraft from training units, gave rise to much speculation. As usual, of course, only the local population and the NAAFI staff knew what was really going on. The main outstanding question for the raid planners concerned the weather, and as the days ticked by inexorably towards the end of May, this was showing no signs of cooperating. Harris was acutely aware of the danger that the giant assembly of aircraft might draw attention to itself, and compromise security, and the time was fast approaching when the operation would have to be launched, or be scrubbed for the time being. At Scampton, all serviceable aircraft were ordered into the sky for night flying tests on the 27<sup>th</sup>, and there was a big “buzz” about an operation that night. In the event, the crews were stood down in a mood of anticipation that tomorrow would be the day. The weather put paid to that hope early on, and matters were not improving on the 29<sup>th</sup> until after lunch, when it seemed that the “big op” was back on! No such luck! Harris decided to release the valve and allow an operation to take place that night, if only to convince the Germans that it was business as usual.

At the end of April, an attack had been attempted on the Gnome & Rhône aero-engine factory at Gennevilliers in Paris, and it was decided to send a force of seventy aircraft there to try to rectify that night’s failure. It gave 83 Squadron the opportunity to launch its Lancaster era, and three of the type lined up for take-off shortly before 00.30. The pilots and aircraft were F/O Sproule in R5621, P/O Partridge in R5564 and F/Sgt O’Hara in R5620. Photographic reconnaissance showed the operation to be as ineffective as the first, and collateral damage to more than eighty houses resulted in the deaths of thirty-four French civilians, with a further 167 sustaining injury. Earlier in the evening, three freshman crews had taken off in Manchesters to deliver leaflets to the Rouen area of France, and P/O Shields went to mine the waters off Fanø Island, Denmark, in Lancaster R5566. All returned safely, and were thus available to participate in the truly historic operation that was to take place on the following night.

It was in a tense atmosphere of frustration and uncertainty that “morning prayers” began at High Wycombe on the 30<sup>th</sup>, and all attention was fixed on Harris’s chief meteorological adviser, Magnus Spence. After delays, while he awaited the latest reports, he was able to give a qualified nod in the direction of the Rhineland as the region of Germany most likely to experience a break in the cloud after midnight, and even hinted at the possibility of moonlight. North-western Germany, wherein lay Harris’s first choice of Hamburg, would remain hidden under buckets of cloud, and thus did the fickle finger of fate point at Cologne, and decree that it would bear the dubious honour of hosting the first one thousand bomber raid in history. That night, the first of 1,047 aircraft began departing from their stations at around



*Ready for Operation Millenium. 83 Sqn Lancasters prepare to depart for the Thousand Bomber Raid on Cologne. Note the line up of 49 Squadron Manchesters in the background.*

22.45 hours, some of the older training hacks doing so somewhat reluctantly, lifted, perhaps, more by the enthusiasm of their crews, than by the power of their engines. A proportion of these, incapable of climbing to a respectable height, would fall easy prey to the defences, or be brought down by mechanical failure. The squadrons with four-engine aircraft were the last away, and they would form the third and final wave of the attack. 83 Squadron dispatched thirteen Lancasters, and six Manchesters, including two borrowed from 49 Squadron's conversion flight. They got away either side of midnight, with both flight commanders, S/Ls Elliott and Hilton, on duty, W/C Crichton-Biggie hitching a ride with the latter in R5565. Three Manchesters turned back early with a variety of malfunctions, but the remainder pressed on to find the weather conditions over the city exactly as Spence had predicted, even to the arrival of moonlight as the attack opened. S/L Elliott bombed from 15,000 feet, and reported that flak opposition was almost non-existent. In contrast, P/O Shields delivered his bomb load from a perilously low 4,000 feet according to the ORB, and must have been in danger from the hardware descending from above! Perhaps the figure 1 was missing from a more likely 14,000 feet? The others bombed from between 10,000 and 15,000 feet, and a total of 868 crews returned to report bombing the primary target. S/L Hilton described seeing at least five aircraft shot down.

The operation was, by any standards, an outstanding success, and destroyed over 3,300 buildings in exchange for a new record loss of forty-one aircraft. At 3.9%, this was a sustainable figure, on a night when conditions were favourable to attackers and defenders alike, and the scale of success, to some extent, eclipsed the casualty figures. There were no losses among the 83 Squadron contingent, but R5768 was badly shot up by flak, causing hydraulics failure, and it was crash-landed at Scampton by P/O MacDonald, happily without crew casualties and very little additional damage. Sgt Irvine was in one of the 49 Squadron Manchesters, which suffered starboard engine failure as he approached the circuit, and, with flaps down, he was unable to maintain height. He also crash-landed, in his case at Ingham, and, again, all on board walked away unscathed. The ORB captured the mood of the squadron following this night; "Here's what we've all been waiting for. Over 1,000 bombers on Cologne, and nearly everyone in the squadron was flying. Those who were unable to go were very disappointed." During the course of the month the squadron launched fifteen Lancaster and thirteen Manchester sorties on six operations.



*One of a number of Lancasters that would bear the code OL-M. The aircraft is landing on the grass runway at Scampton. Certain features of the airfield have been removed by the censor.*

## June 1942

An important aspect of the Cologne operation, was the boost it gave to the folks at home, and, although the critics would never be entirely silenced, Harris had made his point and ensured that their discontent would now be expressed in more whispered tones. While the enormous force remained assembled, Harris was eager to exploit its potential again at the earliest opportunity, and selected Essen as its next target, on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> of June. The losses and battle damage arising out of Cologne reduced the number of available aircraft to 956, but this was still a massive force capable of inflicting serious damage on one of Harris's prime targets. 83 Squadron contributed a dozen Lancasters and a single Manchester, and this would be the final operational sortie by the latter type in service with the squadron. Take-off began with S/L Elliott at 23.06, and continued until 00.22, but S/L Hilton was forced to return early with a fuel-feed problem that left him with insufficient petrol to undertake the full round trip. F/O Sproule also turned back with engine trouble, leaving the others to continue the operation, which was planned on similar lines to Cologne, although the outcome would be in no way comparable. As always, identifying the city through cloud and haze proved beyond the crews, even with increased use of flares from the leading aircraft. As a result, the bombing was scattered across eleven towns, with little falling where intended. So closely packed are the towns and cities of the Ruhr that something urban was almost certain to be hit, and Oberhausen seems to have been the major recipient, along with Duisburg. The 83 Squadron participants bombed from between 12,000 and 20,500 feet on estimated positions, and all but one returned to express doubts about the effectiveness of the raid. Thirty-one aircraft failed to return from this disappointing operation, and among them was R5564, which is presumed to have crashed into the North Sea, taking with it the crew of P/O Busby, and only one body eventually washed ashore. This was the first of many Lancasters to be lost by the squadron on operations.

A conventional force of 195 aircraft set off to return to Essen late on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, with an 83 Squadron contribution this time of just five Lancasters taking off just before midnight. S/L Hilton was on duty again, and, for the second night running, he had to abort his sortie after an engine failed. P/O Farrow had reached Southwold and was at 4,000 feet, when a fuel-feed problem affected both port engines. He jettisoned his 4,000 pounder safe, but it exploded on impact, and the blast was felt in the aircraft. The three remaining squadron crews bombed from between 16,000 and 19,000 feet, after pinpointing on the river, and they observed bomb bursts and fires on the ground. The attack again failed to find the mark, and Harris would have to wait until the following year, before the advent of new electronic devices enabled him to hit this and other Ruhr cities hard. Some compensation was gained at Bremen on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, when 83 Squadron contributed three Lancasters to an overall force of 170. They took off shortly after 23.00, but F/L Smith experienced technical problems and had to turn back. F/O Sproule and F/L Hazelden bombed from 15,000 and 19,000 feet respectively, having used a Gee-fix confirmed by ground detail, but were not enthusiastic at debriefing about the prospects of a successful outcome. In fact, it had been a relatively destructive attack, in which housing had sustained the bulk of the damage.

The 4<sup>th</sup> was a very hot, sunny day, and 83 Squadron took advantage of the conditions to send some crews on cross-country exercises, while others carried out dusk and night-time landings. Only minor operations were mounted that night, none of which involved the squadron, and it also took no part in another failure at Essen on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>. Over 230 aircraft were called into action on the following night, when the port of Emden was the target for a highly effective raid, which destroyed three hundred houses. 83 Squadron contributed nine Lancasters, which were all safely airborne by a few minutes before midnight,

led by S/Ls Elliott and Hilton. This time it was the former who experienced engine failure, and jettisoned his cookie safe into the North Sea from 14,000 feet, when some seventy miles short of the Frisians. F/Sgt O'Hara lost both outboard engines, and also turned back after dumping his cookie seventy-five miles out from Mablethorpe. The others reached the target by pinpointing on the coastline, confirmed by a Gee-fix, and bombed from between 13,500 and 19,000 feet, before returning to report bomb bursts and fires within the town's built-up area. Sgt Irvine carried out the squadron's only operational sortie on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, when undertaking his maiden operation as a Lancaster captain, delivering leaflets to Paris.

Essen was back on for the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, when the squadron put up seven Lancasters, while two others were sent to bomb the docks at Dieppe. The bombing contingent took off either side of 23.30, with F/L Smith the senior pilot on duty, but it quickly turned into a night to forget. F/O Sproule got as far as Norwich, before fuel feed problems forced him to turn back, and similar difficulties afflicted P/O Partridge, when seventy miles out from Skegness. Three crews reached the general target area to bomb from 18,000 to 20,000 feet on estimated positions, F/L Smith ultimately believing that Gelsenkirchen had received his bombs. Two crews failed to make it to debriefing, those of F/L O'Hara and F/O Rowe in R5640 and R5659 respectively. Both crashed in Germany, the former east of Wesel and the latter north-west of the target, and there were no survivors from either crew. The operation, carried out by an initial 170 aircraft, went the way of the previous attempts at Essen, with scattered bombing and minor damage. Meanwhile, P/O Hodgson and Sgt Irvine were unable to identify Dieppe, the former dumping his bombs, while the latter returned his to store.

While wounds were licked on the 9<sup>th</sup>, a crew reorganisation took place at Scampton to bring the strength up to ten per flight. At the same time, the remaining Manchester captains were sent for conversion training. Minor operations held sway during the period, and, on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, the squadron carried out mining-laying duties in the Geranium region off Swinemünde on the Baltic coast, and the Nectarines region around the Frisians. The five Lancasters bound for the Baltic took off between 21.58 and 22.18, with S/L Hilton last away, and first back just five minutes later, after being unable to raise the undercarriage and flaps of R5667. P/O Hodgson also returned early in R5629, after a hydraulics malfunction prevented the bomb doors from opening. R5621 made it all the way to the Baltic, where it came under fire from a flak ship and exploded, throwing clear F/O Sproule and two of his crew, who miraculously survived to fall into enemy hands. It will be recalled that this pilot had been the sole survivor of a Manchester ditching described earlier. F/L Hazelden and P/Os Farrow and Partridge delivered their mines into the allotted locations from between 600 and 1,000 feet, assisted by the Northern Lights and almost daylight conditions for most of the trip. The three crews bound for the Frisians took off shortly after 01.30, and P/O MacDonald delivered his mines into the briefed location from 800 feet by means of a Gee-fix. He returned to report an aircraft diving into the sea and exploding in the target area. This was almost certainly R5636, which disappeared without trace, and took with it the crew of P/O Mackay<sup>7</sup>. Later on the 12<sup>th</sup>, S/L McClure returned to the squadron, although his foot was still in plaster. His arrival coincided with a period of unfavourable weather, which kept the Command mostly on the ground.

83 Squadron stayed at home, when 106 aircraft took off on the 16<sup>th</sup> to carry out the last of five raids on Essen during a sixteen-night period. Only sixteen crews reported bombing in the target area, and the city

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<sup>7</sup> The 83 Squadron and 5 Group ORBs show P/O Mackay as the captain, and F/O Williams as navigator. In *Bomber Command Losses 1942* Bill Chorley records F/O Williams as the captain and P/O Mackay as second pilot.

escaped damage again. During the course of these operations over sixteen hundred sorties had been launched for the loss of eighty-four aircraft, for no gain in terms of industrial damage. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, seven 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready for mining operations in the Frisians that night. Whether it was during the start-up procedure for this operation or for a training flight is uncertain, but aircraftsman Palmer was killed, when the undercarriage collapsed as he was standing under a nacelle priming the engine. Another member of ground crew was also involved, but he had sufficient clearance to crawl out from underneath. They took off after 01.00, with S/L Hilton the senior pilot on duty, and all but one delivered their vegetables as briefed from heights ranging from 300 to 3,000 feet. F/Sgt Williams dropped his in a salvo six miles north-east of the target area, after running into flak and sustaining damage to the port wing, which caused the Lancaster to vibrate violently and spiral to port. He managed to maintain control by using trim and high speed to keep the wings level, and made a fast but safe landing on return.

Following the successful attack on Emden earlier in the month, a series of three more raids against it in four nights began on the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, for which 83 Squadron contributed five Lancasters to an overall force of 194 aircraft. They took off either side of midnight, but P/O MacDonald returned early from sixty miles out over the North Sea, after his rear gunner passed out through oxygen starvation caused by a frozen tube. Three others from the squadron returned to report bombing the primary target from between 15,000 and 19,000 feet, while another attacked Osnabrück, which actually received more bombs than the intended target. The squadron did not participate in the disappointing attack on Emden on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, in which around a hundred houses were damaged. On the following afternoon, seven crews were briefed for mining operations that night off the Frisians, and they took off shortly after midnight led by F/Ls Hazelden and Smith. They delivered their mines in good visibility into the briefed locations from 1,500 to 2,800 feet, either by Gee-fix or timed runs from an identified pinpoint, and returned safely to report an uneventful operation. A more effective operation against Emden on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup> resulted in the destruction of fifty houses and damage to a further one hundred, but even so, the outcome was not commensurate with the commitment of over 220 aircraft, and decoy fires may have drawn off a proportion of the effort. 83 Squadron did not take part, and F/O Rayment and his crew were the only ones to operate on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup>, when they took off at 23.59 to join twenty others, presumably freshmen, to bomb the docks at St Nazaire. It was Rayment's first operation as a Lancaster captain, and he carried out his attack from 17,000 feet, before returning safely.

The Thousand Force was reassembled for one final time in an attempt to repeat the success of Cologne, and erase the memory of the failure at Essen. The target on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup> was the Hansastadt, Bremen, for which 960 Bomber Command aircraft were mustered, along with a handful from Army Co-operation Command, and 102 aircraft from Coastal Command. The last-mentioned had been ordered by Churchill to take part, and although its contribution was classed as a separate operation, it meant that the total number of 1,067 aircraft proceeding to the target, exceeded the size of the Cologne force. 5 Group contributed 142 Lancasters, Manchesters and Hampdens, on the night that would be the swansong for the beleaguered Manchester before its retirement to training duties. 83 Squadron had a record sixteen Lancasters lined up for a take-off either side of midnight, and fellow Scampton residents, 49 Squadron, which was in the process of converting, was able to launch its very first Lancaster sortie. Both flight commanders were on duty as all became airborne by 00.01, and W/C Crichton-Biggie hitched a ride with S/L Hilton. The 5 Group element was tasked with identifying and bombing the Focke-Wulf aircraft factory, but complete cloud cover thwarted their efforts, and most bombed the general area of the main

town. The 83 Squadron contingent released their loads of six 1,000 pounders and incendiaries each from 10,000 to 17,000 feet, two going intentionally for the alternative targets of Bremerhaven and Wilhelmshaven. Though not comparing with the results at Cologne, this operation was, never-the-less, responsible for destroying 572 houses, and damaging over six thousand more, while also hitting a number of important industrial concerns. The cost, however, was considerable, and amounted to a record loss of forty-eight aircraft, of which a staggering thirty were from the training units. 83 Squadron's R5620 crashed around twenty miles south-west of Bremen, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Farrow.

The first of a number of follow-up operations by more conventional forces took place on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, without an 83 Squadron contribution, and some further damage was achieved. On the following night, 83 Squadron sent F/O Rayment and F/Sgts Williams and Calvert to deliver mines into the waters off Bordeaux, while F/Sgt Marchant bombed the docks at St Nazaire, and all returned safely after fulfilling their briefs. The squadron operated for the final time during the month on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, when sending a dozen Lancasters back to Bremen as part of a 250-strong force. Another late take-off saw them all safely airborne shortly before midnight, led by S/L Elliott, and all reached the target area to encounter cloud and generally unfavourable conditions for precision bombing. They each delivered a cookie and incendiaries from between 16,000 and 21,000 feet, based on dead-reckoning confirmed by a Gee-fix, and returned safely to report intense flak, and the glow of bomb bursts beneath the cloud. Local reports detailed extensive damage to five important war industry factories, including Focke-Wulf, while residential destruction was relatively light. During the course of the month the squadron launched ninety-eight Lancaster sorties and a single one by a Manchester on seventeen operations, for the loss of six Lancasters and crews.



*One of the first production batch of Lancasters, L7540, OL-U, joined from 44 (Rhodesia) Sqn, the first unit to operate the type. She survived the experience of serving with 83 Sqn and moved on to 207 Sqn. She eventually wound up at 5 Lancaster Finishing School where she was struck off charge after overshooting on landing at Waddington on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1944. This photo, which shows trolleys laden with 'cookies' about to be loaded for delivery, also makes clear the exposed conditions in which ground crews worked whilst maintaining the hard-worked aircraft.*

## July 1942

The new month began at Scampton with the continuing training programme for gunners, wireless operators and the new position of flight engineer, the last-mentioned replacing a second pilot. Many of those receiving training for this important role were "Halton Brats", men who had undergone engineering apprenticeships at the RAF's technical school in Buckinghamshire. The third, final and largest follow-up raid on Bremen took place on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, at the hands of over 320 aircraft, of which eleven Lancasters were provided by 83 Squadron. They became airborne in the minutes leading to midnight, with S/L Elliott the senior pilot on duty, and all but one reached the target area. F/Sgt Goodfellow jettisoned his bombs live some forty miles out from Cromer, after losing port engine revolutions, leaving the others to press on to find good visibility, but ground haze, in the target area. The haze made identification of the precise aiming point difficult, but crews were able to pinpoint on the River Weser, which glistened in the moonlight, and those from 83 Squadron delivered their single cookie and incendiaries into the general city area from 12,000 to 22,000 feet between 01.42 and 02.12. Local reports put the damage at a thousand houses and a number of industrial premises, and seven ships were hit in the port, one of them sinking. Despite these successes, much of the bombing fell beyond the city's southern fringe. Later on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, P/O McDonald took off for Preston in the station's communications Anson, and had to force-land at Burtonwood after losing a propeller.

During the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup>, daylight high-level formation practice flights were carried out, giving rise to speculation about a possible forthcoming operation. Wilhelmshaven provided the next target on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, for which S/L Hilton led the 83 Squadron contingent of ten Lancasters in an overall force of 285. They took off in a half-hour slot after midnight, and arrived in the target area to find clear skies, which allowed them to pinpoint on the coastline, before running in on the city. F/Sgt Goodfellow arrived early before the flare force, and was unable to recognise ground detail, but most others could pick out the distinctive shape of the docks, and the all-incendiary bomb loads were delivered from 15,000 to 19,000 feet between 01.38 and 02.12. According to local reports, some damage was inflicted upon housing and dock installations, but most fell into open country to the west of the town.

Bad weather kept most of the Command on the ground on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, before briefings took place on a number of 5 Group stations on the 11<sup>th</sup>, to prepare crews for the operation that had been the source of speculation. It was an experiment in tactics, involving forty-six Lancasters, nine each from 83, 61, 97 and 106 Squadrons, and ten from 207 Squadron. The plan called for a low-level crossing of the North Sea in formation, until approaching Denmark, at which point, the force was to split up and each aircraft climb independently into the forecast cloud. They were then to follow the Baltic coast to the target of Danzig, arriving at dusk to attack the U-Boot construction yards from normal bombing height. The return leg of the 1,700 mile round trip would be completed under cover of darkness, and this was the longest range operation yet attempted by the Command. S/Ls Hilton and Elliott led the 83 Squadron contingent away before 17.00, each with a second pilot on board to create eight-man crews. The 106 Squadron element was led by the former 83 Squadron stalwart, W/C Guy Gibson. In the event forty-four aircraft took off, each carrying five 1,000 pounders, but Sgt Irvine lost his port-outer engine, and, uncertain of his position, turned back some thirty miles west of Ejsberg on the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular. P/O Rayment flew through continuous bad weather until about six minutes from the Danzig



*Lancaster R5610, OL-G of 83 Sqn at Scampton in July 1942. The aircraft was lost on an operation to Frankfurt on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1942 with the loss of four crew KIA and two captured. The pilot, F/L O.R. Matheson evaded capture.*

coast, where he found the cumulonimbus cloud to be down to sea level, at which point he jettisoned his bombs and turned back.

The plan had initially worked well, but too much cloud, much of it down to 500 feet near the Danish coast, forced the formations to split up to search individually for their navigation pinpoints. This delayed them, to the extent that it became dark before many could identify the U-Boot yards, and they bombed the general area of the city instead. However, twenty-four crews returned to report bombing the yards as briefed, and among these were some of the Scampton brigade. P/O Partridge was first to carry out an attack, at 22.15 from 4,000 feet, having map-read along a river right to the aiming point. The flak was fierce, and his Lancaster picked up some damage, as did F/Sgt Williams's, fifteen minutes later, when he bombed from 1,400 feet, and was hit in the belly by light tracer. F/Sgt Calvert and S/L Hilton arrived at 22.35 at 2,000 and 2,500 feet respectively, and the former's wireless operator, Sgt Villeneuve, was hit in the leg by a bullet, but continued with his duties until clear of the target. The gunners from each of these crews shot out searchlights and strafed shipping, after which a safe return was accomplished, and the participants were able to express frustration at the conditions. S/L Elliott had overshot the target area by a considerable distance, took photos of Pillau, well to the east of Danzig, and bombed railway tracks at Zarow, north-west of Stettin, on the way back.

F/O S. P. "Pat" Daniels was posted in from 10 O.T.U on the 12<sup>th</sup>, having previously served on Whitleys with 4 Group's 58 Squadron, and he would quickly rise through the ranks to a position of command. On the night of his arrival, Sgts Oakes, Jenkinson and Irvine were sent mining off the Frisians. They took off either side of 01.30, and encountered ten-tenths cloud in the target area, but delivered their mines



*Pilot Officer (later Wing Commander) Harold Shields, DFC, AFC, MiD and his son Brian outside Buckingham Palace after he was awarded the DFC following a daylight raid on the Krupps factories in Essen on 18th July 1942 (Brian Shields).*

into the briefed locations from 3,000 to 4,000 feet on Gee-fixes, before returning safely. A series of five operations against Duisburg began on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, without a contribution from 83 Squadron. Cloud and electrical storms were encountered, which led to scattered bombing and only modest property damage. Mining in various regions occupied the following night, and seven 83 Squadron Lancasters began departing Scampton at 22.59, all to head for western France, three to ply their trade in the Gironde Estuary, and four to continue further south along the river into the port of Bordeaux itself. They encountered mist and low cloud in the target area, and, those following the course of the river, were subjected to searchlights and light flak from both banks. F/Sgt Goodfellow was unable to find his pinpoint in the poor visibility, but the others delivered their mines in or close to the allotted location from 800 to 1,300 feet between 01.33 and 02.23.

After a period of bad weather, four 83 Squadron Lancasters took off shortly before 11.00 on the 18<sup>th</sup>, to join six other Lancasters for an audacious daylight attack on the Krupp works at Essen, under Operation Porpoise. The intention was to bomb through the cloud using Gee, but P/O Rayment felt the cloud cover was insufficient, and turned back shortly after

crossing the Dutch coast. The remaining three 83 Squadron crews were the only ones to bomb the primary target, and did so from the dangerously low altitude of 6,000 to 6,500 feet. The cloud cover was not as complete as forecast, and S/L Hilton described it as totally inadequate. Inevitably, the trio came under intense flak opposition, and R5622 was badly shot-up, resulting in splinter injuries to mid-upper gunner, P/O Stimpson. P/O Shields coaxed the wounded Lancaster home to an impressive one-wheel landing at Martlesham Heath. P/O Partridge's R5626 was attacked and holed by a FW190, and his wireless operator, Sgt Ridd, also sustained splinter wounds. As a result of this and the Danzig operation, immediate awards were made in the form of a DFC and Bar to P/O Partridge, a Bar to his DFC for S/L Hilton, and a DFC to P/O Shields.



*20-year-old Sgt Ralph Wilson RAAF, from Brisbane, was lost without trace along with the crew of Lancaster R5619 during the attack on Duisburg of 25/26<sup>th</sup> July 1942.*

The night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> brought an attack by ninety-nine four-engine aircraft on the Vulkan U-Boot yards at Vegesack in Bremen. The intention was to bomb visually if the conditions allowed, or on Gee if cloud cover was complete. 83 Squadron contributed seven Lancasters led by S/L Elliott, and they departed Scampton either side of midnight. All bombed as briefed from 16,000 to 20,000 feet between 01.59 and 02.30, six on Gee, and the seventh on e.t.a., after the Gee equipment failed, and all returned safely. The series against Duisburg continued on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, when almost three hundred aircraft were dispatched, among them nine Lancasters from 83 Squadron led by S/Ls Elliott and Hilton. They were all safely airborne by the stroke of midnight, and reached the target area to find moonless but clear conditions, which allowed them sight of the ground. The flare force was a little late, but once the target was illuminated, the crews were able to pick out ground detail, particularly the Rhine and docks, and make their approaches accordingly. Flak was less intense than might normally be expected at this target, and the 83 Squadron participants took advantage to deliver their all-incendiary loads from 13,000 to 20,000 feet, between 01.32 and 01.48. F/Sgt Calvert reported a bombing time of 01.05, after fixing his position by Gee, and he did not, therefore, have

the benefit of flares to help his cause. According to local reports, moderate damage was inflicted upon residential districts, with some hits also upon important industrial concerns. Some two hours after the departure of the Duisburg contingent, F/L Matheson took off to mine the waters south of Texel, and completed his task from 800 feet in good visibility.

Two nights later, the squadron contributed nine Lancasters to the third attack of the series on Duisburg. F/L Matheson led them away at 00.58 as the senior pilot on duty, and there was just one early return, F/Sgt Williams losing his port-outer engine and dumping his bomb load into the North Sea, some one hundred miles out from the Lincolnshire coast. The others reached the target area to find cloudy conditions, and those with functioning Gee equipment were able to bomb in the general area of the target, greatly aided by the illuminator flares. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 16,000 to 19,500 feet between 02.20 and 02.35, and returned with little to report. It was later established that the attack

had again been scattered, but had caused some additional housing damage. The next operation against Duisburg took place on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, when six 83 Squadron Lancasters joined forces with more than three hundred other aircraft. S/L Hilton was the senior pilot on duty as they departed Scampton either side of 00.30 and headed out over Skegness, with Leiden in southern Holland as the next navigation point. There were no early returns, and they arrived in the target area to find thick cloud obscuring the ground, although Sgt Jenkinson's bomb-aimer caught a glimpse of the Rhine through a gap, and followed it. Most delivered their cookie, six 500 pounders and two 250 pounders each on Gee-fixed positions, and some on DR, but the result was a lack of concentration, and damage was less than on the previous occasions in the series. Thus far, it had been a loss-free month for the squadron, but P/O Whitehead and crew failed to return in R5619, and were lost without trace. While this operation was in progress, F/L "Pat" Daniels and Sgt Oakes and their crews went mining off Bordeaux. They pinpointed on Cordouan, at the mouth of the Gironde Estuary, before delivering their mines from 1,000 and 600 feet respectively, and both were safely on their way home by 02.00.

On the following night four hundred aircraft set off in the late evening for Hamburg, with S/L Elliott leading the thirteen 83 Squadron participants. They took off either side of 23.00, but the escape hatch in the floor of the bomb-aimer's compartment of R5625 blew out as it lifted off, and became jammed in an upright position, with eighteen inches of it protruding down into the slipstream. The flight engineer and bomb-aimer tried for an hour to fix the problem, but the cold draught was so intense that P/O Rayment had little choice but to turn back. The remainder pressed on, in sometimes icing conditions, to find the target clear of cloud, and this enabled the crews to easily identify the River Elbe and the Binnen and Aussen-Alster lakes just north of the Altstadt. The 83 Squadron crews dropped their all-incendiary loads from 16,000 to 22,000 feet between 01.12 and 01.30, and contributed to a highly effective attack, which started eight hundred fires, of which over five hundred were classed as large. More than eight hundred houses were destroyed, and five thousand others damaged, and 14,000 people were bombed out of their homes. It was an expensive night for the Command, however, and twenty-nine aircraft failed to return, although there were no 83 Squadron casualties. Two nights later a follow-up operation was compromised by poor weather conditions, which caused the cancellation of the contributions from 1, 4 and 5 Groups. In the event, it was a 3 Group show, with support from training unit Wellingtons and Whitleys, and it failed to match the success of the 26/27<sup>th</sup> effort, while costing a further twenty-nine aircraft.

The month ended with two effective and encouraging raids, the first of them against Saarbrücken on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, for which 83 Squadron put up eight Lancasters, led for the first time by W/C Crichton-Biggie. Annoyingly for him, R5743 suffered a port-outer engine fire shortly after taking off at 23.45, and he had to abandon his sortie after jettisoning the bomb load in the North Sea five miles east off Skegness. Among the 291 crews to reach the target were the remaining seven 83 Squadron representatives, who were each carrying a cookie and small bomb cases (SBCs) of incendiaries, which they delivered from 4,000 to 7,000 feet on visual identification between 01.46 to 02.38. The spread in time resulted from P/O Shields remaining in the target area for sixty-three minutes, making check runs on the Gee-box. When satisfied, he dropped his load on the marshalling yards, and observed many fires, including one in a nearby steel works. Reconnaissance revealed a highly accurate and concentrated attack, which destroyed almost four hundred houses in central and north-western districts, with many more sustaining damage.

The last night of the month was devoted to an attack on the Ruhr city of Düsseldorf, for which a new record non-1,000 force of 630 aircraft was made possible by the inclusion of over a hundred aircraft from 92 (O.T.U) Group. 83 Squadron was represented by eleven Lancasters, which took off either side of 00.30, with F/Ls Matheson and Daniels the senior pilots on duty. F/Sgt Zaleschuck jettisoned his cookie and incendiaries twenty-five miles off the Suffolk coast, after experiencing engine problems, but the others pressed on to reach the primary target, having mostly map-read their way. P/O Mackenzie's bomb load fell out as soon as the doors were opened, and F/Sgt Jackson's R4103 was hit by flak at the start of his bomb run. An engine on each side failed, as did the hydraulics, and the bombs were dropped immediately onto the outskirts of the city at 02.38. The Lancaster was down to 6,000 feet over the target, and remained at this height for the entire journey to home airspace. The other squadron representatives bombed from 16,000 to 22,000 feet between 02.00 and 02.26, under clear skies with ground haze, and contributed to the destruction of 453 buildings in Düsseldorf and Neuss, on the opposite bank of the Rhine, and damage to many thousands of others. During the course of the month the squadron launched nine day and one hundred night sorties on sixteen operations, for the loss of a single aircraft and crew.

[www.bombercommandmuseumarchive.com](http://www.bombercommandmuseumarchive.com)

## August 1942

Only minor operations occupied the first five nights of the new month, and it was the 4/5<sup>th</sup> before 5 Group dispatched any bombing sorties. Essen was the target for a small force of thirty-eight aircraft, including five from 83 Squadron, which took off either side of 01.30, briefed to attack through complete cloud cover on Gee-fixes. Three of them obliged, by dropping their four 1,900lb GP bombs and incendiaries from 20,500 to 24,000 feet between 03.04 and 03.13, while F/L Daniels bombed at Krefeld as an alternative, and P/O Marchant was forced to jettison his heavy stuff, after partially losing power in his starboard engines. The Ruhr was the destination for another small force on the following night, for another T.R. (Gee) exercise, to which the squadron contributed three Lancasters. F/Sgt Williams and Sgt Irvine took off at 22.40, and both suffered TR failure, which left them dependent on dead reckoning to deliver their five 2,000 pounders each on Cologne. Sgt Oakes departed Scampton ninety minutes later and headed for Duisburg, upon which, he dropped a cookie, six 500 pounders and two 250 pounders from 18,000 feet at 02.53. Also on this night, and taking off first either side of 22.30, were four crews briefed to lay mines in the Gironde Estuary. W/C Crichton-Biggie was undertaking just his second sortie since taking command, and, unlike his first, which lasted just minutes, this one would go the full distance. It was a dark night, with visibility assessed at two miles, but the coastline was used as a pinpoint, and the vegetables planted from 600 to 1,500 feet between 01.13 and 02.17.

The disappointing campaign against Duisburg was concluded on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when the fifth raid of the series was mounted. 83 Squadron contributed eight Lancasters, led by F/Ls Daniels and Matheson, and they were all safely airborne shortly after 01.00. They reached the target to find eight to ten-tenths cloud, and an intense, accurate flak barrage, which peppered them throughout. Searchlight dazzle through the clouds was an additional problem, and all crews bombed on TR, without making out any ground detail. Bombing took place from 18,000 to 19,500 feet between 02.32 to 02.46, and all returned safely, although P/O Hodgson's navigator became ill after leaving the target, causing them to wander south of track, and they eventually landed at Tangmere on the Sussex coast. The three-week campaign against Duisburg had produced little industrial, and only modest housing damage, and had cost forty-three aircraft from over twelve hundred sorties.

August's operations continued on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, with a raid on Osnabrück, for which almost two hundred aircraft were prepared, among them ten 83 Squadron Lancasters. They began taking off shortly after midnight with both flight commanders on duty, and found the target by TR, although poor visibility prevented them from picking out ground detail. Illuminator flares helped to identify that they were over a built-up area, and the cookies and incendiaries were delivered from 17,000 to 20,000 feet between 02.06 and 02.35, some crews confident of their general position, others not so. S/L Hilton's Gee petered out early, and he bombed on D.R. instead, while S/L Elliott searched in the target area for thirty-five minutes, and eventually bombed a built-up area as it became lit by flares. A local report suggested a scattered attack, which destroyed two hundred houses. The following night brought the first of two operations on consecutive nights against Mainz in southern Germany. 83 Squadron again put up ten Lancasters, for what would prove to be both its final operation from Scampton, and its last for almost two years under 5 Group control. F/Ls Daniels and Matheson again took the lead, as they got away safely by 23.01. All of the squadron participants located the primary target, where they found good vertical visibility that enabled them to map-read to the aiming point by means of features such as the river, the cathedral and bridges. They dropped their cookies and incendiaries from 5,000 to 14,000 feet between

00.59 and 01.20, and returned safely to report a highly successful operation. This was confirmed by reconnaissance, which revealed that substantial damage had been inflicted upon central districts, where some historic and cultural buildings were hit.

During the preceding weeks, discussions had been taking place in senior circles about the problems of target location and marking. Harris had been opposed in principle to the idea of a separate and elitist-sounding target marking force, a view which was shared by all of his group commanders, except for AVM Roddy Carr of 4 Group. Harris was overruled by higher authority, but typically of the man, and to his eternal credit, he gave it his full support, and the Pathfinder Force (PFF) was formed with its HQ initially at Wyton in Cambridgeshire. His choice of the then Group Captain Don Bennett, a brilliant but humourless Australian, as its leader, was both controversial and inspired, and more than a few feathers were ruffled. Bennett was a relatively junior officer to be given such heavy responsibility, but he was an aviator and navigator of unparalleled experience, and had the advantage of recent operational experience as commanding officer of 10 Squadron. During his tour, his Halifax had been shot down over Norway while attacking the Tirpitz, and he managed to evade capture to return home within weeks. Until being granted group status, the new force would fall nominally under the control of 3 Group, from which it would receive its orders, and upon whose stations it would reside.

On the 15<sup>th</sup>, 83 Squadron departed Scampton by road and air to become a founder member of the Pathfinder Force, and take up residence at Wyton. The aircraft flew down in formation, while the ground staff were ferried in a fleet of buses. The move was carried out with a minimum of fuss, and the 16<sup>th</sup> was spent settling in to their new home. The squadron would draw new crews from 5 Group, while the other founder squadrons, 7, 35 and 156 would draw theirs respectively from 3, 4 and 1 Groups. Harris was anxious to get the new force airborne as soon as possible, and no time was allowed for bedding-in. He had intended its debut to come at Osnabrück on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, but the squadron commanders declared their units to be unready, and it was on the following night, the 18/19<sup>th</sup>, when the new era began. The first target was the north German port of Flensburg, an easy-to-find location on the eastern coast of the Schleswig Holstein peninsular, the narrow neck of land joining Germany with Denmark.

Matters began inauspiciously for 83 Squadron, when late bombing-up led to three aircraft having to be scrubbed, and a fourth became unserviceable as it taxied to take-off. This left just six Lancasters to carry out the squadron's maiden Pathfinder operation, and the crews of S/L Hilton, F/L Matheson, P/O Partridge, P/O Hodgson, F/Sgt Goodfellow and F/Sgt Zaleschuck took off either side of 21.00 hours, carrying a variety of ordnance. Hilton and Matheson each had fourteen four-flare cans in the bomb bay, while Partridge, Hodgson and Goodfellow carried a dozen 250lb incendiary bombs, and Zaleschuck a cookie, six 250 pounders and two flares. It turned out to be a discouraging debut for the thirty-one Pathfinder aircraft taking part. None found the target in conditions of intense darkness, and no bombs at all fell close to it, indeed, a number of Danish towns reported being bombed as far as twenty-five miles from Flensburg. F/L Matheson reported seeing an aircraft shot down near Flensburg at 22.59, and S/L Hilton recorded another one going down near Heide at 23.15. P/O Partridge searched for an hour, before finally dropping his bombs on what he believed to be the target area. P/O Hodgson saw a built-up area in the light of flares, and bombed that, while F/Sgt Zaleschuck made no attack, and jettisoned his load safe from 4,000 feet just off the Dutch coast at IJmuiden.

Minor operations held sway for the following week, and it was the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup> before the next Pathfinder-led operation could be mounted. The target was Frankfurt, for which the squadron detailed fourteen crews, led on this occasion by both flight commanders, who got away within a minute of each other at 20.49 and 20.50. Flying with S/L Elliott on this operation was F/L Moyna, who would become well-known in 617 Squadron circles in 1944, through flying with W/C Leonard Cheshire as his cine-camera operator on ground-breaking operations. The Pathfinders again experienced great difficulty in locating the target city in conditions of heavy cloud, although S/Ls Elliott and Hilton and F/Sgt Jackson picked up recognisable pinpoints, from which to make DR runs, and delivered their incendiaries from around 15,000 feet between 23.50 and 23.59. F/Sgt Zaleschuck bombed Wiesbaden from 15,000 feet at 23.52 as an alternative, after finding the primary under nine-tenths cloud, and the others simply reported bombing alternatives, with no real clue as to their actual location. It was another disappointing operation, and most of the main force bombs found open country. Sixteen aircraft, 7% of the attacking force, fell to the defences, including two from 83 Squadron. The experienced F/L Matheson and his crew were homebound in R5610, when they were intercepted and shot down by a night fighter. Matheson, his bomb-aimer and wireless operator survived, and the pilot ultimately evaded capture. R5623 exploded in the air over Kalbach, a few miles to the north of Frankfurt, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/Sgt Goodfellow RCAF.

The third Pathfinder-led raid was directed at Kassel on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 306 aircraft was made ready, eleven of the Lancasters representing 83 Squadron among a total of thirty-three Pathfinders. S/L Elliott led them away from Wyton at 20.49, and all located the target by means of the River Fulda, and the numerous fires already springing up. They delivered their incendiaries from 9,000 to 14,000 feet between 23.30 and 00.09, in the face of a fiercer-than-expected flak and searchlight defence. Pat Daniels saw two aircraft going down in flames, and P/O Marchant also reported one near the target. The illumination allowed the main force crews to pick out streets and buildings, and they exploited the opportunity to inflict substantial damage upon south-western districts. The defences again had their say, however, and 10% of the attackers, thirty-one aircraft, paid the price, although 83 Squadron came through unscathed.

An attack on Nuremberg on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup> brought the first use of target indicators in adapted 250lb bomb casings. Eight 83 Squadron crews were briefed as part of a Pathfinder element of thirty aircraft, and the Wyton contingent took off either side of 21.00 to head for the south coast. P/O Rayment became ill shortly after take-off, and he landed back a little over an hour and a half later, having jettisoned his bombs into the sea about a dozen miles off the Kent coast at North Foreland. The others pushed on to find good visibility in the target area, which enabled them to identify ground detail, and place the marker bombs accurately into the city from 12,000 to 16,000 feet shortly after midnight. Unfortunately, the main force failed to capitalize on the opportunity, and scattered bombs in and around the city up to twelve miles north, allowing Nuremberg to escape serious damage. This was the final operation of a month in which the squadron launched seventy-seven sorties on ten operations, for the loss of two aircraft and crews.

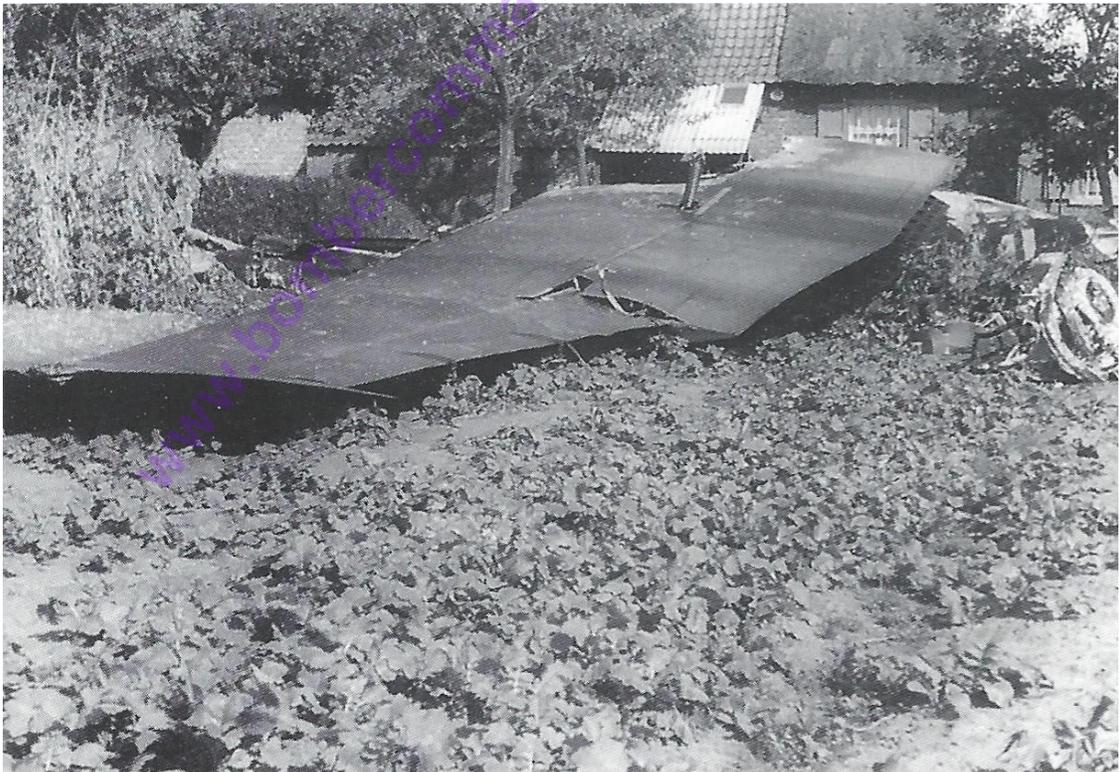


Five of the crew of R5610. Above from left: F/S WR Cubberley (WOP), Sgt Edward Norman (MU gunner) and F/L JW Dicker, RAAF (bomb aimer). Below: Sgt (later F/L) OR Matheson (left) and Sgt. Harold Quintrell (rear gunner).





*The wreckage of R5610, OL-G at Morkoven, after being shot down returning from Frankfurt.*



## September 1942

The Pathfinders posted a “black” on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> of September, when the non-industrial town of Saarlouis was marked in error for Saarbrücken, thirteen miles to the south-east. Much to the chagrin of its inhabitants, the main force followed up with uncharacteristically accurate bombing, and great damage was inflicted upon the town and surrounding villages, while the intended target remained untouched. Just two 83 Squadron Lancasters were involved, S/L Elliott and F/L Daniels taking off just before midnight for the relatively short trip across Belgium. Both visually identified what they believed to be the target, and were able to observe the impact of their bombs, delivered from 10,500 and 12,500 feet respectively at 01.55. This was still in the very early stages of target marking, and it is interesting to note the mix of bomb loads carried by Pathfinder aircraft, as experimentation took place to find what was most effective. On this night, S/L Elliott was carrying thirteen 250lb incendiary bombs, while F/L Daniels had on board flares and four 1,000lb general purpose bombs. Gradually, the fledgling force would get to grips with the difficulties of identifying and marking targets, and the next two weeks would see a series of unusually effective operations.

The improvement began at Karlsruhe on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when 83 Squadron provided eight Lancasters to an overall force of two hundred sent to attack this southern city. S/L Elliott and F/L Daniels were again on duty, swapping the bomb loads of the previous night, and a total of five 83 Squadron participants carried thirteen 250lb incendiary bombs, while two had a 4,000lb cookie on board. They took off either side of 23.00, and all but F/Sgt Zaleschuck reached the target area. His Lancaster was afflicted by engine and turret problems, which persuaded him to jettison his ordnance into the sea thirty miles off Dieppe, and turn for home. The others pressed on to reach the target, which they identified by the River Rhine to the west, and the distinctive docks in the city’s north-western corner. They delivered their loads from 10,000 to 12,000 feet between 01.33 and 01.55, and returned to report scores of fires. Photographic reconnaissance confirmed extensive damage to residential districts and a number of industrial buildings, at a cost of eight aircraft.

New techniques were introduced for Bremen on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, when the Pathfinder element was divided into three distinct areas of responsibility, illuminators, visual markers and backers-up. 83 Squadron sent six Lancasters, with W/C Crichton-Biggie along for the ride with F/L Daniels in the latter’s regular aircraft, R5754 OL-K. They took off either side of midnight, and all reached the target carrying flares and incendiary bombs. These they delivered onto the clearly illuminated docks in clear conditions, from 15,000 to 18,000 feet between 01.55 and 02.01, and two hundred main force aircraft followed up to plaster the target. Local reports put the damage at 460 houses destroyed, with more than 1,300 other seriously damaged, while a number of industrial premises were also hit.

Duisburg received what was probably its most destructive raid to date on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when the squadron again contributed six Lancasters in an overall force of more than two hundred aircraft. S/L Elliott was undertaking his third operation in a week in a fine example of leading from the front, and his commitment would be recognised with the award of a DFC later in the month. They took off from Wyton shortly after 01.00, but F/Sgt Zaleschuck had to return early with a malfunctioning compass, dumping his load twenty-five miles off Lowestoft and homing on TR. The others found the target to be clearly identified by a loop in the Rhine to the north, and they made a number of runs across the aiming point, first to illuminate and then to mark. Typical was P/O Partridge, who dropped illuminator flares

from 16,000 feet at 02.45 on a due east heading, and repeated the exercise three minutes later flying due south, before losing a thousand feet to deliver a marker flare at 03.00 heading due north. Returning crews reported heavy flak and intense searchlight activity, but also clear sight of the docks and marshalling yards in the light from the flares. Local reports put the level of destruction at 114 houses, with a further 316 seriously damaged.

The first failure of the month, ignoring the error at Saarlouis, which was successful in terms of accurate bombing if not target location, came at Frankfurt on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>. 249 aircraft took off for the flight across France to southern Germany, and among them were six Lancasters representing 83 Squadron, led by F/L Daniels, who seemed to be assuming greater responsibility. They got away either side of 21.00, and, despite losing his port-inner engine when just thirty minutes out, P/O Partridge pressed on to the target, which he and the others identified by the River Main, bridges and the marshalling yards. P/O Partridge dropped his flares from 15,000 feet at 23.00, and his eight 250lb incendiary bombs forty-seven minutes later, observing them to fall just short of the aiming point. F/L Daniels spent nine minutes over the target from 23.28, delivering first his flares from 17,000 feet heading due north, before returning across the aiming point on a reciprocal course at 15,000 feet to drop the incendiary bombs. Heavy flak and searchlight activity made for an uncomfortable time in the target area, but with the exception of F/Sgt Jackson, the other 83 Squadron crews carried out their briefs from around 15,500 feet. Jackson had lost his intercom on the way out, and this problem, combined with a failure to locate the target in cloudy and hazy conditions, prevented him from carrying out an attack. It was established later that the main weight of the attack had fallen to the south-west of the city and onto Rüsselsheim, where the Opel tank and Michelin tyre factories sustained damage.

A major effort was mounted against Düsseldorf on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, when the numbers were bolstered by a contribution from the training groups. The total of 479 aircraft included eight 83 Squadron Lancasters, led by S/L Elliott and F/L Daniels. The mid-evening take-off brought the Pathfinder element to the target area shortly after 22.00, by which time S/L Elliott's port-outer engine had caught fire, and



*The fragmented wreckage of W4104, OL-A lies, still smoking, near the target area in Neuss. F/O MacDonald and his entire crew perished.*

he dropped his load on an aerodrome about twenty miles short. The others marked the aiming point successfully, employing "Pink Pansies" in converted 4,000lb bomb casings for the first time. The 83 Squadron crews were over the aiming point at 15,000 to 17,000 feet between 22.12 and 22.35, having identified ground detail by the light of flares. The bombing spread across the city and neighbouring Neuss, and over nine hundred houses were destroyed, while fifteen hundred others were severely damaged. Many industrial premises were also hit and production halted. F/L Daniels reported around five hundred searchlights and an average amount of heavy flak, and he also saw four aircraft falling in flames. One of these may have been W4104, which went down over Neuss with his squadron colleagues, F/O MacDonald

and crew on board, and all lost their lives. In fact, a total of thirty-three aircraft failed to return, 7.1% of those dispatched, and sixteen of these were from the training unit contingent. This was not the first time that the training units had sustained disproportionately large casualties, the three “Thousand” raids also costing them dearly, and perhaps the wisdom of exposing them to such dangers might be brought into question.

The run of successes continued at Bremen on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, when a force of 446 aircraft again included a contribution from the training groups. 83 Squadron sent six Lancasters, led on this occasion by S/L Hilton, who was back in harness following a period of leave. They departed Wyton shortly after 23.00, but Sgt Oakes was back on the ground by 23.40 following engine failure. The others made the relatively short journey to northern Germany in a little over two hours, and identified the target area by the light of flares from preceding aircraft. At 01.15, S/L Hilton added his flares from 16,000 feet to the others going down, and did so in the face of a heavy and accurate defence. The other squadron representatives followed suit from 15,000 to 17,000 feet, before clearing the target area by 01.40. The main force element performed well, and over eight hundred houses were destroyed, and many industrial premises were damaged. The level of destruction far surpassed that achieved by the “Thousand” force, just three months earlier, but losses were again relatively high at twenty-one. More than half of the casualties, thirteen, or fourteen if one counts the loss of a Stirling from XV Squadron’s Conversion Flight, were from non-operational units, and that brought the total to thirty from just two operations.

Wilhelmshaven registered its most damaging attack of the war to date on the following night, when two hundred aircraft were involved, including six Lancasters from 83 Squadron, led by S/L Hilton. This operation also brought the final four sorties by Hampdens, the honour falling to 408 Squadron RCAF. The 83 Squadron Lancasters were safely airborne by 20.24, and all reached the target, where the illumination from flares laid bare the town below. P/O MacKenzie made three passes over the aiming point, the first at 22.00 at 16,000 feet, the second at 22.12 at 17,000 feet, both to drop flares, and the third at 16,000 feet at 22.15 to let go his eight 250lb incendiary bombs. The others carried out their assigned tasks in similar manner from similar



*S/L Hilton and crew. On the right is Sgt. Kitto who was ‘rather badly injured’ in what appeared to be a friendly fire incident. In the background is a Manchester.*

altitudes, with only F/Sgt Zaleschuck opting to ascend to 19,000 feet, from where he saw his incendiaries fall close to the docks. Returning crews described the docks area as clearly visible, but it was central districts and housing that sustained the heaviest damage. S/L Hilton was on his way home over the sea, and overtaking what he described as another four-engine, twin-tailed aircraft, when he was fired upon by it. His wireless operator, Sgt Kitto was, according to S/L Hilton, “rather badly wounded”.

With so much recent success to celebrate, the difficult target of Essen was selected for attention on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>. The squadron put up six Lancasters in a total force of 369, which included another contribution from the training groups. Unusually for 83 Squadron, there were no senior officers on duty,

and it was left to F/Sgt Zaleschuck to lead them away at 20.10. He was forced to turn back with technical problems, which developed shortly after take-off, and this was the third time during the month that he had failed to complete a sortie. P/O MacKenzie and F/Sgt Jackson were defeated by cloud and haze in the target area, and could not positively identify what lay beneath. Sgt Oakes was the first from the squadron to arrive, and established his position by visual identification of a wide stretch of canal to the north of the city. He delivered his fourteen 250lb incendiary bombs from 17,500 at 22.08 on a due-south heading, and watched them burst a little to the east of the briefed aiming point. Sgt Irvine bombed two minutes later from a similar altitude, after also gaining a visual fix, and P/O Marchant attacked from 19,000 feet one minute after that. He returned to report many fires, the glow from which could be seen a hundred miles into the return journey. He also counted seven aircraft shot down, while P/O MacKenzie reported three going down near Essen and one at Cologne. The attack was scattered, but even so, was probably the most effective yet at this notoriously elusive location. The Krupp works was hit, many houses were damaged, and over a hundred fires had to be dealt with, a third of them classed as large. On the debit side the losses were horrendous at thirty-nine, and nineteen of these represented the training units. Thankfully, the message had finally got through to higher authority, and this was the last occasion on which the training groups would be required to support main force operations in numbers.

If any period of the war could be said to represent the turning point in Bomber Command's painful road to becoming a war-winning weapon, then perhaps this first half of September was it. It did not mean an end to failures, which would continue to outnumber successes for some time to come, but it was an unmistakable sign that the elements of tactics, technology and equipment were coming together, and that the Pathfinder Force was maturing and coming to terms with the complexities of its role.

Just one further operation remained in the month for 83 Squadron, and that came on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, when two operations were mounted. The larger, by a force of 118 mostly Wellingtons and Halifaxes, was directed at Saarbrücken, presumably to rectify the errors of three weeks earlier, while eighty-nine Lancasters and Stirlings headed south to Munich. S/L Hilton led the seven 83 Squadron Lancasters away at 20.14, and flying with P/O MacKenzie was the previously-mentioned F/L Moyna, who, earlier in the day, had become officially attached to the squadron from the Air Ministry Film Unit, for special photographic duties. The crews were able to identify the target by the large lakes in the vicinity, and most were able to drop their bombs into the built-up areas in the western, southern and eastern suburbs. The 83 Squadron crews were over the aiming point at 11,500 to 14,000 feet between 23.40 and 00.01, those carrying flares arriving first and making a number of runs across the target. The pilot of R5743 was G/C Victor Bennett, who had been serving in the Middle East earlier in the year, and had commanded 4 Group's 10 Squadron for five months in 1941. Quite what he was doing at Wyton is uncertain, because he was not the station commander, a position currently occupied by G/C Kirkpatrick. He was still around on the 24<sup>th</sup>, when he dropped a special 250lb incendiary bomb at night, with satisfactory results. This may have been an example of the airburst type, two of which were dropped a day earlier over the Lakenheath range. It was a period of experimentation with marking techniques and new hardware, and crews were practicing at this time with the new Mk XIV bomb sight. A new arrival on the 19<sup>th</sup> had been S/L Way DFC, who was posted in from 28 O.T.U. On the 25<sup>th</sup> R5567 caught fire at its dispersal while unoccupied, and its cockpit was burnt out. During the course of the month the squadron launched sixty sorties on ten operations, for the loss of a single aircraft and crew.

## October 1942

The new month began with practice with the Mk XIV bomb sight on the 1<sup>st</sup>. The first operation was directed at Krefeld on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when seven 83 Squadron Lancasters took off around 19.30 to join a force of 180 others. The newly-promoted S/L Daniels had stepped into the shoes of S/L Elliott DFC, who seemed to recede from operations at this point, but remained on squadron strength. S/L Daniels and S/L Hilton were the senior officers taking part, and having reached the target a little behind schedule, they delivered their flares on e.t.a., but could see only fields illuminated below. They stogged around looking for the town, and, eventually, both bombed on existing fires at 21.12, twenty-eight minutes after zero-hour, Daniels from 10,000 feet and Hilton from 16,000 on widely different compass headings. S/L Daniels had both inner tanks holed, and more than a dozen small holes from two bursts of heavy flak. F/L MacKenzie also could not identify the target, and inspected a number of areas of fire, before finally bombing one from 12,500 feet, also at 21.12. He and four others had a cookie in the bomb bay, and they all returned convinced that these had fallen into a built-up area. In the event, the operation was not a success, and caused only minimal damage in a small area within a northern district.

Later on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, S/L John Hurry DFC arrived from 10 O.T.U. to bolster the number of more senior officers on strength. A force of 257 aircraft took off for Aachen in the mid-evening of the 5<sup>th</sup>, with a contingent of seven Lancasters from 83 Squadron, led by S/L Daniels. The weather was very poor, and persuaded Sgt Oakes and P/O Hodgson to turn back before even reaching the English coast. There was also equipment malfunction, a number of crews referring to the “box” packing up, (TR), although they were able to continue their sorties. There was ten-tenths cloud over western Germany, with tops as high as 18,000 feet, and this combined with icing and electrical storms to confound the Pathfinders’ ability to find the target. F/L Partridge dropped two bundles of flares, but they illuminated nothing, and he brought the rest of his load home. The others did what they could from 11,000 to 16,000 feet between 21.23 and 21.45, but it was a futile effort, and, unknown at the time, many bombs hit the small Dutch town of Lutterade instead, some seventeen miles away, and this would have consequences later in the year.

The squadron contributed nine Lancasters to an overall force of 237 aircraft for an attack on Osnabrück on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>. They took off either side of 19.15, with S/Ls Hilton and Daniels the senior pilots on duty, and there were maiden operations with the squadron for P/Os Smith and Scott, who had arrived from 1654 Conversion Unit in September. F/L MacKenzie was at 3,000 feet over Ely in Cambridgeshire, when his port-outer engine caught fire just fifteen minutes after leaving the ground, and that ended his participation. The Pathfinder element successfully illuminated the Dummer See, north-east of the target, and this enabled the main force crews to plot their run-in with accuracy, although six to nine-tenths cloud over the aiming point proved to be a problem. The 83 Squadron element was over the target with flares and a cookie each at 12,000 to 15,000 feet, between 21.19 and 21.42, and it was established later that the bombing had been concentrated in the central and southern districts. Local reports catalogued substantial damage to residential buildings, and a number of industrial premises were also destroyed or seriously damaged. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, F/L Cooke was posted in from 49 Squadron with his crew, and he would soon find himself promoted to the rank of squadron leader. This was to be a month of limited operations, and the period from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> brought only small-scale practice and training sorties. The squadron's losses at this stage of the war were consistently lower than most, despite being at the forefront of operations, but they were a fact of life, and any hiatus was only ever temporary.



*Above left: RAF Scampton Operations Block showing the Hollow Blast Wall surrounding Ops Rooms. Right: Flying Control at Scampton during 83 Squadron's residency. Below: They also served... WAAF's from Flying Control at Scampton.*



Kiel was the destination for a force of 288 aircraft on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, when 83 Squadron put thirteen Lancasters into the air, with S/Ls Hilton, Daniels, Hurry and Way all operating. They got away safely from Wyton in a thirty-five-minute slot to 18.50, and arrived over the target some three hours later to find good visibility and minimal cloud. They pinpointed on the Selentersee, the second largest body of water in Schleswig-Holstein, and used it as the start of their timed run-in to the aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews were carrying flares and a cookie each, and these they delivered from 14,000 to 18,000 feet between 21.12 and 21.35, before returning home, confident that they had hit the town. However, a decoy fire site was successful in drawing off half of the attack, and damage in Kiel, although substantial, was less than might otherwise have been. A modest eight aircraft were missing, and among them was R5911, in which P/O Scott and his crew disappeared without trace on only their second operation since their recent arrival. An operational stand-down occupied the next week, and the squadron was, therefore, not involved in a major, but totally ineffective attack on Cologne on the night of the 15/16<sup>th</sup>. It was at this time that preparations were put in hand for Operation Torch, the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa, as part of the North Africa campaign that would ultimately see Montgomery's Eighth Army defeat Rommel at El Alamein. Bomber Command was called upon to support the undertaking, by attacking Italian cities in a campaign occupying most of the remainder of the year.

It began at Genoa on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup>, when 83 Squadron was tasked with providing all of the illumination for the force of more than a hundred 5 Group Lancasters. They took off either side of 17.30, with S/Ls Daniels, Hurry and Way the senior pilots on duty, eight of the Lancasters loaded with flares and two 1,000 pounders each, and three with four 1,000 pounders only. F/Sgt Zaleschuck had one engine throttled back for three-quarters of the trip, and F/L Partridge lost his port-inner as he ran in on the target, but both carried out their briefs in prompt and accurate fashion. Conditions in the target area were perfect, and the 83 Squadron element attacked from 9,500 to 16,000 feet between 21.11 and 21.30, before returning safely with ten photos plotted on or near the aiming point. F/O Hodgson lost two engines as he crossed the English coast, and he eventually made a safe landing at the SOE station at Tempsford. Local reports confirmed that the relatively small force had caused heavy damage in central and eastern districts, and not a single aircraft had been lost. An attempt to repeat the success twenty-four hours later, with a Pathfinder element and main force drawn from 3 and 4 Groups, was a complete failure, after the wrong town was bombed. 83 Squadron had now completed its operations for the month, and was warned on the 23<sup>rd</sup> to prepare for a temporary attachment to Coastal Command, which would require it to move to Beaulieu in Hampshire's New Forest close to the south coast. A small advance party set out that day, and equipment followed soon after. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the order was cancelled, but not before most of the equipment was in transit. Some was intercepted at Oxford, but the remainder made it all the way to Beaulieu, and that put paid to any thoughts of the squadron being able to recommence operations. S/L Elliott was awarded the DSO during the month, and would begin November in the rank of wing commander. During the course of October the squadron launched forty-seven sorties on just five operations, and lost one aircraft and crew.

## November 1942

There was some good news on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, when it was announced that F/L Matheson had arrived back in the UK, after evading capture, following his encounter with a night fighter on the way home from Frankfurt in August. The consensus was that his survival had been nothing short of a miracle. It fell to Genoa to host the first 83 Squadron operation of the new month, on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>. It was another 5 Group show, involving seventy-two Lancasters, including fifteen from Wyton, led by W/C Elliott, S/Ls Hilton and Daniels and the newly promoted S/L Cooke. There were also three new crews, who were carrying out their first operation with the squadron, P/Os Hackney and Todd and W/O Long. They took off either side of 21.30, each carrying a cookie and flares, and all but one arrived at the target to find good visibility, W/C Elliott having pinpointed on Monaco, before flying direct to the aiming point. P/O Hodgson had turned back with a rough-running engine, and jettisoned his cookie off Cabourg on the Normandy coast. The other 83 Squadron crews made two runs across the target at 7,000 to 9,500 feet, firstly to deliver flares and then bombs, and were able to see clearly as the cookies fell onto the docks and into built-up areas. They were over the target between 01.26 and 01.45, and observed the main force bombing to be also concentrated, although more in residential districts than in the docks area.

It was an eventful night for F/L Partridge, who overshot the Mediterranean coast of France, and had to orient himself on Corsica, before flying back over the target and delivering his 4,000 pounder from 15,000 feet an hour-and-three-quarters late. Just two Lancasters failed to return, both belonging to 83 Squadron, and it was believed by returning crews that R5566 and R5673, containing the freshman Pathfinder crews of P/O Hackney and W/O Long, had collided over the target. The former came down in the Mediterranean south-east of Genoa with no survivors, and the latter disappeared without trace. Weather conditions on return to Wyton were appalling, and many crews were compelled to find alternative places to land, in most cases with hardly better conditions. P/O Todd was forced to go round again having overshot his attempted landing at Mildenhall, but R5670 stalled and crashed near the airfield, and all on board were killed in the ensuing explosion. This meant that all three debutants had been wiped out at a stroke. Later in the morning, R5857, which had also landed at Mildenhall, took off in the hands of F/Sgt Irvine to return to Wyton, but crashed soon afterwards, killing the pilot and two others at the scene, while a fourth member of the crew succumbed to his injuries a few days later. To lose four crews as a result of one operation was a blow to the squadron, but thus are the fortunes of war.

The squadron was able to muster four Lancasters for a return to Genoa on the following night, with S/Ls Daniels, Way and Cooke all on duty. They were airborne between 18.00 and 18.10, S/L Way having to contend with an unserviceable air-speed-indicator (A.S.I.) for the whole trip, but still managing to arrive on time, a considerable achievement considering the distance involved. The visibility in the target area allowed for accurate marking, which the Wyton participants carried out by means of loose flares and a cookie each from 7,000 to 10,000 feet, between 21.29 and 21.35. The main force element, drawn from 3, 4 and 5 Groups, produced an accurate and concentrated attack, the effectiveness of which was confirmed by photographic reconnaissance.

The performance of the meteorological experts fell somewhat short of expectation when forecasting for an operation to Hamburg on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, but it should be noted in their defence that predicting the weather in those days was more of an art than a science. 83 Squadron put up five Lancasters, led by S/Ls Hilton and Way, in an overall force of 213 aircraft. They took off either side of 17.30, but F/Sgt

Zaleschuck abandoned his sortie at 19.40, because of an ailing flight engineer, and jettisoned his load some seventy miles north of the German coast. The others pushed on, expecting to find up to four-tenths cloud over the target, but actually encountered ten-tenths, 10,000 feet thick, which totally obscured the ground. There was also a strong wind from the north, which blew S/L Hilton south of his intended track, and he dropped his cookie near Ratzeburg, a town south of Lübeck and well to the east of Hamburg. The other crews, likewise, encountered cloud, icing conditions and strong winds that had not been forecast, and it proved impossible to mark the city. S/L Way let his load go between Cuxhaven and Bremerhaven at 20.51, and F/Sgt Oakes bombed on estimated position somewhere in the Hamburg area seven minutes later. Over 130 crews bombed in what they believed to be the target area, and others dropped their loads blindly onto other locations, rendering the operation a failure. Later on the 10<sup>th</sup>, the funerals took place of P/O Todd and his crew, and there was a large attendance from the squadron. On the following day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, Armistice Day, those who could afford the time, observed a short silence in memory of the fallen from the Great War.

The night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup> brought a return to Genoa for 5 Group, with 83 Squadron support in the form of six Lancasters led by S/Ls Hilton and Cooke. The last of the Wyton Lancasters was airborne at 18.45, but P/O Jackson was back within two hours with a faulty A.S.I., having dumped his bombs into the sea five miles east of Ramsgate. The remainder arrived over the target under clear skies with good visibility to deliver their flares and ordnance. S/L Hilton was at 10,000 feet when he dropped flares at 22.15 and 22.17, and his three 1,000lb RDX bombs at 22.19, observing the hardware to fall just south-west of the aiming point. S/L Cooke watched his 1,000 pounders burst across the aiming point, and his rear gunner reported a biplane silhouetted against the light from flares. The small 5 Group main force played its part also, in what was reported to be a successful operation, which was repeated two nights later with S/Ls Way and Hurry at the head of the 83 Squadron contingent of seven Lancasters. The former took off at 18.15, but lost the use of his rear turret shortly afterwards, and, noticing some enemy night fighter activity at the French coast, he jettisoned his load five miles off the coast north of Dieppe, and turned back. Conditions in the target area were again good, with ground detail clearly visible, and the remaining squadron crews delivered their flares and 1,000 pounders within minutes of each other around 22.00, doing so from 7,000 to 10,000 feet. The small main force was drawn on this occasion predominantly from 4 and 5 Groups, and they produced an effective attack without loss.

Attention was turned upon Turin for the next trip across the Alps, much, one imagines, to the relief of the beleaguered Genovese, and a force of seventy-seven aircraft took off for the home of the Fiat works in the early evening of the 18<sup>th</sup>. The 83 Squadron element of seven Lancasters had S/Ls Hilton, Hurry and Cooke at its head, as it took off either side of 18.30, and all reached the target to carry out their work. They bombed from 8,000 to 10,000 feet beginning at 21.29, when S/L Hurry was the first to arrive, a little behind schedule, and concluding with F/O Smith at 22.10. In the process they inflicted substantial damage upon the city centre, where fires took hold, and the Fiat works was also hit. There were no losses, despite accurate flak over Paris directed at F/O Smith, but weather conditions throughout England were very unfavourable, and rather than risk fuel emergencies, all of the squadron participants landed safely at Tangmere on the south coast. The squadron sat out the next Turin operation, which was mounted successfully on the night of the 20/21<sup>st</sup>.

Stuttgart was selected as the target for a force of 222 aircraft on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup>, possibly to fool the enemy defences, which might well have expected that the force approaching over France, would

continue on to Italy. Eight 83 Squadron Lancasters took off either side of 18.00, with S/Ls Daniels and Cooke taking the lead. An unusual feature of the operation was a low-level approach and withdrawal over France, and all of the Wyton contingent arrived safely in the target area, having climbed to 13,000 or 14,000 feet for the attack. The 83 Squadron crews delivered their loads of flares and a cookie each between 21.46 and 22.03, just as a thin layer of cloud slid across the city, and combined with ground haze to prevent the centre from being identified and fully marked. Most of the bombing hit southern and south-western districts and outlying communities, and the attack failed in its aims. The force now had to make its way back across France, and the 83 Squadron crews took advantage of the rare opportunity to see the ground from low level. S/L Daniels's gunners strafed an aerodrome, believed to be De-Boisy, from 300 feet, and also a railway engine in a siding. S/L Cooke's gunners shot up two trains, stopping one, and had the rear turret Perspex blown out by flak over a French airfield at 50 feet. F/L Mackenzie reported shooting up a warehouse, some factories and two trains, and praised his gunners for shooting out a searchlight that was holding them, and silencing three flak batteries. F/O Hodgson left his trailing aerial dangling from a pylon somewhere in France, while F/Sgt Zaleschuck arrived back with three malfunctioning engines. It was not all good news, however, and the return to Wyton of the experienced and popular P/O Williams was awaited in vain. It turned out that ED311 had been hit by flak over the French coast on the way home, and had ditched in the Channel. The flight engineer was the only man on board to lose his life, while the others were rescued by the enemy and taken into captivity. P/O Williams was well known for his belief in height as the safest way to conduct night bombing, and he was lost on his first low-level operation. The squadron ORB notes him as one of the squadron's oldest and staunchest members, one of the better pilots, and someone who always gave good advice.

The weather curtailed operations for the next few nights, which meant that the crews were "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed" to have their passport photos taken on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The 26<sup>th</sup> was one of those frustrating and annoying days, when an operation was posted, in this instance to Turin, the briefing had been undertaken, and the six crews had boarded their aircraft to await the take-off signal, when the whole show was postponed for three hours. At the new appointed time it was pushed back another hour and a half, before finally being scrubbed altogether. It was this kind of procedure that stretched the nerves and made people tetchy! The same thing happened to nine crews on the following night, when Stettin had been the proposed target, and the scrub signal came as the first aircraft was already facing into wind at the threshold.

Something vaguely similar happened to a number of crews on the 29<sup>th</sup>, as they prepared to take-off for a small-scale raid on the Fiat works at Turin around midnight on the 29/30<sup>th</sup>. The main force was provided by 3 Group Stirlings, with Pathfinders from 7 and 83 Squadron in support, and the total force amounted to twenty-nine Stirlings and seven Lancasters. Two aircraft got away from Wyton without incident, before P/O Marchant had a tyre burst on take-off and crashed without injury to anyone on board. This caused a delay in getting the others off, and Sgt Milton had his maiden sortie scrubbed, while two others were found to have the wrong bomb loads, and they, too, were pulled out. S/L Daniels eventually took off about half an hour late at 00.25, with W/C Crichton-Biggie in the flight engineer's seat, and he was followed by S/L Hurry and five others. Problems continued with bad weather on the outward route, and only four main force Stirlings actually managed to cross the Alps to deliver their bombs. By this time, the Wyton element had delivered flares and a 4,000 pounder each from 10,000 to 11,000 feet, between 03.09 and 03.52, and were turning for home. F/Sgt Zaleschuck had a flare hang up and ignite in the bomb bay, and he had to jettison the remainder of the flares to release it. He did, at least, bring back the

only valid photo of the aiming point. This concluded the squadron's operational activity for the month, in which fifty-seven sorties had been launched on eight operations, for the loss of five aircraft and four and a half crews. There was a Bar to the DFC for S/L Daniels, and DFCs for F/O Hodgson and P/O Jackson.



*Aircrew gather round the map board in the Briefing Room at Scampton. Although undated, this photograph clearly shows the routes to and from the target, Bremen.*

## December 1942

December began with a relatively small-scale operation to Frankfurt on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when the squadron contributed ten Lancasters to a mixed overall force of 112 aircraft. The Wyton contingent got away either side of 02.00, with S/Ls Daniels, Cooke and Hurry in the lead. An hour into the flight, and ten miles short of the Kent coast at Dungeness, S/L Cooke lost his starboard-outer engine, and turned back. Sgt Milton was back home three hours after take-off, having turned around near Doullens at 03.37, because of a faulty compass, and a rear gunner who had passed out through lack of oxygen. The remainder reached the target area shortly before 05.00, but were prevented by thick haze from identifying the aiming point. On his estimated time of arrival, F/L MacKenzie was caught in a large cone of searchlights, and subjected to heavy and accurate flak. He observed a long stick of flares at zero hour, which he believed were dummies falling about ten miles south of the target. He attempted to investigate, but his Perspex iced up and he abandoned the sortie, dropping his cookie and incendiary bombs about fifty miles west of Frankfurt on the way home. The others bombed on dead-reckoning from 16,000 to 18,000 feet between 04.22 and 05.11, and most of the effort fell into open country south-west of the city. F/O Meikle claimed a JU88 shot down in flames, and this was confirmed by a crew from the top secret Special Operations Executive (SOE) station at Tempsford, who happened to be in the area at the time. A much larger force experienced similar difficulties at Mannheim on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, when 83 Squadron stayed at home.

The campaign against Italian cities was approaching its conclusion at this time, and Turin was to be the focus for the final few operations. One of the beefs at Wyton during this period was the last-minute mounting of operations that allowed barely enough time for NFTs and bombing-up, and when notification came through on the 8<sup>th</sup> for a trip that night to Turin, it was the first time for what seemed ages that everything proceeded according to schedule in unhurried fashion. Ten crews lined up for take-off either side of 18.00, with W/C Elliott and S/Ls Hilton and Hurry taking the lead. F/L Mackie had returned to the squadron on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October to begin his second tour, having just completed a conversion course, and this was to be his first sortie as a Lancaster pilot. F/O Hodgson abandoned his sortie at Cayeux-sur-Mer on the French coast at 19.03, after his starboard-inner engine became troublesome, and S/L Hilton was sixty miles south-east of Paris when he turned back, having given up his battle with an intermittently-working intercom. The others reached the target to release flares and bombs from 9,000 to 12,000 feet between 20.55 and 21.18, accurately marking the target for the 5 Group main force crews following behind. These pummelled both residential and industrial districts, leaving many fires and much damage.

Turin was on again on the following night, when the now familiar mad rush had the crews scrambling into the air for NFTs and the armourers working miracles to get the aircraft bombed up. Serviceability was also becoming a problem at Wyton, and just seven Lancasters lined up for take-off either side of 18.00 with S/Ls Hilton and Hurry on duty as the senior officers. F/Sgt Zaleschuck's compass was showing an error of 45° and increasing, compared with Gee, and he jettisoned his load into the Channel a dozen miles north of Dieppe. It was another mixed force of over two hundred aircraft that headed for the Alps, but, on arrival at the target, the crews found the ground obscured by fire and smoke from the previous night's attack. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 9,500 to 12,000 feet, between 21.25 and 21.57, before returning to Wyton to comment on the poor visibility, and the futility of trying to accurately assess the degree of damage inflicted.

It was intended to target Turin again on the following night, when only four serviceable Lancasters could be made available, but the operation was scrubbed to the relief of all. The crews were becoming tired of the slog across the Alps, and the opinion was that Turin had had its moment in the spotlight, and it was time to move on. Higher authority disagreed, and another operation was called for the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>. This was to be a small-scale attack, involving eighty-two aircraft from the Pathfinders and 1, 4 and 5 Groups. Six 83 Squadron Lancasters answered the call, for what turned out to be a wasted effort, after the meteorological department provided a “duff” forecast. They took off either side of 17.30, with S/L Hurry the senior pilot on duty, but P/O Jackson’s port-outer engine developed oil feed problems and was shut down at 20.27, which left him without a functioning rear turret. The starboard-outer also began to play up, and had to be throttled back, and the cookie was jettisoned safe over the French countryside about forty miles from the Swiss frontier. Unfortunately, it exploded on impact. The small bomb cases (SBCs) were also jettisoned about seventy miles later on the way home. Half of the force turned back before reaching the Alps because of severe icing, but five of the 83 Squadron contingent made it through to the target, and performed as well as could be expected in the cloudy conditions. S/L Hurry had a flare ignite in his bomb bay, and he jettisoned his entire load live over the target, observing the 4,000 pounder to detonate on the east bank of the River Po. He praised his crew for their calm demeanour during such a harrowing experience. F/L Mackie and F/O Hodgson dropped their stores from 10,000 feet at 21.20 and 21.29 respectively, and, although the latter saw nothing through the cloud, the former observed his bomb falling on a factory south of the town. F/O Smith thought it inadvisable to descend through ice-bearing cloud, and delivered his load from 21,000 feet at 21.55.

There was an air of incredulity after Turin was posted for attention again on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, when only three Lancasters were declared serviceable, but the operation was eventually scrubbed. A period of minor operations occupied the following week, and this allowed the serviceability problem at Wyton to be addressed. When the crews were next called to briefing, on the 20<sup>th</sup>, it was for an attack that night on Duisburg by 230 aircraft, of which a dozen would represent 83 Squadron. They were led away by S/L Daniels at 18.05, and he was followed over the ensuing thirty minutes by the others, including S/Ls Cooke and Hurry. They reached the target under moonlit and cloudless, but slightly hazy conditions, by following the Rhine from the north right in to the docks, and S/L Daniels delivered his flares and cookie simultaneously from 18,000 feet at 19.44, while the majority of others bombed five to ten minutes after their flares had gone down. F/L Mackie endured a torrid time at the hands of the defences, after being coned by searchlights and forced down to 7,000 feet. He delivered his flares, before regaining height for the bombing run, only to be engaged again and having to jettison his 4,000 pounder. He ultimately found himself at rooftop height, from where the gunners performed well in shooting out searchlights. Returning crews reported many bomb-bursts on and around the aiming point, and claimed a successful operation. Twelve aircraft failed to return, among them 83 Squadron’s ED353, which crashed in the target area with no survivors from the crew of F/L Marchant RAAF. The ORB notes that this was one of the oldest and most reliable crews on the squadron, and had done some really good work. The loss would be keenly felt in squadron circles.

While this operation was in progress, six Mosquitos of 109 Squadron delivered the first Oboe-aimed bombs on a power station at Lutterade in Holland. This was the culmination of months of hard work by the squadron under the command of W/C Hal Bufton, since joining the Pathfinders in August, and this night’s small step presaged a new era in Bomber Command operations. It would be almost spring before

the benefits of the device were fully unleashed on Germany, and, in fact, this night's calibration test failed in its aims, after it was discovered that the ground around the target was pitted by bomb craters from the previously-mentioned attack on Aachen in October. This meant that the Oboe bombs could not be plotted to gauge their accuracy, but further trials in the coming weeks would rectify that situation.

In the meantime, a raid on Munich was mounted by over 130 aircraft from the Pathfinders and 1 and 5 Groups on the following night. 83 Squadron put up ten Lancasters, led by S/Ls Daniels, Cooke and Hurry, and they set off shortly before 18.00 for the long outward leg across France. This was P/O Oakes's first sortie as an officer, having just been awarded an immediate commission, but his W4193 was engaged by a night fighter near Rheims at 19.30, and the first burst wounded the bomb-aimer and ignited smoke floats and flares. The mid-upper gunner sustained burns from the initial explosion, but he and the other crew members "behaved splendidly" to put out the fires, despite the lack of oxygen and fireproof gloves. F/L Mackie's brief was to illuminate the Walchensee on the southern approaches to the city, to provide a pinpoint, and this he did very effectively, thus helping the others to locate the target despite the cloudy conditions. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 14,000 to 17,500 feet between 20.57 and 21.42, some delivering their entire loads of flares, incendiary bombs and high explosives at the same time, while others spread them out. F/L Partridge dropped his incendiaries from 16,000 feet at 21.00, flying due east, but retained his cookie for a further twenty-seven minutes, before releasing it from 14,000 feet, when heading north-east. Despite the efforts to deposit the bombs in the right place, and the fact that occasional glimpses of the ground presented themselves through small gaps, the main weight of the attack fell in open country, and a decoy fire site may have been responsible for drawing it away.

It looked as though 83 Squadron would see out the old year without further casualties, and parties were being planned on the 31<sup>st</sup> to celebrate the New Year. However, to everyone's surprise and annoyance, a special operation to Düsseldorf was announced in support of the Oboe trials programme. It was to involve just eight Lancasters from 83 Squadron to act as the main force, bombing on markers delivered by two Oboe Mosquitos of 109 Squadron. Take-off took place before 18.00, with F/L Mackie and the newly promoted F/L Hodgson the senior pilots on duty, in the rare absence of any one of squadron leader rank. F/L Hodgson arrived about six minutes early, and circled to waste time, attracting in the process the attention of the flak defences, which forced him out to the west of a bunch of red flares. The others turned up to be greeted by green marker flares, and eight-tenths cloud, and delivered their assortment of bombs from 18,000 to 21,000 feet between 19.45 and 19.55. W4799 was on its way home over Holland, when it ran into a night fighter, which shot it down, killing all on board. P/O Jackson was another Australian, and was very popular on the squadron. He was well known for his gentle treatment of his aircraft and engines, and the entire crew was hailed for its friendly and co-operative nature. They failed by just 3¾ hours to see in the New Year. During the course of the month the squadron launched sixty-three sorties on seven operations, and lost two aircraft and crews.

## January 1943

1943 was to be a year of campaigns, which would bring significant successes, punctuated by gallant and expensive failures, but the first official act of the New Year was the formation of 6 Group, a fully-fledged Royal Canadian Air Force bomber group financed by the Canadian government, but operating under Harris. The group was stationed in the north of England on former 4 Group airfields, and would ultimately operate a mixture of Halifaxes and Lancasters, although most squadrons began with Wellingtons. The constant search for improved target finding and marking techniques brought a continuation of the Oboe trials programme, and these would dominate the first two weeks of January. The first of seven small-scale raids on Essen and one on Duisburg took place on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, at the hands of Pathfinder Mosquitos and Lancasters of 1 and 5 Groups. There was a slow start to the year for 83 Squadron, which welcomed to its bosom S/L Robinson from 23.O.T.U. on the 4<sup>th</sup>, and he was accompanied by a familiar former son, S/L McClure, who was returning following conversion to the Lancaster at 1661 Conversion Unit. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the Pathfinder Force was awarded Group status as 8 Group, but it remained under the command of the now AVM Bennett, who would lead it throughout its wartime career. For the purpose of this work, the titles Pathfinders and 8 Group are interchangeable.

The squadron operated for the first time in the New Year on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, when Essen was the target for its sixth visit during the Oboe trials series. The first disappointment was that it came on a night when the 83 Squadron aircrew had planned a party for the ground crews, to express appreciation for their hard work. The unusual take-off time, set for after 04.00, meant that the evening was occupied by NFTs and bombing-up. The second disappointment was that the operation, which involved just the three NCO crews of F/Sgt Partridge (not to be confused with F/L Partridge), and Sgts Mason and Milton from the squadron, failed, after the Oboe Mosquitos arrived late, and most of the fifty or so 1, 5 and 8 Group Lancasters had already bombed on dead reckoning, and largely missed the target by some distance.

A new Air Ministry directive was issued on the 14<sup>th</sup>, which opened the way for the area bombing of the French ports which contained U-Boot bases and support facilities. The first of many operations against Lorient in line with this took place that night, and included a contribution from 83 Squadron of six Lancasters led by S/Ls Cooke and Hurry. The total force numbered 122, made up predominantly of Halifaxes, Wellingtons and Stirlings, and it was the first bombing operation for the fledgling 6 Group. They took off either side of 23.00, and flew out in cloud until shortly before the target was reached, when the skies cleared. They pinpointed on Groix Island off the mouth of the Blavet Estuary in good visibility, and S/L Cooke arrived over the target on time, but was hit in the bomb doors by flak, and had to make three runs before releasing his flares. He dropped his incendiaries from 14,000 feet at 01.45, more than forty minutes after S/L Hurry, who had W/C Crichton-Biggie beside him in the cockpit. The others delivered their flares shortly after 01.00, and followed up with incendiaries a few minutes later. The marking was accurate, but main force bombing became wild, and the town took some hits and civilian casualties. This operation was followed up twenty-four hours later, with the NCO crews of F/Sgts Partridge and Timmins and Sgts Mason and Milton representing the squadron, and operating as part of the main force. They took off shortly after 17.30, and arrived in the target area to find cloudy conditions, with gaps that allowed some sight of the docks. They bombed from 13,000 to 14,500 feet between 19.52 and 20.12, before cloud rolled in to obscure the ground and prevent an accurate



*R5868 flew with 83 Sqn as OL-Q. The Lancaster completed well over one hundred ops and is now proudly displayed at the RAF Museum, Hendon, London. In this photograph, Rick Garvey (far left) poses with his air and ground crew in front of R5868, which he flew on twenty ops.*

assessment of results. In fact, it had been a more accurate attack than twenty-four hours earlier, and had destroyed eight hundred buildings<sup>8</sup>.

Berlin, a target which would feature prominently later in the year, received its first raid for over twelve months on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, at the hands of a main force drawn predominantly from 5 Group, with 1 and 4 Group support. There was initial shock at Wyton when the target was revealed, then high spirits at the prospect of getting the "Big City" in the logbook. 83 Squadron was to provide thirteen Lancasters, but matters during the course of the day did not proceed according to plan, when, first,

the weather closed in while four were airborne on NFTs, and they had to be diverted to Docking. One became unserviceable there, and only three returned to Wyton with four crews on board. Then, during the bombing-up process, a 4,000 pounder destined for Sgt Milton's aircraft was found to have no lifting lugs, and with no time to replace it, his participation was scrubbed. The squadron effort was led by the big guns, S/Ls Hilton, Daniels, Cooke and Hurry, and this would be the final operation of their tours for the two first-mentioned. S/L Hilton was in Lancaster R5868 Q-Queenie, which would go on to complete more than a hundred sorties, and now resides in the Bomber Command hall in the RAF Museum at Hendon as S-Sugar. This was the first major operation to be carried out by a purely four-engine force, which totalled 201 aircraft, and proper target indicators were to be employed for the first time.

The Wyton element got away either side of 17.00, and headed out across Denmark for an approach to the target from the Baltic. There had been problems bombing up Sgt Mason's Lancaster, and he got away late, at 17.29, with a starboard-outer engine that was running rough from the outset. It finally packed up off the Scandinavian coast, and he turned back after jettisoning his load. He eventually landed on three engines and with minimal hydraulics, and tried to pull up the undercarriage to bring the Lancaster to an abrupt halt. The retraction of the undercarriage had to be accomplished through use of the air bottle, which took too long, and R5669 went off the end of the runway. It caught fire, and there was internal damage, but no crew casualties. S/L Hurry passed too close to Stettin, and copped a packet of flak that wounded his bomb-aimer in the left arm. He was forced down to ground level to escape, and opted to jettison his load and turn for home. There are confusing reports concerning F/L Mackenzie's sortie, one suggesting that he turned back before reaching the Danish coast, and the other that he continued on to the target. The timings support the latter, and what follows is the author's interpretation. R5913 was hit by flak over Sylt on the way out, which damaged both outer engines, and the high explosive content of the bomb bay was jettisoned in order to enable the sortie to continue with just the flares. F/L MacKenzie

<sup>8</sup> . It should be understood that the three concrete U-Boot pens, K1, K2 and K3, constructed on Lorient's Keroman peninsular between February 1941 and January 1942, were, at the time, the largest projects attempted in the modern world, and were impervious to the conventional bombs then available. The purpose of the bombing campaign was to destroy the town and cut communications to the base.

proceeded towards Berlin in ten-tenths cloud, which dissipated about ten miles short of the target, and left generally clear but hazy conditions. Despite this, he was unable to identify the aiming point, and turned for home, again passing over Sylt, where he jettisoned the rest of his load at 22.48. Those of his squadron colleagues, who also made it all the way, were over Berlin at 18,000 to 21,000 feet between 20.13 and 20.49, a time consistent with F/L MacKenzie reaching Sylt on the way home at the time specified above. It was at this point that he lost the use of both outer engines, and limped home at 700 feet at ninety-five knots to land at 01.55, a full hour behind the previous returnee, and almost two behind the majority. S/L Hilton spent twenty-five minutes over the target, but was unable to find the aiming point, and brought most of his load home. F/L Partridge, who had S/L Robinson on board, searched for ninety minutes, and picked up a little flak damage before calling it a night, and F/L Hodgson had a similar story to tell, and added that the main weight of the attack seemed to be falling on the southern edge of the city. It was a disappointing operation, made bearable by the remarkably low loss of just one Lancaster, but it did claim the complete destruction by fire of the 10,000 seat Deutschlandhalle, the largest covered venue in Europe. It had been packed for the annual circus when the raid began, and, miraculously, it was quickly evacuated, and no lives were lost.

The operation was repeated on the following night by 170 Lancasters and seventeen Halifaxes. 83 Squadron contributed ten Lancasters, led by S/Ls Hurry and Cooke and S/L McClure on his first sortie since re-joining the squadron from 1661 Conversion Unit. It was also the final operation of F/L Hodgson's tour, before his posting towards the end of the month to 19 O.T.U at Kinloss. F/L Partridge was accompanied by the station commander, G/C Kirkpatrick, who had commanded 218 Squadron with distinction for eight months in 1941. They got away in an eleven minute slot either side of 17.00, and adopted the same route as on the previous night. Weather conditions were not as forecast, and ten-tenths cloud prevailed over Germany. Haze and snow added to the difficulties, and it proved impossible to identify the aiming point. The squadron crews were over the target at 17,500 to 20,000 feet between 20.34 and 20.58, mostly releasing their flares on e.t.a, although S/L Hurry was able to pinpoint on the Heligoland Canal, and make a DR run from there. Some crews were confident that they had caused damage in the city, but local authorities reported nothing significant. The B.B.C broadcaster, Richard Dimpleby, was observing the attack from a 106 Squadron Lancaster piloted by Guy Gibson. In contrast to the previous night, losses were high at twenty-two aircraft, 11.8%, and among them was 83 Squadron's R5630, which crashed in northern Germany. The pilot, F/Sgt Timmins, and his bomb-aimer were the only survivors, and they fell into enemy hands. The ORB notes that they had arrived at Wyton with ideas very much at variance with the squadron's approach to attacking a target, but were beginning to fall in line. It was further noted that they possessed a highly-developed offensive spirit, and never missed an opportunity to shoot up something on the ground.

An operational stand down over the ensuing days allowed the serviceability issue to be addressed, and there was plenty of opportunity for practice flying. Acting S/L Pat Daniels, whose substantive rank was still only flying officer, was posted to the Bombing Development Unit at Gransden Lodge on the 19<sup>th</sup>. At the tender age of twenty-two, he was one of those characters who managed to inspire others by his example and the force of his personality. He would return to the operational scene, and, in November 1943, be handed the prestigious job of commanding 35 Squadron, which, like 83, was a founder member of the Pathfinders. He would remain in post until late July 1944, at which point he was screened from operations having completed in excess of seventy. Briefings took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> for the next operation against Lorient, for which eight 83 Squadron crews were detailed. S/L Hurry was the senior pilot on

duty, and he had W/C Crichton-Biggie on board for company. They and their squadron colleagues would be flying the only Lancasters to participate in an overall force of 121 aircraft. They took off shortly after 18.00, and arrived in the target area to find some thin cloud, but generally clear conditions, and timed runs were made from Groix Island. Flares were delivered from 13,000 to 16,000 feet between 19.53 and 20.15, and returning crews claimed a successful operation, which was achieved for the loss of a single Stirling. Three nights later, S/L McClure led the four 83 Squadron participants in a return to Lorient, taking off at 18.30 to find five-tenths cloud and haze in the target area, which made pinpointing difficult. Some ground features were identified to help orientation, and they delivered their flares from 16,000 feet between 20.28 and 20.33, and followed up minutes later with two 1,000lb GP bombs each from a slightly reduced altitude. They returned to report a scattered attack, although a number of cookies were seen to explode within the town.

The squadron bade farewell to one of its stalwarts on the 27<sup>th</sup>, as S/L Hilton departed for 8 Group HQ, which meant that he would remain at Wyton. His contribution, in terms of leadership, enthusiasm and level-headedness, was crucial to the success of the squadron, and he would return in time. A landmark operation took place that night against Düsseldorf, when Oboe Mosquitos carried out ground marking for the first time, to provide a reference for the Pathfinder heavies following on behind. The target indicators were designed to burst just above the ground and cascade down, and offered far greater accuracy than the parachute flares previously used. 83 Squadron put up nine Lancasters in an overall force of 162 aircraft, and they were led away by F/L Mackenzie at 18.05. He and F/L Mackie were the senior pilots on duty, and they arrived in the target area to find a thin layer of low cloud obscuring the ground. It seems that the markers were visible, and backed up by marker flares, and the 83 Squadron crews delivered their cookie and four 500 pounders each from 15,000 to 18,600 feet between 20.03 and 20.16, and helped to inflict serious damage in southern districts, where housing, industry and public buildings were destroyed. The tactics employed successfully on this night, augured well for the forthcoming assault on the Ruhr.

The month closed for the Command with an attack on Hamburg on the night of the 30/31<sup>st</sup>, for which 83 Squadron had five Lancasters lined up for a late take-off. A few minutes before the first one was due to get away, a Mosquito crashed on the flare path, and by the time it was cleared away, it was too late for the 83 Squadron element, and its participation was scrubbed. The target was beyond the range of Oboe, and the less precise H2S device, which was being employed for the first time, caused much of the bombing to miss the city, although over a hundred fires were started. Given time, H2S would become an effective tool in identifying urban targets through cloud, but it relied on the interpretive skills of the operators, and to pick out a particular district from an indistinct image on a cathode ray tube would always be a challenge. During the course of the month the squadron launched fifty-six sorties on six operations, for the loss of a single aircraft and crew. There were deserved awards, to F/L Mackenzie of the DSO, and a DFM to F/Sgt Oakes.

## February 1943

The first day of the new month brought NFTs for nine crews, with the prospect of operations against Essen and Hamburg that night. In the event, the weather caused both to be scrubbed, and the designated crews were able to enjoy a night in bed. Not so the crews of S/L Robinson and F/Os Hope and Garvey, who were put on standby from 01.00 for air-sea-rescue duties. It was 07.30 before they finally took off to search off Yorkshire's Flamborough Head, but nothing was found. Later on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, briefings took place for an experimental operation to Cologne, to further explore target marking techniques. The plan called for the initial marking to be carried out by Mosquitos of 109 Squadron, and followed by H2S-equipped Stirlings and Halifaxes from 7 and 35 Squadrons respectively, with the other Pathfinder aircraft backing up. 83 Squadron dispatched eleven Lancasters during a forty-minute slot from 17.02, led by S/Ls McClure and Hurry, the latter with W/C Crichton-Biggie on board, for what would be his last sortie with the squadron. They arrived over the target to find varying amounts of cloud, but generally good visibility, and the initial marking was described as accurate. The squadron participants were carrying green target indicators (TIs), a cookie and incendiaries, and these they delivered from 18,000 to 21,000 feet between 21.02 and 21.14. The first phase of bombing was concentrated around the markers, but, as the attack developed, the marking and bombing became widely scattered across the city, and no serious damage was inflicted. F/Sgt Zaleschuk's ED420 sustained flak damage to the tail-plane, and this may have contributed to the ripping-off of the starboard undercarriage on landing, and the subsequent crash, from which the occupants walked away.

Later on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, F/O "Wimpy" Wellington and crew arrived on posting from 106 Squadron, where they had gained a reputation as a first-rate crew. S/L McClure led the seven-strong 83 Squadron contingent to Hamburg that night, to join an overall force of 260 aircraft. They took off in the early evening, with P/O Oakes last away at 17.59, and encountered icing conditions outbound, which persuaded many crews to turn back. However, the 83 Squadron contingent all reached the target, perhaps a little behind schedule, by which time the release point flares had been burning for some minutes and were beginning to become extinguished. They bombed through complete cloud cover from 19,000 to 20,500 feet between 21.02 and 21.23, and some returning crews reported the flash of explosions, and a glow visible for some fifty miles into the return journey. Despite the effort, it was a disappointing attack, from which sixteen aircraft failed to return, and P/O Moore's W4231 was almost the seventeenth. Flying straight and level off the Dutch coast while taking an astro-fix on the way home, the Lancaster was raked from stem to stern by a night fighter, which closed to within fifty yards. The starboard-inner engine erupted in flames, which died down once it was feathered, and the crew made a safe return to Wyton.

There were two targets for 83 Squadron crews on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, both involving a trip across the Alps to Italy. S/Ls Cooke and Hurry were joined by F/L Partridge and Sgt Mason for an attack by 180 aircraft on Turin, while, S/L Robinson undertook his first operational sortie with the squadron as crew captain, and was flanked by F/Os Garvey and Hope, the latter also an 83 Squadron debutante, for an attack by just four Lancasters (one from 156 Squadron) on the port of La Spezia, on Italy's north-western coast. This element took off first, between 18.16 and 18.23, each carrying an experimental air-burst 4,000 pounder, calibrated to detonate at between 200 and 600 feet above the ground. There was some cloud in the area, but the target itself was clear at first, and identified visually, largely through not even being blacked out. Three bombs were delivered accurately, including those of S/L Robinson from 10,500 feet at 22.07, and F/O Garvey from 10,000 feet at 22.19, and both were seen to explode over a built-up

area. By the time that F/O Hope arrived, a layer of cloud had slid in to obscure the ground, and he dropped his bomb live into the sea some thirty miles north of the island of Corsica at 22.44. Having done so, he turned back towards the mainland, and passed over Turin at 18,000 feet on his way home at 23.23, noting numerous fires burning throughout the city. F/O Garvey, meanwhile, had lost his port-inner engine as he left the target behind, and then the starboard counterpart over the Alps, but limped home to cross the English coast at Bournemouth. The Turin quartet had taken off immediately after their Spezia-bound colleagues, and arrived in the target area to find clear skies and good visibility. A red flare identified Lake Bourget, and, from there, the crews were able easily to identify the detail of the city, including bridges over the River Po, and they delivered their cookie and flares each from 14,000 feet between 21.34 and 21.59. The defences were light, and did not open up until ten minutes into the attack, and all crews returned safely to report a successful operation, which, it was later established, had caused serious and widespread damage. While these operations were in progress, a successful all-incendiary attack fell on Lorient.

Navigator, F/L Tommy Blair, arrived with his larger-than-life personality on posting from 1660 Conversion Unit at Swinderby on the 7<sup>th</sup>, and he would team up with F/O Wellington. A major raid by over three hundred aircraft was directed at Lorient on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, and involved eleven Lancasters from 83 Squadron. They took off either side of 18.30, with S/Ls McClure and Robinson the senior pilots on duty, and they arrived in the target area under clear skies with good visibility and just a little haze. F/L Mackie lost his starboard-inner engine outbound, and, having also developed an unserviceable bomb sight, decided to jettison his TIs over the Brest peninsular, before continuing on to the target with flares only. Both aiming points stood out in the light from the flares, and the squadron crews delivered their mixed loads, some with flares, TIs and incendiaries, and others with an additional cookie, from 14,000 feet between 20.14 and 20.28, and contributed to a devastating two-phase attack. Crews were briefed for Wilhelmshaven on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, but each operation was cancelled, on the last-mentioned occasion, when the crews were already in their aircraft.

W/C James Gillman became the new commanding officer on the 10<sup>th</sup>, on the departure to the Vickers Aviation factory at Weybridge of W/C Crichton-Biggie. The ORB speaks of sorrow generally throughout the squadron, and credits the departing commanding officer with forging 83 Squadron into the best unit in Bomber Command, citing his oversight of the conversion through Manchesters to Lancasters, and the spirit of friendliness and co-operation he engendered. W/C Gillman presided over his first operation on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, when the first of an eventual four raids on Wilhelmshaven was finally launched. 83 Squadron contributed a dozen Lancasters, with S/Ls McClure, Hurry and Robinson taking the lead. They took off either side of 17.30, carrying a mixed load each of three green TIs, six cans of four white flares, a cookie and three 500 pounders, and all arrived in the target area to find tenths cloud completely obscuring the ground. This meant that the attack had to take place on parachute flares (skymarkers), the least reliable marking technique, and they were reliant upon H2S for accuracy. The 83 Squadron crews were over the aiming point at 16,000 feet, apart from F/L Partridge, who chose 19,000 feet, and released their loads between 19.59 and 20.13. At least one bomb load from the 170-strong force hit a naval ammunition dump at Mariensiel, a south-western suburb, and the resulting explosion lit up the sky like day, leaving behind a glow that lingered for ten minutes before subsiding. Most returning crews reported witnessing this event, in which 120 acres of the town were devastated, and major damage was caused in the naval dockyard.

The penultimate raid on Lorient was mounted by 466 aircraft on the night of the 13/14<sup>th</sup>, and involved a dozen crews from 83 Squadron, led by S/Ls Hurry and Robinson. Take-off was completed by 18.43, and they began to arrive in the target area after some two-and-a-half hours, to encounter clear skies and good visibility, although later arrivals would find smoke drifting across the aiming point. P/O Oakes was able to pick out ground detail, as the first from the squadron to deliver his flares, which he did at 20.32 from 16,000 feet on a north-north-westerly heading. He dropped his cookie two minutes later from 12,500 feet, having swung ninety degrees towards the north-east, and he observed his 4,000 pounder burst in the town. The other squadron participants released their flares from 12,500 to 15,000 feet between 20.33 and 20.44, before dropping their cookies a few minutes later into the developing fires in the town. S/L Robinson had the frustration of losing his entire load to a short circuit as the bomb doors opened at the start of his run.

Eleven crews were briefed on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> for a trip to Italy, seven to join 129 main force aircraft from 1 and 5 Groups, along with six fellow Pathfinders of 156 Squadron to attack Milan, while four others went alone to bomb the docks at La Spezia. The latter departed Wyton first, and were airborne by 19.09, led by S/L Robinson, while S/Ls Cooke and McClure took off at the head of the Milan-bound element immediately afterwards. The plan at Milan called for route-marker flares to be dropped over Lake Bourget on approach to the Alps, and then over Lake Maggiore, on the other side, north-west of Milan, and for four crews to start proceedings by delivering flares across the aiming point. Twelve of the 8 Group aircraft would then regroup, to drop illumination flares and red ground markers onto the exact aiming point for the benefit of the following main force element. They arrived in the target area to find clear skies and good visibility under a bright moon, and the first flares were delivered punctually. Thereafter, however, timings went awry as aircraft turned up late, and marking was spread over half an hour, and covered an area with a one-mile radius. The 83 Squadron crews made timed runs from visually identified pinpoints, and delivered their loads, which included a cookie each, from 10,000 to 14,000 feet between 22.38 and 23.05. The main force followed up with a display of concentrated bombing, creating many fires, the glow from which could be seen from a hundred miles into the return journey. Meanwhile, the Spezia-bound force had also become strung out, but enjoyed the same excellent conditions, as they picked up the Italian coastline at Genoa, and proceeded south-east along it to the target. Bombing took place from 8,600 to 10,500 feet between 22.54 and 23.30, and all returned safely to report an accurate attack.

The final raid of the series on Lorient was mounted on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, and involved 377 aircraft, of which ten represented 83 Squadron. S/Ls McClure and Robinson were the senior pilots on duty as they departed Wyton either side of 17.00, and headed south in excellent visibility under clear skies with a rising moon. They delivered their flares between 20.45 and 20.59 from an average of 14,000 feet, before bombing minutes later, and all returned safely from another highly successful assault on a town, which was now little more than a deserted ruin. Three further attacks on Wilhelmshaven, delivered over a six night period, began on the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 195 aircraft was made ready. The original target had been Hamburg, but doubts about the weather for returning crews prompted a change, and Wilhelmshaven represented a saving of 160 miles on the round-trip. S/L McClure led the nine-strong 83 Squadron element away at 18.28, and they arrived in the target area having been told to expect eight-tenths cloud, but actually found clear skies and good visibility. Each was carrying a mixed load of TIs, a cookie and 500 pounders, which were let go in a single salvo from 16,000 to 18,000 feet between 20.29 and 20.45. All returned safely, Sgt Milton on three engines, and F/O Garvey with a rear

turret, which had been unserviceable for three-quarters of the sortie. It was established later that most of the bombing had missed the town, and fallen into open country to the west.



*Navigator PO John Ridley, DFM, RAAF was lost without trace on 19/20<sup>th</sup> February 1943 when R5743, OL-K failed to return from Wilhelmshaven.*

The assault on Wilhelmshaven continued on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, when 338 aircraft were made ready, of which ten Lancasters represented 83 Squadron. The senior pilot on duty was W/C Hilton, who was making a guest appearance with his former crew, and he was supported by S/L Cooke, who had W/C Gillman alongside him in the cockpit. There was also a maiden operation for F/L Bright, who had arrived from 21 O.T.U. on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and had twice been Mentioned in Despatches. His bomb-aimer, F/O Holmes DFC, was also on his first operation with the squadron, and both had proved to be popular and were fitting in well. The rest of the crew were old hands, who had flown with the recently departed S/L Pat Daniels. S/L Cooke was first off the ground at 17.55, with F/L Bright bringing up the rear at 18.16, and they reached the target area to find ten-tenths low cloud and a smoke screen in operation. They had been able to pinpoint on the coastline to the north-east of the target, and make a timed run to the aiming point, which was identified by skymarkers, but it was clear to S/L Cooke that the attack was both inaccurate and lacking in concentration. He was also of the opinion that it was a bad idea to route the force along a coastline within range of enemy radar. All but one of the 83 Squadron crews delivered their mixed loads of flares, TIs and a cookie

from 16,000 to 18,500 feet between 20.00 and 20.07, but F/Sgt Partridge had two overheating engines, and could only make 14,500 feet. Some observed the flash of their bomb burst, others not, but all commented on the scattered nature of the marking. It is unclear whether or not F/L Bright carried out an attack, but he and his crew were all killed, when R5743 crashed into the sea, and only the body of the rear gunner, F/Sgt Knill, was recovered for burial. The raid was a complete failure, for which outdated maps may have been partially responsible, and there followed a general updating of maps.

Eleven 83 Squadron crews were detailed for an attack on the shipyards at Vegesack on the 21<sup>st</sup>, but the target was changed to Bremen, a dozen or so miles further inland on the River Weser. The number of crews was reduced to nine, and they were to be part of a Pathfinder element of twenty-eight aircraft in an overall force of 143. S/L McClure was the senior pilot on duty, as they began taking off shortly after 18.30 with a variety of bomb loads. Some had a cookie and incendiaries, and others a mix of 1,000 and 2,000 pounders with their red TIs. Route markers were dropped over the Dutch Frisian island of Schiermonnikoog, after which the force arrived in the target area to find ten-tenths low cloud, which necessitated the use of skymarkers. The squadron participants were over what they assumed to be the aiming point at 17,000 to 18,500 feet, between 20.47 and 21.05, and it seemed that a good concentration

of bombing was achieved. All returned safely, but none was able to provide any kind of assessment as to the outcome.

On the 25<sup>th</sup>, a dozen 83 Squadron crews were told to standby for an operation to Hamburg, Bremen or Wilhelmshaven, but found themselves being briefed for Nuremberg as part of an overall force of 337 aircraft. They took off from Wyton either side of 20.00, with S/Ls Cooke, Hurry and Robinson the senior pilots on duty. P/O Moore almost didn't make it, after a "sticky" port-outer engine caused him to swing on take-off and almost collide with the 25 yard gunnery range. Happily, he managed to pull up, and his second attempt was successful, despite the engine continuing to play up, and it would fail altogether on the way home. They all arrived in the target area some three hours later to find clear skies, but hazy conditions and visibility at around five miles. The H2S-equipped Pathfinder spearhead arrived late, and the attack officially opened sixteen minutes after zero hour. As might be expected, the first markers to go down were pounced upon by the waiting main force, who were anxious to bomb and head for home, and a reasonable concentration was achieved. Unfortunately, the first target indicators had fallen over the northern rim of the city, where three hundred buildings sustained damage, but many loads also fell onto outlying communities and open country up to twelve miles north. The squadron contingent was over the target at 15,000 to 18,000 feet between 23.22 and 23.37, and all returned safely, mostly satisfied with their night's work.

Cologne was selected for its third raid of the month on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, for which nine 83 Squadron crews were briefed. They were to be part of an overall force of 429 aircraft, but two of the Wyton element would be scrubbed at the last minute because of technical problems with their aircraft. S/L Robinson was the senior pilot on duty as F/O Smith led them away from Wyton at 19.15, with W/C Gillman beside him in the cockpit. The target area was found to be clear of cloud, but thick ground haze interfered with the accuracy of the marking, and despite a clear instruction at briefings to not undershoot, it soon became clear that this was happening. Approaching from the west, the crews bombed the first clear concentration of markers, and these were on the south-western fringes of the city, where a substantial amount of damage was inflicted upon residential, public, commercial and historic buildings, although little of an important industrial nature. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 16,000 to 18,000 feet between 21.18 and 21.34, and all but one returned safely. W4846 crashed near Mönchengladbach, well to the north-west of Cologne, which suggests that it was on its way home. S/L Robinson DFM, who had previously served on Wellingtons with 38 Squadron, was killed along with the rest of his crew, which included, as a stand-in for the regular mid-upper gunner, S/L Simpson DFM, formerly of 49 Squadron, and currently the 83 Squadron gunnery leader.

Having dealt with Lorient under the recent directive, the attention of the Command now turned upon St Nazaire, and the first attack on this important Nazi-held port was mounted on the last night of the month. Ten 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready, as part of an overall force of 437 aircraft, and the senior pilots on duty were to be S/Ls Cooke and Hurry, with S/L Daniels putting in a guest appearance. They were all safely airborne by 18.55, and arrived in the target area to find clear skies with slight ground haze, but the docks were easily identified in the light from flares. There was heavy and accurate flak as the squadron element passed over the aiming point at 13,200 to 16,500 feet between 21.01 and 21.19, and delivered their cookie each and incendiaries onto red and green target indicators. Again, all but one returned to report a successful operation, which, it was later established, had destroyed about 60% of the town. The return of R5913 was awaited in vain, and P/O Danahy RCAF and his crew were duly posted

missing. They had only recently joined the squadron, but had gained popularity, and, with experience, would have become an asset. They had been brought down in the target area, and there was some speculation as to whether P/O Danahy's very individual and eccentric approach to bombing had been responsible, which was to carry out the bombing run as slowly as possible, with wheels and flaps extended, presumably to counter predicted flak. A cause for celebration tinged with sadness was the completion of F/L Partridge's tour. He had been ever present, participating in all of the squadron's big operations, but now he was on his way to 5 Group HQ at Grantham for a two-week attachment for special duties. On his return he would be posted to 8 Group HQ for operational duties. During the course of the month the squadron launched 141 sorties on sixteen operations, for the loss of three aircraft and crews.



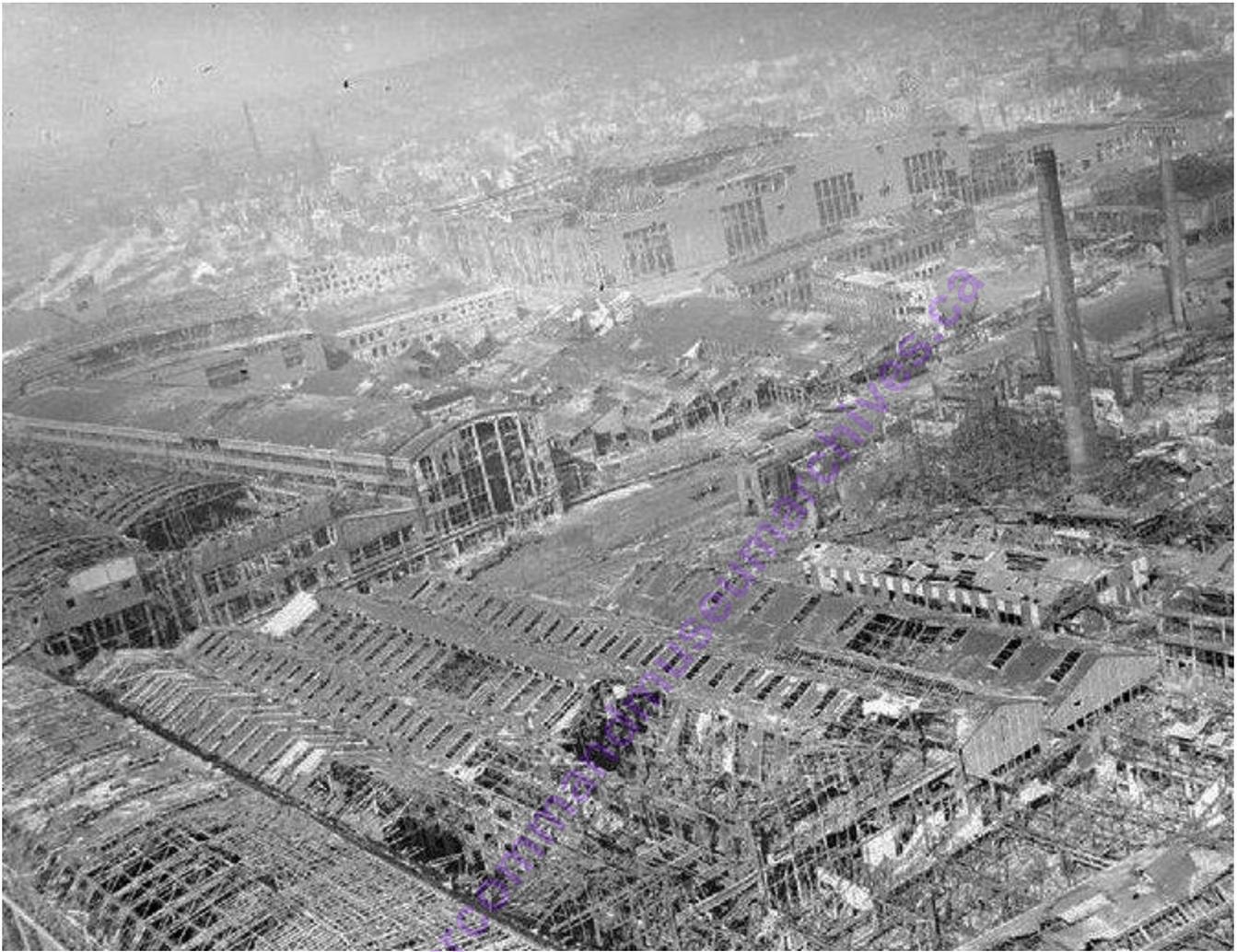
*F/L Jack Partridge completed his tour and was promoted to Squadron Leader. He survived the war, achieving the rank of Wing Commander in his career with the RAF.*

## March 1943

S/L Shaw was posted in from 11 O.T.U on the 1<sup>st</sup>, and would be joined by S/L Flower from Kinloss two days later. Harry Shaw was a veteran of the carnage inflicted upon the Fairey Battle squadrons of the Advanced Air Striking Force in France in May 1940. While serving with 218 Squadron, he participated in and survived the two suicidal attacks that decimated the squadron, and effectively knocked it out of the conflict. On return to England he converted successively to the Blenheim and then the Wellington to complete his tour, at the end of which he received no award in recognition of his service. Berlin opened the month's operational account on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>, for which 302 aircraft were made ready, including eight from 83 Squadron, led by S/L Hurry. They took off either side of 19.00, and made their way eastwards in good conditions without incident until thirty miles short of the target, when F/O Hope lost his port-outer engine, which denied him use of his rear turret and Gee. He also lost height, and was down to 14,000 feet as he made his run across the aiming point. The others were at 18,000 to 21,000 feet, and, under cloudless skies, they were able to identify the built-up area below, assisted by red target indicators. They bombed between 22.13 and 22.24, and returned to report that the marking had been widespread, with a particular concentration over the southern half of the city. Despite this, some claimed exultantly that the concentrated bombing had eclipsed even the Thousand raid on Cologne, with the glow of fires visible from Hanover, some 150 miles away. F/O Hope was down to 9,000 feet by the time he flew over Hanover, and found himself coned in searchlights and fired upon by the flak, but managed to escape, by which time he was at a lowly 6,000 feet. He had regained another 6,000 feet by the time he reached the coast, and made a safe return to Wyton. It was later established that this had been the most destructive raid yet on the capital, but it had been spread over a hundred square miles. The main weight of the attack had hit south-western districts, and had destroyed almost nine hundred buildings, mostly houses, but many industrial premises had also been badly damaged.

This operation was followed on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup> by a large-scale attack on Hamburg, which involved more than four hundred aircraft. 83 Squadron contributed nine Lancasters, led by S/Ls Hurry and McClure, and they were all safely on their way by 19.00. The H2S-equipped Pathfinder aircraft dropped route markers over the coast to guide the main force, and then red and green target indicators over what they believed was the aiming point. The skies were clear and the visibility good, as the 83 Squadron aircraft attacked from 16,000 to 18,500 feet between 21.19 and 21.41, and there was no hint at this stage that the majority of bombs were falling around the small town of Wedel on the Elbe, thirteen miles downstream of Hamburg. S/L McClure was one of those who actually attacked Hamburg, identifying it by the Hamburg-America landing stage, the Blohm & Voss shipyards, the Binnen-Alster Lake and the main railway station. The others relied on the red and green TIs, and paid little attention to ground detail, although haze blotted out much of this anyway, and few were able to observe their bombs bursting. Wedel sustained very serious damage, but the emergency services at Hamburg had to deal with a hundred fires before they could focus their attention on their neighbour.

The time had now come for Harris to launch the first major campaign, for which the Command was adequately prepared and equipped with large numbers of suitable aircraft, effective electronic aides and well-thought-out tactics. Oboe had proved its worth in trials, and would now be put to good use, to finally allow the bombers to hit the Ruhr towns and cities, even in the face of the cloak of industrial haze and frequent cloud cover. The device's margin of error of four hundred or so yards was as good as pinpoint over urban areas, and reliability was now the only question. The Battle of the Ruhr opened on



*The attention of Bomber Command on the extensive Krupps armament complex at Essen is evidenced by the widespread damage. It came at a terrible cost to the crews over a long series of raids against this formidable target.*

the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup>, with Essen predictably selected by Harris as the target for a force of 442 aircraft. The operation was to be conducted in three waves, with Halifaxes in the van, followed by Wellingtons and Stirlings, and Lancasters bringing up the rear. 83 Squadron prepared eight Lancasters, with S/L Hurry the senior pilot on duty in ED313, and the other crew captains and aircraft on this momentous occasion were; F/L Wellington in ED601, F/O Garvey in ED372, F/O Hope in R5626, F/Sgt Partridge in W4847, and Sgts Mason and Milton in R5671 and R5622 respectively. S/L Hurry was first off at 18.55, and the others followed over the ensuing fifty minutes. F/O Garvey had S/L Moyna of the RAF Photographic Unit on board to record the attack on cine-film.

On this night, an unusually high number of early returns and the bombing of alternative targets, reduced the numbers reaching Essen to 362. These, however, exploited the accurate Pathfinder blind marking, and deposited their loads squarely into the centre of the city. In addition to their TIs, the 83 Squadron

Lancasters were each carrying a cookie and incendiaries, and these they delivered from 17,500 to 20,300 feet between 21.03 and 21.35, contributing to the severe damage inflicted upon an estimated 160 acres of built up area, which extended from the city centre to the Krupp works. A total of three thousand houses was destroyed and fifty buildings within the Krupp site were damaged to some extent, in return for the moderate loss of fourteen aircraft. F/O Garvey returned with a Lancaster full of holes and bits of bomb after a narrow escape over the target. The first run was a little early and somewhat uninteresting for the camera, so the cookie and incendiaries were retained for a second run. Seconds after release, the cookie was apparently hit by flak, and exploded directly underneath, peppering the bomb bay with shrapnel and setting it on fire. The Lancaster was propelled upwards 500 feet, after which, the crew set about extinguishing the fire, a feat they accomplished within five minutes. On return, the ground crew pulled bits of bomb out of the main-plane and engine nacelles, and catalogued holes in the bomb doors, dents in the tail-plane and a bent propeller tip on the port-inner. Despite this lucky escape, it was a sad night for 83 Squadron, which posted missing the experienced crew of F/Sgt Partridge RCAF. They were all killed, when W4847 was shot down into the IJsselmeer by the night fighter of Lt Robert Denzel of IV.NJG.I, when on the way home at 22.24. The ORB speaks of this crew as an example to all others for their cheerfulness, willingness and crew co-operation, and added, "It is seldom that a crew such as this comes to any squadron."

It would be a week before the next Ruhr operation was mounted, and, in the meantime, Harris switched his force to southern Germany for a series of three operations. First came Nuremberg on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 335 aircraft was prepared, including eight Lancasters of 83 Squadron. They took off either side of 20.00 led by S/Ls Cooke, Hurry and McClure, and the newly-arrived S/L Hildyard flew as flight engineer with the last-mentioned. F/O Hope turned back after the oxygen and heating tubes to the mid-upper turret became severed, and he jettisoned his 4,000 pounder into the English Channel north-east of Dieppe at 22.56. The others reached the target area to find clear skies but haze, and the city was identified by flares and red TIs. The flares were too few and scattered, as were the TIs, and S/L Cooke observed a cookie and yellow TIs being jettisoned east of Heilbronn, some forty miles short of the target, and being accurately backed-up by other Pathfinders. This would, inevitably, draw off other bomb loads. F/L Wellington reached the target, and estimated the flares to be in the correct location as he bombed from 16,500 feet at 23.18. It was only about fifteen minutes into the return flight that the cookie and a yellow TI were found to have hung up, and it was decided to jettison them live over Mannheim or Karlsruhe. However, as the bomb doors were opened, the contents of the bomb bay fell out, and this was almost certainly what S/L Cooke had seen. The other squadron participants bombed from 13,500 to 18,500 feet between 23.17 and 23.40, and returned safely, some to report clearly identifying the marshalling yards, and observing bomb bursts and developing fires. In fact, only half of the bomb loads had fallen within the city boundaries, the others contributing to a ten-mile creep-back along the line of approach from the north. Even so, local reports recorded six hundred buildings as destroyed, and fourteen hundred others, including some important war industry factories, damaged to some extent.

The following night was devoted to the city of Munich, for which 83 Squadron briefed seven crews, as part of an overall force of 264 aircraft. S/Ls McClure and Hurry were the senior pilots on duty as they departed Wyton either side of 20.30, with S/L Hildyard again flying with the former. S/L McClure lost his port-outer engine to a coolant leak outbound, and his port-inner began to overheat, so he bombed an aerodrome from 16,000 feet at 23.29 on the way home. There were clear skies over the target, with

ground haze, but flares illuminated sufficient detail for crews to be aware of their position. The attack opened late, possibly because of a headwind, which continued to push the bomber stream towards the west of the city. S/L Hurry picked out a factory north of the railway from 18,000 feet, and saw his cookie explode in the vicinity at 00.03. He also witnessed a massive explosion, believed to be south-east of the aiming-point, at 00.15, and reported the glow of fires still visible from a hundred miles away. The others from the squadron bombed from 11,500 to 18,000 feet between 00.09 and 00.20, before returning to report also observing the huge explosion, which F/O Hope and crew placed near the marshalling yards. Local reports confirmed that the raid had fallen largely into the western half of the city, and put the number of buildings destroyed at 291, with 660 others seriously damaged.

After a night's rest, 314 aircraft were prepared for an operation to Stuttgart, and eight 83 Squadron crews were briefed during the afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup>. The senior pilots on duty were S/Ls Cooke, Hurry and Hildyard, the last-mentioned undertaking his first operation as crew captain since joining the squadron. S/L Flower was also taking part to gain experience, and was flying as flight engineer to S/L Cooke. F/L Mackie and crew were back to begin their second tour after a spell as instructors at O.T.U.s, and new pilot, Sgt Henderson, was with them. S/L Cooke led them away at 20.07, and all were safely airborne by 20.31, before forming up and heading to the exit point over the south coast. The plan called for H2S-equipped aircraft from 7 and 35 Squadrons to deliver flares across the aiming point along with red TIs, and for seven of the 83 Squadron contingent to supplement the illumination, and back up with green TIs visually, along with six aircraft from 156 Squadron, while the eighth Wyton Lancaster, of S/L Hildyard, was to bomb with the main force. They reached the target area to find clear skies and a little haze, but some Pathfinder and main force aircraft arrived a little late, because of wrongly-forecast winds. The initial marking was accurate, but late-comers allowed the focus of the attack to drift to the south-west, where most of the backing-up and bombing was directed. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 15,000 feet between 22.54 and 23.26, and all but one returned to report bombing on concentrations of TIs and observing many fires. S/L McClure came back on three engines again, after W4126 OL-E developed another coolant leak in its port-outer, prompting the ORB to announce, "E now to be thrown out." ED313 failed to return with the crew of F/L Mackie, after it was shot down by a night fighter over the Marne region of north-eastern France. The pilot and four of his crew survived, while both gunners lost their lives. Sgt Henderson and navigator, F/L Ogilvie DFC, managed to evade capture, but the others fell into enemy hands. It was a sad loss for the squadron, and the ORB noted that F/L Ogilvie had been one of the longest-serving members. A report from Stuttgart claimed that the operation had destroyed just a little over a hundred houses in south-western suburbs.

The second round of the Ruhr campaign was planned to fall on Essen on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 457 aircraft was detailed. Seven crews attended briefing at Wyton, with S/L McClure and S/L Hildyard the senior pilots, and S/L Shaw also scheduled to fly as flight engineer to P/O Oakes. They took off either side of 19.30, and headed for Dorsten, a town north of the Ruhr, where white ground markers were dropped as a guide to the main force. Essen lay under clear skies less than twenty miles to the south, and the visibility was excellent as the approaching force bore down upon the aiming point. The Pathfinder Mosquitos delivered their markers with great accuracy around the Krupp complex, and these were backed up with green TIs from the heavy Pathfinders. In addition to their TIs, the 83 Squadron aircraft were each carrying a mixture of bombs, which included a cookie, and a selection of 1,000, 500 and 250 pounders, some of which contained long-delay fuses. They crossed the aiming point at 17,000 to 20,500 feet between 21.20 and 21.37, and observed a well-concentrated attack in progress,

with many fires and a huge red explosion at around 21.35. The glow from the fires could be seen from the Dutch coast, and the crews returned with enthusiastic claims of a successful night's work. The return of W4298 was awaited in vain, and it was a bitter blow to the squadron to realise that S/L McClure and his crew would not be among them any longer. The Lancaster had crashed in the target area, and all on board had lost their lives. It will be recalled that S/L McClure had come back to the squadron after recovering from a severe leg injury sustained on his forty-eighth operation. He had twelve sorties to go to complete his second tour, and, having done so, volunteered for a further eight, of which, this fateful one was the third. The ORB spoke of his keenness and cheerfulness, with special mention of navigator, F/L Waterbury DFC, and gunner, F/O MacQueen DFC, as being the oldest members of the squadron, who were well-loved, and had been involved in the toughest operations. The one that cost them their lives achieved a greater degree of concentration than the one of a week earlier, and, this time, it was centred on the Krupp works. Although substantially less housing was destroyed, much new damage was inflicted here for the loss of twenty-three aircraft.

Minor operations occupied the middle of the month, although briefings did take place for a number of targets, including Berlin, Augsburg and Munich, but were subsequently cancelled. Posted to the squadron from 106 Squadron on the 20<sup>th</sup> was acting F/L David Shannon, but he barely had time to unpack, before Gibson was on the phone to him to entice him away to 617 Squadron and a place in bomber folklore. The night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup> brought the second attack on St Nazaire under the January directive, and 357 aircraft were made ready, including thirteen Lancasters of 83 Squadron. S/Ls Hurry and Hildyard were to be the senior pilots on duty, and there were first operations as crew captains for S/Ls Shaw and Flower, and for F/O Johnson, F/Sgt McDonald and Sgt Leigh. W/C Gillman was also to take part, acting as flight engineer to F/O Hope. "Wimpy" Wellington led them away at 19.12, and he was first from the squadron to arrive in the target area, which he found under good conditions, without the usual smoke screen in operation. He was actually a few minutes early, and was coned while stooging around awaiting the initial markers. This made him ninety seconds late in delivering his eight 1,000 and two 500 pounders, having identified the built-up area of the town and aimed at the green TIs from 14,000 feet at 21.32. His squadron colleagues followed him in at 18,000 feet between 21.34 and 22.13, and all returned more or less safely to report a concentrated and apparently successful attack. P/O Moore had an engine catch fire over the French coast on the way home, but it was successfully extinguished, and they made it back on three. F/Sgt McNichol landed just ten seconds after receiving permission to do so, and beat the previous record held by a Mosquito belonging to fellow residents 109 Squadron.

The Ruhr campaign continued at Duisburg on the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, for which 455 aircraft were made ready. A dozen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, ten to be told that they were to act as backers-up, while two were to bomb with the main force. In the event, the participation of eleven crews was scrubbed, which left only Sgt Leigh to represent the squadron, and he took off at 19.32. The target was covered by ten-tenths cloud with a base at 8,000 feet, as had been forecast by the meteorological section, and marking was to be by the Wanganui method, skymarking, with the inherent tendency of the parachute flares to drift across the target at the behest of the wind. The problem on this night was the early return of five of the nine 109 Squadron Mosquitos because of Oboe equipment failure, and the loss of a sixth, which meant that the marking was sparse and ultimately scattered. Sgt Leigh bombed from 20,000 feet at 21.54 on the estimated position of the skymarkers, which had gone out, and he noted a series of markers fifteen to twenty miles to the north-north-west. All of this led to an ineffective attack, which, according to local reports, was responsible for the destruction of just fifteen houses, with seventy

others damaged. At first light on the 27<sup>th</sup>, P/O Calvert and F/O Johnson were sent to search for the missing 109 Squadron Mosquito, which had gone into the sea off North Foreland. Nothing was found, and this was the first operational loss of an Oboe Mosquito.

A dozen crews were called to briefing later on the 27<sup>th</sup>, to be told that Berlin was to be their destination that night, as part of a force of 396 aircraft. The senior pilots on duty were S/Ls Flower, Hildyard, Hurry and Shaw, and this would be the final operation of a successful tour for S/L Hurry DFC and his navigator, S/L Forrest DFC. Sgt Leigh was also on the Order of Battle to undertake his first operation as a marker. They took off either side of 20.00, but it wasn't long before P/O Hope's port-outer engine failed, and he jettisoned his cookie and 250 pounders at the mid-point in the North Sea between the Norfolk coast and Texel at 21.11, before turning for home. The others pressed on over complete cloud cover until about twenty miles from Berlin, when the skies cleared to leave only ground haze. The bombers approached the target from the south-west, but the H2S operators misinterpreted what they saw on their cathode-ray tubes, and marked two areas with red target indicators, both well short of the city. The 83 Squadron crews could only back up on what they could see, and delivered their green TIs and bombs onto the reds from 18,000 to 21,000 feet, between 22.50 and 23.20, believing themselves to be over a built-up area. F/O Johnson was followed for fourteen minutes by a night fighter, which made two ineffective attacks from extreme range, and it was not necessary to return fire. They all arrived home safely to report a scattered attack, and many fires, but no crew was certain of its actual position at the time of bombing. It was later established that the main weight of the attack had fallen seven to seventeen miles short of the intended aiming point, causing minimal damage, and post war reports claimed that 25% of the bombs were duds.

Berlin was "on" again on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, with 83 Squadron contributing fourteen Lancasters to an overall force of 329 aircraft. S/Ls Shaw and Flower were the senior pilots on duty as they began taking off shortly after 21.00, and there was a first operation of his second tour for P/O Calvert, and maiden operations with the squadron for F/O Wilmot and Sgt Renshaw. A message was received from F/O Johnson at 23.33, to the effect that he was returning early because of the weather conditions, which were not particularly favourable, and included icing and wrongly-forecast winds. A fix put them mid-way between the Lincolnshire and Schleswig-Holstein coasts, about sixty miles north of the Frisians, but nothing further was heard, and R5754 failed to return. The crew was on its third operation since joining the squadron, and had already gained a reputation for its "press-on" spirit, the ORB describing them as "shaping up well". The plan of attack on this night called for the H2S-equipped Pathfinder crews to mark the Müggelsee, south-east of Berlin, and, although it was cloud-covered at first, it was identified, and the initial marking was backed-up. The main force crews were able to orient themselves by means of a visual reference on the lake, before making a timed run to the aiming point. A reasonable concentration of TIs was achieved with a three-mile radius, but the main force effort was directed east and south-east onto the fringes of the city. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 16,000 to 20,600 feet between 00.54 and 01.16, and returned to report, what appeared to have been, a fairly accurate attack. In fact, most of the effort had fallen into open country south-east of the capital, and only limited damage was achieved. The disappointment was compounded by the loss of twenty-one aircraft, 6.4% of the force. This was the final operation of the month for 83 Squadron, during which it had launched ninety-three sorties on thirteen operations, and lost five aircraft and crews.

## April 1943

April would prove to be the least rewarding month of the Ruhr period, largely because of the number of operations mounted to targets outside of the region, and beyond the range of Oboe. The first operational activity was the conclusion of the campaign against the U-Boot-sheltering French ports on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, when small-scale raids of fifty-five and forty-seven aircraft were launched against St Nazaire and Lorient respectively. 83 Squadron briefed seven crews for the former, led by S/Ls Flower and Shaw, and three for Lorient with NCO pilots. The former began taking off shortly after 20.00, but F/O Hope was forced to turn back with an engine failure south-west of Guernsey, and jettisoned his bombs into the Channel. It was around 22.15, when the remaining St Nazaire element arrived in the target area in clear skies with a little ground haze. The docks were easily identified visually, and by the red TIs, which had been delivered by Oboe Mosquitos. The loads of six 1,000 and four 500 pounders went down from 17,000 to 18,000 feet, between 22.16 and 22.29, and all returned safely to report a concentrated and successful attack. The Lorient trio had taken off an hour after the others, and found similar conditions, although, when F/Sgt Milton arrived, having followed the coastline, he saw only green TIs, which fell into the sea and were immediately extinguished. He waited for twelve minutes until 23.12, before bombing from 18,500 feet, and only then did he observe red Oboe-laid TIs. Sgts Leigh and Mason had also seen the green TIs fall into the water at 23.03, followed by a red one minute later, but they stooged around until 23.55, before bombing from 17,000 and 18,500 feet respectively.

The Ruhr campaign continued in encouraging style, when Essen was the target once more on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>. 348 aircraft were detailed, of which ten represented 83 Squadron, led by S/Ls Flower and Shaw. They took off either side of 20.00, S/L Shaw carrying special voice-recording equipment and an extra crew member to operate it, perhaps an early version of "Jostle", the jamming device that 101 Squadron would pioneer on operations in the autumn as Airborne Cigar or ABC. They arrived in the target area to find clear skies and the usual ground haze, but this was negated by the accuracy of the Oboe markers, which fell around the aiming point. The attack began slowly, but built up to a crescendo, during which a massive explosion was observed by many crews in the centre of the bombing. The searchlight and flak defence was fierce and accurate, beginning well in advance of the target, and P/O Moore was forced to jettison his bombs at 21.40 somewhere near Gladbeck, a town some ten miles due north of Essen. The TIs caught fire in the bomb bay, and they were also dumped two minutes later, before ED439 was pointed towards home, with one engine and all turrets out, a fuel tank holed and the bomb-fusing panel damaged.

On a night of heavy casualties for the squadron, this Lancaster would at least make it home to land at 23.45, its crew intact, but with more than two hundred holes and an awaiting Cat A/C notification. The other squadron participants to return home reported bombing from 17,500 to 21,000 feet, between 21.59 and 22.09, and described a highly concentrated and accurate raid, which was confirmed by photo-reconnaissance that revealed fresh damage in central and western districts. The defences claimed a further 6% haul of the attackers, amounting to twenty-one aircraft, and 83 Squadron suffered its worst reversal in a single night, losing three crews without survivors. F/L Hope DFC was an Australian serving in the RAF, and he and his crew were described in the ORB as very determined and keen, and recently haunted by bad luck, with three early returns in their last four operations. They were in R5626, which crashed in the target area, almost certainly the victim of the flak defences. ED334 was despatched by a night fighter flown by Hptm Herbert Lütje of III/NJGI, and, according to Bill Chorley's superb and

indispensable reference work, RAF Bomber Command Losses for 1943, it crashed at 22.54 at Winterswijk, close to Holland's border with Germany and north of the Ruhr. The timing suggests that S/L Flower and crew were on their way home, but having approached the target from the north, the withdrawal route should have taken them south towards Mönchengladbach. This brings the time of ED334's crash into question, and the author believes that it should be 21.54, when it would have been still on its way to the target. Although S/L Flower and his navigator, F/O Southon, were relatively new to the squadron, they had already made a favourable impression, while the others in the crew were long-serving squadron members and were well-liked. LM302 contained the crew of P/O Calvert DFM, he and his bomb-aimer, P/O Ridd, having just returned to the squadron for a second tour. The rest of the crew were newcomers, and were on just their second operation, when they came down near Mönchengladbach on the way home.

The naval port of Kiel was selected as the target for the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, for which the largest non-1,000 force to date of 577 aircraft was assembled. Among them were seven 83 Squadron Lancasters, five of them assigned to NCO pilots, with F/O Smith the senior pilot on duty. They took off either side of 20.30, and reached the target to find ten-tenths cloud with tops at between 5,000 and 10,000 feet. The Pathfinders delivered flares and markers, but only a dim glow could be seen through the clouds, and the backing-up became erratic. The squadron crews were over the target at 17,500 to 22,000 feet between 23.04 and 23.28, and returned safely unable to offer an assessment of results. P/O Dundas was carrying film cameras and F/L Peace to operate them, but the conditions ruined any chance of useful footage. Local reports suggested that only a few bombs fell within the town, causing minor damage, and that decoy fire sites may have drawn off some of the effort. S/L Smith was posted to the squadron from 15 O.T.U on the 5<sup>th</sup>, presumably to fill the vacancy left by the loss of S/L Flower. The 6<sup>th</sup> was spent moving personnel into new living quarters, and a gale prevented any flying on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

Briefings took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> for an operation to Duisburg that night. 392 aircraft were made ready, nine of the Lancasters provided by 83 Squadron. S/L Hildyard and the newly-promoted S/L Wellington were the senior pilots on duty, as they got away from Wyton either side of 21.30, before Sgt Leigh lost the use of the rear turret ten minutes into the outward flight, and decided to turn back after coming into close contact with enemy night fighters twenty-five miles off Texel. The others reached the target area, to encounter ten-tenths cloud with tops as high as 24,000 feet, and a strong wind, which drove the skymarkers across the target, and ruined any chance of accurate marking. The attack descended into a typical pre-Oboe affair of widely scattered bombing, to which the 83 Squadron crews contributed from 18,500 to 21,000 feet, although "Wimpy" Wellington came down to 13,000 feet to try to get a better view. Five Mosquitos and a hundred Lancasters returned to Duisburg twenty-four hours later, without an 83 Squadron presence, but similar conditions led to another scattered and largely ineffective raid.

Harris switched his focus upon southern Germany on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, when Frankfurt was selected as the objective for a force of 502 aircraft. Eight 83 Squadron Lancasters were started up on their dispersals, but one dropped out immediately with oil pressure problems, leaving seven to make their way to the threshold for take-off at midnight. S/Ls Hildyard, Shaw and Wellington were the senior pilots on duty, and F/Sgt Milton had F/O I.C.B. "Brian" Slade performing the role of flight engineer. Slade, at the tender age of 21, was a voluble Londoner, who would become known as "the boy Slade", and had arrived from 23 O.T.U., on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March having set himself the task of completing a double Pathfinder tour of sixty operations straight through. They reached the target area to find ten-tenths cloud



*Lancaster ED601, OL-T, subsequently flew with 207 Sqn, failing to return from Berlin on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1943.*

cover with tops between 8,000 and 12,000 feet, and the plan, under such conditions, was to employ H2S-laid skymarkers. However, the leading Pathfinder crews dropped ground markers instead, in the belief that they would be visible through the cloud, which proved not to be the case. The glow of those remaining visible was indistinguishable from decoys, incendiaries and searchlights, and the backers-up were unable to establish a point of concentration. The 83 Squadron crews each carried a cookie and four 1,000 pounders in addition to their TIs, and they delivered them on e.t.a., from 15,500 and 20,000 feet between 02.34 and 03.05. S/L Wellington circled for fifteen minutes, before bombing the largest red glow he could find, and commented that the general glow stretched from the south of Mainz to the north of Frankfurt, a distance of about twenty-five miles. Bombing photos showed nothing but cloud, and local reports confirmed that few bombs had found the mark.

Briefings took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> for an attack that night on the docks at La Spezia, on Italy's north-western coast, where warships were the principal objectives. 83 Squadron prepared ten Lancasters as part of an overall force of 211 aircraft, with S/Ls Hildyard, Shaw and Wellington the senior pilots on duty, and W/C Gillman acting as flight engineer to the last-mentioned. Also on board ED601 was W/C McGowan, who is believed to be the chief medical officer. There would be a maiden trip as crew captain for F/O Slade DFC, and this operation would be the sixtieth and final one for P/O Moore. They were all safely airborne by 21.24, each carrying three 2,000lb armour-piercing bombs in addition to their various-

coloured flares, and reached the target area about eight minutes late because of wrongly-forecast winds. On arrival, they found little or no cloud, but a smoke screen in operation to protect the warships sheltering in the port. They were able to make a visual identification of some ground detail, but none caught sight of the naval vessels, and most bombs fell onto the docks and town from 10,000 to 14,000 feet between 01.30 and 01.56. P/O McDonald noticed early on that fuel consumption was excessive, but carried on using the most economical settings, and arrived back on fumes to land at Tangmere on the Sussex coast.

Stuttgart was the destination for 462 aircraft on the following night, for which 83 Squadron detailed nine crews. S/Ls Shaw and Wellington were the senior pilots on duty, as they departed Wyton between 21.43 and 22.07, and there was a first operation as crew captain for Sgt King. F/O Slade had issues with both port engines, and jettisoned his cookie and a couple of 1,000 pounders in mid Channel at 22.45, and F/O Wilmot also returned early with intercom failure, after jettisoning his bombs into the sea north of Dieppe at 23.11. The others arrived in the target area to find clear skies but hazy conditions, and the blind markers (H2S) from 7 and 35 Squadron delivered red TIs onto what they believed to be the aiming point. In fact, as a demonstration of the shortcomings of H2S in its early form, they had fallen short of the city centre, and the backing up and bombing was concentrated to the north-east in a creep-back along the line of approach. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 13,000 to 17,000 feet between 00.40 and 01.21, many picking out ground detail such as marshalling yards, the railway station, the river and the Bosch factory, and believed themselves to be over the briefed aiming point. Creep-back predominantly became a feature of many large-scale operations, and was caused by the tendency of crews to bomb the first TIs or fires they came upon, in order to be on their way home as early as possible, rather than to push on to the briefed aiming point. Sometimes creep-back could bring benefits, and at other times it wasted vast resources in open country, but on this night it rescued the operation from failure by falling across the industrial suburb of Bad Canstatt in the north, where railway repair shops were hit, and the neighbouring districts of Münster and Mühlhausen, where almost four hundred buildings were destroyed.

The night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup> brought an attempt to destroy the Skoda armaments factory at Pilsen in Czechoslovakia, for which a force of 327 Lancasters and Halifaxes was made ready. There was also to be a diversionary raid by 270 aircraft at Mannheim, in an effort to confuse and divide the enemy's night fighter defences. The plan revealed to the Lancaster and Halifax crews for the main operation was a disaster waiting to happen, and the outcome could have been anticipated. In the event of the expected clear weather conditions, the south-west edge of the target was to be marked by green TIs and backed up, but the bulk of the flares and yellow TIs were to be delivered over the town, and were intended to confirm the route and provide a final reference point seven miles from the factory complex. 83 Squadron briefed a dozen crews to be led by S/Ls Hildyard, Shaw and Wellington, and they began taking off at 21.13, the marker aircraft carrying a selection of target indicators and flares with a cookie, and the non-markers a cookie and 1,000 pounders. P/O Dundas lost his way outbound, and ended up being coned by searchlights over Munich, where he jettisoned his bombs. On arrival in the target area, the others encountered five to eight-tenths cloud, which forced the H2S Halifaxes to search for the aiming point and threw the operation behind schedule. Chaos reigned as many main force crews bombed on the yellow TIs over the town in error, and S/L Shaw, flying at 19,000 feet, commented on the main force bombing too early. The 83 Squadron crews bombed mostly from 13,000 feet between 01.36 and 01.56, although F/Sgt Murray, who was flying as crew captain with the squadron for the first time, was at 9,600 feet. He had stumbled across Karlsruhe on the way out, and picked up some flak damage for his pains.

The operation was an expensive failure, paid for with thirty six aircraft, split equally between the two types, and this represented a massive 11% of the force. The intended target escaped damage, and the majority of the bombs fell on and around an asylum seven miles away. F/O McNichol RCAF was one of many crew captains to sacrifice his life for his crew, when remaining at the controls of a badly damaged R5484. A signal was received at 04.11 from north-east of Paris to the effect that they were returning on two engines, and the Lancaster crashed soon afterwards, about fifteen miles north-west of Reims. The others on board all survived to be taken prisoner, a hope expressed in the ORB, along with comments as to the popularity and keenness of the crew. They had been converted onto Lancasters by the squadron, and were then posted away, only to volunteer to return as Pathfinders. Sadly, there were no survivors from F/Sgt Milton's crew, after R5622 crashed at Dobransy in Czechoslovakia, some ten miles south-west of Pilsen. The ORB speaks of F/Sgt Milton as an outstanding NCO and crew captain, and credits the good performance of his crew to his leadership. The diversionary raid on Mannheim by a predominately Wellington and Stirling force fared better in terms of the damage inflicted, but also suffered the loss of eighteen aircraft, bringing the night's casualty figure to a new record high of fifty four.

A return to La Spezia on the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup> saw eight Lancasters made ready at Wyton, as part of a force of 178 aircraft. S/L Hildyard was first off the ground at 21.08, and the others followed him safely into the air over the ensuing fifteen minutes. They were routed out over France at 12,000 feet, but Sgt King failed to locate the target area, and turned back at the Hyeres Islands near Toulon, and jettisoned his bombs live a few miles inland. The others arrived in the target area to find perfect conditions for bombing, although a smoke screen was already in operation. The town and dockyards remained visible, however, and it was easy to visually identify the aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 13,000 to 14,600 feet between 01.44 and 01.54, and all returned without major incident having crossed France at the briefed height of 1,000 feet to avoid enemy night fighters. Reconnaissance revealed that the main weight of bombs had fallen to the north-west of the aiming point, but the main railway station and many public buildings had been damaged.

Another distant target was the Baltic port of Stettin, for which a force of 339 aircraft was assembled on the 20<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron briefed ten crews, and in the rare absence of a flight commander, F/L Rickinson was the senior pilot on duty. They took off either side of 21.30, briefed to fly as low as practicable on the way out, but to climb to 18,000 feet for the bombing run, although, for an unspecified reason, P/O McDonald and F/O Garvey were told to go in at 14,000. F/Sgt Murray lost an engine sixty miles from the target, but pressed on, and arrived with the others to find clear skies and excellent visibility, which enabled them to establish their positions visually by ground features. The main concentration of red TIs was in the docks area, and the squadron participants delivered their TIs, flares, cookie and two 500 pounders each from 10,000 to 18,000 feet between 01.01 and 01.12. A large explosion at 01.12 caused masses of black smoke, and the fires could be seen from 120 miles away. A message was received from P/O McDonald RCAF at 01.14, to say that ED312 was being abandoned somewhere near Sweden. It had been attacked and severely damaged by a JU88 while at 16,000 feet, and was losing fuel. The mid-upper gunner had been wounded during the engagement, and it was possibly for this reason that an attempt was made to land at Malmo, which proved to be unsuccessful. The Lancaster was eventually ditched close to the shore, and the entire crew was rescued, to spend a few weeks enjoying the legendary hospitality of their hosts as internees, before returning to the squadron. The ORB describes them as, "a really fine crew with an exceptional captain, who have made a big impression, though they have not been long with us."



*ED312, OL-F (above), failed to make it back from Stettin and ditched close to Malmö. The aircraft was recovered and brought ashore by the Swedish authorities. The crew enjoyed the obligatory period of internment before returning to England to continue their duties.*



The operation was an outstanding success, which devastated an estimated one hundred acres in central districts at a cost of twenty-one aircraft, over 6% of the force.

It was now time to return to the Ruhr, and Duisburg was selected as the target for the night of the 26/27<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 561 aircraft was made ready. This was the largest force yet sent against this important industrial city, and fourteen of the Lancasters were to be provided by 83 Squadron. S/Ls Hildyard, Shaw and Wellington were the senior pilots on duty as they departed Wyton over an extended period between 23.58 and 01.10. F/Sgt Murray's rear gunner lost his oxygen supply, forcing them to turn back and jettison the bombs into the sea a dozen miles west of IJmuiden at 01.49. The others arrived in the target area to find clear skies and good visibility, but ground detail was hard to pick out, and crews relied upon the accurate and punctual Oboe marking. This was well backed up, and the attack developed a degree of concentration, before seeming to stray towards the north-east as it progressed. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 17,000 to 21,000 feet between 02.17 and 02.55, and returned safely to report a relatively quiet trip. Reconnaissance revealed that most of the bombing had fallen to the north-east of Duisburg, but damage within the city, according to local reports, was put at three hundred houses destroyed.

Five crews were briefed for an operation to Essen on the last night of the month, but two were scrubbed as they taxied to take-off, because of their inexperience in unfavourable weather conditions. This left F/O Thompson, F/Sgt Murray and Sgt Britton to take off from 00.30, carrying only bombs as part of the main force effort in an overall force of 305 aircraft. There was ten-tenths cloud over the target, as forecast, but the tops were higher than expected, at 16,000 feet, and the skymarkers tended to become swallowed up too quickly. The tracking flares were clearly visible, however, and allowed for timed runs to be made, and those release point flares remaining visible, attracted the main concentration of bombing. The 83 Squadron trio were over the target at 18,000 feet between 02.55 and 03.02, and returned safely to report being unable to assess the results. Local reports gave a figure of 189 buildings destroyed, and 237 others seriously damaged. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 107 sorties on thirteen operations, for the loss of six aircraft and six crews, although one of these would return eventually from internment.

## May 1943

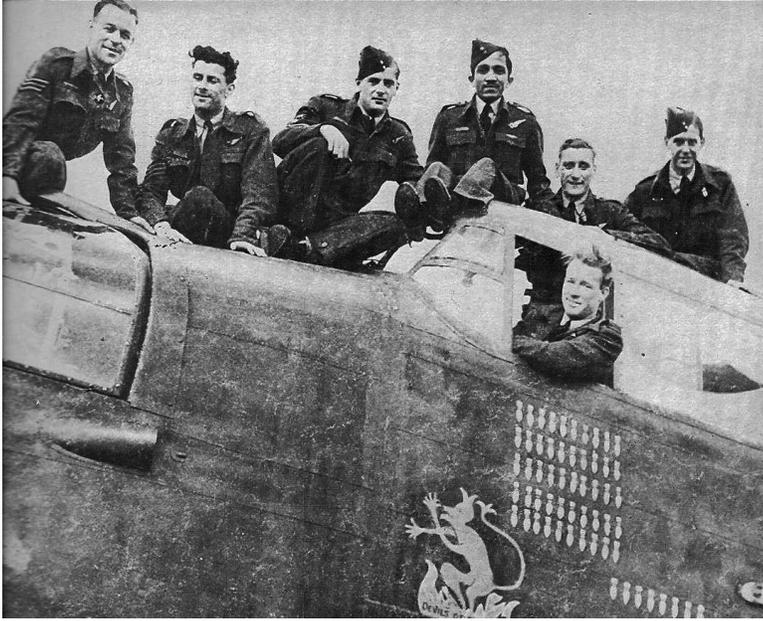
May would bring a return to winning ways, and some spectacular successes, but the first three nights passed without operational activity for the bulk of the Command, despite briefings for Duisburg on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Acting S/L Swift was posted in from 11 O.T.U on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and then, on the afternoon of the 4<sup>th</sup>, briefings took place for what would be the largest non-1000 raid to date. It was to be directed at Dortmund that night, and would involve 596 aircraft. Fourteen Lancasters were armed and fuelled at Wyton, and those assigned to a backing-up role had their bomb bays filled with two cans of long-burning red TIs, three cans of standard reds, a cookie, four 1,000 pounders and three 500 pounders. Those bombing with the main force carried no TIs, but had an additional three 500 pounders and two delay-fused 250 pounders. S/Ls Hildyard and Wellington were the senior pilots on duty as they got away safely either side of 22.30, with S/L Swift acting as flight engineer to the former, and F/O Chick to the latter. W/C Gillman put himself on the Order of Battle, and was flying as "second dickey" to Sgt Leigh in R5629. They found Dortmund under clear skies with a little ground haze, but the Oboe Mosquitos had dropped green TIs, which were accurately backed-up, and the squadron crews carried out their attacks from 15,000 to 18,000 feet between 01.03 and 01.39. Sgt Renshaw lost his port-inner and starboard-outer engines as he approached the target, and tried to press on at 10,000 feet, but could not maintain height. He reluctantly turned back from about ten miles short, and jettisoned most of the hardware onto farmland east of Zutphen in Holland at 01.21, and the TIs into the Zuider Zee twenty minutes later. He eventually landed at Graveley with the good engines beginning to overheat. S/L Wellington reported a large explosion, which lasted ninety seconds as he was leaving the target, and others were observed at 01.10 and 01.33. Other returning crews reported many fires, and smoke rising to bombing altitude as the raid developed, and there was also mention of a few stray TIs. Foggy conditions at Wyton presented difficulties for returning crews, and many landed away, although F/O Slade managed to find his way down to land on three engines. Post-raid analysis showed that, in spite of some bomb loads being lured away by decoy fires, more than twelve hundred buildings had been destroyed, while a further two thousand sustained serious damage. It was, however, an expensive success, costing thirty-one aircraft, the highest casualty figure of the campaign thus far. 83 Squadron lost its commanding officer, W/C Gillman, after R5629 crashed in the target area, with no survivors from the crew of Sgt Leigh. The ORB speaks highly of W/C Gillman, who, during his short period of tenure, had "created a good squadron spirit, and had helped it morally and numerically to build up from the somewhat depleted state it had been in when he took over." The ORB also described Sgt Leigh and crew as, "an exceptionally keen volunteer crew, which had proved itself as most reliable and determined."

The new commanding officer was W/C John Searby, who was posted in on the 9<sup>th</sup> from 106 Squadron, where he had been Gibson's successor on the latter's posting to form 617 Squadron. Searby's substantive rank was still flight lieutenant, demonstrating his rapid rise to stardom, despite having no operational experience prior to joining 106 Squadron as a twenty-nine year-old flight commander in November 1942. He had served previously as an instructor, a ferry pilot, a staff officer, and 2 Group navigation officer, before arriving on the operational scene. His first week in command passed uneventfully, as a number of briefings took place for operations to Duisburg, but each was cancelled. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> before Searby introduced himself to his crews, and the 12<sup>th</sup> before he presided over his first operation. Duisburg was selected as the target for 572 aircraft, of which fourteen represented 83 Squadron. S/Ls Hildyard and Wellington were the senior pilots on duty, and there were maiden sorties as Pathfinder crew captains for F/Os Chick and Mappin and Sgt Shipway, and the first as a marker for F/O Tilbury and crew. They took

off either side of midnight in poor weather conditions and low cloud, with S/L Swift once more flying with S/L Hildyard as an extra "bod". By the time they reached the target to find clear skies and moderate to good visibility, the nine 109 Squadron Mosquitos had dispensed their yellow preliminary markers and then their red TIs right onto the aiming point, and these were backed up by twenty-six heavy Pathfinder aircraft. The remainder of the 8 Group effort formed part of the main force, which achieved unaccustomed concentration and plastered the aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 14,000 to 19,500 feet between 02.03 and 02.33, F/O Chick having first been coned and forced down to 11,000 feet in the defence zone. A large explosion was seen at 02.16, which lasted about five seconds, and another very large one was reported at 02.32. The defences were very active and fierce, and the thirty-four missing aircraft represented a new record for the campaign. Among them was W4955, which was damaged by flak, and finished off by a night fighter, to crash at 02.17 about five miles north-east of Hilversum in Holland. F/L Rickinson DFC and all but one of his crew lost their lives, and only F/L Ransome DFC survived to fall into enemy hands. The pilot was relatively new to the squadron, and had made a good impression, while his crew were old hands, who had flown with S/L Cooke. In some compensation for the heavy losses, Duisburg had finally succumbed to a massive blow at the fifth attempt since the campaign began, and had suffered the destruction of almost sixteen hundred buildings. In addition, sixty thousand tons of shipping was either sunk or severely damaged in the port area.

Two operations were mounted on the following night, one to Bochum by over four hundred aircraft, and the other to the Skoda works at Pilsen with a 5 Group main force, in an attempt to rectify the previous month's failure. 83 Squadron briefed F/O Chick and F/Sgt Finding for the former, and ten crews for the latter, with F/L Smith the senior pilot on duty. With further to travel, the Pilsen-bound Lancasters took off first, and were all safely airborne by 21.54, leaving the Ruhr-bound duo on the ground for a further two hours. The plan at Pilsen was to blind mark the factory complex by H<sub>2</sub>S, and for backers up to mark visually. F/O Mappin returned early after the oxygen supply to the mid-upper turret failed, and he jettisoned his bombs live from 9,000 feet at 22.53, some fifty miles off Mablethorpe. W4981 was outbound over Holland at 22,000 feet, when intercepted by Oblt Lothar Linke of IV/NJGI, and shot down to crash near Lemmer, on the eastern shore of the IJsselmeer. Sgt Renshaw and all but one of his crew lost their lives, and only wireless operator, F/O Gould, survived in enemy hands. The others reached Czechoslovakia to find clear skies and good visibility, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed from 12,000 to 18,800 feet, although mostly from 13,000 feet, between 01.14 and 01.31. Somehow, despite the crews' claims of making a visual identification of the factory complex by the light of flares and target indicators, they conspired to bomb open country to the north of the site, and the factory again escaped damage.

There were clear skies also over Bochum, situated about a dozen miles east of Essen, but the usual industrial haze prevented any ground detail from being identified. The first Oboe Mosquitos dropped red TIs onto the aiming point, but then a gap developed, and although the backers-up kept the aiming point marked throughout, the bombing lacked a degree of concentration, possibly as a result of decoy markers. The 83 Squadron Lancasters bombed as part of the main force from 19,000 feet, F/Sgt Finding at 02.05 and F/O Chick twenty minutes later, the latter reporting the target to be a mass of flames with many explosions. Photo-reconnaissance revealed the raid to have been moderately effective, and local reports admitted to 394 buildings destroyed, and more than seven hundred seriously damaged.



*Rick Garvey and his crew with OL-Q. At this time the Lancaster was already a veteran of 58 ops.*

A nine day break in main force operations allowed the squadrons to rest and replenish, and it was during this period that 617 squadron entered bomber folklore with its epic attack on the Ruhr Dams. Mounted on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, the operation, codenamed Chastise, was led by the former 83 Squadron officer, W/C Guy Gibson, who would be awarded a Victoria Cross. When the crews were next called to briefings on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, they learned that Dortmund was to be their target for the second time during the month. The first time had involved a record force of 596 aircraft, and now a new record of 826 aircraft reflected the massive increase in

numbers available to Harris through an expansion programme. Many squadrons added a third or C Flight, which would eventually be hived off to form a new squadron. Fourteen 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready, and W/C Searby would lead for the first time, with S/Ls Hildyard, Smith and Wellington in support. (The recently arrived S/L A.B. Smith should not be confused with the long-serving F/L C.A.J. Smith). It took more than an hour to get them all away from Wyton either side of 23.00, and all reached the target to find clear skies but ground haze and smoke blotting out ground detail. The Oboe marking was accurate, however, and well backed up, and the main force crews had little difficulty in finding the mark. The 83 squadron marker crews were each carrying a cookie and six 1,000 pounders in addition to their TIs, while those bombing as part of the main force carried mostly a cookie, three or four 1,000 pounders and seven 500 pounders. They delivered their loads from 16,000 to 20,000 feet between 01.04 and 01.47, and all returned safely to report the target to be a mass of flames, with thick black smoke rising to many thousands of feet. Reconnaissance revealed that central, northern and eastern districts had been devastated, with almost two thousand buildings destroyed, and there was much damage to war-industry factories. It was not a one-sided affair, however, and the loss of thirty-eight aircraft was the highest of the campaign to date, but would not remain so, and "Happy Valley's" fearsome reputation was set for all time.

Düsseldorf came next on the night of the 25/26<sup>th</sup>, for which fourteen 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready, as part of an overall force of 759 aircraft. They took off from Wyton over a period of an hour, either side of midnight, with the newly-promoted W/C Shaw the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/L Smith and S/L Swift, the latter undertaking his first operation with the squadron as crew captain. A ground-marking plan had been prepared, but when the Oboe Mosquitos arrived in the target area, they were greeted by two layers of cloud, and although they delivered their TIs with great accuracy, they could not be seen by the backers-up, and the marking became scattered. The 83 Squadron crews attacked from 16,000 to 20,400 feet between 01.34 and 02.16, and returned to report a scattered attack, with bombing spread over about fifteen miles. There were also decoy markers and fire sites in operation, and the result was that the target escaped with no more than a hundred buildings destroyed, in return for a loss to the Command of twenty-seven aircraft.

Briefings on the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup> informed crews that they were to return to the cauldron of the Ruhr that night for another crack at Essen. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews attended the briefing at Wyton, but the five assigned to marking duties were cancelled, leaving nine Lancasters to be fuelled and bombed up as part of an overall force of 518 aircraft. They departed Wyton either side of 23.00, with S/Ls Smith and Swift the senior pilots on duty, but Sgt Shipway returned early after his port-inner engine caught fire, and he jettisoned his load over the sea. A skymarking plan had been prepared in anticipation of cloudy conditions over the Ruhr, and this was confirmed as the crews were met by seven to nine-tenths cloud with clear patches. They identified the aiming point by means of red and white parachute flares, and the 83 Squadron participants delivered their cookie, four 1,000 pounders and six 500 pounders from 19,000 to 21,000 feet, between 01.16 and 01.25. They all returned safely to report a good concentration of fires, and although it was confirmed that almost five hundred buildings had been destroyed, the raid had been scattered and suffered from undershooting.

The final operation of the month took place on the night of the 29/30<sup>th</sup>, and was directed at a new Ruhr target, although it had probably been the victim of many stray bombs in the past. Wuppertal consisted of the twin towns of Barmen and Elberfeld, and was situated some twenty miles east of Düsseldorf and the same distance south of Bochum, towards the eastern end of the Ruhr Valley. The specific area for attention on this night was Barmen, the more easterly urban area, for which a force of 719 aircraft was made ready, including fourteen Lancasters of 83 Squadron. W/C Searby put himself on the Order of Battle to lead, and he was supported by S/Ls Smith, Swift and Wellington. They took off either side of 23.00, and all but two from the squadron reached the target in good order to find only high-level cirrus cloud and slight ground haze. F/Sgt Finding and Sgt Rust had both experienced engine problems, and returned early after jettisoning their loads into the sea. At the target, there was a standard Oboe ground-marking plan in place, with backers-up, and fifty-four Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters performing a fire-raising role with incendiaries. The 83 Squadron crews attacked the TIs around the aiming point from 15,500 to 18,800 feet between 00.48 and 01.29, and returned safely to report concentrated bombing, large areas of fire and black smoke rising to 10,000 feet. The effectiveness of the raid was confirmed by reconnaissance, which revealed that a thousand acres of Barmen's built-up area had been devastated. Five large factories, over two hundred other industrial premises and around four thousand houses had been destroyed, and, uniquely, this number exceeded the tally of buildings seriously damaged, which stood at almost nineteen hundred. A record number of 3,400 people lost their lives, in what was an unprecedented outcome for a Bomber Command raid. Thirty-three aircraft failed to return home, but 83 Squadron operated without loss. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 85 sorties on eight operations, for the loss of three aircraft and crews. Among awards for the month were DSOs for S/L Cooke, S/L Forrest and S/L Hurry, and DFCs for F/O Johnson, F/O (now F/L) Smith and P/O Kleeman DFM.

## June 1943

There were no major operations at the start of June because of unfavourable weather conditions, and the opportunity was taken to hold a rain-interrupted cricket match on the 2<sup>nd</sup> between A and B Flights, which A Flight won. 8 Group's H2S-equipped Stirlings and Halifaxes had thus far been referred to as "special aircraft" in operational plans, but now that 83 Squadron had begun to take on H2S-equipped Lancasters, they would be referred to as "Y" aircraft, and crews underwent training with the device when conditions allowed. Four "Y" aircraft were detailed for an operation to Münster on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and eight for main force duties over Oberhausen on the same night, but both were cancelled, and Münster was on and off again on each of the three succeeding days. It was all becoming too much for S/L Wellington and his navigator, S/L Tommy Blair, who were waiting to go on their sixtieth and final operation, and the suspense was beginning to get to them. S/L Manton had been posted in from 13 O.T.U on the 7<sup>th</sup> as "Wimpy's" replacement, but it was not until the afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup> that a briefing was held for fourteen crews for operations that night, which might actually go ahead. They were told that a force of 783 aircraft was to attack Düsseldorf, and it would be the first occasion on which more than three hundred Lancasters and two hundred Halifaxes had operated together. 83 Squadron would provide six Lancasters, with W/C Shaw the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/Ls Smith and Wellington. The chief medical officer, W/C McGowan, would fly as a passenger with S/L Wellington. While this operation was in progress, a further seventy Lancasters, Halifaxes and Stirlings from 8 Group were to carry out a mass H2S trial at Münster as a diversion, and eight of these would represent 83 Squadron, with S/L Swift taking the lead.

The two elements took off together either side of 23.30, in less than ideal conditions, which required them to climb through cloud until over the North Sea, where it dissipated. Because of uncertainty about the conditions in the Ruhr area, the twelve-strong Mosquito element was to deliver both ground markers and parachute flares, and, despite technical problems afflicting half of them, the remaining six delivered their markers accurately, although erratically. The ground markers proved difficult to pick out in the face of four-tenths thin, patchy cloud and haze, but the skymarkers provided an excellent reference point for the backers-up and the main force. The 83 Squadron crews were all acting as backers-up, and each carried a cookie, four 1,000 pounders and a 500 pounder in addition to their TIs. F/L Smith and P/O Shipway were the first from the squadron to arrive, and bombed from 19,500 feet at 01.27, having observed no release-point flares or red TIs during the run-in. The first red TIs went down at 01.31, and the later arrivals had the benefit of them in their sights, as they delivered their loads from 15,000 to 19,600 feet between 01.36 and 02.07. P/O Mason saw a large red explosion at 01.35, and smoke rising to 5,000 feet, while S/L Smith described black smoke up to 15,000 feet and the whole area well ablaze. The inadvertent release of target indicators by an Oboe Mosquito, fourteen miles north-east of the target, lured away a proportion of the bombing, but almost nine thousand separate fires were started, and covered an area measuring eight by five kilometres across central districts. Almost thirteen hundred people lost their lives, while 140,000 others were rendered homeless, and it was the city's worst experience thus far in the war. On the debit side, this success was gained at a cost of a further thirty-eight aircraft, equalling the campaign's record set at Dortmund in early May.

Meanwhile, Münster-bound Sgt Rust returned early with H2S equipment failure, and jettisoned his bombs live twenty-five miles off the Suffolk coast. The others reached the target to find clear skies over the aiming point, and bombed from 14,500 to 17,500 between 02.00 and 02.06. F/O Tilbury and crew

were the first from the squadron to act as a blind marker in a “Y” aircraft. The attack lasted just ten minutes and left much damage in its wake, but at a cost of five aircraft, including 83 Squadron’s R5686, which crashed into the sea off Holland without survivors. The bodies of S/L Swift and mid-upper gunner, Sgt Anderton, were eventually recovered for burial, and now rest in Bergen-op-Zoom and Bergen General Cemetery respectively. The ORB described S/L Swift as above average, and his crew as a perfect example, adding that they would have become special. S/L Wellington had now completed his operational career, and awaited his posting, along with S/L Blair and F/L Harley of his crew, who were both awarded a well-earned DFC.

The above operations demonstrated that Oboe was continuing to prove its worth, and was allowing even cloud-covered targets to be accurately marked and bombed. It was to be put to the test again at Bochum on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 503 aircraft was made ready, including a dozen Lancasters of 83 Squadron, seven to act as backers-up and five to bomb with the main force. S/Ls Hildyard and Smith were the senior pilots on duty as they began taking off shortly after 23.00, and by the time they reached the target area, the initially clear skies had been invaded by a thin layer of stratus, with tops at around 8,000 feet. Those arriving in the spearhead saw red and green TIs burning on the ground, and although they were few in number, they were close together and provided a good reference. Later arrivals watched reds and greens cascading and achieving concentration, before the bombing began to creep towards the north. The 83 Squadron crews were over the aiming point at 19,000 to 20,000 feet between 01.20 and 01.48, and reported major areas of fire, and two large explosions at 01.23 and 01.29. F/O Chick had his load hang up, and eventually dropped his cookie, two 1,000 pounders and incendiaries ten miles north-east of Bochum, which would have put him near the oil town of Castrop-Rauxel, where he caused a fire. Twenty-four aircraft failed to return, among them the squadron’s ED603, which crashed into the IJsselmeer without survivors. F/O Tilbury and his rear gunner, Sgt Sugar, were relatively recent arrivals to the squadron, but the others were old hands, and three were holders of the DFM. The ORB speaks of F/O Tilbury as the keenest of pilots, who would leave nothing undone to become perfect, and added that his bomb-aimer, F/Sgt Fletcher often brought back aiming point photos. Photo-reconnaissance revealed 130 acres of devastation, and a local report provided a figure of 449 buildings destroyed, with a further nine hundred seriously damaged.

Another H2S trial was carried out on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, when Cologne was the target for 202 Lancasters and ten Halifaxes from 1, 5 and 8 Groups. There were to be no Oboe Mosquitos, the plan calling instead for sixteen heavies to mark by H2S alone. 83 Squadron provided fourteen Lancasters, with F/Sgts Fletcher and Britton assigned as “Y” markers, in company with four other Lancasters and the ten Halifaxes. They were to drop track markers by H2S, and then skymark the aiming point for the main force element. F/L Sells was the senior pilot on duty as they began taking off shortly before 23.00, and S/L Manton was flying with F/Sgt King to gain experience. There was seven to ten-tenths cloud in the target area, with tops at around 10,000 feet, but bright moonlight helped to provide good horizontal visibility. It seems that the marking was late, and, because of technical problems with some H2S equipment, sparse, but TIs could be seen through the cloud. F/Sgt Fletcher and F/Sgt Britton were over the target at 19,000 feet at 21.07 and 21.19 respectively, and could see an area of fire developing, but were unable to make an accurate assessment. Both were hit by heavy flak, but made it home safely. The other squadron crews bombed from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 00.59 and 01.15, and F/Sgt King observed a large area of fire developing in the southern half of the city, and a very large explosion at 01.18 that lit up the whole sky. He also noted nine aircraft bombing on green flares approximately fifteen

miles north-east of the target, before his attention was captured by an enemy night fighter. It attacked, sending a shell into the starboard side of the fuselage two feet in front of the rear turret, and the port side was also peppered with machine-gun fire, but there were no injuries to crew members. Among the fourteen missing aircraft was ED907, which fell victim to a night fighter near the target, killing P/O Murray RCAF and his Canadian rear gunner, F/O Mackay, while the remainder of the crew were taken into captivity. The crew's regular wireless operator was on leave, and his place had been taken by F/O East, a long-standing member of the squadron and former 4 Group Whitley crewman, whose presence would be missed in the signals section.



*F/Sgt Max Cummings RAAF whose Lancaster crashed in flames during a bombing practice flight on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1943. His crew, along with two ground crew passengers, perished with him.*

The squadron suffered very few training accidents, which was testimony to the high standards set and achieved, but, occasionally, tragedies did occur, as on the 18<sup>th</sup>, when ED439 crashed seven miles south-east of Sleaford, killing the entire crew of the recently-arrived F/Sgt Cummings RAAF, and two ground crew corporals who were along for the ride. An eye witness saw the Lancaster emerge from low cloud on fire, and touch the roof of a farm building, before striking the ground and ploughing its way into a copse of trees, where it disintegrated and became unrecognisable as an aircraft.

Back in October, 5 Group had launched an audacious daylight attack on the Schneider armaments factory, known as the French Krupp, situated at le Creusot in east-central France, and the Montchanin transformer station five miles to its south-east. Despite the confidence of returning crews, and the leadership of W/C Guy Gibson at the latter, neither target had been dealt with effectively, and it was decided to try again on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 290 aircraft was drawn from 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups. "Y" aircraft from 8 Group were to illuminate and then mark the factory complex for the Halifax and Stirling main force element, before flying on to Montchanin to repeat the process, after which, twenty-six 8 Group Lancasters would act as the main force. 83 Squadron was assigned to the latter, and contributed three "Y" aircraft, captained by F/O Slade and F/Sgts Britton and Fletcher, and eight to support the main force, led by W/C Searby, with S/L Hildyard in support. F/O Slade was first away from Wyton at 22.25, and they were all safely off the ground within twenty minutes. W/C Searby's navigator on this night was F/L "Scriv" Scivenor, a frequent member of Gibson's crew, when he was the commanding officer of 106 Squadron. Weather conditions in the target area were excellent, and the crews easily identified land marks, such as a nearby lake. There was no opposition, which was fortunate, as crews would have to make up to five passes over the aiming point, not counting dummies, depending on their role. On his first run, F/O Slade delivered his green TIs at 01.56 from 7,000 feet, and followed up four minutes later with four 1,000 pounders from the same height, which he believed hit the southern end of the target. The remaining four 1,000 pounders were

dropped from 4,500 feet at 02.05, but overshot, and all this was carried out at an indicated air speed of 150 knots. The other “Y” aircraft completed their tasks from 6,500 and 10,000 feet, before the bombing element went in, and mostly carried out two runs. Fires and blue electrical flashes were observed, and the consensus was of a successful operation, W/C Searby bringing back an aiming-point photo. It was established later, however that a small metal factory had been mistaken for the intended target, and had attracted most of the bombs, while the transformer station had escaped damage.

A hectic round of four major operations in five nights began on the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, when a force of seven hundred aircraft was made ready to attack Krefeld, a town on the western edge of the Ruhr, with Duisburg to the north and Düsseldorf to the south. 83 Squadron briefed fourteen crews, of which S/L Hildyard was the senior pilot on duty, and they began taking off shortly after 23.00. F/Sgt King’s rear turret became unserviceable, and he turned back when at the mid-point between the Essex and Belgian coasts. He jettisoned his bombs into the sea “safe” from 21,000 feet at 00.50, but saw the cookie explode on impact. The others pushed on to find the target almost clear of cloud, and the first Mosquito-borne Oboe marker burning accurately on the ground. The other Oboe Mosquitos were late in arriving, but this had no effect on the outcome of the raid, as the backers up maintained a continuous supply of TIs on the aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews delivered their TIs, cookie and six 1,000 pounders each from 18,500 to 20,000 feet, between 01.34 and 02.14. They did so in the face of a moderate flak defence, and most returned to describe concentrated fires and smoke rising to 10,000 feet. They also reported evidence of night fighters, which proved to be responsible for the majority of the forty-four missing bombers, a new record loss for the campaign. Over 25% of the casualties were Pathfinders, two of them belonging to 83 Squadron, and neither produced survivors. ED977 fell to the night fighter of Hptm Manfred Meurer of I/NJGI, while outbound, and crashed at 01.23 in south-eastern Holland within sight of the German frontier. F/Sgt Fletcher was the squadron’s most experienced “Y” captain, and his loss, along with that of his crew, would be keenly felt. F/O Mappin’s EE121 is presumed to have crashed off the Frisians, as three bodies washed ashore on Terschelling, and were buried in the local cemetery. The operation had been an outstanding success, caused by 2,300 tons of bombs falling mainly within three miles of the city centre aiming point, and destroying almost 50% of the built-up area in a giant conflagration. Among the buildings destroyed were more than 5,500 houses, while over a thousand people lost their lives.

Twenty-four hours later it was the turn of Krefeld’s near-neighbour, Mülheim, to receive attention from the Command. A force of 557 aircraft was detailed, and nine 83 Squadron crews underwent briefing during the afternoon. W/C Shaw was the senior pilot on duty as they were led away by Sgt Rust at 23.04, F/O Thompson having been withdrawn, after being declared unfit to take-off. They reached the target to find little or no cloud, but the usual industrial haze, and moderate visibility, and fifteen miles to the south-west, the fires from Krefeld were still visible. The marking was punctual, accurate and very concentrated, and the 83 Squadron crews carried out their attacks from 17,300 to 20,000 feet between 01.22 and 01.48, in the face of a typical Ruhr-style heavy flak defence. An estimated 150 searchlights were in operation, and F/L Wilmot and crew spent six torrid minutes in a cone over the target. If that were not enough excitement, they lost six square feet of the starboard wing, and had the rear turret Perspex smashed by a 156 Squadron Lancaster at 01.55, when twenty-five miles into the return journey. The heavy losses continued on this night with thirty-five failures to return, and 83 Squadron posted missing the all-sergeant crew of Sgt Rust. It would emerge later that W4982 had crashed in the target area, killing all on board. The operation was another massive success, which caused enormous damage

in central and northern districts, and spilled over into the eastern fringes of Oberhausen. Over eleven hundred houses were destroyed, with a further twelve thousand damaged to some extent, and a large proportion of the industry in the afflicted areas was severely affected. As events were to prove, the Ruhr campaign would claim no more 83 Squadron crews, despite further operations.

After a night's rest, the Command turned its attention upon the Elberfeld half of Wuppertal, following up on the devastation of Barmen at the end of May. A force of 630 aircraft was made ready, of which eight Lancasters represented 83 Squadron, led by S/L Hildyard. They took off either side of 23.00, but F/O Chick returned early with an unspecified technical problem. The others reached the target to find thin, patchy cloud above 18,000 feet, and good visibility, with accurate Oboe marking, which was well backed-up. The 83 Squadron crews attacked from 16,000 to 20,000 feet between 01.06 and 01.46, aiming at well-concentrated red and green target indicators, and returned to report fires visible from the Dutch coast. Reconnaissance confirmed that the raid was a copybook example of what the Command was capable of achieving every time, but rarely did. On this occasion, three thousand houses were destroyed, in what amounted to a 90% destruction of the town's built-up area. A further 2,500 houses and fifty-three industrial buildings sustained severe damage, and 1,800 people lost their lives, at a cost to the Command of thirty-four bombers. The run of successes came to an end at Gelsenkirchen on the following night, when few bombs, if any, found the target in an echo of pre-Oboe times, after equipment failure afflicted five of the Oboe Mosquitos. 83 Squadron did not take part in this operation, which resulted in the failure to return of a further thirty aircraft.

A mini campaign against Cologne began on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, and would span the turn of the month. 608 aircraft were made ready, of which eight Lancasters belonged to 83 Squadron, their crews all assigned to backing-up duties. The gremlins were at work at Wyton on this night, as first, F/L Sells lost an engine while taxiing, and P/O Mason suffered a similar malfunction thirty miles short of the Belgian coast, forcing him to turn back at 01.15. To cap off a bad night, Sgt Turp suffered hydraulics failure, and also turned back, although from a position over the North Sea, a hundred miles north of P/O Mason, which suggests that Turp's coordinates are incorrect, or he was wildly off course. The remaining five pressed on with F/Ls Garvey and Smith the senior pilots on duty, and they reached the target to find tenths cloud, with tops at around 6,000 feet. It seemed as though the gremlins were also at work over Germany, as the cloud cover required the use of skymarkers, and half of the twelve Oboe Mosquitos had been forced to return early with equipment failure. The others arrived late, and could only provide intermittent marking, and this catalogue of negative events suggested that the omens for success were not good. The 83 Squadron crews were over the aiming point at 17,500 to 20,000 feet between 01.46 and 02.07, and some noted that bombing had begun before the first markers were released. They returned to report nothing visible beneath the clouds, but smoke was observed to be rising, and had reached 10,000 feet by the time they turned for home. F/Sgt King and crew reported two giant blue explosions south of the target at 01.50. Amazingly, this turned out to be Cologne's most bruising experience of the war thus far, with 6,400 buildings destroyed and a further fifteen thousand damaged to some extent. The death toll was put at 4,377, the largest yet resulting from a Bomber Command raid, and 230,000 people were rendered homeless. During the course of the month, the squadron dispatched eighty-nine sorties on nine operations, for the loss of six aircraft and crews, including the one involved in the training crash.

## July 1943

The first two days of the new month were beset by poor weather conditions, which kept the crews off operations. It did, however, present an opportunity to continue training, particularly on H2S, after a decision that all crews should be trained on the device. The station commander delivered a lecture to all aircrew, and administered a severe “ticking off” for lax discipline, which the flight commanders reiterated later to press home the point. The irrepressible S/L Tommy Blair left the squadron at this time, on posting to HQ 91 Group. The second attack of the current campaign against Cologne was scheduled for the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, and nine 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing during the afternoon. They learned that they were to be part of an overall force of 653 aircraft, seven to act as backers-up, and two to bomb with the main force. W/C Shaw was the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/L Smith, both backers-up, while F/O Chick and Sgt Turp bolstered up the main force element, carrying a cookie each, plus sixteen SBCs of 4lb incendiaries. They took off in a half-hour slot from 22.50, but P/O Shipway was forced to return early, because, according to the author of the ORB, who had adopted a more jocular style of recording events, his navigator was “paying more attention to the Elsan than the box”. The bombs were jettisoned twenty-five miles off Lowestoft at 00.20, and a safe return made. The ORB continues, “Met boomed badly, promising nine-tenths cloud from the English coast. Over target was nine-tenths smoke, not cloud.” Although somewhat triumphal, the comment was accurate, as the Oboe Mosquitos had arrived over the target under clear skies, to deliver their red ground markers onto the aiming point on the eastern bank of the Rhine. There was a certain amount of haze, but this did not interfere with the accuracy of the attack, which developed in concentrated form in the face, initially, of an intense flak defence. The 83 Squadron crews attacked from 17,000 to 20,000 feet, between 01.20 and 01.55, and returned to describe a highly successful raid, which left the city a mass of flames, with smoke rising to 10,000 feet, and blotting out ground detail. W/C Shaw and crew felt that there was a tendency to creep-back, but the overall impression was of an operation more successful than the Thousand raid of May 1942. Taking into consideration the fire-breaks created by that, and the recent attack described above, the destruction of a further 2,200 houses was remarkable, and more was to come. A further comment by W/C Shaw concerned the abundance of night fighters, and it was on this night that the new tactic of Wilde Sau (wild boar) was launched by the Luftwaffe. This involved sorties by single-engine day fighters of the specially-formed NJG 300, led by Major Hajo Hermann. They were to position themselves over the target, and pick out bombers silhouetted against the burning city, thus exposing themselves to their own flak. However, there were occasions when the ground defence was moderated to allow the fighters free-reign.

Intensive H2S training occupied the squadron until it was next called to arms, which was for the final raid of the current series on Cologne on the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>. The 83 Squadron contribution of seven Lancasters in an overall force of 282 of the type from 1, 5 and 8 Groups, was cut to five in the evening, four of them carrying crews assigned to marking duties. S/Ls Hildyard and Smith were the senior pilots on duty as they took off either side of 23.00, the former acting as host and guide to S/L Price, who had been posted in from 49 Squadron on the 1<sup>st</sup>, and needed to observe Pathfinding in action. Sadly, they were forced to turn back at 00.16, when twenty five miles off the Suffolk coast, after their instruments iced up. S/L Smith had problems with his Gee and compass almost from the outset, and stoged around off track for some time trying to establish his position. Unfortunately, he also had to abandon his sortie at 01.47, when fifteen miles off the Suffolk coast, and this left just three squadron representatives to attack the target. They arrived to find ten-tenths cloud in two layers, with tops at 8,000 and 20,000 feet,

but the Oboe Mosquitos, despite being late in opening the attack, delivered accurate skymarkers for the backers-up and main force element to aim at, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed from 19,500 to 20,600 feet between 01.14 and 01.29. Having arrived before the first Oboe Mosquito marked, F/L Garvey headed westwards to wait, but ran into very heavy and accurate flak, which damaged his windscreen. He was forced back towards the target, where he bombed on e.t.a. F/Sgt Finding saw the first markers go down at 01.13, and was more than six minutes into the homeward flight, before the second ones were seen. P/O Mason was attacked by night fighters three times on the way home, and praised the calmness of his gunners during the successful evasion process. The operation was another outstanding success, which hit mainly north and south-western districts, and destroyed 2,381 domestic buildings and nineteen of an industrial nature. When the dust had settled sufficiently for the local authorities to assess the three-raid series, they reported that it had killed around 5,500 people, rendered a further 350,000 homeless, and destroyed eleven thousand buildings. The cost to the Command was sixty-two aircraft and crews.

A return was made to Gelsenkirchen on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, in an attempt to rectify the failure, of two weeks earlier. A force of 418 aircraft was made ready, of which just one was to represent 83 Squadron. P/O Reid had been posted in from 106 Squadron on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and this would be his first operation. Not yet qualified as a marker, he was assigned to the main force, and took off at 23.20 carrying a cookie and an assortment of incendiaries. The target was covered by cloud, as forecast, with tops at around 15,000 feet, which would not have been a problem had five of the Oboe Mosquitos not experienced equipment malfunction. The skymarking was sparse and intermittent, and one of the Mosquitos accidentally released a marker flare with route flares ten miles north of the aiming point, which inevitably attracted some bomb loads. F/O Reid bombed from 19,500 feet at 01.31, and his description of the markers in the bomb sight at the time, suggests that he was somewhere near the briefed aiming point. Even so, this very important centre of oil production escaped major damage on this night, and the operation effectively brought an end to the Ruhr offensive. Two further attacks on the region would take place at the end of the month, but these would be in isolation.

There is no question that the Ruhr campaign had been a major success, even though at a substantial cost in aircrew and aircraft. Harris could look back over the past five months with genuine satisfaction at the performance of his crews, and, as an advocate of technology, draw particular satisfaction from the contribution made by Oboe. Furthermore, the factories had more than kept pace with the rate of attrition, and the Empire Training Schools were feeding eager new crews into the squadrons to fill the gaps. It left the Command in confident mood for the next campaign, the systematic destruction of a major German city in a short, sharp series of maximum effort raids until the job was done. Having been spared by the weather from hosting the first thousand bomber raid in May 1942, Hamburg would have the dubious honour of receiving Operation Gomorrah, and the ten thousand tons of bombs estimated as necessary to erase it from the map. As Germany's second city, Hamburg satisfied Harris's main criteria in both operational terms, and its likely effect on enemy morale. Its importance to Germany's war effort, as a centre of U-Boot construction and other industry was undeniable, as was its political status. Equally important, though, was its close proximity to a coastline to aid navigation, and the fact that it could be reached in the few hours of darkness afforded by mid-summer. It was, of course, beyond the current range of Oboe, which had proved to be so crucial at the Ruhr, but it had the distinctive feature of the wide River Elbe to provide strong H2S returns for the navigators high above. In each year of the war to date, Bomber Command had visited Hamburg during the last week of July, and Operation Gomorrah would be reserved for then.

In the meantime, there were other targets to occupy the Command, and Turin was to provide the next destination for 83 Squadron. Fourteen crews were called to briefing on the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup>, and it is interesting to look at the assignment of roles to those participating. In company with others from the group, the blind markers (H2S) were the crews of F/L Sells, F/L Wilmot, F/O Chick and P/O Mason, who were to mark the aiming point with yellow TIs and white flares. F/Sgt Britton was a visual marker, who, if able to identify the aiming point by the light of the flares, would confirm it with red TIs, while W/Cs Searby and Shaw and S/L Hildyard backed up with green TIs, and G/C Graham, S/L Smith, F/O Thompson, P/O Shipway, and F/Sgts Finding and King bombed with the main force. G/C H. R. Graham DSO, DFC, had commanded 7 Squadron from April 1941 to April 1942, and after a spell as a navigation officer at Bomber Command HQ, and been appointed station commander at Wyton on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June. Flying with W/C Searby was G/C C. D. C. Boyce, a senior air staff officer (SASO) at 8 Group HQ. In 1941 he had commanded 84 Squadron, a dive-bomber unit operating in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and briefly the Far East.

They took off either side of 22.30, for what the ORB described as “a long and arduous trip, but a pleasant change from bashing the Ruhr.” They crossed the French coast in semi-darkness, but soon encountered ten-tenths cloud with lanes of clear sky. Route markers were dropped on Lake Annecy, just before the Alps, which were almost completely under cloud, but as the force reached the Italian side the skies cleared. F/Sgt Britton was able to identify the aiming point visually from 16,000 feet, and delivered his TIs onto it at 01.54. The other squadron crews carried out their attacks from 14,500 to 16,000 feet between 01.46 and 02.09, and set off for home, confident that the many fires and billowing clouds of black smoke confirmed that a successful operation had taken place. The defences had been light, with about thirty-five searchlights active, but P/O Mason managed to lose his port-outer engine to flak as he departed the target area, and another would play up as he crossed the Biscay coast. G/C Graham was attacked inconclusively by a JU88 west of Brest, and was the only one from Wyton to report seeing a night fighter. However, thirteen Lancasters were lost, many without trace, it is believed to night fighters off the Brittany coast, and among them was W/C Nettleton VC of 44 Squadron, who had led the epic daylight raid on the M.A.N factory at Augsburg in April 1942. F/O Chick sighted two U-Boats off St Nazaire, and machine-gunned them, and his report enabled a Beaufighter to sink one of them that afternoon. Reconnaissance showed the main weight of the attack to have fallen just north of the city centre, and a local report stated that 792 people had lost their lives, the largest number of fatalities from a Bomber Command attack on Italy.

Flight engineer Sgt Henderson returned to the squadron on the 14<sup>th</sup>, having evaded capture as a member of F/L Mackie’s crew, lost on the Stuttgart operation on the 11/12<sup>th</sup> March. An operational stand-down occupied the ensuing week and a half, causing great despondency and frustration among the crews, but allowing an opportunity for intensive training. Starting from the day after Mülheim, 83 Squadron was now halfway through an almost unprecedented two month period of loss free operations, which always engendered a buoyant mood and eagerness to get at the enemy. When sixteen crews trooped into the briefing room on the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup>, they probably expected the day to end with yet another scrub. Instead, they were read a special message from the commander-in-chief, to announce the beginning of the Battle of Hamburg. They learned that they were to employ entirely new methods, which peaked their level of enthusiasm, and were to be part of a force of 791 aircraft. It was a new record for the squadron as a Pathfinder unit to put up sixteen Lancasters, of which five crews were assigned to backing-up

duties, led by W/Cs Searby and Shaw, with F/L Sells and F/Sgt Turp responsible for re-centring the attack if required. There were four blind markers, while F/L Wilmot would be the only visual marker from the squadron, and the remaining six crews, which included S/L Manton operating for the first time, were to bomb with the main force. The new method outlined at briefing, was the first operational use of "Window", tinfoil-backed strips of paper, which, when dispensed by a designated crew member in bundles into the airstream, would descend slowly in great clouds, reflecting the enemy radar beams, and producing masses of false returns to blind the night fighters, gun-layers and searchlights.

Take-off from Wyton began at 21.58, and continued until all were safely airborne by 22.45. There were no early returns, and, at a predetermined point during the crossing of the North Sea, Windowing began, and its effectiveness was made immediately apparent by the few combats taking place en-route to the target. The aircraft lost during this stage of the operation were generally off course, well outside of the protection of both Window and the bomber stream, and may also have been returning early with technical problems. Over the target, the usually efficient coordination between flak and searchlights was absent, and the opportunity was there to exploit the confusion, and deal a major blow to Hamburg. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their attacks under clear skies from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 00.57 and 01.27, most of them able to visually identify ground features, such as the River Elbe and the Binnen and Aussen-Alster Lakes near the city centre. All crews returned safely to home airspace, and at debriefing reported some scattering of bombs, but many fires and explosions, along with copious amounts of smoke rising towards them. W/C Searby had a lucky escape, after a 156 Squadron Lancaster from Warboys removed his starboard fin and rudder, and made a mess of the mid-upper turret, while he was in the circuit preparing to land. Reconnaissance revealed that the initial marking had been slightly misplaced, and an extensive creep-back had developed, which cut a swathe of destruction from the city centre across the north-western districts along the line of approach, and out into open country, where a proportion of the record 2,300 tons of bombs was wasted. Never-the-less, it was an encouraging start to the campaign, and had cost a very modest twelve aircraft. Sgt Miller was carrying special cameras for colour photography, but, sadly, the film was put into the standard developer for processing, and was ruined.

In the light of the obvious benefits of Window, Harris decided to take advantage of the chaos it had caused to the night fighter system, and raid Essen on the following night. A factor in this decision not to return immediately to Hamburg, was the likelihood of smoke from the previous night's attack, lingering over the city and impairing visibility. A force of 705 aircraft was made ready for Essen, of which seven were provided by 83 Squadron, two as backers-up and five to bomb with the main force. F/L Garvey, who was in veteran R5868 Q-Queenie, was carrying a very important passenger in the form of Brigadier-General Fred Anderson of the USAAF. It was also an important occasion for F/L Meikle, mid-upper gunner in F/L Smith's crew, for whom it would be his forty-fifth and final operation with the squadron. P/O King was first away at 21.45, with the others departing over the ensuing hour, according to their designated position in the bombing stream. They arrived to find some very thin cloud over the target, with the usual industrial haze, but the marking was accurate, and crews approaching the aiming point in the later stages of the attack, were confronted by heavy smoke rising to meet them. The 83 Squadron crews attacked from 18,000 to 20,400 feet between 00.39 and 01.09, and returned safely to report many fires, large explosions and a concentrated raid. Brigadier-General Anderson remarked that it was one of the most impressive sights he had ever seen, and reconnaissance confirmed that the industrial half of the city to the east had sustained massive damage. The Krupp works suffered its worst experience of the

war, and fifty-one other industrial buildings were destroyed, along with 2,852 houses. Earlier in the day, S/L "Wimpy" Wellington had been posted to Pathfinder HQ, with a well-deserved DSO to add to his DFC.

After resting his crews on the following night, Harris planned a return to Hamburg on the 27<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 787 aircraft was prepared, including a contribution from 83 Squadron of fourteen Lancasters. At briefing, they listened to a special message of congratulations from Harris for the successes at Hamburg and Essen, and the ORB added that, "the crews were given to understand that their last few raids have done more to end this war and save thousands of "Brown Types" than anything so far." It continued, "The aircrew do feel that they are at last really achieving something vital towards ending this war, and their spirit and press-on attitude is at a peak." W/C Shaw was the senior pilot on duty, as they departed Wyton over a period of an hour either side of 22.00, with Brigadier-General Anderson once more flying as a guest member of F/L Garvey's crew. P/O Shipway turned back with instrument failure when an hour out, but the others pressed on, and what followed their arrival over the city was both unprecedented and unforeseeable, and resulted from a conspiracy of circumstances. A period of unusually hot and dry weather had left the city a tinderbox, and the spark to ignite it arrived with the Pathfinder markers, which again missed the planned aiming point, but fell with great concentration into the densely populated working class districts of Hamm, Hammerbrook and Borgfeld, about two miles east of the city centre. Four of the 83 Squadron crews, including the newly-promoted F/L Slade, were acting as blind markers, with a further five as backers-up, and the remainder in the main force, and they carried out their assigned tasks from 18,500 to 20,000 feet between 00.57 and 01.35 in good bombing conditions. The main force produced uncharacteristically accurate bombing and almost no creep-back, and delivered much of the 2,300 tons of bombs into this relatively compact area. The individual fires joined together to form one giant conflagration of such intensity that it sucked in oxygen from surrounding areas at hurricane velocity to feed its voracious appetite. Trees were uprooted and flung bodily into the inferno, along with debris and people. Temperatures at the seat of the fire exceeded a thousand degrees Celsius, and the flames only died down once all of the combustible material had been consumed. The first recorded firestorm in history caused over 40,000 fatalities, on top of the fifteen hundred killed three nights earlier, and the first of an eventual exodus of 1.2 million people began to file out of the city on the following morning.

Operation Gomorrah continued two nights later, for which a force of 777 aircraft was made ready, among them fourteen Lancasters of 83 Squadron. The senior pilots on duty were all of squadron leader rank, S/L A.B. Smith and his newly-promoted namesake S/L C.A.J Smith, along with S/L Sells, were assigned to blind marker duties, S/L Hildyard was a backer-up, while S/L Manton was to bomb with the main force. S/L Hildyard was carrying an additional crew member in the person of W/C Hewins. They began taking off shortly after 22.00, and from as far away as the Danish coast, they were guided to the target by the fires still burning from the previous attack. The skies over the city were clear of cloud, and only haze and smoke impaired the vertical visibility. F/O Chick was one of the twenty-five blind markers briefed to drop yellow target indicators onto the aiming point, and he claimed to be the first to arrive, delivering his by H2S from 18,500 feet at 00.37 and 55 seconds. It was 00.39 before any further yellows were seen, and the first greens to be dropped by backers-up appeared at 00.44. The other 83 Squadron participants bombed from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 00.40 and 00.57, and reported fires covering a large area, with smoke rising up to bombing altitude. It was also clear to some crews that the marking and bombing had not fallen precisely where intended, while some others commented on the increase in



*R5625, OL-O lines up for take off from Scampton. The aircraft later went to 622 Sqn where she was lost with her crew attacking Lisieux on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1944.*

searchlight and night fighter activity in comparison with the previous raid. W/O Finding was coned and then attacked over the target, sustaining severe damage to the port main-plane and flaps, and P/O King's R5625 was hit by flak, which knocked out his starboard-inner engine and also robbed him of brake-pressure. On return he was ordered to land at Wittering, for which he mistook the grass landing field at nearby Sibson, and spread his aircraft over the farmland after over-running the boundary. The Lancaster was a write-off but the crew was able to walk away, apparently none the worse for the experience, and, remarkably, this was the only aircraft casualty to afflict the squadron during the entire campaign. Reconnaissance confirmed the suspicions that the attack had been misplaced, and had fallen largely two miles to the east of the planned aiming point. The intention had been to hit the districts to the west of the Binnen and Aussen-Alster Lakes, but a strong crosswind had pushed most of the marker aircraft too far east, and the first bombs had fallen close to the firestorm area, before creeping back across it into northern, middle-class residential districts, particularly Barmbek, Winterhude and Uhlenhorst. Large sections of these areas were almost obliterated, as fires raged out of control for hours, and were visible from 130 miles away.

The above operation proved to be the final one of the month for 83 Squadron, despite an attack on the Ruhr town of Remscheid on the night of the 30/31<sup>st</sup>, for which four crews had actually been briefed. A further ten crews had been briefed for Turin and Genoa, but all participation by the squadron was

scrubbed. The attack on Remscheid, situated on the south-eastern fringe of the Ruhr, was carried out by a force of 273 aircraft, which destroyed an estimated 83% of the town, and brought down the final curtain on the Ruhr campaign. Earlier in the day, W/C Shaw had taken off for an unspecified flight, possibly a night flying test (NFT), but had lost an engine immediately. He skilfully put the Lancaster down in an adjacent pea field, before walking back to complain about the disgusting quality of the peas! Fourteen crews were ready to go back to Hamburg on the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup>, when a thunderstorm broke, and forced a cancellation. That was followed by a stampede to the bar to drown the disappointment. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched eighty-one sorties on eight operations, and lost just one aircraft at home. Among awards to squadron members was a DSO to F/L Wilmot and a DFC to W/C Shaw.



*Squadron Leader John Searby (left) and Wing Commander Guy Gibson (right) both served with 106 as well as 83 Sqn. The two are pictured here prior to Searby's promotion to wing commander and appointment as CO of 83 Sqn.*

## August 1943

Briefings for the fourth and final round of Operation Gomorrah took place on the afternoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and were attended at Wyton by fourteen 83 Squadron crews, including F/L Wilmot, for whom this was to be the final operation of his second tour. The blind markers were W/C Shaw, S/Ls Sells and C.A.J. Smith, F/O Chick, P/O King and F/Sgt Britton, with F/L Slade acting as visual marker. The re-centerers were F/O Thompson, P/O Shipway and F/Sgt Turp, and the backers-up S/L Hildyard, F/L Wilmot and P/O Pidding, the last-mentioned undertaking his first sortie with the squadron as crew captain. Frustratingly for F/L Wilmot, his Lancaster was beset with engine failure shortly before take-off, and the final sortie of his tour would have to wait. The others were led off by W/C Shaw at 23.10, although it would be midnight before the final Lancaster was on its way. The carefully prepared plan of attack was thrown into chaos as ice-bearing cloud, with tops, some claimed, at 35,000 feet, and electrical storms barred the approaches to the target. Visibility was down to zero, and the static blinded crews for seconds at a time, forcing many to abandon their sorties and bomb last resort targets, or just jettison their loads and turn back. Four bombed in the Cuxhaven area, but W/C Shaw, S/Ls Hildyard and Sells, F/Os Chick and Thompson, P/O Pidding, W/O Finding and F/Sgt Britton were the 83 Squadron crews among those pressing on in search of the aiming point. W/C Shaw lost his starboard-inner engine during the bombing run, and the other three surged erratically, causing height to be lost. Everything other than the guns was thrown out by the crew to save weight, and bombing took place on H2S at 01.50. Through careful nursing of the available engines, they staggered back across the North Sea at a fraction above stalling speed. F/Sgt Britton descended to 9,500 feet, in order to get below the cloud base to deliver his attack, which he did on e.t.a. at 02.02. F/O Chick had his port-inner engine fail shortly before bombing from 17,000 feet at 02.05, and he returned on three engines. The operation was a failure, but the damage had already been done, and no city would suffer a higher death toll until the American attacks on Japan later in the war. During the four operations against Hamburg, 83 Squadron despatched fifty-seven sorties, of which fifty six reached and bombed the target, and this was achieved without loss, a magnificent record. (The Battle of Hamburg. Martin Middlebrook).

P/O Tolchard became the latest recruit to the squadron, when posted in from 97 Squadron on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Italy was by now teetering on the brink of capitulation, and Bomber Command was invited to help nudge it over the edge, with a series of operations against its cities between the nights of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> and 16/17<sup>th</sup>. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing on the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup>, to learn that they were to target two objectives, Turin and Genoa, while a third attack went ahead at Milan, and, as the ORB pointed out, this was a politically, rather than strategically, motivated decision. The operation was also to be used as a rehearsal for the Master of Ceremonies technique, which had been pioneered by Gibson at the Dams, and which was to be employed at a vitally important target ten days hence, a fact known at the time only to the most senior amongst the Bomber Command elite. 83 Squadron's commanding officer, G/C Searby, was selected to act as Master Bomber at Turin, to direct the bombing, exhort the crews and generally bind the effort into one consolidated force. Twenty-four 8 Group Lancasters were to mark the target for a main force element of fifty Lancasters from 1 and 5 Groups, and twenty-two of the markers were then to continue on to repeat the process at Genoa for a further 50 Lancasters, again drawn from 1 and 5 Groups. The Wyton contingent took off either side of 21.30, and headed for the south coast and the long outward leg. Conditions in the target area were good, with clear skies, and the 83 Squadron crews carried out their part in the proceedings from 16,000 to 18,500 feet between 00.54 and 01.03, before pointing their noses towards the south east to cover the seventy miles to Genoa. Once there they

bombed between 01.14 and 01.25, and all returned safely to report what appeared to be generally successful raids. The consensus was that the performance at Turin had been concentrated, while that at Genoa had been more scattered. F/L Wilmot had other thoughts on his mind after landing, and he was last seen heading rapidly in a southerly direction towards Huntingdon station with a bag, and an, "I've got fourteen days leave" gleam in his eye.

Before the second raid took place on Italy, two major operations were directed at cities in southern Germany, beginning with Mannheim on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>. A force of 457 aircraft was made ready, but it was decided not to bother 83 Squadron, which put on a party for all ranks instead. There was much drinking and dancing, except for the armourers, who were required to bomb up a visiting squadron's aircraft, and by the time they joined the festivities, most of what they turned up for had already been consumed. News came through on the following day that the Command had managed to destroy thirteen hundred buildings in Mannheim, miraculously achieving that without the assistance of 83 Squadron! Orders then came through for operations that night, for which the squadron would be required, and fourteen crews attended briefing during the afternoon. They learned that Nuremberg was to be their destination, which, like Mannheim, represented a deeper penetration into Germany than had been the norm over recent months. However, with the approach of autumn and longer nights, this was something to be expected. They were to be part of a force of 653 aircraft, and S/Ls Hildyard, Manton and both Smiths were the senior pilots on duty, as they took off either side of 22.00, with six assigned as blind markers, two as visual markers, one as a re-centerer, one as a backer-up and four to bolster the main force. A ground marking plan had been prepared, which became compromised by the presence of seven to ten-tenths cloud, and the TIs were visible only for a short period. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 11,500 to 19,000 feet between 00.57 and 01.22, and most bombed on the glow of TIs and fires coming through the cloud. On return they were unable to provide details of their precise location in relation to the briefed aiming point, and the consensus was of an unsatisfactory operation. F/L Slade had an engine fail before reaching the target, which he bombed from 14,000 feet, and a second one lost most of its power after bombing. He and his crew then had to traverse the defence zone at Germany's frontier with France, and make it all the way back over enemy-occupied territory and the English Channel on 2¼ power plants. It was a feat which they ultimately achieved, and they were the last to land after 7¾ hours aloft. Despite the pessimism, the operation had been remarkably successful, and had caused much damage in central and southern districts, where a large area of fire had taken hold.

S/L Johnson DFM arrived on posting from either 7 Squadron or 10 O.T.U on the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>, according to which page in the ORB one accepts as gospel, and he would take over the former crew of F/L Wilmot. The Italian campaign continued on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, when Milan and Turin were selected as the targets. The larger force of 504 aircraft was briefed for the former, and 83 Squadron provided fourteen of the Lancasters, with an impressive array of senior pilots on the Order of Battle. At the top was G/C Graham, the station commander, who took over the crew of Sgt Millar, and he was supported by S/Ls Hildyard, Manton, Sells and both Smiths, while the recently-arrived pilot, Sgt Henderson, was eased into Pathfinder operations as a guest member of F/L Slade's crew. They began taking off shortly before 21.30, and covered the outward leg across France without incident, to arrive in the target area some three and a half hours later and encounter clear skies with just a little ground haze. The initial markers appeared to fall towards the north-east of the aiming point, and later to the south-west, but the 156 Squadron Master Bomber kept the attack on track, and corrected a tendency to undershoot. Later arrivals were confronted by a pall of smoke rising over the city, and the glow of fires was visible for eighty miles

into the return journey. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 15,000 to 19,000 feet between 01.10 and 01.43, some making a number of runs across the target, and all returned safely to report a concentrated and successful attack. Local reports seem to confirm the crews' impressions, without being specific about this night, and it is likely that much damage was visited upon the city, along with many hundreds of fatalities. The simultaneous operation against Turin by 150 aircraft of 3 and 8 Groups appeared also to be highly successful.

Milan was given little time to lick its wounds, before the next assault came on the night of the 14/15<sup>th</sup>. A force of 140 Lancasters of 1, 5 and 8 Groups was made ready, and fourteen 83 Squadron Lancasters were fuelled and bombed up during the late afternoon and early evening. In the event, S/Ls Hildyard and Manton were unable to take off, presumably because of technical issues, and this left the newly promoted G/C Searby as the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/Ls Sells and A.B. Smith. They took off either side of 21.30, with S/L Johnson flying as a passenger with S/L Sells to gain experience. The cloud that was present for most of the outward leg across France, cleared after the Alps, and Milan lay under clear skies, although, considerable ground haze and smoke from the previous attack blotted out much of the ground detail. S/L Sells bombed on H2S, and like most of his squadron colleagues, went in at 16,000 feet, while F/L Garvey chose to be at 8,500 feet and F/O Thompson 10,500 feet. They were over the target between 01.12 and 01.25, and all again returned safely to report another successful operation.

The following night brought a return to the tortured Italian city by a force of 199 Lancasters, of which fourteen represented 83 Squadron. S/Ls Hildyard, Manton, Sells and C.A Smith were the senior pilots on duty, as P/O Reid led them away from Wyton at 21.12, and they arrived in the target area to find clear skies and fires from previous attacks still burning. It was becoming routine for the crews, and, although the defences had been strengthened to an extent, that had no bearing on the accuracy of the attack, which was delivered from an 83 Squadron perspective from 8,500 to 18,000 feet, between 23.56 and 00.16, with F/L Garvey again preferring the low-level approach. They all returned safely to continue the magnificent run of loss-free operations, and this concluded 83 Squadron's association with Italy. 3 Group provided the main force at Turin on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup> for the Command's final raid of the war on an Italian city, with Pathfinder Halifaxes and Lancasters providing the marking. A proportion of the Stirling force was diverted on return, and they would not arrive back at their stations in time to be made ready for the next night's vitally important operation.

Since the earliest days of the war, intelligence had been filtering through, much of it from anonymous sources, concerning German research into rocketry. Gradually it became clear that this activity was centred on the rocket research and development establishment at Peenemünde on the island of Usedom, at the eastern end of Germany's Baltic coast, and regular reconnaissance flights were sent to the area. Churchill's chief scientific adviser, Professor Lindemann, or Lord Cherwell as he became, steadfastly refused to accept the feasibility of rocket technology, and even when presented with a photograph of a V-2 taken by a PRU Mosquito in June 1943, he found an alternative explanation for its purpose. It required the combined urgings of Duncan Sandys and the brilliant scientist, Dr R.V. Jones, to persuade Churchill to act. Professor Jones had been able to monitor V-1 trials through Ultra, the decoding of German enigma signals traffic, and the information gained would be used to feed false information to the enemy once the V-1 menace was launched on London in the summer of 1944. Operation Hydra was meticulously planned, and was put into action at the earliest opportunity, which arose on the night of the 17/18<sup>th</sup>.

The complex operation was to be undertaken by 597 aircraft, a somewhat depleted number for the reason stated above. The plan called for three aiming points to be marked and bombed, the housing estate, the assembly shed and the experimental site in that order, each of which was assigned to a specific wave of aircraft, and one crew from each Pathfinder squadron was designated as a “shifter”, charged with the great responsibility of shifting the point of aim from one to the other. Aiming point A was assigned to the Stirlings and Halifaxes of 3 and 4 Groups, aiming point B to 1 Group Lancasters, and aiming point C to 5 Group Lancasters and 6 Group Halifaxes, along with nine Hercules-powered Lancaster IIs of 426 Squadron. As Master of Ceremonies, G/C Searby was to monitor the progress of the operation, and direct the crews by VHF radio. It was a highly demanding and dangerous task, which required him to remain within range of the defences throughout the operation for as long as his fuel lasted. 83 Squadron’s crew captains and aircraft for the operation were: G/C Searby in JA928, S/L Hildyard in JA913, S/L Manton in JA677, S/L Sells in ED602, S/L Smith in JA705, F/L Mason in JA701, F/L Slade in ED984, F/O Chick in ED876, F/O Thompson in JA940, P/O Allcroft in EE175, P/O King in ED974, P/O Reid in JA927, P/O Shipway in JA686, W/O Finding in W4959 and F/Sgt Turp in JA712. A simultaneous “spoof” raid on Berlin by eight Mosquitos of 139 Squadron, led by the former 49 Squadron commander, G/C Len Slee, was designed to persuade the enemy night fighter controller that the large bomber fleet being tracked off the coast was bound for the capital, and that he should concentrate his forces there.

The 83 Squadron crews took off either side of 21.00, but F/O Chick experienced a problem with his starboard-outer engine, and turned back at 21.55, from a position a hundred miles east of Bridlington. The remainder pressed on, and found the target in fairly clear conditions, with a thin sheet of cloud and a smoke screen in operation. The initial marking of the housing estate went awry, and some target indicators fell onto the forced workers' camp at Trassenheide, more than a mile south of the aiming point. These inevitably attracted some of the 3 and 4 Group bombs, and trapped inside their wooden barracks, many of the friendly foreign nationals were killed or injured. Once rectified, however, the bombing was accurate, and the operation proceeded more or less according to plan, although a cross-wind became troublesome to the 1 Group crews trying to hit the assembly sheds on what was a fairly narrow strip of land close to the dunes. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews bombed the target from 11,000 to 16,300 feet between 00.10 and 00.39, and all returned safely to report a successful operation. The enemy night fighters had been sent to Berlin, where they found no bombers, but the activity 130 miles to the north-north-east was clearly visible, and they took it upon themselves to head there at full speed. They arrived on the scene during the later stages of the operation, when predominantly 5 and 6 Group aircraft were attacking, and scored heavily from that moment, both in the skies above Peenemünde, and on the route home towards Denmark. They were employing their upward-firing Schräge Musik (slanting or jazz music) cannons for the first time, and by not using tracer, they were able to keep them secret for many months. Forty aircraft failed to return, and twenty-nine of these were from the final wave, seventeen from 5 Group and twelve from 6 Group. The following is a special report of the operation by G/C Searby.

*“On the approach to the target across the Danish islands, the weather was clear and no difficulty was experienced in map-reading, thus it was hoped that the same conditions would prevail over the target. Rügen Island (north-east of Peenemünde) was clear apart from one or two small patches of cloud, and on approaching it, a layer of very thin cloud sheet, estimated to be between 2,000 and 3,000 feet was*

*seen to cover the small promontory. On reaching the target area, and before any markers had been dropped, we made a run across, and were able to discern the target reasonably well through the thin cloud layer. After turning left across the sea and flying parallel to the shore, the first reds were seen to fall at Zero-5, and it was considered that they had slightly overshot the aiming point (A). A second bunch of reds fell a few minutes later, and then a yellow was seen to fall between the two, and as near as could be judged, this yellow marker was very well placed. Green markers fell almost immediately onto the yellow, and instructions were broadcast to the main force aircraft to bomb these green markers. More reds were dropped, and some of these were seen to fall into the sea, and backers-up were warned by broadcast of this fact. Backing-up continued, and greens were seen to fall into the sea. A third broadcast informed the main force that this was so, and they were to bomb the greens which lay to the right, as it was estimated these were on the target. Two more runs across the target by our own aircraft confirmed this, and whilst we were over the target more greens overshot. A fourth broadcast informed the backers-up that they had overshot, and other backers-up were instructed to watch their bombing runs and not to overshoot. A sixth broadcast to the main force instructed them to ignore the southerly greens, which had overshot, and bomb those lying to the north. This was repeated. Another run across confirmed that the second aiming point (B) was well covered, but some reds were still falling into the sea, and backers-up were warned of this. At 00.42 another broadcast informed backers-up that they must endeavour to avoid any green markers falling into the sea. Another run across showed that both aiming points were still being bombed, and fires were seen breaking out, and in the case of the large target, to be going well. There is no doubt that the woods were burning, and it was difficult to differentiate. Further instructions were given to the main force to carry on bombing greens, and a broadcast informed them that the attack was going well despite the smoke screens. These smoke screens were put into operation very soon after the attack started, and were very effective. They were located to the east and north-east of the target area, and the generators could be plainly seen. One more broadcast was made urging the main force to watch their bombing, to make steady runs, and continue bombing greens. During the whole time our aircraft was over the target area. Seven runs were made across the target, and many aircraft were seen shot down. Fighter activity was intense, and we saw twin engine and single engine fighters clearly silhouetted against the fires below. There were a small number of heavy flak guns, the most troublesome to us being located approximately one mile out to sea, due east of the promontory. This gun fired consistently at us as we circled left away from the target to make another run. Other heavy flak guns were seen to be firing from the western shore in the neighbourhood of the aerodrome. After making the last broadcast we circled right with the main string, and a few miles from the target were engaged by a twin engine fighter. This fighter was first seen below, when the rear gunner fired four bursts directly at him. He then attacked from the starboard side, when a sharp turn was made in the direction of the attack, and the M.U. gunner got in a burst as he passed below. His own fire was inaccurate. The aircraft was claimed as damaged. A large mass of fire was observed in the target area, which did not seem to be consistent with the size of the target, and these fires were observed until well past Langeland (a Danish island east of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular) on the way home. In this particular area there was much fighter activity, and several more aircraft were seen to go down. Light flak guns too, were very much in evidence, and there can be no doubt that some aircraft were employing very bad tactics indeed in flying low across these islands.”*

The operation was generally successful, and it put back development work on the V-2 by a number of weeks, and ultimately forced the testing programme to be withdrawn eastwards into Poland, out of range

of Bomber Command. The assembly was also transferred into hastily prepared underground facilities in caves at Nordhausen, 140 miles east of the Ruhr, where brutal slave labour was used.

With barely time to draw breath, the opening shots in the next campaign were fired less than a week later. Harris had long believed that Berlin held the key to ultimate victory. As the seat and symbol of Nazi power, its destruction would represent a political disaster for the regime, and surely rock the foundations of national morale. Many commentators see the Battle of Berlin as beginning in November, but it is clear from official documents, particularly those at squadron level that the “Battle of Berlin” was being referred to, and was keenly anticipated by the crews in August. Therefore, in the author’s opinion that is when Bomber Command’s hardest-fought and bloodiest campaign of the war began. There was a stand-down at Wyton after Peenemünde, and an operation against the Ruhr town of Leverkusen on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup> passed by, without an invitation for 83 Squadron to take part. A feeling of monotony was beginning to pervade the crew rooms, until a call to briefing on the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> lifted spirits in anticipation of a trip to the “Big City”. A record-equalling sixteen crews received the news that their wishes were to be granted as part of an overall force of 727 aircraft. A Master Bomber was appointed in the shape of the tough, grizzled, former Canadian bush pilot and frequent brawler, W/C Johnny Fauquier, commanding officer of 405 (Vancouver) Squadron. W/C Shaw was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty, supported by S/Ls Hildyard, Manton, Sells and C.A. Smith, and he was first off at 20.16, to be followed by the others over the ensuing forty-five minutes. They crossed the Norfolk coast near Yarmouth, and pointed their snouts towards the gap in the enemy defences at Egmond on the Dutch coast, from where the route took them almost due east into and across Germany, with a slight dogleg to the south-east at a position north of Hanover. Many crews were unhappy with the return route, however, which would require them to fly out over the Baltic coast and the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular for a long crossing of the North Sea, and this would add considerable mileage and time to the round trip.

They arrived in the target area to find clear skies, no haze and good visibility, and yet the marking went badly astray. The plan had been to pass the southern fringe of the city, and turn to approach from the south-east, but many crews cut the corner, and came in from the south-west. W/C Shaw bombed on H2S from 19,500 feet at 23.43, two minutes before zero hour, and he left the scene confident that his, and the other target indicators, had fallen into built-up areas, a belief backed up by fires and smoke from the subsequent bombing. A number of 83 Squadron crews had issues with their H2S sets, and, it seems that this problem applied also to an unusually large number of other Pathfinder aircraft on this night. The Wyton crews were over the target at 17,600 to 20,000 feet between 23.42 and 00.20, and all but two returned to report that the bombing had been concentrated around the TIs, and that there were many fires and large explosions. Later in the day, photographic reconnaissance revealed that the attack had developed some six miles to the west of the planned aiming point, and had fallen mostly onto the south-western corner of the city, and onto many outlying communities. Despite the failures, this was the most damaging attack of the war thus far on Berlin, and resulted in the destruction of 2,600 individual buildings of a residential, industrial and public nature, and 854 fatalities. The Command paid for this success with the record loss of fifty-six aircraft, among which were two from 83 Squadron, ending an almost unprecedented loss-free period since Mülheim in June. ED984 was coned in searchlights on approach to the target, before being shot down by a night fighter, to crash into a wooded area south-east of Berlin. Typically, F/L Brian Slade DFC, who was on his fifty-ninth and penultimate operation, was adhering to the official plan when the end came, and he died alongside five members of his crew, three of whom were holders of the DFM, including F/Sgt Lewis, one of the squadron’s longest-serving

members. Only his rear gunner, F/L Turner DFM, the A Flight gunnery leader, survived, and he was soon in enemy hands. Also missing was JA927, which was brought down by flak ten miles due south of the city, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Reid, who was very well thought of by the squadron, and was on his tenth sortie as a Pathfinder.

F/L Wilmot bade farewell to the squadron on the 25<sup>th</sup>, on posting for instructional duties at 23 O.T.U., and it was announced that G/C Searby was to receive the immediate award of the DSO for his magnificent leadership of the Peenemünde operation. The 26<sup>th</sup> was a very wet day with no flying, and, during the afternoon, all available crews were treated to a performance of an American film on venereal disease. Sixteen crews were called to briefing on the 27<sup>th</sup>, still chastened by the previous day's chilling warnings about dalliances with local girls in pub carparks. Nuremberg was a much more pleasant prospect, particularly when surrounded by over 670 other crews, all with the single purpose in mind of delivering an unforgettable experience to the birthplace of Nazism. W/C Shaw was the senior captain on duty, ably supported by S/Ls Hildyard, Sells and Johnson, the last-mentioned taking over F/L Wilmot's crew, and undertaking his first sortie as crew captain since his arrival. They took off either side of 21.00, and headed out across the south coast to make for landfall over northern France. Following the "Y" equipment failure at Berlin, forty-seven Pathfinder crews were instructed to test their device by dropping a 500 or 1,000 pounder on Heilbronn, a hundred miles and thirty minutes flying time to the west of the target. Twenty-eight complied, including W/C Shaw, who bombed from 16,000 feet at 23.51, before reaching Nuremberg under clear skies to be the first to deliver a red target indicator. The others from the squadron delivered their loads from 13,700 to 18,000 feet, between 00.23 and 01.02, during which, a number were coned by searchlights and hit by flak. S/L Hildyard was among these, and jettisoned his bombs before making a second run across the aiming point to deliver his TIs. P/O King's ED974 was hit by flak after bombing, and this knocked out his hydraulics, leaving the bomb doors open and the undercarriage partially inoperable. The cookie was jettisoned onto hilly ground twenty miles north-west of Nuremberg, and a safe return made to base. The single undercarriage leg collapsed on touch-down, and a belly landing ensued, which was accomplished without injury to those on board. F/L Mason stooged around for nine minutes without being able to identify the aiming point, and bombed a clearly-defined built-up area. It was another night of heavy night fighter activity and excessive losses, which amounted to thirty-three aircraft, including 83 Squadron's ED876, containing the crew of the newly-commissioned P/O Turp. It crashed near Kettenheim, about seventy miles from the Luxembourg frontier, which suggests that it may have been homebound at the time. Once again, all on board were killed, and the ORB expressed the sentiment that they would be missed. The operation was not successful, despite the accuracy of the early marking. A creep-back soon developed, which the Master Bomber could not correct, probably because of communications difficulties, and apart from the southern fringes of the city being hit, most bombs fell into open country and outlying communities.

A large-scale attack on the twin towns of Mönchengladbach and Rheydt was mounted on the night of the 30/31<sup>st</sup>, without an 83 Squadron contribution. It proved to be highly successful, destroying a combined total of 2,300 buildings, many of an industrial nature, and this amounted to around 50% of the built-up area of each town. The afternoon of the 31<sup>st</sup> brought the next call to briefing at Wyton for sixteen crews, who learned they were going back to Berlin that night. A force of 622 aircraft was made ready, and this time the route was to take them over Texel, on a long, straight leg, south of Hanover, as if heading for Leipzig, but then swinging to the north-east to pass Berlin's south-eastern corner, before making a sharp turn to port for the final approach. It would require another long flight home, with a south-westerly

course from Berlin to a point between Frankfurt and Cologne, where they would then head due east across southern Holland and northern France to the Channel, and thence the Sussex coast. The senior pilots on duty were S/Ls Hildyard, Johnson, Sells and A.B Smith, and the take-off began with F/O Chick at 19.57. A major feature of this operation was the high number of early returns, amounting to eighty-six aircraft, or 14% of those dispatched, but only one from 83 Squadron failed to make it to the target. W/O Finding experienced problems with both starboard engines, and he bombed Texel from 14,000 feet at 21.35 as a last resort. The others pressed on to find six to ten-tenths cloud, and winds, which were less strong than forecast and more northerly. This caused the attack to open late, and the blind markers became spread out, preventing the backers-up from achieving any concentration. Cloud also contributed to the lack of accuracy, and the attack developed over the southern suburbs of the city, before creeping back some thirty miles along the line of approach. The 83 Squadron aircraft were over the target at 16,500 to 19,400 feet between 23.29 and 23.56, and returned safely, uncertain as to the effectiveness of their work. Nothing meaningful was gained from the huge effort expended, and the loss of a further forty-seven aircraft compounded the disappointment. During the course of the month, the squadron launched 143 sorties on eleven operations, and lost three aircraft and crews.



*Easy does it... Two armourers load a 4,000 lb 'cookie' into the bomb bay of a Lancaster. The concentration on their faces is a far cry from the PR photos of ground and aircrews cheerfully writing messages on bombs bound for Germany. Armourers generally did not find bombs a subject for levity.*

## September 1943

Having closed the August account it fell to Berlin to open that for September. An all-Lancaster force of 316 aircraft was made ready on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the fourth anniversary of Britain's entry into the war, while fourteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing. They learned that the route in was to be direct, with a 350-mile leg across Holland and Germany, passing north of Hanover to the lakes west of the target near Brandenburg, from where H2S would guide them to the aiming point. The return route was very long, and required a reduction in bomb load in favour of extra fuel. They were to proceed north across the Baltic coast, deliberately violating Swedish air space by flying just inside its western coast, before passing over the northern tip of Denmark for the North Sea crossing. S/Ls Johnson and A.B Smith were the senior pilots on duty as they departed Wyton either side of 20.00, and headed for the Dutch coast south of Den Helder. P/O Pidding turned back at 21.11, when at the mid-point between England and Holland, after an engine overheated and his rear guns refused to work. The others pushed on over a blanket of cloud, which dispersed twenty miles from the target, to leave clear skies and good visibility with ground haze. The defences were more active than during the previous two raids, with many searchlights co-ordinating with heavy flak, and night fighters much in evidence. The 83 Squadron crews bombed on H2S from 18,500 to 20,000 feet between 23.10 and 23.29, and they turned for home confident that a concentrated operation had taken place. The glow of fires was visible from the Baltic coast, and, as they flew out over Sweden, they were treated to the rare sight below of communities not blacked out. The Swedish flak batteries offered a token response to the incursion of their airspace, but the shells were set to explode well below the bombers, and, as the Lancasters turned to port to skirt the northern tip of Denmark, the Swedes laid their searchlights horizontally in a friendly gesture to point the way. Reconnaissance revealed that much of the bombing had undershot, but some useful damage was inflicted upon the western districts of Moabit and Charlottenburg, and the industrial suburb of Siemensstadt. Twenty-two Lancasters were lost, 7% of those dispatched, thus demonstrating that, in the absence of Stirlings and Halifaxes, Lancasters were equally vulnerable. This was the final operation of F/L Mason's second tour, and he would be posted to 84 O.T.U on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The twin cities of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen faced each other on opposite banks of the River Rhine, deep in southern Germany, and this made them vulnerable to the tendency for bombing to creep-back along the line of approach. At briefings on the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup>, crews were informed of the plan, which began with an approach from the west and the initial marking of the eastern side of Mannheim on the right bank by H2S. This would be backed-up visually, and any creep-back would spread across the central and western parts of the city, before spilling over onto Ludwigshafen on the left bank. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews learned that they were to be part of an overall force of 605 aircraft, and they took off between 19.41 and 20.16 led by W/C Shaw, with both S/L Smiths in support. The station commander, G/C Graham, was on board JA677 with S/L A.B. Smith. Clear skies and good visibility over the target enabled the attack to proceed as planned, and the 83 Squadron crews carried out their briefs from 15,000 to 18,500 feet, between 22.56 and 23.15. They watched as fires gained hold right across the target, and a number of massive explosions lit up the area on both sides of the Rhine, one, at 23.01, appearing to be in the marshalling yards in Ludwigshafen. F/L Chick was coned in searchlights and held for eight minutes, but escaped, and carried out a second run to deliver his cookie, six 500 pounders and TIs on H2S. S/L C Smith described the target as beautifully clear in the light of flares, and he could pick out the exact streets into which his bombs fell, "which, by the way, was the aiming point." W/C Shaw bombed on his third run, and described the searchlights as "a bit clueless", but commented on the abundance of night

fighters. Thirty-four aircraft failed to return, and among them was 83 Squadron's JB118 with the crew of P/O Price RCAF, who were about half-way through their tour and failed to survive. Their burial in the Rheinberg CWG cemetery suggests that they came down close to the Ruhr, but at what stage of the operation, and under what circumstances, is not clear. The operation was an outstanding success, and was described by the Mannheim authorities as a catastrophe. Central and southern districts of Ludwigshafen were devastated, and nearly two thousand fires had to be dealt with, while almost eleven hundred houses were destroyed, and the I.G. Farben synthetic oil plant was among important war industry factories damaged.

The following afternoon brought briefing for thirteen 83 Squadron crews, who learned that they were to be part of a force of 404 aircraft with Munich as their destination. G/C Searby was the senior pilot on duty, backed up by W/C Shaw and S/Ls Johnson and C. Smith, and they got away safely either side of 20.00. P/O Mercer turned back from the mid-point of the Channel, after discovering that his navigator had forgotten to bring his computer with him. It was, perhaps, fortunate that his commanding officer was at 15,000 feet with his mind occupied by more important matters, but one can picture the scene, probably on the following morning, when the two men confronted each other. Cloud during the outward flight persisted over the target, and was estimated as thin and around seven-tenths, for which conditions, ground marking was felt to be appropriate. Returning crews would largely disagree with this decision, as it proved difficult to pick up the glow of TIs burning on the ground. S/L Smith withheld his load after a first run, anticipating that the controller would revert to Wanganui (skymarking), but no such order came, and he ran in for a second time to bomb on H2S. The squadron crews attacked from 17,000 to 20,000 feet between 23.20 and 23.43, and many commented on the use of illuminator flares by enemy night fighters. They described a long line of forty or so along the approach, and suggested it was like flying along Blackpool seafront. The raid was scattered, mainly around southern and western districts, and the disappointment was compounded by the loss of sixteen aircraft, thirteen of them Halifaxes, thus confirming that in a mixed force, it was safer to be in a Lancaster.

Operations to Germany by the main force now took a backseat for two weeks, although Berlin was "on" and then "off" on a number of occasions. Two major speeches were made on the 10<sup>th</sup>, one by Hitler, and the other via Wyton's tannoy system by G/C Graham, congratulating the station on its performance during August. He called for increased efforts in the months ahead, to bring an early conclusion to the war, and the crews remained convinced that this could be brought about through the medium of bombing. Major changes in personnel took place on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> with the departure of W/C Shaw to 17 O.T.U., and S/Ls Hildyard and Sells to HQ 3 Group. According to the 83 Squadron ORB, S/L Hayter arrived from fellow Pathfinder unit, 405 (Vancouver) Squadron, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, although there seems to be no reference to him anywhere in the 405 Squadron ORB. It was also on the 15<sup>th</sup> that the inexperienced crews of P/O Davies and F/S Rathbone were briefed to take part in an operation against the Dunlop Rubber factory at Montlucon in central France. In the event, the latter did not take off, but P/O Davies got away at 20.42, to join up with 368 other aircraft from 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups, all crews having been exhorted to avoid collateral damage and French civilian casualties. It was a moonlit night, with six to seven-tenths cloud, but the marking was accurate, and P/O Davies bombed from 6,500 feet at 23.35, before returning safely home to report the smell of burning rubber infiltrating the Lancaster in the target area. Reconnaissance revealed that every building in the factory complex had been hit, and a large fire started.

3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups provided the aircraft also on the following night, when an operation was launched against the railway yards at Modane in eastern France. The marshalling yards formed part of the main rail link through the Alps to Italy, and lay in a valley with 11,000 foot mountains on each side. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, with G/C Searby the senior pilot among them, along with S/Ls Johnson, Manton and both Smiths. They took off either side of 20.00 to rendezvous with the rest of the 340-strong force, before making their way across France, in sometimes cloudy conditions, in which a degree of icing was experienced. Over the target there was a little patchy cloud, but visibility was generally good, compromised only by smoke from flares and TI fires. The majority of the 83 Squadron aircraft bombed from 14,000 feet, although G/C Searby was at 16,000, and they were over the target between 00.01 and 00.23, having, in some cases, made a number of runs. It was clear that a few of the TIs had overshot, and the ORB blames two of the squadron's crews for backing up, without visually identifying the aiming point. S/L C. Smith, who was one of four squadron leaders on board JA701, including the recently-arrived S/L Hayter, admitted to being one of them, but there was a confusing scene below, of scattered and misplaced markers in the opinion of some, and concentrated marking and bombing according to others. Some reported ground detail clearly identifiable, while F/S Rathbone saw no TIs after arriving in the "presumed" target area at 00.01, and eventually bombed on estimated position after searching for twelve minutes. One unusual feature was the sound of cookies exploding, a phenomenon caused by the echoing effect from the surrounding walls of rock. Reconnaissance established later that the operation had failed.

A period of stand-downs after Modane was becoming irksome, and the crews were pleased to be called to briefing on the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, to be told that Hanover would be their target that night. The announcement was met with approval, as an attack on this large city in northern Germany had been considered long overdue. The operation would actually be the first in a series of four over the ensuing month, for which a force of 711 aircraft was made ready. A dozen crews attended briefing at Wyton, with S/Ls Johnson, Manton and both Smiths the senior pilots on duty. S/L Hayter would continue his introduction to the squadron by flying again with S/L C. Smith. The plan unveiled to the crews involved two operations, the main one to Hanover, while a "spoof" attack went ahead at Oldenburg, a town a hundred miles to the north-west within thirty miles of Bremen. A force of twenty-one 8 Group Lancasters and eight Mosquitos was to fly there, and draw as much attention to itself as possible, with much windowing, dispensing of flares and TIs, and a cookie or two, hopefully to create confusion and divide the night fighter defences. S/Ls Johnson and Manton were to lead, with P/Os Allcroft, Millar and Shipway, but it was the Hanover-bound element which took off first, after 18.30, to be followed by the "spoofers" after 18.40. In order to give the night fighters time to commit themselves to north-western Germany, the Oldenburg force arrived at its destination about thirty minutes ahead of the main effort, and carried out its brief by H2S from 17,000 to 19,500 feet, between 20.57 and 21.07. At Hanover the visibility was good, and the 83 Squadron crews were able to identify ground detail before delivering their loads from 16,800 to 18,200 feet between 21.24 and 21.35. They returned with confident claims of a successful attack, which created fires visible from a hundred miles away. There was incredulity, therefore, when it was revealed that the attack, although concentrated, had fallen south of the city as a result of stronger-than-forecast winds causing elements of the Pathfinders to mistime their runs. The 83 Squadron ORB described it as one of the worst Pathfinder raids ever, but exonerated the Wyton crews, two of which, S/L A. Smith and P/O King, each brought back an aiming point photo. The question of the

fires visible well into the return flight is a mystery, however, as decoy sites rarely, if ever, gained such intensity<sup>9</sup>.

The following night brought a return to Mannheim and Ludwigshafen, which were still reeling from their visit two-and-a-half weeks earlier. 628 aircraft were made ready, of which eleven represented 83 Squadron, nine for the main operation, led by S/Ls Manton and C. Smith, while F/L Thompson and P/O Britton were to be part of a small-scale diversion of twenty-one Lancasters with Mosquito support to Darmstadt, twenty-five miles to the north. P/O Davies's rear gunner was conspicuous by his absence as the crews boarded their aircraft, and F/L Heeley was dragged out of the mess to take his place. They were all safely airborne by 18.55, and reached the target area to find clear skies and good visibility. The diversion failed in its aim by being too close to the main operation, which allowed for night fighters to observe the activity and cover the distance in minutes. F/L Thompson and P/O Britton dropped their TIs, cookie and incendiaries from 18,500 and 16,600 feet at 21.37 and 21.39 respectively, and helped to inflict damage upon the university town of Darmstadt to the tune of 273 buildings. This was probably its first experience of a Bomber Command attack, but a much greater ordeal awaited it twelve months hence. The intention at Mannheim was to hit the northern districts, which had escaped relatively lightly in the previous attack, and the Pathfinders produced accurate marking in good visibility under clear skies, which the main force crews exploited. The 83 Squadron element bombed from 16,000 to 19,000 feet between 21.26 and 21.48, and a number of crews reported a large explosion at 21.36. Reconnaissance revealed that the operation had been highly successful, although a creep-back had fallen across the northern rim of Ludwigshafen and into open country. 927 houses and twenty industrial premises were destroyed, and the emergency services had to deal with more than two thousand fires.

After a few night's rest, crews once again assembled in briefing rooms on the 27<sup>th</sup>, to learn of their next operational foray, which turned out to be Hanover round two, with a diversionary raid on Brunswick, some forty miles away to the south-east. A force of 678 aircraft was made ready for the main event, of which ten were provided by 83 Squadron, while a further four from Wyton were assigned to the small-scale diversion. S/L Manton was the senior pilot on duty among the Hanover contingent, and this would be the first operation for F/O McDonald and crew since their return from internment in Sweden. S/Ls C. Smith and Hayter, the latter acting as crew captain for the first time, were the senior pilots for the diversion, again to be carried out by twenty-one 8 Group Lancasters with Mosquito support, and they took off first shortly after 19.00. The others followed in their wake from 21.16, and encountered cloud over England and the North Sea, which began to thin over the Continent, leaving clear skies and good visibility in the target area. The 83 Squadron crews attacked Brunswick from 16,300 to 19,000 feet between 21.48 and 21.56, and claimed a reasonable concentration within the built-up area, which S/L Smith identified by the light of fighter flares, thus demonstrating that some had been drawn away from Hanover. The main operation opened as the diversion came to an end, the target having been located, after a timed run from the Steinhuder Lake, north-west of the city. The initial markers seemed scattered, but a better concentration was achieved as the attack developed. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 15,000 to 20,000 feet between 21.56 and 22.09, some based on visual identification and others not, and a number of crews commented on many fires in the east of the town area. P/O Henderson and crew claimed fires visible from the Zuider Zee, but this seems highly unlikely, considering the distance involved of more than two hundred miles, and the fact that most of the bombs fell into open country to

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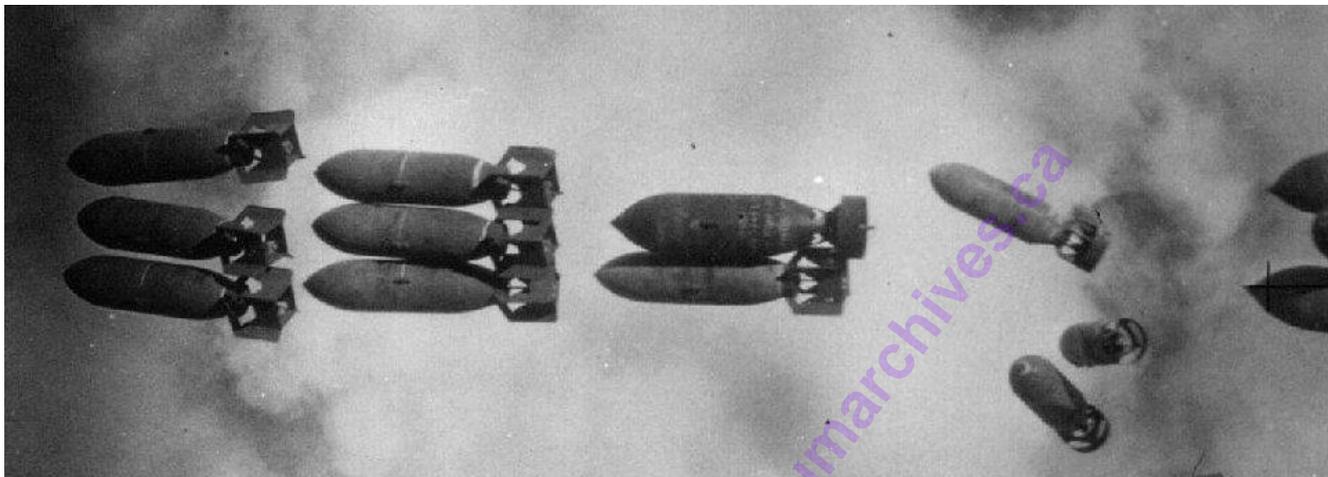
<sup>9</sup> *The damage caused by the third raid would be in excess of anything previously achieved in a single attack on any target, and one wonders whether, perhaps, more success was achieved in the first two raids than we have been led to believe.*

the north of the city. P/O Finding did not reach the target, after being hit by flak over the Steinhuder Lake at 22.08, and losing his escape hatch. The intercom was also knocked out and the navigator lost his log and several maps, all of which forced them to turn back onto a westerly heading, and bomb an aerodrome at Hävern at 22.20. This proved to be a mistake, as they were immediately hit again, holing both main-planes and rendering Gee and wireless unserviceable. Through excellent crew co-operation and efficiency, they eventually landed under a 300 foot cloud base at Catfoss, near the Yorkshire coast between Bridlington and Hull. This failed operation cost a massive thirty-eight aircraft, with Halifaxes and Stirlings again sustaining the highest percentage casualties.

The final operation of the month was to be against the Ruhr city of Bochum, where Oboe could be brought to bear, and for which a force of 352 aircraft was made ready. 83 Squadron was called upon to provide three backers-up and two supporters, with S/L Hayter the senior pilot on duty. He led them off at 18.14, but was forced to turn back when fifty miles off the Dutch coast, after his H2S and Gee failed. F/O McDonald also returned early with technical problems with JB187, a new Lancaster, which had only managed a short cross-country before this, its first operation. A number of instruments failed, as did the mid-upper turret, before it dived out of control suddenly, when about twenty-five miles off the Norfolk coast, and the situation was rescued only with great difficulty. The bombs were jettisoned from 14,000 feet at 19.25 about ten miles off Sheringham, and, once over Swaffham, F/O McDonald ordered his crew to bale out through the front hatch. When he was sure they had all left the aircraft, he turned it back towards the sea, and, having secured the navigator's bag, he too jumped from 5,000 feet, and broke a leg on landing. The flight engineer hurt his back, but the others were able to walk away. The remaining three squadron participants reached the target to bomb from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 20.48 and 20.59, and contributed to a highly successful attack, which destroyed 527 houses and seriously damaged 742, with a particular emphasis on the old town.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> S/L "Joe" Northrop was posted to the squadron from 1473 Flight, a unit engaged in the development of Radio Counter Measures (RCM), which would shortly become part of the new 100 Group. The main purpose of RCM was to interfere with enemy night fighter communications through various devices, including "Jostle", which was currently being trialled in 101 Squadron Lancasters as ABC, "Airborne Cigar". Joe had joined the RAF as a "Halton Brat" engineering apprentice in 1929 at the age of sixteen, in the same intake as G/C Searby, and progressed to gain his wings. He had spent much of the war on development work that had led to major advances in technology and tactics, and had served alongside others, who, like him, would achieve squadron commander status before the war was over. In July 1940, he had joined the Blind Approach Development Unit at Boscombe Down under W/C Hal Bufton, and along with the likes of George Grant, Vic Willis and Butch Cundall, was involved in the "battle of the beams", to combat the Luftwaffe's KG100 Pathfinder unit's Knickebein (crooked leg) guidance system, which was being used to find industrial cities in Britain, like Coventry. Later he served with the Wireless Intelligence Unit, which ultimately became 109 Squadron, the pioneers of Mosquito-borne Oboe, again under Bufton, and 1473 Flight, which was developing the Radio Countermeasures capability eventually employed first by 192 Squadron under W/C Willis in the imminently forming 100 Group. The new group would come into being in November under Air Commodore Addison, to provide a jamming function on every major operation, and also to be home to "Serrate" Mosquito units, whose job was to hunt down and destroy enemy night fighters. The impending absorption of 1473 Flight into 100 Group released Joe to volunteer for Pathfinding duties, but conversion to the Lancaster and various other courses, to prepare him for his new role, would keep him from Wyton until well into October.

Among numerous awards to squadron members during the month were Bars to the DFC for W/C Shaw, S/L Hildyard and F/L Mason, DFCs for S/L Sells, F/Ls Thompson, Chick and Garvey and P/O King, and a DFM for F/S Britton. During the course of the month the squadron dispatch 114 sorties on nine operations, for the loss of three aircraft and two crews.



*A cluster of 500 lb bombs falls from ED908 during that aircraft's time with 83 Sqn. She would later move to 582 Sqn, failing to return from Foret du Croc on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944 when she exploded on the run in to the aiming point. S/L James Foulsham DFC, AFC perished with his crew.*

## October 1943

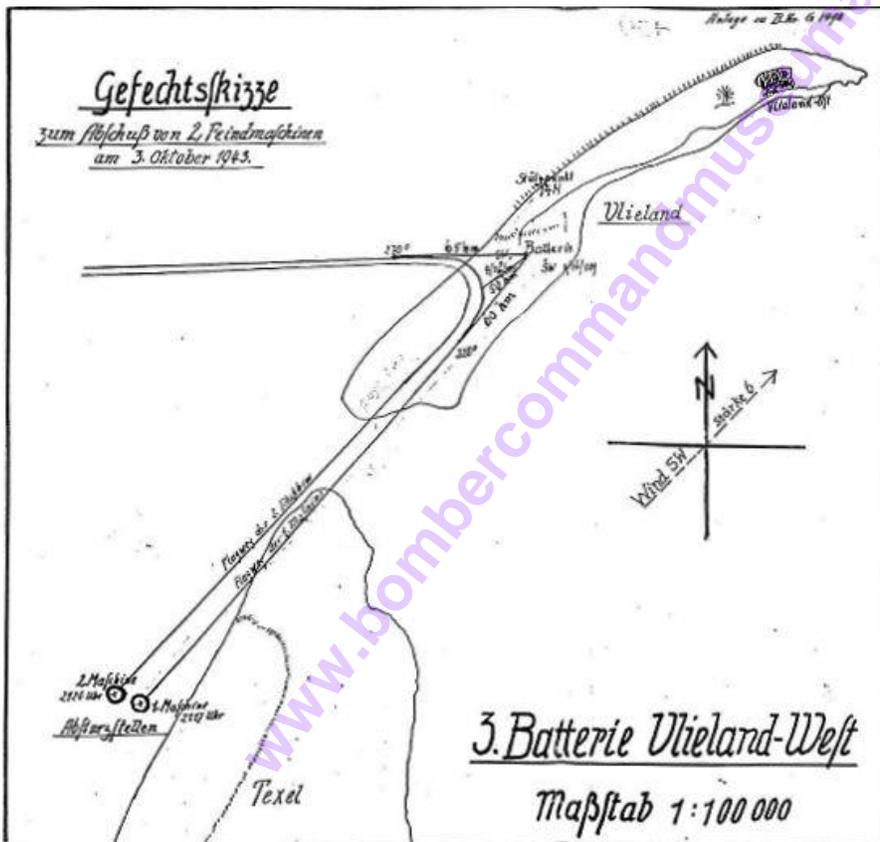
October would begin in hectic fashion, with major operations for the Lancaster brigade on the first four nights, starting on the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> at Hagen, a small city located on the south-eastern edge of the Ruhr, a dozen miles south of Dortmund. A force of 243 Lancasters was drawn from 1, 5 and 8 Groups, with a contribution from 83 Squadron of just two aircraft. That simple statement masked a day of chaos and confusion at Wyton, which lived long in the memory of those present and involved. Operational orders were received very late, and the squadron was asked to provide twelve aircraft for Stuttgart. The bombing up process was well under way, when a change of target to Hagen was announced at 13.00, for which two aircraft would be required. The armourers got to work removing the bombs, when, at 15.00, the original plan was reinstated, and all surplus aircrew were press-ganged into assisting the armourers to reload. About an hour later, Stuttgart was “off” again and Hagen “on”, and after much rolling on the ground in anguish and pulling of hair, the armourers unloaded ten Lancasters and bombed up two, before visiting the chapel for prayers. S/L Hayter and P/O Simpson took off shortly after 18.30, and reached the target to find complete cloud cover, and Oboe skymarking in progress. P/O Simpson bombed from 18,000 feet at 21.01, having observed a large explosion during the run-in, and two more afterwards producing blue flames. S/L Hayter followed up five minutes later from a 1,000 feet lower, and also described a large explosion at 21.05, which produced a green-blue flash that lit up the clouds for five seconds. They returned with the impression that it had been a concentrated and successful attack, which was confirmed later by photo-reconnaissance. Of the city’s four industrial areas, two had been severely damaged, and a third less so, and more than three thousand fires had to be dealt with. Damage to an accumulator battery manufacturer slowed the output of U-Boots.

Munich followed on the night of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, for which 1, 5 and 8 Groups provided 294 Lancasters, a dozen of them representing 83 Squadron. S/Ls Manton and both Smiths were the senior pilots on duty, as they took off either side of 19.00, and headed towards southern Germany. On arrival, they found clear skies and good visibility, despite which, the initial marking was scattered, and the main focus of the bombing developed over the city’s southern and south-eastern districts. The 83 Squadron element bombed from 13,000 to 19,000 feet between 22.25 and 22.35, and returned safely to report an apparently concentrated attack, with large explosions, many fires and a column of smoke rising to 7,000 feet. Photo-reconnaissance, however, revealed that a creep-back had led to bombs falling up to fifteen miles short, and this was largely as a result of 5 Group adopting its “time-and-distance” method, independently of the Pathfinders, and failing to accurately locate the Würmsee starting point. Even so, local authorities reported that 339 buildings had been destroyed, at a cost to the Command of eight Lancasters.

Twenty-four hours later, it was the turn of Kassel to face the Command, which had spent the day preparing a force of 547 aircraft, including eleven Lancasters of 83 Squadron. G/C Searby was to lead, on what would prove to be his final operation with the squadron, with S/Ls Hayter and both Smiths in support. S/L C. Smith had to drop out through illness, however, and the “Doc” decreed that he had done enough and would fly no more. He and his crew had been desperate to be the first Pathfinders to complete sixty operations, but the “Doc” was adamant, and it was not to be. P/O Tolchard and crew filled the gap on the Order of Battle, and took over S/L Smith’s regular mount, JA701 E-Easy. They were all airborne by 18.55, before heading for the rendezvous point over the North Sea, and entry into Fortress Europe via the Frisian island of Texel. They were met by clear skies in the target area, but thick ground haze, and, after the Pathfinder blind markers using H2S had overshot the aiming point, the visual



Four of the crew of JA972, OL-D, which came to grief over Texel en route to Kassel with the loss of S/L John Hayter (left) and all on board. Also shown from second left are F/L Frank Heeley, rear gunner, navigator F/L Frank Webb, shown wearing the brevet of an Observer, and flight engineer F/S Garth Taylor.



A sketchmap attributed to 3. Batterie, Vlieland-West, showing the track of two 'Feindmaschinen' (enemy aircraft) claimed by the unit on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1943. One of these was JA972, flown by S/L Hayter.

markers found themselves unable to identify ground detail and correct the situation. As a result, the main weight of bombs fell into the western half of the city, and beyond into outlying communities, but the district of Wolfsanger, east of the city centre, was devastated, possibly because a stray bomb caused an ammunition dump in nearby Ihringshausen to detonate and attract more bomb loads. Among the damage were fires at the Henschel and Fieseler aircraft factories. Twenty-four aircraft failed to return, but there were only four Lancasters in that figure. Sadly, one of those contained the crew of S/L Hayter, who were all killed, when JA972 was shot down by flak from Texel on the way to the target, and crashed into the sea within sight of the island.

The bodies of S/L Hayter and two of his crew subsequently came ashore on Texel at Paal 22, and, later, two others were recovered for burial on Terschelling further north, and Esbjerg in Denmark. S/L Hayter was a twenty-four-year-old South African, who, in his short time with the squadron, had endeared himself to all through his operational efficiency and great personal charm. He had taken over the experienced crew of S/L Sells,

and all would be greatly missed. They were not the only victims of this particular flak battery on this night, as a 158 Squadron Halifax was also brought down.

The following is the official report by Oberfeldwebel Karl Brendlin of 3 Batterie Marineflakabteilung 815. "On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1943, between 21.13 and 21.14, while acting as flak leader, I engaged two enemy aircraft approaching from the west, and turning to the south-west. I opened fire at a range of 6,500 metres, and, at 5,000 meters (over Vlieland) they turned sharply. Immediately after the last salvo, at about 220°, I saw a very bright glow of fire above the clouds, which lasted for about a minute. Then several pieces of burning aircraft fell through the clouds as the result of a large explosion, and crashed on a bearing of 220 to 225°. About two minutes later I saw another bright glow above the clouds in the same direction, which fell vertically and very fast to the ground as an intact fireball. This fireball I recognised without question as a second aircraft, which burned for a long time some fifteen to twenty kilometres away."

The busy start to the month continued on the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, when a force of 406 aircraft was made ready to attack Frankfurt, and a further sixty-six crews drawn from 1 and 8 Groups were briefed to carry out a diversion at Ludwigshafen. P/O Stiles was the sole 83 Squadron representative in the latter, while five others were to take part in the main event, with F/L Chick the senior pilot on duty, and it was he who led them away at 18.29. P/O Finding had reached Reading, when an intermittent tearing sound was heard near the rear spar. It became more persistent, until it was decided to abandon the sortie at 19.17, and the bombs were jettisoned, at which point the sound ceased. The others arrived in the target area to find clear skies and good bombing conditions, and although the initial marking was early and somewhat scattered, it was soon corrected, and the aiming point was maintained throughout the attack by backers-up. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 16,500 to 18,000 feet between 21.30 and 21.43, having been able to identify ground detail, and they returned to report what looked to be a successful operation. A very large explosion was thought to come from the gas works in the east harbour, and fires were still visible from 160 miles away on the return journey. F/L Chick arrived back with a live 4lb incendiary bomb in a petrol tank, which was removed in a most gingerly fashion by a member of ground crew. Reconnaissance confirmed that the main weight of the attack had fallen into the eastern half of the city and the inland docks on the River Main, which were described by local reports as "a sea of flame," and this represented the first serious damage of the war at this target. P/O Stiles also returned without incident from his visit to Ludwigshafen, where the outcome of the bombing was of secondary importance to diverting the defences, and the loss of ten aircraft from the two raids suggests that, in that regard, it was a success.

W/C Porter was posted in from 1660 Conversion Unit on the 5<sup>th</sup>, possibly as a direct replacement for S/L Hayter. The crews had been champing at the bit for a night off in Cambridge, and, once it became clear that no operations were to be conducted that night, busses were arranged, and sixty-seven joyous airmen piled on board. Crews were awoken by the Tannoy at 08.30 on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and told to report to the briefing room, where they were to watch a film on ditching. The usual one featured a Halifax crew, with a pilot who assured his men that "it will be alright, chaps", but this one turned out to be a different and interesting take on the subject produced by the R.A.E. at Farnborough. Ops were announced later, and

scrubbed soon after tea, but not before a few keen ones turned up in flying kit to be greeted with a sarcastic, “going somewhere?”

The next operation was an all-Lancaster attack on Stuttgart, for which 343 crews from 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8 Groups were briefed on the 7<sup>th</sup>. A small diversionary raid by sixteen 8 Group Lancasters on Friedrichshafen, on the shore of Lake Constance, some eighty miles south, was also laid on, and 83 Squadron would support both. This was the night on which 101 Squadron’s ABC Lancasters would operate in numbers for the first time, spread throughout the bomber stream to jam enemy night fighter communications. At Wyton, eight crews were briefed for the main event, with S/Ls Johnson and Manton the senior pilots on duty, while P/Os Henderson, Pidding and Stiles were involved in the latter, and all took off together between 20.30 and 20.50. Zero hour for the diversion was set for 23.55, ten minutes ahead of Stuttgart, and P/O Stiles was well on his way over enemy territory, when a fuel leakage became apparent, and he turned for home immediately, while he still had sufficient reserves left to complete the journey. He arrived back with all of the petrol on one side, causing the fuel-transfer cocks and the flight engineer’s finger to come under suspicion. The others reached their respective targets to find complete cloud cover and skymarking in progress, and, at Stuttgart, two main areas of TIs were established about two miles apart. With the exception of F/L Garvey, who chose to go in at 14,000 feet, the others from the squadron attacked from 18,000 feet between 00.01 and 00.12, and all commented on the scattering of TIs, some falling well short, but confirmed the glow of fires through the clouds. There was also only a glow to report from Friedrichshafen, but at such a compact industrialized location, almost any bomb was likely to cause useful damage. The bombing at Stuttgart was, indeed, scattered, but 344 buildings, mostly of a residential nature, were destroyed, and 4,500 others damaged, at a cost to the Command of just four Lancasters. This suggested that the ABC deployment had been successful, and from this point on, 101 Squadron ABC-equipped Lancasters would take part in every major operation, whether or not other elements of 1 Group were involved, and 101 Squadron would remain with 1 Group, despite the formation of 100 Group in November to undertake Radio Counter Measures (RCM) duties.

The third raid of the series on Hanover was called for the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 504 aircraft was made ready. Among them would be twenty-six Wellingtons of 300 and 432 Squadrons, for the venerable old type’s swansong on a bombing operation. Thirteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, but shortly before take-off, P/O Smeaton and his navigator reported sick. S/Ls Johnson and Manton were the senior pilots on duty as they began taking off shortly after 23.00, and all arrived in the target area to find clear skies and visibility good enough for the visual markers to be able to identify the city centre. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 14,000 to 19,000 feet between 01.22 and 01.45, and it was clear that the aiming point was being hit, with a number of large explosions observed, and fires beginning to take hold as they retreated towards the west. Night fighters were out in force, but Wyton welcomed home all of its sons, F/L Chick, P/O Tolchard, and newcomer, F/Sgt Hellier, each bringing back an aiming point photo. All were confident that Hanover had, at last, succumbed to an accurate attack, and reconnaissance confirmed massive destruction resulting from a concentration of bombing in the centre, and a creep-back of no more than two miles, all falling within the city. Local reports listed almost four thousand buildings destroyed and 30,000 others damaged to some extent, with twelve hundred fatalities.

S/L Joe Northrop completed a course of training at the Navigation Training Unit at Upwood, and arrived at Wyton to take up flying duties on the 11<sup>th</sup>. He had plenty of time to bed himself in, while a period of

minor operations and misty weather conditions kept the heavy brigade on the ground. On days when flying was cancelled, crews attended lectures, watched films and were pressed into PT, and, when flying was possible, the accent was on H2S training. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> that the next operation was able to take place, and this was the last in the series against Hanover. An all-Lancaster force of 356 aircraft was drawn from 1, 5, 6 and 8 Groups, of which thirteen represented 83 Squadron, led by S/L Johnson. S/L Northrop would undertake his first operation with the squadron as a guest in F/L Thompson's crew. They took off either side of 17.30, and all from the squadron reached the target area to encounter complete cloud cover. The blind markers failed to find the city centre, and the main force bombing was scattered across the northern and north-western fringes, but mostly in open country. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 17,000 to 18,000 feet between 20.01 and 20.24, and all landed safely back home either side of 22.30, after the relatively short round trip of around five hours.

Two nights later, plans were put in place for the first major attack of the war on Leipzig in eastern Germany, a hundred miles south-west of Berlin. 358 Lancasters of 1, 5, 6 and 8 Groups were bombed and fuelled up for this deep penetration raid, and for the eleven participants from 83 Squadron, this took place at Warboys, the home of 156 Squadron six miles to the north-east. The Wyton runways had been declared unserviceable, so the Lancasters were flown to Warboys, and the crews bussed back home for meals, briefing and all other matters, before returning in full flying kit for the operation. S/L Manton led the take-off at 17.25, with S/L Northrop again guesting with F/L Thompson, but it was not long before the first "boomerang" was back in the circuit. P/O Tolchard was forty miles off Sherringham, when he was forced to return with an unserviceable rear turret, which, as the route turned out to be thick with enemy fighters, was the correct decision. P/O King also came back early with instrument failure, which, as a visual marker with no bomb sight, left him with little choice, and he dropped his bombs on Texel. A torrid time awaited the others, as they fought their way towards the target in appalling weather conditions. They passed north of Hanover, as if heading for Berlin, before turning to the south-east for the final run-in, and P/O Henderson was still some hundred miles short of Leipzig, when his port-inner engine failed and JA928 was beset with icing problems. Full control of the aircraft was gained only after it had dropped to 5,000 feet, at which point the crew took off their parachutes and prepared for the long flight home. The six crews known to have reached and bombed in the target area did so from 16,000 to 18,000 feet between 20.52 and 21.10, and then had to run the gauntlet of night fighters as they made their way home.

P/O Simpson was engaged by a night fighter, sustaining damage to the starboard tailplane, and he also lost his hydraulics, air-pressure and starboard-inner engine, and had a burst tyre. Despite that, the night fighter was evaded, and the Lancaster brought to a safe landing at Newmarket. P/O Britton and crew experienced even greater difficulties, after a night fighter knocked out an engine and the rear turret, and inflicted damage to the port wing and flaps, the tailplane and, again, burst a tyre. The trimming tab wires had been severed, and the only way to keep the Lancaster from pitching up and down was to keep the control yoke fully forward. This was an intolerable strain on the pilot, and it required full crew co-operation to accomplish. The flight engineer, F/L Forster, was instrumental in organising that, then went aft to locate the severed cables, which he manipulated manually to enable the aircraft to return to a safe landing at Hardwick in Northamptonshire. At 22.30, the flying control section had decided to bring the returning aircraft down at Wyton, but, after advising all ground crew and all others concerned with the process, then thought better of it, and diverted all personnel to Graveley, home of 35 Squadron. All available transports and personnel were sent off in convoy, as the WAAF drivers didn't know the way,

and all returning aircraft were landed without further incident. It soon became apparent that two aircraft were missing, those of S/L Manton and W/O Hall. JB154 was shot down by a night fighter at 22.45, while homebound, and crashed near Assen in northern Holland, with no survivors from the crew of S/L Manton. JA701 was lost without trace with the crew of W/O Hall, and the likelihood is that it met a similar fate off the Dutch coast.

Much of the 21<sup>st</sup> was spent returning the aircraft to Wyton from Graveley, and it was fortunate that no operations were scheduled for that night. The following day brought briefings for eight crews for a major raid on Kassel, which was being targeted for the second time during the month, while five others would join a small 8 Group diversion involving twenty-eight Lancasters and eight Mosquitos at Frankfurt, about eighty miles to the south. Those bound for southern Germany got away first either side of 18.00, with F/L Sambidge the senior pilot on duty, and they were followed immediately by S/L Johnson leading the Kassel element. According to the ORB, the crews flew out in heavy cloud, and when the scale of the losses came through afterwards, many were convinced that the weather had played its part. Over Kassel itself, the skies were clear and visibility good, and this enabled the visual markers to correct the initial blind marking, which had overshot. What followed was a catastrophe for the city, exceeded thus far only by the events of the firestorm raid on Hamburg in July. The 83 Squadron contingent attacked with great accuracy from 15,000 to 20,000 feet between 20.42 and 21.06, and the main force followed up with unusual concentration to seal the target's fate. As they retreated to the west, fires were gaining hold, with smoke rising to 15,000 feet, and returning crews were confident that their efforts had been successful. The attack, which created a firestorm, destroyed more than 4,300 apartment blocks containing 26,782 dwelling units, and a similar number sustained damage, leaving more than a hundred thousand people homeless. A huge number of industrial and public buildings were also destroyed, and the death toll stood somewhere around six thousand people. A massive forty-three aircraft failed to return, and it can be assumed that the majority fell to night fighters using upward-firing cannons without tracer. At Frankfurt, F/L Sambidge, who was on his second operation since joining the squadron, was coned for two minutes, and his port wing set alight, but he made it home full of praise for the performance of his crew under challenging circumstances.

It was on this night that an RAF ground radio station successfully began broadcasting spurious instructions to German night fighters to create confusion. During the course of the month, the squadron dispatched ninety-one sorties on twelve operations, for the loss of three aircraft and crews.

## November 1943

On the 2nd of November, W/C Ray Hilton DSO DFC\* arrived on the squadron from 8 Group HQ, having formerly served it as a flight commander, and he would officially assume command on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Sadly his period of tenure would be brief. The operations orders came through early on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, informing the squadron that two aircraft were required for the main event against Düsseldorf that night by a force of 589 aircraft, and eight for an 8 Group diversion to Cologne. F/L Sambidge and P/O Allcroft were briefed for the former, while F/L Chick would lead the Cologne contingent as one of three blind markers from the squadron, with the remaining five acting as supporters. The latter got away first either side of 17.00, with the recently-arrived W/C Porter flying with F/L Chick to gain experience. The Düsseldorf duo followed close behind, and both operations, just twenty-five miles apart, benefitted from favourable weather conditions. F/L Sambidge and P/O Allcroft bombed from 20,000 feet at 19.48 and 19.59 respectively, and reported much smoke over the target, before returning without incident to report a successful outcome. At Cologne, P/O Henderson experienced technical difficulties, and was unable to release his bombs during two passes across the aiming point, but was eventually able to release them on Eschweiler, north-east of Aachen at 20.13. F/O Davies had his control yoke seize up about forty miles short of the target, sending the Lancaster into a spiral dive from 18,500 feet. It had reached 6,000 feet before control was regained, and he bombed Mönchengladbach as an alternative. The others carried out their attacks from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 19.34 and 19.37, and all returned satisfied that their efforts had been successful. Reconnaissance confirmed that both operations had, indeed, been accurate, concentrated and destructive.

In a letter to Prime Minister Churchill on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, Harris had stated that with the support of the American 8th Air Force, he could “wreck Berlin from end to end”, and bring an early conclusion to the war, without the need to engage in the kind of protracted and bloody land campaigns, which he had personally witnessed in France twenty-five years earlier. There was never a chance of enlisting the Americans, of course, who were committed to a land campaign, but Harris would not be denied, and undaunted and as adamant as ever, he would go to Berlin alone. There would be no operations now for some time, and a party was held on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup>, partly to bid farewell to G/C Searby, who had been appointed to command the Pathfinder’s Navigation Training Unit. The ORB speaks in glowing terms of his eight months in command, during which the morale of the squadron had been raised to new heights, and the quality of its work improved. There was genuine sadness at his departure, but W/C Hilton was a popular successor, and was welcomed back as a wanderer returning to the fold. His loss, however, would bring G/C Searby back to the squadron within weeks.

The briefing of fourteen crews took place on the 8<sup>th</sup>, but a scrub came through shortly before take-off. The 10<sup>th</sup> was a day of fine weather, and, as expected, an operation was announced, with briefing at 13.00 in preparation for an early take-off. There was a buoyant mood as the briefing neared its conclusion, when it was announced that fuel and bomb loads were to be altered. There was a stunned silence, and the ebullient mood changed to one of frustration, as the crews trooped off to their respective messes to await further instructions. They returned to the briefing room at 17.00, to be told there would be a late take-off for Modane in southern France, where the marshalling yards on the main railway line into Italy was the target. Fifteen Lancasters were made ready at Wyton, as part of an overall 5 and 8 Group force of 313 aircraft, and the senior pilots on duty were W/C Porter, flying as crew captain for the first time, and S/L Johnson. The armourers finished their work just before the appointed take-off time, and they all got

away safely either side of 21.00, for what would be an outward leg of almost four hours duration. It was a night of brilliant moonlight, which enable the crews to pick out ground detail and identify the aiming point visually, after its general location had been marked by TIs. The surrounding terrain, so close to the Alps, presented some difficulties, and there was a suspicion of overshooting, but so clear was the visibility that it was possible to determine which TIs were inaccurate and ignore them. The squadron representatives bombed from 13,500 to 17,500 feet between 00.55 and 01.15, and all returned safely to report a successful operation. Two hundred crews brought back photos plotted within one mile of the aiming point, seven of which were from 83 Squadron, including that of W/C Porter, and severe damage was inflicted upon the target.

S/L Jones was posted in from 15 O.T.U on the 17<sup>th</sup>, a day on which the squadron was initially told it would not be required for operations that night. It was decided to take full advantage of the favourable weather conditions, to get the whole squadron into the air for training on H2S and Fishpond (night fighter warning radar), and get in some bombing practice and fighter affiliation. While they were airborne, orders came through for operations, and all were hastily recalled by W/T for a briefing at 13.00. A dozen crews from the squadron were to join seventy-one others from the group, for an H2S blind bombing raid on Ludwigshafen, without any marking taking place. F/Ls Chick and Thompson were the senior pilots on duty as they took off either side of 19.00, and headed for the south coast on a clear and very cold night. They bombed from 16,700 to 18,000 feet between 20.01 and 20.09, and all returned safely to report fires, explosions and rising smoke. P/O Hellier brought back the best photograph, while six crew men returned with frostbite, which would keep them off operations for a time. There had been few night fighters in action over Germany and France, because effective spurious instructions from an English radio station had persuaded most to land.

The long and arduous road to Berlin was re-joined by Harris's legions on the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup>, on this first occasion, by an all-Lancaster heavy force, while the Halifax and Stirling contingent carried out a diversionary raid on Mannheim and Ludwigshafen. There was an excited buzz in the briefing room as the target was revealed, and Germany's capital brought out the squadron's "big guns", in the form of W/C Hilton and S/L Northrop, the latter operating as crew captain for the first time. The squadron contributed eleven Lancasters in a force of 440, and they began taking off a fraction before 17.00 to head for the rendezvous over the North Sea, before settling on a course slightly south of east across northern Holland and Germany. Only two Lancasters equipped with the new Mk III H2S had been ready for operations, and one had developed a fault before take-off. This left just P/O Britton to fly the flag for the new device, but it, too, developed a fault when over the North Sea, and, in accordance with instructions not to take unnecessary risks with it over enemy territory, he bombed Texel at 18.43 and turned for home. The others found Berlin under ten-tenths cloud with blind marking in progress, and it was clear that there was no point of concentration. The 83 Squadron crews attacked mostly from 19,000 feet between 20.56 and 21.09, some after making a timed run from Brandenburg, and returned safely to report what they had seen. It was impossible to assess the outcome, and there seemed to be a high rate of failure of H2S equipment. It was established later that bombs had fallen in most parts of the city, and some useful industrial damage had been achieved, along with the destruction of 169 houses.

The crews rested on the following day, and then mist descended to scupper any chance of flying for the next two days, the crews spending the time attending lectures and film shows. A maximum effort on Berlin was called on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and a force of 764 aircraft was made ready, of which fifteen were to be

provided by 83 Squadron. Four of them would be carrying the new H2S Mk III equipment, and their crews were designated as “special blind markers. The others from the squadron were to act as blind markers or supporters, and those designated in the latter category would carry five 2,000 pounders each. The plan of attack adopted for this operation would become known as the “Berlin method”, which required the deployment of both ground and skymarkers, whatever the cloud conditions, so that something should be visible to the main force. The “special” blind markers carried their own coloured TIs with which to open the attack, and the first group of ordinary blind markers would assess them and back-up, while the second group maintained the backing-up process throughout the duration of the raid. The route was once more fairly direct, passing over Texel to a point north of Hanover, where a slight swing to port would bring the bomber stream onto a due easterly heading, and after bombing they were to turn south and adopt a reciprocal course.

S/L Northrop was the senior pilot on duty for the first time, as they took off either side of 17.00, but three crews, those of F/O Tolchard, F/O Thompson and P/O Britton, followed instructions to return if their special equipment failed, the two last-mentioned having progressed far enough to bomb Texel as an alternative. This left just P/O Hellier to carry the new equipment into battle, and he reached the target with the rest of the squadron participants, after flying through cloud and icing conditions all the way. The weather did, at least, keep the night fighters on the ground, but it also prevented route markers from being seen, and presented challenging conditions over the target. The 83 Squadron aircraft were over the city at 18,200 to 20,000 feet between 20.00 and 20.24, and returned without any clear understanding of what had played out beneath the clouds. One Lancaster failed to return to Wyton, and it was learned later that JB424 had crashed into Berlin, north-west of the centre, killing P/O Henderson and his crew. P/O Henderson had walked back from France on a previous occasion, and the ORB held out the hope that he would do so again. At least he had contributed to the most destructive raid of the war on the Capital, which had devastated an area from the centre to the west, and destroyed three thousand houses, killed an estimated two thousand people and rendered a further 175,000 homeless.

Having heard preliminary reports of the previous night’s success, Harris ordered another immediate attack on Berlin, a decision that would place a great strain on the ground staff on the bomber stations, and stretch the nerves of the aircrew, who were still in recovery mode. A reduced heavy force of 375 aircraft included ten Pathfinder Halifaxes, otherwise the burden fell upon the Lancaster units, and thirteen 83 Squadron crews underwent briefing. The force would have been much larger, had the task of preparing them not proved too much, and many others would fail to take-off because of last-minute technical failures and weather conditions. The crews learned that the plan was to be identical to that employed the night before in terms of route and timings, and, ultimately, eleven Lancasters lined up for take-off at Wyton, after S/L Johnson lost an engine and F/O Tolchard’s “special” equipment broke down. W/C Hilton was the senior pilot on duty, and a W/C Hewins was flying as a guest with F/L Thompson as they got away either side of 19.30.

A massive forty-six aircraft returned early, 12% of the force, and this was an indication of the stress of back-to-back Berlin operations, both in terms of rushed servicing and faint hearts. Over the North Sea, the splash of cookies could be seen below, as returning aircraft jettisoned their loads. Some of the splashes, however, were bombs being dumped by 1 Group Lancasters to lighten loads sufficiently to enable them to gain as much height as possible. This was caused by two factors. Firstly, on any night when Stirlings and Halifaxes were absent, the night fighters were forced to go for the Lancasters, and the

Lancaster crews were sensitive to this and the need for height and manoeuvrability. Secondly, the 1 Group A-O-C, AVM Rice, had insisted that his aircraft carried the maximum possible bomb tonnage, and conducted trials to assess the point at which the undercarriage buckled during taxiing. The theory might have been sound, but the reality was that even though, in comparison with 5 Group, more 1 Group bombs left the ground, fewer reached the target as a result of unofficial dumping. F/L Thompson, F/L Shipway and P/O King were among the early returns through the breakdown of their "special" equipment, and both bombed Texel before turning back. P/O Millar was unable to gain operational altitude, and he added to the discomfiture of the enemy occupiers of the Dutch Frisian island. The others pressed on to find Berlin still under ten-tenths cloud and a pall of smoke, but the glow of fires still burning from the previous night's attack provided a guide to its location. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 18,000 to 19,000 feet between 19.59 and 20.05, and all but one returned without major incident to report what appeared to be a successful operation. The return of W/C Hilton DSO, DFC and bar was awaited in vain, and it emerged later that JB284 had been brought down by flak during the bombing run, and crashed in the target area without survivors. The ORB stated, "During his short stay he had impressed all with his outstanding powers of leadership, his skill in every branch of airmanship, and his ability to get the last ounce out of the men in his command." He had completed at least sixty-four sorties, and, in the act of his death, contributed to another enormously successful raid on Berlin, which destroyed a further two thousand houses and killed approximately 1,400 of its inhabitants. G/C Searby was asked to return temporarily to 83 Squadron, until a suitable replacement could be found from among the 5 Group contenders.



*W/C Ray Hilton, DSO, DFC and Bar, whose loss was a serious blow to 83 Sqn when he and his crew were failed to return from Berlin on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1943.*

The air and ground crews rested on the 24<sup>th</sup>, but prepared for operations on the 25<sup>th</sup>, only to be told, when kitting-up in the crew room that it had been scrubbed. Orders came through on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> for another trip to Berlin, and the squadron was asked to provide fourteen crews, for what would be an overall heavy force of 443 aircraft. Preparations continued throughout the day, and by 17.00 everything was ready. It was at this point that JA686 blew up at its dispersal, after an electrical fault ignited a photo-flash bomb. F/O Hyde, his flight engineer and both gunners scrambled clear before the

explosion, but the remains of the navigator were never found, and the bomb-aimer and wireless operator died of their injuries within hours. Five others also lost their lives, including three ground crew and corporal "Ginger" McDowell, a popular WAAF driver. As a result of the accident, F/L Sambidge's sortie was scrubbed, and P/O King's "special" equipment failed, to prevent him also from taking off. The others got away safely either side of 17.30, with F/L Chick the senior pilot on duty, and headed for the south coast for the long outward leg across northern France, Belgium and south central Germany. At a point north-east of Frankfurt, the Berlin brigade was to turn to the north-east, while a diversionary force of predominantly Halifaxes peeled off to the south to hit Stuttgart. After bombing they were to adopt a direct route westwards, to pass south of Bremen and exit Fortress Europe at the Dutch coast near Egmond.

F/L Tolchard was about twenty miles north of Dieppe outbound, when an unserviceable rear turret persuaded him to turn back, and F/L Thompson's "special" equipment failed at about the same time, adding him to the number of early returns. The others pressed on, and, for once, and rather unexpectedly, they found Berlin under clear skies with good visibility. Even so, a skymarking plan was put into action, and F/L Shipway was due to be the first of the "special H2S aircraft to mark at 21.13, zero minus 2. They were to the south-west of Berlin, approaching the aiming point over the Havel Lake and a wooded area, when they were picked up by searchlights and coned for six minutes. As a result of taking evasive action, the run was ruined, and rather than drop his TIs in the wrong place, F/L Shipway delivered only his cookie at the appointed second from 18,500 feet. The others from the squadron were over the target at 18,200 to 19,500 feet between 21.12 and 21.25, and those that returned were enthusiastic about the success of the raid, reporting fires visible a hundred miles into the return journey. In fact, the Pathfinders had marked the north-western quarter of the city, and most of the bombing fell there, where, by good fortune, the industrial districts of Tegel and Siemensstadt were hit, and thirty-eight war-industry factories were destroyed, with many more damaged. It seems likely that around eight hundred people lost their lives. Twenty-eight Lancasters failed to return, and two of these belonged to 83 Squadron. JA913 crashed to the west of Tegel, almost certainly after bombing, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Millar RCAF, among whom were two holders of the DFM and one of the DFC. JB459 was one of five Lancasters to fall victim to night fighters near Frankfurt during the outward flight, and crashed some fifteen miles north-west of the city, killing F/O Smeaton and his crew. This was the eighth and final operation of the month, during which the squadron dispatched eighty-seven sorties for the loss of five Lancasters and four complete crews.

## December 1943

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, 15 O.T.U sent the squadron F/L Sparks, a pilot who would enjoy a distinguished career, eventually as a Master Bomber, then as an evader, and, finally, as a PoW. It was decided to open December's operational account with the fifth raid on Berlin since the resumption. A heavy force of 425 Lancasters and fifteen Halifaxes was made ready on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, of which 83 Squadron provided thirteen of the former. S/L Johnson was the senior pilot on duty as they lined up for take-off from Wyton at 17.00, briefed to follow the direct route adopted for three of the last four Berlin trips. This would take the bomber stream across the Dutch coast near Egmond, passing over the northern shore of the IJsselmeer, before entering Germany north of Osnabrück and flying due east to the target, tracking north of Hanover and Brunswick. After bombing, they were to continue on an easterly heading until clear of the city, and then turn north and south-east to pick up the outward route between Brunswick and Hanover for a reciprocal return. F/Ls Shipway and Tolchard and P/O Britton all returned early with unserviceable "special" H2S, but the others pressed on to reach the target, although not at the point intended. The winds proved to be not as expected, and this caused the blind markers to arrive late and further south than they realised. The H2S operators were looking for the towns of Stendal, Rathenow and Nauen to appear as echoes on their screens, lying in a line sixty to thirty miles from Berlin's north-western quarter, but, because of the stronger-than-forecast winds, they were actually fifteen miles south of track, and mistook the echoes from Genthin, Brandenburg and Potsdam as their starting point for their timed run. This resulted in the markers falling over the southern half of the city, and most of the subsequent bombing was scattered across these districts from west to east, and into open country to the south. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 19,000 to 19,800 feet between 20.05 and 20.24, in conditions of three to four-tenths cloud, and reported a fair concentration of TIs, and fires beginning to take hold as they turned for home. In fact, it was not a successful operation, and, apart from some lucky hits on war-industry factories in the Siemensstadt district, it was a disappointing performance, compounded by the loss of forty aircraft, mostly to night fighters on the way home.

83 Squadron came back from Berlin intact, but ten crews were roused from their beds on the following morning, when orders came through for an attack on Leipzig, which had been saved by the weather back in October. A force of 527 aircraft was made ready, and the crews informed that they would be heading directly for Berlin, before peeling off to the south to attack the home of the World Fair. F/L Chick was the senior pilot on duty as they took off after midnight, but F/L Tolchard and P/O Hellier came home early with special equipment failure. They were joined on the ground by F/O Allcroft, whose rear gunner had fallen ill. The others continued on, and managed to avoid the night fighters infiltrating the bomber stream over Germany. The sudden and sharp turn to the south threw off the fighters, and they, as expected when the feint was planned, congregated over Berlin. The target was covered by ten-tenths thin cloud, and the first Wanganui markers were delivered in accurate and concentrated fashion within sight of the intended aiming point at 03.57. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 16,500 to 18,000 feet between 03.56 and 04.07, and all returned safely to report what appeared to be a successful operation, confirmed by the glow of fires visible for a hundred miles. Local authority reports spoke of substantial damage to housing and industry alike, and there is no question that this was a highly effective raid. Losses had been light until aircraft strayed into the Frankfurt defence zone on the southerly withdrawal route, and twenty-four aircraft failed to return.

W/C Hilton's official replacement was appointed on the 4<sup>th</sup>, in the form of W/C Abercromby, a thirty-three year-old balding Scotsman, who was posted in from his command at 619 Squadron, having previously been a flight commander at 50 Squadron. He would not arrive physically until the 10<sup>th</sup>, however, following a course at Upwood, and the ORB extolled his virtues as an officer held in high esteem in 5 Group, and added, "we consider ourselves very lucky to have a man of his vast flying experience under all sorts of operational conditions, and also gained through many hours of practical aviation, to lead us." During the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup>, the crews gathered in the briefing room for a discussion on tactics with their new commanding officer. 5 Group's A-O-C, AVM Cochrane, had an aggressive attitude to aircraft defence, and ordered his crews to fly straight and level to provide a stable platform for the gunners to open fire as soon as a night fighter came into range. AVM Bennett of 8 Group took a different approach, and ordered his pilots to weave, to allow the gunners to search blind spots below the Lancasters, where night fighters might hide. He also believed that it was prudent not to draw attention to oneself by opening fire, if not under attack. The squadron's lower-than-average loss rate during the second half of the year would seem to support Bennett's contention, and the discussion between W/C Abercromby and the crews centred upon these matters. The author of the ORB goes out of his way to report the outcome in as diplomatic a fashion as possible. "*Some excellent points were brought up in favour of both. As the policy of the squadron up to the present has been in favour of corkscrewing, the instinctive feeling among the crews was for its continuance. Unfortunately, we were unable to bring the discussion to a satisfactory conclusion owing to a) the very excellent points, of which both were about equal, and b) our old enemy, TIME.*" What the author might like to have recorded was that Abercromby banned weaving, and, thereby, ruffled a few feathers, most notably and appropriately those of F/L Chick, whose flying he apparently described as cowardly. Chick refused to abandon a policy, which had seen him through more than forty operations, and predicted that Abercromby would survive no more than three weeks if he continued to fly straight and level. It is highly likely, although unrecorded that the other crews shared Chick's opinion, and Chick would complete his tour on forty-eight operations shortly afterwards, having seen his prophecy fulfilled.

There were no main force operations for twelve nights after Leipzig, as damp, foggy weather descended upon eastern England to keep the aircraft grounded. It has to be said, however that W/C Abercromby's arrival on the station heralded an improvement in the conditions, and training flights were able to go ahead from the 11<sup>th</sup>. Orders came through on the 16<sup>th</sup> for the next round of the Berlin campaign, and fourteen crews assembled for the briefing, with S/L Northrop the senior pilot. It was to be an all-Lancaster heavy force of 483 aircraft, with an early take-off, largely to avoid a three-quarter moon rising late on, and this should see the crews arriving back around midnight. There had been some anxiety during the planning of the operation, which centred on the conditions, particularly the risk of fog. It could work in the bombers' favour by keeping enemy night fighters on the ground, but might also provide challenging conditions for landing. The route out was the usual direct flight across Holland and Germany, with a long, looping return over the Baltic and Denmark, and F/L Chick led them away from Wyton at 16.26, no doubt to weave his way to and from the target. S/L Jones was flying with F/L Allcroft, S/L Henderson with F/L Chick and F/L Sparks with F/L Garvey, all to gain first-hand experience of Pathfinders in action. F/O Pidding returned within three hours with a defective turret, but the others pressed on into the night, and arrived over a cloud-covered Berlin some three and a half hours later. The 83 Squadron crews guided themselves to the aiming point by H2S, and the skymarking was placed accurately over the centre of the city, before spreading both east and west as the attack

progressed. The Wyton crews carried out their briefs from 18,500 to 20,000 feet between 19.58 and 20.08, and all returned safely to report a concentrated and seemingly successful raid.

However, this night, “Black Thursday”, will forever be remembered for the thick fog that blanketed the airfields predominantly of 1, 6 and 8 Groups as the bombers returned. S/L Joe Northrop was fortunate in having plenty of fuel as he crossed the coast, and settled his Lancaster well above the 1,200 foot fog layer for a standard beam approach. When his turn came to land, he was warned of an unidentified aircraft in the circuit attempting to land visually, so he and his crew watched vigilantly, as he let down gradually through what was a turbulent band of fog. At 200 feet he hit the full slipstream of another aircraft coming in from the port side, which almost removed the mid upper turret with its wingtip. Joe’s Lancaster plunged towards the ground, and scraped the tops of trees as the throttles were opened and the undercarriage retracted, and they ultimately climbed back to 5,000 feet, before regaining their composure and eventually landing safely. The other Lancaster was JB344, which contained the crew of P/O McLean RAAF, and crashed on the airfield at 00.40, killing the bomb-aimer, F/Sgt Tankard RAAF, while the others on board all sustained injury. This was just one of twenty nine Lancasters to crash or be abandoned by their tired crews as they searched vainly for somewhere to land, mostly with insufficient fuel reserves to reach a fog-free area. Fellow Pathfinders, 97 Squadron, based at nearby Bourn, alone lost seven aircraft. In all, 148 crewmen lost their lives in these tragic circumstances, when so close to home and safety.

This was the squadron's final casualty of a year, in which it had consistently maintained a record of lower than average losses, despite being at the forefront of operations. The year was not yet done, however, and after a few days of unfavourable weather, thirteen crews assembled in the briefing room, to hear of a major operation that night to Frankfurt, and a small-scale diversion to Mannheim fifty miles to the south. W/C Abercromby put his name at the top of the Order of Battle for the main event, for which 650 aircraft were made ready, while S/L Johnson was to head a squadron trio as part of the forty-four-strong Lancaster diversion force. The familiarization of the new arrivals continued with S/L Henderson, S/L Jones and F/L Sparks joining the crews of P/O Hellier, F/L Tolchard and S/L Johnson respectively. They began taking-off shortly after 17.00, but neither W/C Abercromby nor F/L Allcock were able to complete their sortie, the latter turning back from twenty miles off Lowestoft at 18.19, and the former from a position south-east of Brussels. Both had starboard-inner engine failure to blame, but the commanding officer was at least able to bomb Haamstede aerodrome on the island of Schouwen on the way home. The others pushed on to find three to eight-tenths cloud in the target area, and plenty of ground markers delivered by H2S, apparently onto the planned aiming point. A decoy fire site had been lit five miles south-east of Frankfurt, and this combined with dummy target indicators to draw off a large proportion of the effort. Fortunately, a creep-back developed which worked in the Command’s favour, to destroy 466 houses and damage almost two thousand others. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 19.29 and 19.50, and somehow managed to avoid the large number of night fighters, which had intercepted the bomber stream early on, and remained in contact with it all the way to the target. There were forty-one empty dispersals to contemplate on bomber stations on the following morning, two-thirds of them belonging to Halifaxes. The diversionary force returned intact, having largely missed Mannheim with its bombs.

The main part of the Christmas festival in Germany is celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and one wonders if this figured in Harris’s plans to attack Berlin again on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>. A predominantly Lancaster

heavy force of 382 aircraft was made ready, fourteen of them at Wyton, and the name of W/C Abercromby again topped the Order of Battle. The route out took the bomber stream across north-eastern Belgium to the German frontier between Aachen and Cologne, where a dogleg to port pointed directly eastwards and threatened Frankfurt. The bombers were actually tracking for a point south-east of Leipzig, where nine Mosquitos would peel off to carry out a spoof raid there, as the main force swung to the north-north-east to run in on Berlin. The return route would be undertaken in an almost straight line to skirt the southern shore of the IJsselmeer and cross the Dutch coast near IJmuiden. It became a long night for the crews, who were on their way to the aircraft for a late afternoon take-off, when a postponement came through, and it was seven hours later, at 00.16, when F/L Chick lifted off the ground as the first to depart Wyton. There were no early returns, and the conditions of heavy ice-bearing cloud over Germany, combined with effective jamming and false instructions from broadcasting stations in England, nullified the night fighter response. Berlin lay under ten-tenths cloud, and a skymarking plan was put into action, which, through H2S failures and the withholding of TIs by crews uncertain of their position, resulted in sparse marking, and the most clearly visible concentration falling six miles south of the intended aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their attacks from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 03.57 and 04.16, and all returned safely, but unable to provide an assessment of the results. P/O Foote was unfortunate in making it all the way to Berlin, only to have his entire bomb load hang up, and refuse all efforts by his bomb-aimer and navigator to dislodge it. They were on their way home west of the city, when it finally fell away. It was established later that a number of south-eastern suburbs had been hit, and the destruction of fewer than three hundred houses was a poor return for the effort expended.

The fifth Christmas of the war came and went in relative tranquillity on the bomber stations, and was celebrated in traditional style. It seemed that the year might fade out on a peaceful note, but a call to briefing on the 29<sup>th</sup> quashed that notion. The final raid of the year was to be against the Capital, and would be the eighth in the series since the resumption. It was also to be a maximum effort involving 712 aircraft, including thirteen Lancasters of 83 Squadron. What was not known, however, was that it would be the first of three Berlin raids in an unprecedented five nights spanning the turn of the year, something which would place great strain on air and ground staff alike. S/Ls Henderson and Jones were the senior pilots on duty for the first time, and there was also a maiden operation as crew captain for F/L Sparks. They took off either side of 17.00, and crossed the Norfolk coast to rendezvous with the rest of the force over the North Sea. The entry point into enemy territory was over the northern tip of Vlieland, and this was followed by a long, straight leg south-east, to a point south-west of Magdeburg, where eight Mosquito were to break away and carry out a spoof raid. The bomber stream, meanwhile, continued on to a position north of Leipzig, where a second force of Mosquitos peeled off, in what was designed to look like the opening of a raid. At this point the bomber stream swung north-east to run in on Berlin, with the intention, after bombing, of flying north and then due west to pass under Bremen and cross northern Holland to exit over Vlieland. F/L Sambidge was the first to turn back, after losing his port-outer engine, and he bombed a flak concentration on Texel at 18.43. Soon afterwards, F/L Shipway's H2S gave up the ghost, and he also selected Texel as the recipient of his bomb load at 19.06. The others reached Berlin to encounter ten-tenths cloud with tops as high as 15,000 feet, and a standard skymarking plan was put into action. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from an average of 19,000 feet between 20.01 and 20.22, and the impression they gained was of an effective attack, with plenty of TIs spread in a band five miles wide from east to west. One crew suggested a slight undershoot, but most reported on fires sufficient to produce a glow visible, according to F/L Chick, from Osnabrück, well over two hundred

miles to the west. A local report listed 388 houses and mixed property destroyed in southern and south-eastern districts, and many bomb loads wasted to the east of the city. It was another disappointment at a cost of twenty aircraft, on top of the sixteen missing from Christmas Eve, and the coming year promised only more of the same. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched seventy-nine sorties on seven operations, for the loss of a single Lancaster at home.



*War of attrition....An unidentified Lancaster of 83 Sqn lies wrecked in a field near Berlin.*

## January 1944

Having enjoyed a remarkably low rate of attrition in crews compared with most heavy squadrons during the second half of 1943, the start of 1944 would seem like a period of atonement for 83 Squadron, as if to redress the balance. The immediate future offered a bleak prospect for both the crews of Bomber Command, and the citizens of Berlin, who no doubt shared the common hope that the Capital would cease to be the main focus of Harris's attention. It would be some time yet before either camp had that particular wish fulfilled, and, in the meantime, the Berliners presented a cheerful and defiant face to the world, precisely as had their counterparts in London during the last quarter of 1940. Both were a hardy people, and the Berliners proved themselves equally resilient, and able to withstand the best that Bomber Command could throw at them during their winter of discontent. Banners in the streets proclaimed, "You may break our walls, but not our hearts", and the song *Nach jedem Dezember kommt immer ein Mai* (After every December comes always a May) was played endlessly over the air waves, hinting at a change of fortunes with the onset of spring.

Thirteen 83 Squadron crews assembled in the briefing room on New Year's Day, to learn the details of the night's attack on Berlin. W/C Abercromby and S/L Northrop were present as the senior pilots, and the commanding officer would be flying with the freshman crew of F/Sgt Nairn RAAF. The plan was for a mid-evening take-off for the 421 Lancasters, and a route out over the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula and southern Denmark, before crossing the Baltic coast on a south-easterly heading for the target. Unfortunately, doubts about the weather delayed the start, and it was not until thirty seconds after midnight that F/L Sparks had the honour of leading the squadron off the ground for the first operation of 1944. The delay caused a major alteration of the route, which now took the Bomber stream into Holland south of Den Helder, and straight on to a point south of Hamburg, where fifteen Mosquitos were to carry out a spoof raid. Thereafter, it was a direct route to Berlin, followed by a withdrawal to the south, to pass east and south of Leipzig, then west across central Belgium and northern France to the Channel. ND354 had crossed into Germany, and was passing the northern rim of Vechta, a town about thirty-five miles south-west of Bremen, at 03.00, when it was torn asunder by an explosion and fell in pieces about three miles further on. The flight engineer, Sgt Lewis, was thrown clear and survived as a PoW, but W/C Abercromby and the other occupants lost their lives. Were they, perhaps, the victims of his policy of flying straight and level? The others pressed on to reach Berlin, which they found under ten-tenths cloud, and those with functioning H2S sets delivered their loads from 18,000 to 19,800 feet between 02.59 and 03.13, while the remainder bombed on skymarkers. F/L Allcock was forced to jettison his load after being hit by flak on the bombing run. The operation was a complete failure, which scattered bombs across the southern districts and out into wooded country to the south-west. A paltry twenty-one houses were destroyed in return for the loss of twenty-eight Lancasters. The ORB stated, "*A great blow to the squadron was the non-return.....W/C Abercromby, who, although only a short time with the squadron, was held in high esteem by all.....*"

Forty-two crew members, who were late to bed on that cold Sunday morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, were no doubt sleeping fitfully, and, perhaps, dreaming of a night off in Cambridge, unaware of the orders coming through for that night's operation. Before darkness returned, they would find themselves facing the large wall map in the briefing room at Wyton, along with forty-nine of their more rested colleagues, contemplating the point at which the red string terminated. They were incredulous that they were being sent back to Berlin, still fatigued from the previous night, but, despite a feeling of injustice, their

professionalism and self-discipline kept them in check. The route was more or less straight-in straight-out over the Den Helder peninsular, with doglegs south of Bremen and north-west of Berlin on the way out, and south of Berlin, south-east of Hanover and north of Osnabrück on the way home, with no feints or spoofs. S/L Henderson was the senior pilot on duty, as F/L Chick led them away at two minutes after midnight on what was to be a sad night for the squadron. They rendezvoused with the other 349 Lancasters and nine Halifaxes over the North Sea, where they encountered ice-bearing cloud, with electrical storms and tops as high as 28,000 feet. It was at this point that F/L Tolchard turned back with a defective H2S set, to be followed soon afterwards by P/O Field, who was prevented by icing from climbing, and jettisoned his bombs twenty miles off the Dutch coast. Finally, S/L Henderson abandoned his sortie at the Dutch/German frontier, as he also was unable to climb to operational altitude. The others pushed on towards the target to approach from the north-west, where a strong wind was forecast to drive them quickly over the aiming point. P/O Stiles RCAF was on his final approach to bomb, when JB453 was brought down to crash at Blankenburg, on the north-eastern outskirts of the city, and there were no survivors. The remaining 83 Squadron crews bombed by H2S or on marker flares from 15,000 to 19,500 feet between 02.42 and 02.59, before setting off for the journey home. JB355 came down at 03.15 east of Berlin, and F/O Allcroft DFC RCAF and crew, who had been here twenty-four hours earlier, all perished in the wreckage. F/L Munro and crew made it a little further in JB114, before they too crashed, a dozen or so miles south of Berlin, again without survivors. Another Lancaster of 83 Squadron was also lost on this night, ND330 having been borrowed by a crew from 405 Squadron. The operation was a complete



*Above left: F/L M Chick and crew pose alongside Lancaster JA967, OL-S2 'The Saint' and her ground crew. Right: F/Sgt. Arthur Pearson, RAAF, was the rear gunner for W/C Abercrombie in ND354, OL-A. His aircraft was lost attacking Berlin on the night of 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> January 1944.*

failure, paid for by twenty-seven Lancasters, of which five belonged to fellow Pathfinders, 156 Squadron, at Warboys.

It was from that very squadron that the new commanding officer arrived on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, in the shape of twenty-six year-old W/C Laurie Deane, who was no stranger to the men of 83 Squadron. Twenty-four hours earlier, he had been a flight commander at 156 Squadron, “a rival though friendly camp”, and had been resting after completing his sixth Berlin trip on New Year’s Night. He had previously served with 49 Squadron, with which he undertook his first operation, against enemy naval units, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1939, and, at the end of his first tour in February 1941, moved to Finningley, where he helped to form 25 O.T.U. After three months as an instructor he was posted again, this time to Hemswell, to join 144 Squadron as a flight commander, and he completed his second tour in early April 1942. After a period away from the operational scene, Deane volunteered for a return, preferably as a Pathfinder, and was posted to 156 Squadron as a flight commander in the autumn of 1943, replacing the highly experienced George Grant, and taking over his crew.

The remainder of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> became a period of what the ORB described as “make and mend”, when crews rested, aircraft were repaired and serviced, and training took place. When briefing was held at Wyton on the 5<sup>th</sup>, it was presided over by the new commanding officer, from whose lips the ten crews were pleasantly surprised to learn that the Baltic port of Stettin was to be their target that night. Not only was it a welcome change from Berlin, it was also, for reasons known only to crews, a popular destination, and, perhaps because of its coastal location, it always suffered grievously at the hands of the Command. S/L Northrop was the senior pilot on duty, and he was last away from Wyton at 00.02. They joined up with the rest of the 338 Lancasters and ten Halifaxes over the North Sea, and all from the Squadron made it to the target, helped, no doubt, by a Mosquito diversion at Berlin. The skies were clear and the visibility good as Stettin hove into sight, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed either on H2S or visually from 17,000 to 18,000 feet, between 03.39 and 03.56, and all returned safely to report a concentrated attack with many fires, the glow of which could be seen from the Danish coast. For the first time in ages, bombing photographs were likely to show something other than cloud, and they were eagerly awaited. They revealed substantial damage in central districts, extending towards the west, and, according to local reports, 504 houses and twenty industrial premises were destroyed and eight ships were sunk in the harbour. In addition, more than eleven hundred houses and twenty-nine factories were damaged.

A period of minor operations during the moon period saw the Command through to mid-month, and, having completed his tour, F/L Chick DFC was posted to the Bombing Development Unit at Newmarket on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The presence of such a long-standing and experienced member of the squadron would be missed, especially after the recent spate of losses. That afternoon, fourteen crews assembled in the briefing room, and, probably to their relief, noted the red string on the wall map terminating at Brunswick, an historic city some forty miles east of Hanover. In the event, only thirteen Lancasters took off either side of 17.00, with S/Ls Jones, Johnson and Northrop the senior pilots on duty. They met up with 483 other Lancasters and two Halifaxes en-route to the north German coast, where enemy night fighters awaited them. Once in contact with the bomber stream, the fighters scored steadily all the way to the target and back to the Dutch coast. Brunswick lay under eight to ten-tenths cloud, with tops at between 5,000 and 10,000 feet, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed on H2S or red and green target indicators from 17,000 to 19,800 feet, between 19.05 and 19.25. They withdrew from the target with an

impression of a concentrated and successful attack, the fires from which could be seen from a considerable distance into the return journey. Sadly, it seems the operation was a complete failure that caused minor damage in the southern edge of the city, and hit mostly outlying communities. The disappointment was compounded by the loss of thirty-eight Lancasters, eleven of them from Pathfinder squadrons, which had taken a beating since the turn of the year. 156 Squadron alone had lost fourteen aircraft and crews in just two weeks, and sideways postings took place to ensure a leavening of experience in each unit.

The weather helped to keep the Command grounded until the 20<sup>th</sup>, when briefings took place for the next round of the Berlin campaign, the city now having been left unmolested for two-and-a-half-weeks. 83 Squadron contributed fourteen Lancasters to the heavy force of 759 aircraft, which was routed to enter Germany over the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula on a south-easterly heading, to pass north of Hamburg. The Müritz Lake, sixty miles north-north-west of Berlin, would provide the final turning point for the run on the city, and, after passing the south-eastern extremity, the return route was via a point north of Leipzig, to pass south of Hanover to the Münster area, then north-west to the Island of Terschelling and the North Sea. S/Ls Jones and Northrop were the senior pilots on duty, as they began taking off shortly after 16.00, and headed towards a cloud-covered Fortress Europe. The enemy night fighter force was pioneering its latest tactic on this night, the *Sahme Sau*, or Tame Boar running commentary, which provided much greater flexibility than the old box system, and allowed fighters to hold at beacons, until being fed into the bomber stream by the controllers tracking its progress. It was shortly after Hamburg when the first fighters made contact, and they would remain a menace until breaking off between Leipzig and Hanover as the bombers retreated westwards on the way home.

Berlin was completely hidden by dense cloud, and the 83 Squadron blind marker and supporter elements bombed by H2S or on skymarkers from 19,000 to 20,700 feet, between 19.32 and 19.46. Those who returned, reported two concentrations of markers, one in the west, which seemed to be maintained, and the other in the east, which faded to nothing, but, in truth, no-one had any real idea of what was going on beneath the clouds. Two small diversions by Mosquitos at Kiel and Hanover were totally ignored by the enemy controllers, and thirty-five aircraft failed to return. Three empty dispersals at Wyton told their own story, and further depleted the stock of experienced crews available to 8 Group, which was approaching a crisis. ND414 was hit by flak at 19,000 feet over the target, and blew up shortly afterward over the city's southern extremity, killing five of the crew, but delivering S/L Jones and his navigator, F/L Butler, into the hands of the enemy. F/L King DFC RAAF was thrown clear as the sole survivor of his crew, when JB461 also blew up over the target after a direct hit by a flak shell. He was wounded as a result, and would be repatriated in February 1945. Among his crew were four decorated men. ED974 also came down in the target area, killing P/O Ransome RCAF, and all but his flight engineer, who joined the growing list of 83 Squadron personnel in enemy hands. It was established later that the main weight of the attack had fallen into the, hitherto, less-severely afflicted eastern districts, in an eight-mile spread from north to south, where some useful damage was inflicted upon war-industry factories, along with communications and utilities installations.

Orders came through on the 21<sup>st</sup> for the first major attack of the war on Magdeburg, a city associated with synthetic oil production, and located some fifty miles east-south-east of Brunswick. There was also to be a diversion by twenty-two Lancasters and twelve Mosquitos of 5 and 8 Groups at Berlin. A force of 648 aircraft was made ready, of which thirteen Lancasters were to be provided by 83 Squadron. W/C

Deane was the senior pilot on duty for the first time since his arrival, and he was supported by F/Ls Allcock, Collett, Mirfin, Mitchell and Sparks, as they took off either side of 20.00. The enemy night fighter controller tracked the progress of the Bomber Stream across the North Sea, and had some of his forces waiting at the German coast. Once in contact, the night fighters remained with the bombers all the way to the target and part of the way back, taking a heavy toll, particularly amongst the Halifaxes. Stronger than forecast winds drove the vanguard of the bomber stream to the target ahead of zero hour, and twenty-seven main force crews bombed on H2S before the first markers went down. The fires from this inevitably attracted other bomb loads, and effective decoy markers added to the problem, preventing the Pathfinders from establishing an aiming point. W/C Deane summed up the situation over the target, reporting four to five-tenths cloud and good visibility, but no target markers or illuminating flares. He made an orbit, and watched the first TIs cascade at 22.59, after which, the main force came in with incendiaries. The dazzle from these prevented W/C Deane from making a visual identification of the aiming point, so he bombed from 18,000 feet at 23.07. The other squadron participants carried out their attacks from 18,000 to 20,200 feet between 22.55 and 23.08, and headed for home to report fires developing as they left the target area, and the glow from them visible for at least fifty miles. There is no definitive account to provide details of the effectiveness of the operation, but it is believed that it was an abject failure that cost the Command a new record of fifty-seven aircraft, thirty-five of them Halifaxes. 83 squadron again posting missing two crews, those of F/O Davies in JB488 and F/O Hutton RAAF in JB365. The latter was at 20,000 feet over the target when shot down by a night fighter, and the pilot died with both gunners, while the survivors were taken into captivity. They were joined by the Australian navigator from the former, which also fell victim to a night fighter at 19,000 feet, when on approach to the target, and crashed near Stendal to the north, killing all others on board.

The weather was largely responsible for a respite of six days in main force operations, and this prepared the crews to an extent for three Berlin trips in the space of four nights, an unprecedented concentration of long range flights back-to-back, the stress of which, would be reflected in the rate of early returns. The first of these was briefed out on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the day on which, F/L Garvey became another long-standing member of the squadron to be declared tour-expired, and he was posted to 1679 Conversion Unit. Fourteen Lancasters were made ready at Wyton to make up a force of 515 of the type, and S/Ls Johnson and Northrop were the senior pilots on duty. The plan was complex and clever, and involved a large mine-laying force of Stirlings and Wellingtons off the Frisians, and a spoof mining effort off Heligoland, under cover of which, the bomber stream would sneak across northern Holland in a south-easterly direction, as if to threaten Hanover, Brunswick, Magdeburg and even Leipzig. At a point somewhere south of Magdeburg the bomber stream would swing to the north-east, while three Mosquitos continued on, dropping window and fighter flares. At the same time, dummy route markers and night fighter flares would be released over two areas much further north, as the bombers made a final turn to approach Berlin from due west. The southerly return route passed south of Aachen, to cross central Belgium and the coast of northern France north of Dieppe.

Take off was completed shortly before 18.00, but F/L Collett turned back from a position some forty miles off Sheringham, after his turrets and guns failed, while F/O Pidding's load had to be jettisoned two miles off the Dutch coast north of Harlingen, after a fire broke out in the bomb bay. The others pressed on towards the enemy coast, where night fighters were waiting to intercept them, and some were, in fact, already many miles out over the North Sea. For once the diversions had some effect, and many fighters were lured away to the mining activity, believing this to be the main operation. The target was covered

by ten-tenths cloud, which concealed the ground markers, but Wanganui flares provided an aiming point, and the 83 Squadron crews carried out their attacks from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 20.26 and 20.42, some on H2S, and others by dead-reckoning and skymarkers. Returning crews reported good concentrations of flares maintained throughout the raid, and the glow of fires visible for a hundred miles into the return journey. Although the enemy night fighters were less effective on this night than of late, thirty-three Lancasters failed to return, and 83 Squadron was represented by JB724. It was shot down by the night fighter of Major Wilhelm Herget of 1/NJG.4, and crashed in south-western Belgium close to the frontier with France, about a hundred miles short of the Channel and safety. There were no survivors from among the crew of F/L Allcock DFC. It was established later that the attack had been scattered across the city, and into outlying communities, something which had become a feature of the entire campaign, but some useful damage had been inflicted upon important war industry factories.

Thirteen crews returned to the briefing room later on the 28<sup>th</sup> to hear the news that they were going back to the "Big City" that night. Twelve of them had been involved in the previous night's operation, and only P/O Banfield and crew were completely fresh. The route out was over southern Denmark, followed by a long south-easterly leg to the target, and a more-or-less reciprocal return. A Mosquito feint on Berlin would take place four-and-three-quarter hours before the main raid, and there were other diversionary measures in the form of an attack by Mosquitos on the four main night fighter airfields in Holland, a spoof raid on Hanover, and a mining effort in the early evening in Kiel Bay. S/L Northrop was the senior pilot on duty, as the 83 Squadron contingent departed Wyton in a seventeen-minute slot from 00.04, as part of an overall force of 677 aircraft. P/O Kerr was seventy miles off the western coast of Denmark, when his fuel system failed at 02.03, and he jettisoned his bombs before returning home. Seventeen minutes later, JB412 was shot down by a night fighter to crash in south-eastern Denmark close to the Little Belt coast. P/O Simpson and four of his crew managed to take to their parachutes, but the mid-upper gunner landed in the sea and drowned, leaving the others to be taken into captivity. Just ten minutes after these events, and in the same piece of sky, JA967 collided with HK537 of 463 Squadron, and crashed on the northern end of Als Island off Denmark's Baltic coast. F/L Hyde and his crew lost their lives, as did F/L Cooper and crew in the other aircraft. The others continued on, to find Berlin under nine-tenths patchy or ten-tenths thin cloud, which allowed ground marking to take place, although this was largely ineffective. The 83 Squadron crews began to arrive in the target area shortly after 03.00, and S/L Northrop was first to bomb, from 19,000 feet at 03.11, a minute before the first TIs and Wanganui flares went down. The other squadron participants went in at 18,500 to 20,000 feet, between 03.12 and 03.24, and observed a good concentration of skymarkers, particularly over the eastern half of the city, the fires from which could be seen from 150 miles away. The Command was convinced that this was the most concentrated attack of the period, and, certainly, extensive damage was inflicted, which left 180,000 people homeless, and many industrial, public and administrative buildings severely affected. However, any success was tempered by the loss of forty-six aircraft, many of which had fallen victim to night fighters in the Berlin defence area.

All crews were rested on the 29<sup>th</sup>, after what had been a punishing schedule of back-to-back long-range operations. The month was not yet done with Germany's capital city, however, and crews were back in the briefing rooms on the 30<sup>th</sup> for the fourteenth round, and eleventh since the resumption in November. A force of 540 aircraft was made ready, of which a dozen Lancasters were provided by 83 Squadron. This represented a maximum effort, after it was decided to exclude the Mk II and V Halifaxes, which had been taking a beating over recent weeks. The route out was similar to that of the previous raid,

although crossed the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular on the German side of the border. The return leg passed south of Brunswick, before doglegging to starboard to skirt the northern rim of the Ijsselmeer, and cross the Dutch coast south of Den Helder. It was an early take-off, for a change, and S/L Johnson led the squadron contingent away at 17.01, in fine conditions of clear skies and good visibility. There would also be a rising half-moon to help the night fighters, if the expected thick ice-bearing cloud over Germany failed to keep them on the ground. F/O Field was about fifty miles west and forty miles north of the German coast, when his starboard-outer engine let him down, and he turned for home. The others pushed on over the forecast cloud, above which, the night was clear and other aircraft could be seen. After a slow response, the enemy night fighters caught up around seventy miles from Berlin, and harried the bombers all the way, scoring steadily. Among the victims was 83 Squadron's JB352, a Mk III H2S-equipped Lancaster, containing the crew of F/L Sambidge, which was attacked from behind when approaching the aiming point at 18,000 feet. As it dived out of control towards the ground, flight engineer, P/O Scatchard, managed to escape through the forward hatch, and drifted down from 5,000 feet into the arms of his captors. F/L Sambidge was on his thirty-first operation, and he died with the rest of his crew in the Lancaster's wreckage. The others from the squadron bombed through the complete cloud cover from 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 20.12 and 20.19, and returned to report that the ground markers were ineffective in the conditions, but that the scattered skymarking in the early stages of the attack became well concentrated later on. Local reports spoke of heavy damage in central and western districts, but many other areas within the city and outside were also hit. The death toll of a thousand people is an indication that this was, indeed, a destructive operation, at a cost to the Command of thirty-three aircraft.

The enormous effort and cost of the January raids, was rewarded with less success than hoped for, however, the sheer weight of bombs being carried by the large numbers of bombers employed, had caused extensive damage, even though the vital ingredient of concentration had been lacking. More than two thousand Berliners had died as a result of these last three raids, and a further 200,000 were now without homes, but Berlin was still a functioning and defiant city, and, nowhere, were there signs of collapse. This series was the final concerted effort to destroy Berlin, and the remaining two operations would be in isolation, and spread over the next two months. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 112 sorties on nine operations, for the loss of thirteen aircraft and crews, plus the Lancaster loaned out.

## February 1944

Bad weather and the moon period helped to keep the main force on the ground for the first two weeks of February, during which period, and when conditions allowed, 83 Squadron was stood down for intensive training, and to bed in the new crews arriving to fill the vacancies arising out of the recent heavy losses. F/L Tommy Blair DSO, DFC returned to the squadron on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, following two weeks at the Pathfinder Navigation Training Unit, after his spell at HQ 91 Group. On the same day, tour-expired F/L Tolchard was posted to 19 O.T.U, and a week later, F/L Shipway was also on his way, in his case to 1660 Conversion Unit. It was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> that sixteen crews presented themselves for briefing at Wyton, where they learned that thirteen of them were to continue the campaign against Berlin, while S/Ls Johnson and Northrop and F/O Foote joined up with twenty-one other Lancasters from the group, to carry out a diversionary attack on the virgin target of Frankfurt-an-Oder, a city some fifty miles east-south-east of Berlin on the border with Poland. (*This should not be confused with the frequently bombed Frankfurt-am-Main in southern Germany.*) Tommy Blair would be flying as navigator to S/L Johnson on this night. The Berlin force was to be made up of a record number of 891 aircraft, the largest non-1,000 force to date, and it would be the first time that over five hundred Lancasters and over three hundred Halifaxes had been dispatched together to a single target. The bomb load would also be the heaviest to date, and would be carried to its destination over much the same route as on the previous Berlin raid, except for the crossing of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsular on the Danish, rather than German side of the frontier. The return route was as before, while the diversionary measures involved mining in Kiel Bay, before the bomber stream passed nearby to the north, a spoof attack by Mosquitos on Berlin with TIs, bombs and fighter flares, which the Germans were meant to take as a diversion, and the already-mentioned feint at Frankfurt-an-Oder.

Take-off from Wyton was accomplished without incident by 17.34, and the Luftwaffe controller tracked the progress of the bomber stream as it made its way across the North Sea and Denmark. It was after it had left Denmark's east coast behind that the fighters made contact, and harried the tail end of the stream, bringing down more than twenty bombers. There were no early returns among the 83 Squadron contingent, which avoided the attentions of night fighters to reach the target area in good order. Closer to the front of the action, they encountered ten-tenths cloud, although this would break a little as the attack came to a conclusion. Ground markers had been employed, but were not visible through the clouds, and most bombed on H2S or skymarkers, which fell in strong concentrations predominantly, it seemed, over the central part of the city. They carried out their attacks from 19,000 to 21,000 feet between 21.11 and 21.29, and contributed to the 2,640 tons falling into the target area. The consensus of returning crews was of a scattered but effective attack, which was confirmed by Mosquito crews over the target after the main raid. They reported a huge pall of black smoke rising over the city to 20,000 feet, and a pear-shaped area of fire centred in the north and east, tapering towards the south. This differed from local reports, which described extensive damage in central and south-western districts, with a thousand houses and more than five hundred temporary wooden barracks destroyed. There was also much useful damage to important war industry factories, particularly in the Siemensstadt district on the western fringe. The Frankfurt-an-Oder diversion was ignored by the night fighter controller, but the 83 Squadron participants bombed from 16,000 to 17,000 feet at 21.18, and helped to damage 147 houses. Forty-three aircraft failed to return, from what turned out to be the penultimate Bomber Command main force raid of the war on the capital, and, unusually, there were more Lancaster casualties than Halifax.



*Leipzig was attacked on a number of occasions, with considerable damage to its war industry and surrounding oil installations. However, the raid of 19/20<sup>th</sup> February was very costly with 78 aircraft failing to return, a toll exceeded only by the attack six weeks later on Nuremberg (Robert Fletcher via MTW Archive, first published in No-one Can Stop Us, the Definitive History of 514 Squadron).*

Briefings took place on the succeeding three days for further attacks on Berlin, but they were all scrubbed because of the weather. F/O Kennedy and his crew took off for a training flight in JA940 at 11.35 on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and crash-landed in Huntingdonshire twenty-five minutes later, after being unable to maintain height. All of the occupants walked away unscathed on this occasion, but, sadly, most would not live to complete their tour. When the crews assembled in the briefing room later in the day, they learned that Leipzig was to be their target that night, for which a force of 823 aircraft was made ready. Fourteen Lancasters were fuelled and bombed up at Wyton, and they took off either side of midnight with S/L Johnson the senior pilot on duty. They were to adopt the old, familiar direct route across the Dutch coast, as if making directly for Berlin, before turning sharply to starboard for the run-in on Leipzig. The enemy night fighter controller sent only a proportion of his resources to defend the mining diversion in Kiel Bay, and reserved the others to meet the bomber stream at the Dutch coast. Once the main threat was identified, he recalled the Kiel Bay element, and they joined their colleagues already in contact with the bombers, and a battle ensued all the way to the target. Stronger-than-forecast winds drove the spearhead of the main force to the target ahead of schedule, and they were forced to orbit to await zero hour, during which period, twenty were shot down by flak and four were lost to collisions. The sight of falling bombers probably incited others to bomb, and the main force attack began at 03.45,

eleven minutes ahead of the first red skymarkers and TIs. The TIs disappeared into the ten-tenths cloud, but a degree of concentration of skymarking was achieved, and this seemed to be maintained throughout the attack. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 17,000 to 21,000 feet between 03.55 and 04.13, and all but two returned, mostly with little to say in the way of an assessment. F/L Sparkes observed a large area of fire through the clouds, while P/O Whitford and W/O Lane reported the glow of fires, but it would be the scale of the losses that characterized this operation. When all of the aircraft that were going to return had been accounted for, there was an unbelievable shortfall of seventy-eight, the largest loss in a single night to date by a clear twenty-one aircraft. This represented almost 10% of the force, and the Halifax casualty rate amounted to almost 15% of those that didn't turn back early. 83 Squadron had two empty dispersals that should have been occupied by ND448 and ND505, which were now smouldering wrecks on foreign soil. The former crashed some miles west of Berlin on the way out, killing F/O Field and his crew, while the latter was homebound over Holland, and tantalizingly close to safety when the end came. It was intercepted by Lt Heinz Oloff of 1/NJG.1, and crashed on the island of Walcheren at 05.45, with the crew of F/O Langford still on board.

Despite the horrendous losses, Harris ordered his men to remount the horse immediately, and 598 crews attended briefings on the 20<sup>th</sup>, for an operation that night to Stuttgart. One change was the permanent withdrawal of the Mk II and V Halifaxes from future operations over Germany, a move which would side-line a sizeable proportion of 4 and 6 Groups. The new, and much improved, Hercules-powered Mk III variant had been introduced to operations in November, but it would be springtime before it was available to all. 83 Squadron detailed a dozen crews, who would be led by W/C Deane, and they took off after midnight to head for the south coast, and an approach to the target over France. Meanwhile, a North Sea sweep by a force predominantly from training units, and a diversionary raid by Mosquitos on Munich, had the enemy controller guessing as to the destination for the main attack, and drew away a proportion of the night fighter force. The target was found to be under ten-tenths cloud, but occasional gaps allowed the red TIs to be glimpsed on the ground, and the built-up area to be identified visually. The initially elongated skymarking became more concentrated as the attack developed, and fires were observed to break out, the glow from which could be seen from 150 miles into the return journey. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 19,000 to 21,000 feet between 03.58 and 04.10, and returned safely to report what appeared to be a concentrated attack, with a large explosion at 04.03 that lasted for five seconds. Local reports confirmed that extensive destruction had occurred in central districts, and in those of a more industrial nature to the north-east and north-west, where a highly important Bosch factory sustained serious damage. The loss of just nine aircraft was a relief, but planners had been working on a new tactic in an effort to reduce the recent prohibitive losses, and it would be incorporated into the next two operations.

Schweinfurt was the centre of the enemy's roller and ball-bearing production, and, as no moving parts functioned without the assistance of some kind of bearing, it was considered to be a target of vital importance. This status was evident from the size of the force assembled to attack it on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup>, when 734 aircraft were made ready, of which 83 Squadron contributed fourteen Lancasters. The new tactic involved the splitting of the force into two distinct phases, separated by two hours, in the hope of catching the night fighters on the ground, refuelling and re-arming, as the second wave passed through. There would be six 83 Squadron Lancasters in the first wave of 392 aircraft, taking off before 19.00, and led by the newly-promoted W/C Johnson, and eight in the second wave of 342, which were scheduled to depart Wyton either side of 21.00, led by the also newly-promoted W/C Northrop. The raid

was following hard on the heels of a daylight effort by the American 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, although there was no mention of fires still burning, which would have been visible under the clear skies. F/L Hellier was the first to mark the target, which he did by H2S from 18,000 feet at 22.58, and assessed his own green TIs to be approximately two miles east-north-east of the aiming point. The others from the squadron followed up from 16,300 to 19,500 feet, between 23.01 and 23.10, and set off for home quietly confident that they had delivered a telling blow on the target. As the second wave aircraft approached, the crews could see fires burning and smoke rising, and they carried out their attacks from 17,000 to 21,000 feet between 01.03 and 01.17, before turning for home to describe a good concentration of TIs in the built-up area, and many fires taking hold. The enthusiasm of the crews was reflected in the ORB entry for the night, which announced triumphantly; “The attack, which, although inclined to spread, was counteracted by the very large force sent, and reports to the effect that Schweinfurt, as a manufacturing centre, has been obliterated, are eagerly awaited.” Whether the crews ever discovered that the operation had failed through undershooting, caused largely by poor Pathfinder backing-up, is not known, but, on a positive note, the second wave lost 50% fewer aircraft than the first, in a combined casualty figure of thirty-three aircraft.

A new target awaited the crews at briefing on the 25<sup>th</sup>, although its name, Augsburg, would strike a chord, because of the epic daylight attack there on the M.A.N. diesel engine factory by 44 and 97 Squadrons in April 1942, which resulted in the award of a VC to the late W/C Nettleton. Augsburg was an historic city, with a long cultural heritage, but it was also home to a Messerschmitt aircraft factory and major elements of the Wehrmacht, as well as a sub camp of Dachau concentration camp, from which slave labour was drawn for the local factories. A force of 594 aircraft was made ready, of which fourteen represented 83 Squadron, ten for the first wave, taking off either side of 19.00, and four for the second wave departing just before 22.00. W/C Northrop was the senior pilot on duty, acting as a visual marker in the first phase of the operation, and he picked up the aiming point without difficulty as he made his approach under clear skies, and watched the first green TIs go down at 22.39, a couple of miles west of the aiming point. He bombed two minutes later from 14,500 feet, and could see immediately that it was a very good attack, with concentrated marking, and the M.A.N. factory already on fire. The others in the first wave bombed from 16,000 to 18,500, between 22.37 and 22.48, and returned safely to confirm W/C Northrop’s impressions. F/L Hellier took off at 21.56, and returned twenty-five minutes later with a dead starboard-outer engine. The other squadron representatives in the second wave had the benefit of a burning city to act as a beacon, and they bombed from 18,000 to 19,000 feet between 01.14 and 01.17, before also returning home safely. W/C Northrop brought back an aiming-point photo, and to this was added the results of photo-reconnaissance, which revealed a city in ruins. It had been one of those rare occasions, when all facets of the plan came together in perfect harmony, and the concentrated bombing burned out the heart of this beautiful and historic city, destroying forever centuries of culture. Almost three thousand houses were destroyed and five thousand damaged, and 762 people lost their lives on this bitterly cold night that caused many fire hoses to freeze up. Twenty-one aircraft failed to return, confirming that there might, indeed, be some merit in dividing the force, and this tactic would become a regular feature of heavy raids, particularly from the autumn onwards. Later, all Pathfinder squadrons received a congratulatory message from an unnamed source on the performance at Augsburg. 83 Squadron had negotiated these last three operations without loss, and this good fortune was to continue throughout March and into April. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched seventy sorties on five operations, for the loss of three aircraft and two crews.

## March 1944

After finishing the previous month with a couple of nights off, it was straight into operational mode for the first night of March, when Stuttgart was selected as the target for a force of 557 aircraft. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, most of them having arrived fairly recently to embark upon their careers as Pathfinders. The senior officer on duty for this night's operation was W/C Johnson, and the ranking system with 8 Group should, perhaps, be clarified. It had always been the case that ranks in Pathfinder units would be one step above those of the main force, but it had taken time for that to apply to senior officers. Main force squadrons were commanded by wing commanders, with squadron leaders as flight commanders, and now it was becoming standard practice for Pathfinder units to be commanded by group captains, with flight commanders of wing commander rank. It would not be long before W/C Deane benefitted from this system. There was a late take-off, either side of midnight, and the bomber stream reached France to find heavy cloud, which kept the night fighters on the ground. They arrived unmolested in the target area, where the cloud persisted, and the target indicators disappeared quickly from sight. The 83 Squadron contingent bombed mostly on H2S, as Wanganui flares were, at first, a little sparse, and did so from 17,000 to 19,800 feet, between 02.57 and 03.12. W/C Johnson was the odd man out, and came beneath the cloud base to 13,000 feet, where he could see green TIs, which he bombed at 03.04. It was difficult to assess the results from above the cloud, but the glow of fires was seen from a hundred miles away. In fact, central, northern and western districts had sustained further extensive damage, and all for the staggeringly low loss of just four aircraft.

Thereafter, despite briefings twice for Munich and once for Königsburg, the squadron remained operationally inactive until mid-month, and used the period to carry out intensive training. Meanwhile, the first salvos were fired in the "Transportation Plan", the systematic destruction by bombing of the French and Belgian railway systems, as a prelude to the invasion of Europe. Operations began on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, with an attack by Halifaxes on marshalling yards at Trappes, and continued at le Mans twenty-four hours later. These operations would provide useful employment for the Stirlings and Halifaxes, which had been banned from operating in German skies. Finally, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, with the moon on the wane, the faithful masses of the heavy Pathfinder and main force brigades were called to prayers, and once assembled, learned that they would be going back to Stuttgart for the third time in a little over three weeks. The hiatus had allowed a degree of replenishment, and this enabled a force of 863 aircraft to be prepared, of which over six hundred were Lancasters. 83 Squadron briefed sixteen crews, with W/C Northrop the most senior pilot, backed up by the newly-promoted S/L Sparkes. Take-off took place between 19.32 and 20.05, with W/C Northrop last away from Wyton a little later than planned. The route over France took the bomber stream almost to the Swiss frontier, before swinging north-east for the run in on the target, and it was at this point that the night fighters made contact. The opening of the raid was delayed by adverse winds, and the marking affected by ten-tenths cloud, into which the TIs disappeared. The skymarkers were somewhat sparse, and seemed to form two clusters, one to the north-east and the other to the south-west, and it was at these locations that the attack developed. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 17,000 to 19,800 feet between 23.05 and 23.27, and all returned safely, mostly uncertain as to the effectiveness of their work. W/C Northrop was late on target, and he described a very scattered attack, which was confirmed by a Mosquito crew, who were over the city at 01.11, and noted a concentration of fire in the north-east and south-west, and a wide corridor completely free of fire between them. It was established later that some bomb loads had fallen into the city centre, but that

much of the effort had been wasted, and the disappointment was compounded by the loss of thirty-seven aircraft, most of which fell to night fighters.

Fog, or the threat of it, prevented operations from taking place on the following two nights, until briefings on the 18<sup>th</sup> revealed Frankfurt as the target for 846 aircraft, of which sixteen Lancasters would be provided by 83 Squadron. W/C Deane put his name at the top of the Order of Battle, with W/C Johnson and S/L Sparkes among those underneath, and they began taking off shortly before 19.30, for the flight out across France. A mining diversion distracted part of the night fighter force, while other elements were positioned inside the German frontier to meet the bombers ahead of the target. A visual ground marking plan (Newhaven) had been prepared, but thick ground haze made initial identification difficult, and the marking developed as a combination of Newhaven and Parramatta (H2S-based ground-marking), with the odd Wanganui (skymarker) thrown in. W/C Deane believed he was the first to bomb, which he did from 18,000 feet at 21.55, and he observed a good concentration of marker flares early on. In fact, others from the squadron had preceded him, and the Wyton-based Lancasters delivered their attacks from 15,000 to 19,500 feet between 21.49 and 22.06, and were on their way home, when a huge, red explosion lit up the sky for thirty seconds at 22.19. The general opinion of returning crews was that the operation had been successful, and after a scattered beginning, the bombing had become concentrated around accurately-placed markers. This was confirmed by local reports, which catalogued five and a half thousand houses destroyed or seriously damaged, along with a hundred industrial firms, hundreds of small businesses and many public buildings. The loss of twenty-two aircraft represented 2.6% of the force, and could be considered relatively low for such a deep-penetration raid.

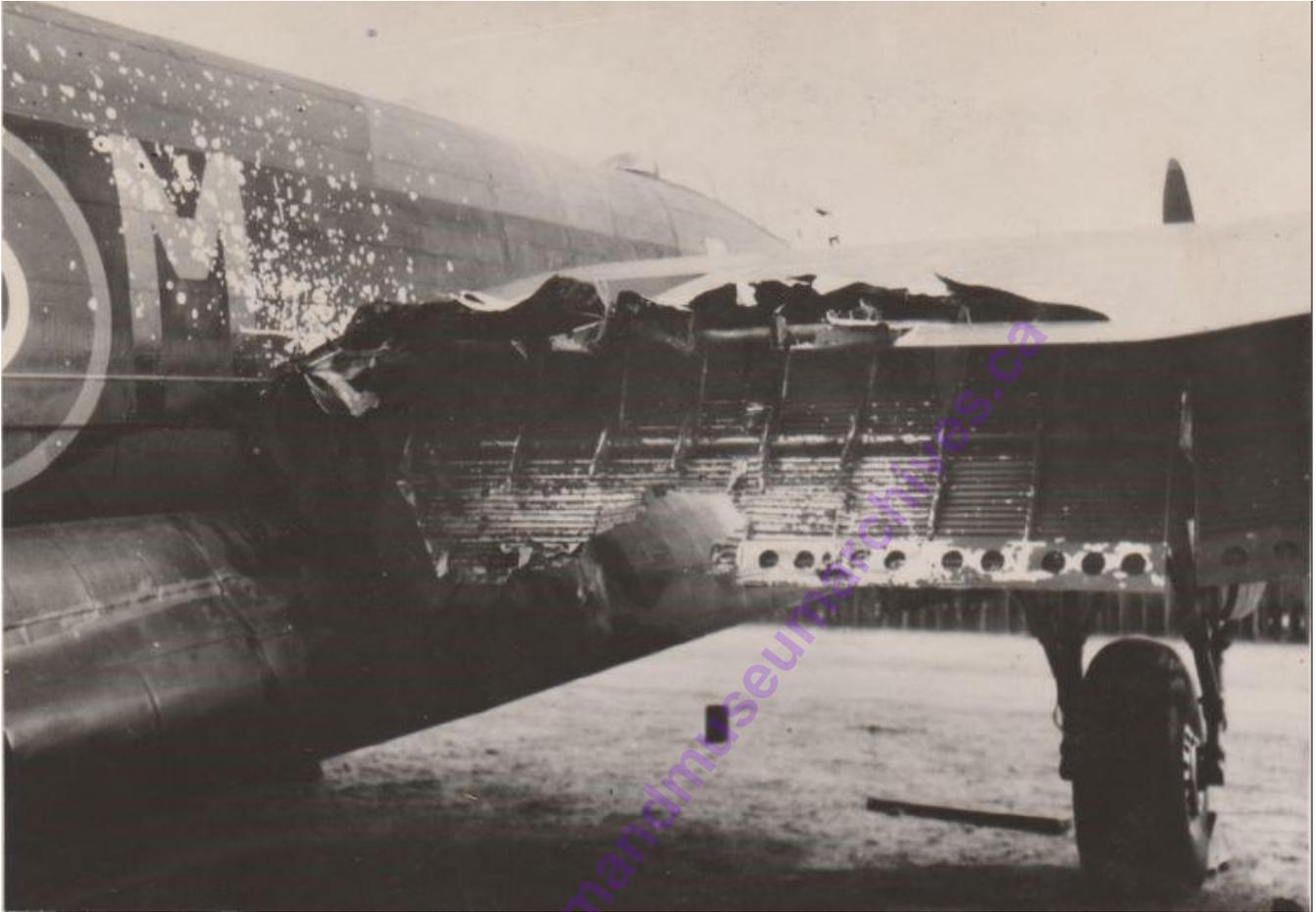
Operations were announced on each of the succeeding three nights, but scrubbed because of the weather, but it was clear as briefings took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> that the prospects were good for that night. Frankfurt was “on” again, this time for a force of 816 aircraft, fourteen of them provided by 83 Squadron. W/C Northrop was the senior pilot on duty, as they took off either side of 19.00, to adopt, somewhat unusually for a target in southern Germany, a route out over the Dutch coast. This, and a mining diversion in northern waters, confused the enemy controller, who suspected Hanover as the target, and he failed to bring his night fighters into contact with the bomber stream. A ground marking plan had been prepared, but cloud began to drift across the target as the spearhead arrived, and the Pathfinders would ultimately employ a combination of Newhaven and Wanganui (ground and sky marking). Most of the 83 Squadron crews relied on H2S, but one bombed on skymarkers, and a number of others visually identified the aiming point, carrying out their attacks from 16,500 to 19,000 feet between 21.46 and 22.04. As they retreated to the west, there was no doubt in their minds that a heavy blow had been delivered, and they were able to watch the glow of fires for a considerable part of their return journey. Thirty-three aircraft failed to return, and it is believed that flak accounted for the majority of them during the flight out and in the target area. Local authorities reported this as an even more destructive raid than the earlier one, and it left half of the city without electricity, gas and water for an extended period. All parts of the city were hit, but the more industrialized western districts bore the brunt, and the old Frankfurt, with its history and culture built over hundreds of years, ceased to exist.

The Command was, no doubt, basking in its power to destroy cities almost at will, but the events of the ensuing week were to bring it back to the stark realisation that it had not yet gained the upper hand, and that victory was a long way down a very rocky road. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews assembled for briefing on the 24<sup>th</sup>, to learn that they were to take part in what would prove to be the nineteenth and final Berlin

operation of the campaign, and, as it turned out, the last of the war as far as the heavy brigade was concerned. A force of 811 aircraft was made ready, and a plan prepared that would route the bomber stream over southern Denmark, to cross the German coast near Rostock, and approach Berlin from the north-east. After bombing they would pass close to Magdeburg, then south of Hanover on a north-westerly heading, before turning due west just before the Dutch frontier, and reaching the North Sea south of Den Helder. S/L Sparkes was the senior pilot on duty as they departed Wyton in the minutes before 19.00, and headed under clear skies for Rømø island off Denmark's western coast.

The "met" section had forecast winds from the north, but not at the unheard-of speed in excess of a hundred miles per hour that were being encountered, and when navigators checked their position by H2S, they discovered they were over the southern end of Sylt, well to the south of the intended track. The problem for most, was being unable to trust their calculations, and, as the situation persisted, the bomber stream lost its cohesion, with some crews flying up the Danish coast to re-establish the briefed track, while others continued on, some oblivious to the fact that they were already over Germany rather than Denmark. The force now approaching Berlin was spread over a seventy mile front, and many flew past it to the west, and were amazed to see the action going on behind them as the attack began. A few had realised what was happening, and had throttled back to await zero hour, and many others had worked out from the H2S returns that they had reached Berlin, and they were now making wide orbits. The intention had been to mark the northern and north-eastern parts of the city, but all plans went out of the window as the Master Bomber, Canadian W/C "Reg" Lane of 405 Squadron, had no chance of giving useful directions, and was able only to offer stirring words of encouragement to the bewildered crews. In conditions of eight to ten-tenths cloud, the 83 Squadron contingent bombed mostly on H2S from 15,000 to 20,000 feet, between 22.24 and 22.42, and, on another night of horrendous losses, returned intact. F/L Eggins was attacked by a night fighter, and picked up some damage to the port wing tip, but the gunners put in an unspecified claim themselves. Post-raid analysis showed that the operation had failed in its aims, and that the wind had pushed the skymarkers over the south-western edge of the city and beyond. There was much damage to residential property here, but many bomb loads were wasted on 126 outlying communities and open country. On the return flight, many aircraft were blown by the winds over heavily defended areas of Germany, and over two thirds of the massive seventy-two missing bombers fell to the flak batteries, which enjoyed their most successful night of the war. During the campaign against Berlin, the squadron was present on all nineteen main raids on the Capital, despatching 253 Lancaster sorties for the loss of sixteen missing, and another that crashed on return. 104 of its aircrew were killed, including two commanding officers, and only ten others survived to spend a period of extended leave in Germany. (The Berlin Raids. Martin Middlebrook).

The period, which became known as The Battle of Berlin, or more accurately the winter campaign, still had a week to run, and two more major operations for the crews to negotiate. Following a night off, fourteen crews attended briefing on the 26<sup>th</sup>, and were no doubt surprised to find that Essen was to be the target, providing them with the luxury of a short duration trip. This would be the first main force attack on Essen since the previous July, and a force of 705 aircraft was made ready. There were no senior pilots on duty for this operation, and F/Ls Denny and Eggins were the highest ranking, S/L Tommy Blair DSO, DFC flying as navigator with the latter. Take-off was set for 20.00, and all got away safely to reach the target, which lay under ten-tenths cloud, but, even so, was at the mercy of Oboe. The marking was accurate and concentrated, and the 83 Squadron crews carried out their attacks from 16,500 to 20,000 feet between 21.59 and 22.09, mostly on H2S, but some on DR after the TIs disappeared into the cloud.



*Although not an 83 Sqn aircraft, this photograph shows the serious damage that could be caused by night fighter attacks on bombers. 514 Squadron's P/O Douglas Woods and his crew in Lancaster Mk.II LL739, JI-M, survived a sustained onslaught during the Nuremberg raid, coming under attack no fewer than five times. The crew had to turn for home without completing the sortie, but lived to tell the tale on this occasion. They were, however, lost on their 27<sup>th</sup> operation, to Villers-Bocage on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1944 (Linda Miles via MTW Archive).*

Returning crews commented on enemy spoof Wanganui flares, but had little to report by way of an assessment of the outcome. Post-raid analysis revealed a highly effective raid, in which 1,756 houses were destroyed, and forty-eight industrial buildings seriously damaged, at a cost to the Command of just nine aircraft. Thus was continued the remarkable run of successes against this vitally important centre of war production, since the introduction of Oboe to main force operations at the start of the Ruhr campaign a year earlier.

The final curtain on the winter offensive was to come down with a standard maximum effort operation against Nuremberg, for which 795 aircraft were made ready on the 30<sup>th</sup>. W/C Johnson was the senior pilot among the fourteen 83 Squadron crews attending briefing, when they learned that there would be diversionary operations, but no complex routing, which had become a major feature of raid planning to keep the enemy controllers guessing. At a conference earlier in the day, the Lancaster Group commanders had bought-in to a 5 Group-inspired outward route, which would take the bomber stream from Belgium on a 250-mile straight leg across Germany, to a point about fifty miles north of the target, from where the final run-in would commence. This was to be undertaken in the face of bitter opposition from Pathfinder A-O-C, AVM Bennett, who offered an alternative plan, and predicted a disaster if he

were overruled. The meteorological section had forecast a layer of high cloud to conceal the presence of the bomber stream, on what would be a moonlit night, but believed the target would be clear for a ground marking plan. However, a 1409 Met Flight Mosquito radioed back to cast doubts on the accuracy of the forecast, suggesting that the cloud was unlikely to materialize, but could well be present over the target. Many thought the operation unlikely to go ahead, but they were wrong, and, at 22.23, the first of the Wyton contingent took to the air.

It was not long before the crews began to notice unique, almost freak meteorological conditions, which included unusually bright light from a quarter moon, and crystal clear visibility. Instead of being cocooned in darkness, ostensibly alone in the sky, they were able to see dozens of other aircraft, which, in the absence of the forecast cloud at cruising altitude, were silhouetted like flies on a table cloth against an unanticipated layer of white cloud below. Condensation trails formed in the cold night air to further advertise the presence of the bomber stream, which was handed on a plate to the enemy night fighters, orbiting their beacons close to the chosen route. The battle for survival began over Charleroi in Belgium, and the massacre of the bomber stream continued all the way to the target, the track marked out by the burning wreckage on the ground of Lancasters and Halifaxes. What was not immediately appreciated, was the presence of a jetstream wind, like the one that had compromised the Berlin operation a week earlier. This time it blew from the south, pushing a proportion of the bomber stream up to fifty miles north of the intended track. In each squadron, there were crews designated as wind-finders, whose job was to ascertain the wind speed and direction, and broadcast it back to group, where it would be collated and rebroadcast to the force. The problem on this night, and at Berlin the previous week, was that the wind-finders did not believe what they were seeing, and moderated the data before sending it to group, where it was also disbelieved, and moderated further before being broadcast back. This left many crews unaware of the inaccuracy of their navigation, and, as a result, aircraft turned onto the final leg from a false position, and more than a hundred of these bombed Schweinfurt in error. Combined with the losses, eighty-two before the target was even reached, this substantially reduced the numbers available to attack Nuremberg. The 83 Squadron crew bombed from 15,000 to 20,000 feet between 01.00 and 01.22, and they all returned safely to provide general comments about the attack, but no useful assessment. F/O Kennedy and crew were praised for bombing and returning on three engines. When the dust had settled, the realization dawned that the biggest disaster to afflict the Command in the entire war had taken place, dwarfing even the recent catastrophes at Leipzig and Berlin. The final tally reached ninety-five failures to return, with many more written off in landing crashes, or with battle damage too severe to repair, and this was in return for no useful damage to the target. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 102 sorties on seven operations.

## April 1944

That which now lay before the crews of Bomber Command, in preparation for the impending invasion, was in marked contrast to what had been endured over the past months. In place of the gruelling, deep-penetration flights on dark, often dirty nights, the majority of operations would now be shorter-range hops to France and Belgium in improving weather conditions. As already mentioned, the Transportation Plan had started in early March, but now, with the whole of the Command available, it would gather pace. Despite the belief in high places that such operations would be “a piece of cake” compared with trips to Germany, and therefore worthy of counting as just one third of a sortie towards the completion of a tour, they would prove to be equally demanding in their way, and would require of the crews a greater commitment to accuracy to avoid casualties among friendly civilians. Despite the prohibitive losses of the winter period, the Command was in remarkably fine fettle to face its new challenge, and Harris was in the enviable position of being able to achieve what had eluded his predecessor, namely, to attack multiple targets simultaneously, with forces large enough to make an impact. He could now assign targets to individual Groups, to Groups in tandem, or to the Command as a whole, according to operational requirements.

Meanwhile, over at 5 Group, Dambuster S/L “Mickey” Martin and his 617 Squadron commanding officer, W/C Len Cheshire, had been experimenting with low level marking techniques. Frustrated by the slight inaccuracy of Oboe marking during attacks by the squadron on flying bomb sites in the Pas-de-Calais in December and January, they had sought a more precise way of delivering markers onto the pinpoint targets, to which they were being assigned. Martin took a Lancaster to a bombing range, and dived it onto the aiming point, almost tearing the wings off in pulling out, but the result was perfect. Cheshire tried it in a Mosquito, and convinced of the efficacy of the technique, took the idea to the ever-receptive 5 Group A-O-C, Sir Ralph Cochrane. During February and March, 617 Squadron carried out attacks on precision targets in France, principally individual factories, perfecting the method and proving its worth, after which, Cochrane approached Harris. Harris authorized the squadron to take on charge four Mosquitos for marking duties, initially for 617 Squadron, but ultimately, the Group. The consequences of this in April, would be a triumph for 5 Group, and would effectively hand it its independence from the main force, while delivering a major blow to the Pathfinder Force and its chief, AVM Bennett.

The new month brought a period of stand-down, caused largely by the weather, and even training was limited. The crews’ black mood brightened on the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup>, when the Sergeants’ Mess Easter dance was held, and was attended by the A-O-C and his wife. The affair was an unqualified success, although there were a few sore heads on the following morning. It was not until the 9<sup>th</sup> that crews were called to briefing with a real prospect of taking off in anger, but it applied to only four, who were to be supporters for one of two operations that night under the new offensive. The targets were the Lille-Delivrance goods station in north-eastern France, and Villeneuve-St-George marshalling yards, on the south-eastern edge of Paris, and the 83 Squadron contingent was assigned to the former. The crews, each of which was a new arrival, were those of F/Os Kelly and Pennington, and P/Os McConnell and Saunders, and they were all safely airborne by 22.56, for an operation that would count as just one-third of a sortie. It took less than two hours to reach the target, which they found under five to six-tenths cloud, and they delivered their eleven 1,000 pounders and two 500 pounders each onto red TIs, from an average of 16,200 feet between 00.44 and 00.53. P/O Kelly brought home an aiming-point photo, and

the success of the operation was confirmed by other photographs from a reconnaissance aircraft. Much damage was caused to buildings and track, and more than 2,100 items of rolling stock were destroyed. Sadly, heavy casualties, 456 fatalities, were inflicted upon French civilians in adjacent residential districts, where five thousand houses were either destroyed or damaged, and this problem of collateral damage was one that would never satisfactorily be addressed. The other operation was also successful, but likewise resulted in French casualties, although considerably fewer.

On the following night, four similar targets were attacked in France and one in Belgium, and four 83 Squadron crews were assigned to supporting duties at Laon in the north-east. F/O Pennington and P/O Kelly were on duty again, and they were joined by P/Os Keeling and Meggeson in an overall heavy force of 148 Lancasters from 3, 6 and 8 Groups. They got away between 01.40 and 01.57, and arrived in the target area to see a red Oboe marker going down ten minutes ahead, to be followed by a cluster of greens. The twelve 1,000 pounders each were delivered from 12,000 to 14,600 feet between 03.46 and 03.48, and a good concentration of bombs was observed around the aiming point. P/O Meggeson's ND400 collided with another Lancaster over the target, sustaining a severely damaged wing, but made it home safely. P/O Kelly brought back his second aiming-point photo in succession, but had still only completed two-thirds of a sortie. This proved to be the least successful of the night's operations, and reconnaissance revealed damage only to a corner of the yards.

While Harris was at the helm, city-busting would never be entirely shelved in favour of other considerations, and the town of Aachen was selected to host an attack by 341 Lancasters of 1, 3, 5 and 8 Groups on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>. Although the raid would be aimed primarily at the marshalling yards at each end of the town, the size of the force ensured that an area attack would develop. Situated close to the borders with Holland and Belgium, this was a short-range operation allowing a maximum bomb load to be carried, and the seven 83 Squadron participants departed Wyton either side of 20.45 with thirteen 1,000 pounders each. The newly-promoted F/O Kelly and F/O Pennington were on their third operation in successive nights, and they arrived with the others to find clear skies and good visibility. The marking was punctual and accurate, and the bombs went down from 16,000 to 17,000 feet between 22.42 and 22.45. Widespread damage was caused in central and southern districts, where power supplies and communications were cut, and fifteen hundred people lost their lives. Only nine Lancaster failed to return, but two of them belonged to 83 Squadron. A W/T message was picked up from ND389 at 22.05, while it was still outbound, but nothing further was heard. It was eventually established that it had crashed in Belgium about fifty miles north-west of the target, after falling victim to a night fighter, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O McConnell. ND395 was hit by flak when at 13,000 feet over the target, and crashed into the town with just the Canadian navigator surviving from the crew of F/L Denny. As events turned out, these were the last casualties to afflict the squadron while operating directly under the banner of 8 Group.

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, control of the Command officially passed to Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) under General Dwight Eisenhower, and it would remain thus shackled until the Allied armies were sweeping towards the German frontier. Also on this day, the crews were informed by W/C Deane that they, and 97 Squadron at Bourn, were to be posted back to 5 Group on temporary detachment. The news was met with dismay by the crews, who were happy at the station and liked the district. They were stood down on the following day, and everyone wandered off to their favourite haunts for a final look round. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, an advanced party went to Coningsby to prepare the way, and



*Sgt. Gordon Bradshaw was mid-upper gunner in ND389, OL-A when the aircraft crashed near Antwerp on 11/12<sup>th</sup> April 1944 during a raid against Aachen. There were no survivors from the crew who, it is believed, fell victim to a nightfighter flown by Oblt. (later Major) Heinz-Wolfgang Schnaufer. Schnaufer survived the war, becoming the Luftwaffe's highest-scoring nightfighter pilot, with 121 victories.*

always considered itself to be the elite, and probably felt that the new squadrons should view the move as a promotion. It should also be remembered that most crews joining 83 and 97 Squadrons had come from 5 Group, and it was not, therefore, a totally alien environment. Bennett and Cochrane had opposing views on target marking, although both were brilliant men in their own right with regard to tactics. Bennett was arguably the most intelligent man in the entire service, and knew it, had a high opinion of himself, did not suffer fools gladly, and was totally without humour. Even so, he had the loyalty of his crews, and had moulded the Pathfinder Force into a skilled and efficient organisation. He considered that low-level marking exposed the crews to unnecessary danger, while Cochrane was less cautious, more aggressive, and was prepared to experiment in search of improvement. Cochrane also had the ear of

the 17<sup>th</sup> was spent packing and bidding farewell to the station staff. As they began to depart Wyton at 09.00, the crews would dearly have loved to "beat up" the station in a low-level fly-past, but were prevented from doing so by having to carry a bomb load each. Once at Coningsby, they were to act as 5 Group's illuminator force, to enable the third unit involved in the transfer, 627 Squadron with its Mosquitos, to carry out the visual low level marking pioneered by 617 Squadron. Although all three squadrons were officially only on detachment, and the crews retained their Pathfinder badges and ranks, they had effectively cut ties with 8 Group, leaving Bennett distraught, and this is said to have deepened the rift, which already existed between him and 5 Group's Cochrane.

The Command was now so large and effective, and each group so powerful that it made sense to split it up and attack numerous targets simultaneously. Initially, only 5 Group gained independence, and it would now be able to mark its own targets, and occasionally those of other Groups, with the result that the effectiveness of the low level technique would be ably demonstrated in the months ahead. The resentment felt by the 83 Squadron crews, and indeed those of the other squadrons, at their forced removal from what they considered to be an elite status, would gradually turn to a grudging loyalty to 5 Group. 5 Group, of course, had

Harris, having served under him as a flight commander in the Middle East many years earlier, and there is little doubt that Harris, as 5 Group's first wartime A-O-C, favoured it above all other groups.

Matters began badly at Coningsby, when, immediately on their arrival, the crews were summoned to the operations briefing room to be lectured by the 54 Base commander, Air Commodore Bobby Sharp, an egotistical officer, with no relevant operational experience. The basis of his verbal assault, rather than welcoming the new arrivals as "brothers in arms", was that they should discard their bad 8 Group habits, and buckle down to becoming proficient in 5 group techniques. This was the worst possible way to induct experienced and proud Pathfinders, who were used to tasks far more complex than anything they would have to do in 5 Group, and it would leave a bad taste for a considerable time. W/C Deane found himself in a difficult position, having been a former 5 Group stalwart and then a Pathfinder. He found chain of command procedures to be different, after becoming accustomed to the direct contact between Bennett and the squadron commanders, whom the former addressed by first name or nickname. The 5 Group base system, comprising a main station and two satellites with a base commander overseeing all three, was also unfamiliar to him.

It had been intended to "blood" the newly-arrived squadrons immediately, but, possibly irritated by their welcome, the two heavy squadron commanders, W/C Deane and W/C Carter of 97 Squadron, declared their crews unready, and the attack that night on railway yards at Juvisy, which was highly successful, went ahead without them. Briefings for the first operation for the three newly-transferred squadrons took place of the 20<sup>th</sup>, when the crews learned that Cologne would host the main operation, while they would be involved in a two-phase attack on railway yards at la Chapelle, just north of Paris, as part of an overall force of 247 Lancasters and twenty-two Mosquitos. There would be an hour between waves, each with its own specific aiming point, and fifteen 83 Squadron crews were to take part, with W/C Deane the Master Bomber and S/L Sparks his deputy. The plan called for 8 Group Mosquitos to drop cascading flares by Oboe to provide an initial reference, and for a Mosquito element from 627 Squadron to lay a Window screen ahead of the main force Lancasters. Once the target had been identified, the first members of the 83 Squadron flare force were to provide illumination for the low-level marker Mosquitos of 617 Squadron, which would mark the first aiming point with red spot fires for the main force element to aim at. The whole procedure would then be repeated at the second aiming point. W/C Deane conducted the briefing, and, at its conclusion wished the assembled throng good luck, before dismissing them, whereupon a voice from the back declared that the briefing wasn't over, and that the base and station commanders wanted their say. This had not been standard practice in 8 Group, and left Deane mystified and a little humiliated. The senior officers had only waffle to offer, but it made them feel important, while confirming the first impressions of the crews that Sharp was a self-important and irrelevant link in the chain of command.

The 83 Squadron crews began taking off shortly after 22.00, for what would be an entirely different role from that employed with 8 Group. There were two blind illuminators, eleven illuminators and two visual markers, and they arrived in the target area to find clear skies, good visibility and some ground haze. Zero hour was set for 00.05, but the Oboe Mosquitos were two minutes late, and some communications problems had to be ironed out before matters began to run smoothly. The 83 Squadron Lancasters were carrying a variety of stores, including flares, spot fires and 1,000 pounders, and most made four or five runs across the target, from 11,000 to 14,800 feet between 00.07 and 00.28. P/O Pezaro brought his bombs home, after his bomb sight failed over the target. All from 83 Squadron returned safely to report a

successful operation, which caused a large orange explosion at 00.28, followed by a column of black smoke. Reconnaissance confirmed the success of both phases of the operation, which left the yards severely damaged, and the crews received a congratulatory message from Cochrane.

Thus far, the 5 Group low-level marking method had proved to be highly successful against French targets, but the real test would come against a heavily-defended German city, for which Brunswick was selected. The main operation on the night of the 22/23<sup>rd</sup> was to be Düsseldorf, and a force of 596 aircraft, drawn from all but 5 Group, was duly made ready. Fifteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and were told that they and 97 Squadron were to act as visual markers at Brunswick, and were to drop hooded flares on the aiming point. The senior pilot on duty was W/C Northrop, backed up by S/Ls Collett, Mitchell and Sparks, and they got away from Coningsby either side of 23.30 in excellent weather conditions, which persisted all the way to the target. Ground detail was visible, and the squadron element attacked from 14,000 to 19,500 feet, mostly the latter, between 01.46 and 02.02. The failure of VHF communications meant instructions had to be delivered by W/T, and the order to drop Wanganui flares was not received, while some W/T messages were misunderstood. Generally, the illumination by 83 and 97 Squadrons and the marking by 617 Squadron went according to plan, but the 5 Group main force failed to exploit the situation. Many bombs did fall within the city's central districts, but it was believed that a large proportion hit outlying communities to the south, and the operation could not be declared a success.

Two nights later, the 5 Group method was tried again, this time at Munich, for which a force of 244 Lancasters and sixteen Mosquitos was made ready, ten of the Lancasters representing 101 Squadron in an RCM role. The crews learned at briefing that the main operation, by more than six hundred aircraft, would be taking place also over southern Germany, but at Karlsruhe, some 170 miles to the north-west, and that this may draw off some of the night fighter response. W/C Deane was to lead the squadron, with the three squadron leader pilots staying at home. 617 Squadron Mosquitos would be on hand again to carry out the low-level marking for the final time, before handing the role over to 627 Squadron. The 83 Squadron crews were all safely airborne by 21.04, and headed for the south coast for the journey out across south-western France, feinting towards Italy. The 617 and 627 Squadron Mosquitos took a direct route, the latter laying a Window screen as the target drew near. Cheshire dived towards the aiming point at 01.40, and released his spot fire right onto the aiming point from 1,500 feet, before screaming across the rooftops to make good his escape. The 83 Squadron crews found clear skies, good visibility and target markers well placed, and followed up to deliver their flares, and either incendiaries or cluster bombs, from 16,000 to 19,000 feet between 01.37 and 01.53. As always, Munich was defended by two hundred flak guns, and many searchlights, and W/O Lane's ND467 was coned and hit by flak, setting fire to the starboard-inner and port-outer engines, which had to be shut down. The port-inner also cut out, but was restarted, and the crew threw out everything moveable to shed weight, before limping home on two engines. Nine Lancasters failed to return from this operation, among them 83 Squadron's ND469, which was shot down by flak, and crashed about seven miles north-west of the city centre at 01.45, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/O Pezaro. The operation was an outstanding success, which destroyed eleven hundred buildings, seriously damaged thirteen hundred others, and knocked out railway installations, and Cheshire's part in it undoubtedly sealed the award to him of the VC at the end of his tour. In his book, *A Pathfinder's War and Peace*, W/C Deane agrees that Cheshire warranted a VC for completing a hundred operations, but that it should only be awarded for one explicit brave deed. He comments that Cheshire was over the target for only five minutes, and perhaps the award

reflected more favourably on Cochrane and the “Independent Air Force” or “Lincolnshire Poachers”, as they were referred to, somewhat disparagingly, in 8 Group circles.

At briefing on the 26<sup>th</sup>, fifteen 83 Squadron crews were told that Schweinfurt was to be their target that night, after the failure of the American 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force to destroy it two weeks earlier. The tone of the ORB entry was very much, “leave it to RAF Bomber Command”, and with the satisfaction of Munich still fresh in the mind, and the natural rivalry between the two forces, such attitudes were to be expected. On this occasion, 627 Squadron would act as the low-level marker force for the first time, for a main force of 215 Lancasters, including nine from 101 Squadron. This was just one of three major operations taking place, the main event being at Essen, while the railway yards at Villeneuve-St-Georges were being attended to by a predominantly Halifax main force. W/C Northrop was appointed as the Deputy Master Bomber for Schweinfurt, and S/Ls Collett, Mitchell and Sparks were also on duty. They took off either side of 21.30, and arrived in the target area, having been delayed by stronger-than-forecast head winds. They found generally clear skies and good visibility, which the 627 Squadron crews failed to exploit, as their debut marking effort proved to be inaccurate. The 83 Squadron crews remarked on the lack of illumination, and those carrying hooded flares were called in a number of times. Other 83 Squadron crews carried spot fires and up to fourteen 500 pounders, but most of the hardware fell outside of the target area. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 16,800 to 19,000 feet between 02.00 to 02.35, and three of them were among twenty-one Lancasters failing to return, after night fighters infiltrated the bomber stream. JA928 crashed in north-eastern France, killing F/L Mirfin and three of his crew, while the survivors fell into enemy hands. ND400 went down in wooded country near Pirmasens, close to Germany’s border with France, with just one survivor from the crew of F/O Pennington. Both were almost certainly victims of night fighters, and another one accounted for S/L Collett and crew in ND499, also over Germany, but right on the French border, about fifty miles further south.

The target for eighty-eight Lancasters and four Mosquitos of 5 Group on the night of the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, was an explosives factory at St-Medard-en-Jalles, a north-western suburb of Bordeaux in south-western France. Fifteen 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, among them W/C Deane, W/C Northrop and S/L Mitchell. They took off either side of 23.30 for the long outward flight, but F/L Hellier lost his starboard-inner engine while climbing out over base, and had to abandon his sortie. F/L Meredith’s starboard-inner engine also caught fire, and he turned back from forty miles south of Start Point on the Devon coast. The others pressed on to the target, and picked up a route marker at 02.12, which W/C Deane backed up four minutes later. He approached the target at 11,000 feet, and was the first to drop a cluster of flares at 02.28, but was unable to confirm their accuracy. At 02.30, he broadcast to the first and second waves to drop their flares independently, which they did to provide good illumination, allowing the first red spot fire to go down at 02.38. He asked for an assessment of its accuracy, and, on receiving non-committal answers, called in the reserve flare force to back up the spot fire before it went out. When no assessment had been received by 02.54, Deane called in the marker force to back up the red spot fire with greens, telling them to aim at the factory buildings generally, rather than the briefed aiming point. The marker Mosquito crews complained that there was insufficient illumination, and, as all of the flares had been used up, Deane instructed his deputy to drop a yellow TI, which went down at 03.02. Someone claimed another red spot fire was delivered at 03.10, but Deane and his crew did not see this, and he spent the next five minutes trying to elicit an answer from the Mosquito markers, as to whether or not they could mark the target. He eventually received a negative response, and, at 03.17, abandoned the operation,

instructing all aircraft to retain their bombs. Despite this, twenty-six bomb loads were dropped, and it was a highly frustrated bunch of crews who returned to Coningsby to dissect the failure.

The operation was rescheduled for the following night, when a force of sixty-eight Lancasters and five Mosquitos was made ready. Fourteen 83 Squadron crews were briefed, with W/C Deane again leading, and S/L Sparks in support. They took off either side of 22.30, and, this time, all reached the target, where Deane saw the first red spot fire go down, and asked the marker leader for an assessment. The marker leader asked for more illumination, but Deane declared it unnecessary, and went in himself to confirm that the spot fire was within twenty yards of the power station aiming point. He called in the bombers, and the first few sticks obliterated the power station and the markers with it, and set off many large explosions, which made it too dangerous for the low-flying Mosquitos to re-mark. W/C Deane and S/L Sparks backed up with red spot fires at 02.12 and 02.15, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed from 6,700 to 11,000 feet, although mostly from 7,000 feet, thereafter until 02.38. The attack was highly accurate and concentrated, and confirmed by the large explosions rocking the complex between 02.15 to 02.40. There were no losses, and it was a much happier bunch of crews who returned to Coningsby between 05.20 and 06.04. Among awards to squadron personnel during the month were a DSO for W/C Johnson DFM & Bar, and a Bar to the DFC for F/L Chick. The squadron dispatched 104 sorties during the month on nine operations, and lost six Lancasters and crews.

[www.bombercommandmuseum.org.uk](http://www.bombercommandmuseum.org.uk)

## May 1944

Fifteen crews were called to briefing on the 1<sup>st</sup>, to learn that ten of them would be going to Tours in western France, to attack an aircraft repair workshop, as part of a force of forty-six Lancasters and four Mosquitos. Five others were to join 126 Lancasters and eight Mosquitos at Toulouse in southern France, where the targets were an aircraft assembly factory and the Poudrerie explosives works. W/C Northrop was to be Master Bomber at the former, with S/L Mitchell as Deputy, while S/L Sparks controlled at the latter. A/C Sharp had pulled Northrop aside to tell him that he would be flying with him that night, but by the time Joe and his crew were at the aircraft, Sharp had not put in an appearance. Joe and his flight engineer were carrying out external checks after the rest of the crew had embarked, when a large American staff car pulled up flying the base commander's pennant. Sharp got out clad in an American flying suit, and demanded to have the crew lined up and presented to him one-by-one. Cursing under his breath, Joe obliged, and dragged his men back out of the Lancaster for the ceremony. Eventually, they were able to get back in, but were held up by Sharp, as he made his way to the navigator's compartment. They all got away safely from Coningsby either side of 22.00, maintaining radio silence in accordance with standard procedure, whereupon Sharp decided to carry out a radio test on the controller's frequency. A number of unidentified voices told him to belt up and keep quiet, which offended his ego greatly.

Weather conditions in the target area were good, with clear skies and some moonlight, and the only ground defence came from light flak that opened up every time Northrop passed low across the aiming point. He spent about half an hour circling the target in range of the flak, which sent small strings of tracer shooting past the wingtips, but with no real danger of scoring a hit. A/C Sharp disliked being shot at, and Joe decided to climb a little higher to keep him quiet. The marking was accurate, and four red spot fires were observed on the south-eastern corner of the site, which attracted many bomb loads. The markers quickly became obscured by smoke, however, and the bombing was halted, to allow further spot fires to be dropped. These fell south of the target, and instructions were given to undershoot them by 250 yards. The 83 Squadron crews successfully carried out their part in the operation, making a number of runs to deliver flares first, and then bombs, from 7,000 to 11,000 feet between 00.28 and 01.19. The main buildings were completely destroyed, and all aircraft returned safely, S/L Northrop touching down at 03.33, after which Sharp was whisked away without a word of appreciation to the crew, or even the offer of a lift to debriefing. Apparently, the following day brought the immediate award to Sharp of the DSO. Meanwhile, at Toulouse, the first Mosquito delivered its markers accurately and on time, and S/L Sparks called in the main force element at 01.21, repeating the order at two minute intervals, although nothing happened at first. By 01.34, after some bombing had taken place, he called for a halt to allow further marking, but found it difficult to get crews to comply. The second Mosquito marked at 01.44, and by the time Sparks left the target area shortly afterwards, he assessed that 50% of the bombing had been accurate, but some was falling up to two thousand yards away. Reconnaissance revealed that the factory, and a nearby explosives works, had been hit, and no aircraft were lost.

S/L Dunn was posted in from 52 Base on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, while briefings were taking place on 1 and 5 Group stations for an operation that night against a Panzer training camp and transport depot at Mailly-le-Camp in north-eastern France. The units based there posed a potential threat to Allied forces as the invasion unfolded, and needed to be eliminated. The events of the operation proved to be controversial, and, in its aftermath, recriminations abounded, and still do today, concerning the 5 Group leadership provided by

W/Cs Cheshire and Deane. Although the grudges by 1 Group aircrew against them can be understood in the light of what happened, they are unjust, and based on emotion and incorrect information, and it is worthwhile to examine the conduct of the operation in some detail. W/C Cheshire was appointed as marker leader, and was piloting one of four 617 Squadron Mosquitos, while 83 Squadron's commanding officer, W/C Deane, was overall raid controller, with S/L Sparks as Deputy. Deane and Cheshire attended separate briefings, and neither seemed aware of the complete plan, particularly the role of the 1 Group Special Duties Flight from Binbrook, which was assigned to mark its own specific aiming point for an element of the 1 Group force.

The ten 83 Squadron participants were airborne by 22.01, and arrived in the target area to find clear skies, moonlight and excellent bombing conditions. 617 Squadron's Cheshire and Shannon were in position before midnight, and as the first flares from the 83 and 97 Squadron Lancasters illuminated the target below, Cheshire released his two red spot fires onto the first aiming point at 00.00½ from 1,500 feet. Shannon backed them up from 400 feet five and a half minutes later, and as far as Cheshire was concerned, the operation was bang on schedule at this stage. A 97 Squadron Lancaster also laid markers accurately, to ensure a constant focal point, and Cheshire passed instructions to Deane to call the bombers in. It was at this stage of the operation that matters began to go awry. A communications problem arose, when a commercial radio station, believed to be an American forces network, jammed the VHF frequencies in use. Deane called in the 5 Group element, elated that everything was proceeding according to plan, but nothing happened. He checked with his wireless operator that the instructions had been transmitted, and called up S/L Sparks, who was also mystified by the lack of bombing. A few crews from 9, 207 and 467 Squadrons had heard the call to bomb, and did so, but, for most, the instructions were swamped by the interference. Deane then attempted to control the operation by W/T, but this also failed, and the wireless transmitter in his Lancaster was later found to be sufficiently off frequency, to prevent the call to bomb from reaching the main force crews.

Post raid reports are contradictory, and it is impossible to establish an accurate course of events, particularly when Deane and Cheshire's understanding of the exact time of zero hour differed by five minutes. Remarkably, it also seems that Deane was unaware that there were two marking points, or three, if one includes 1 Group's Special Duties Flight. Cheshire, initially at least, appeared happy with the early stages of the attack, and described the bombing as concentrated and accurate. It seems certain, however that many minutes had passed between the dropping of Cheshire's markers and the first main force bombs falling, during which period, Deane was coming to terms with the fact that his instructions were not getting through. A plausible scenario is that in the absence of instructions, and with red spot fires clearly visible in the target, some crews opted to bomb, and others followed suit. These would have been predominantly from 5 Group, but as the 1 Group crews became increasingly agitated at having to wait in bright moonlight, with evidence of enemy night fighters all around, some of them inevitably joined in.

Now a new problem was arising. Smoke from these first salvos was obliterating the entire camp, and Cheshire had to decide, whether or not to send in Fawke and Kearns to mark the second aiming point. His feeling, and that of Deane, as it later transpired, was that it was unnecessary. The volume of bombs still to fall into the relatively compact area of the target, would ensure destruction of the entire site. By 00.16, the first phase of bombing should have been completed, leaving a clear run for Fawke and Kearns across the target. In the event, the majority of 5 Group crews were still on their bombing run, a fact

unknown to Cheshire, who asked Deane for a pause in the bombing, while the two Mosquitos went in. As far as Cheshire was concerned, there was no response from Deane, who would, anyway, have been confused by mention of a second aiming point, of which he was unaware. In the event, Deane's deputy, S/L Sparks, eventually found a channel free of interference, and did, in fact, transmit an instruction to halt the bombing, both by W/T and R/T, and some crews reported hearing something. While utter chaos reigned, Kearns and Fawke dived in among the falling cookies at 00.23 and 00.25 respectively, to mark the second aiming point on the western edge of the camp. At 2,000 feet, they were lucky to survive the turbulence created by the exploding 4,000 pounders, when 4,000 feet was considered to be a minimum safe height. They were not entirely happy with their work, but F/O Edwards of 97 Squadron dropped a stick of markers precisely on the mark, and S/L Sparks was then able to call the 1 Group main force in. Meanwhile, the night fighters continued to create havoc among the Lancasters, as they milled around in the target area, and as burning aircraft were seen to fall all around, some 1 Group crews succumbed to their anxiety and frustration, and in a rare breakdown of R/T discipline, let fly with comments of an uncomplimentary nature, many of which were intended for and, indeed, heard by Deane.

The 83 Squadron crews carried out their illuminating and bombing briefs from 3,500 to 8,000 feet between 00.06 and 00.32, and, having become aware of the field day being enjoyed by the night fighter brigade, to which the last to leave the target area were most vulnerable, W/C Deane decided to deviate from the planned route home. He hit the deck, and headed due west to a point south of Paris, before turning north-west to reach the Channel east of Cherbourg. Even then he wasn't safe, as he had to dodge the flak from light-fingered British naval vessels engaged in an invasion exercise. Despite everything, the operation was a major success, which destroyed 80% of the camp's buildings, and 102 vehicles, of which thirty-seven were tanks, while over two hundred men were killed. Forty-two Lancasters failed to return, however, two thirds of them from 1 Group, but 83 Squadron's JB402 also fell victim to a night fighter on the way home at 00.45, and crashed near Orbais, some thirty miles north-west of the target. The loss of S/L Neville Sparks and his crew was keenly felt by the squadron, but news would eventually come through that Sparks, and five of the eight men on board, had evaded capture, while two had become PoWs. On the following day an inquest revealed that Deane's wireless operator had been slightly off frequency, which had allowed the interference to mask the transmission of instructions. The 1 Group A-O-C, AVM Rice, decided he would not participate in further operations organized by 5 Group, which was a blow to Cochrane, but a cause of delight to Bennett.

Five small-scale operations were mounted on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, against airfields, ammunition dumps and a coastal battery, all in support of the coming invasion. 5 Group was involved in two raids, the airfield at Tours and an ammunition dump at Salbris, some sixty miles to the east. Seven 83 Squadron crews were assigned to the latter, with S/L Mitchell appointed Deputy Master Bomber. They were airborne shortly before 22.00, and arrived over north-central France to find clear skies and good visibility. S/L Mitchell circled the target, until being called in to back up the first red spot fire, which was on the aiming point. He witnessed a large explosion at 00.21, followed by a column of smoke up to 7,000 feet, and bombed three minutes later from 4,000 feet. F/O Kennedy's bombs hung up, but he and his crew were unaware of that, until over the Channel on the way home. F/O McLean had his bomb sight fail, preventing him from carrying out an attack, and he was another to observe a huge explosion, some five miles away, which shook his Lancaster when at 3,500 feet. The other squadron representatives attacked from 3,500 to 7,000 feet between 00.22 and 00.29, and all returned safely to report a successful operation.



*The highly-experienced F/L Allan Whitford RAAF, DFC, was lost with his crew when ND818 was shot down by flak whilst attacking an airfield at Brest.*

On the following night, fifty-eight 5 Group Lancasters and six Mosquitos were made ready for an attack on the Lanveoc-Poulmic airfield and seaplane base at Brest. Three 83 Squadron crews were to take part, F/L Pidding and F/Os Siddle and Whitford, and they took off at 21.15, for what would be a round trip of five-and-a-half hours. They found the target area in good visibility, and two bombed at midnight from 7,000 feet, before returning to report a successful, but unspectacular attack. ND818 did not return, after being shot down by light flak in the target area, and disintegrating, which strongly suggests that it was still carrying its bomb load at the time. F/L Whitford RAAF, DFC was a highly experienced pilot, on, it is believed, his fortieth operation, and his loss, along with that of his crew, three of whom were also Australians, would be keenly felt by the squadron. It is interesting to note that the 5 Group ORB refers to an enemy "scarecrow" shell conveniently exploding at the start of the attack on the seaplane base hangars, which, together with photo-flashes, illuminated the target, after the green spot fires had failed to ignite. An entire myth built up concerning

scarecrows, which, it was believed by many, had been invented by the Germans to simulate the explosion of a fully-laden bomber, in order to target the morale of other crews. In fact, there is no evidence, even from the German side that such shells existed, but it certainly suited Bomber Command to encourage such a belief. The truth is that what looked like a bomber exploding, was, indeed, a bomber exploding, and it seems certain that the case referred to in the 5 Group ORB was the end of the Whitford crew.

Another twenty-four hours, another operation, this time by fifty six Lancasters, with Mosquito support, against the foundry and stamping plant of the Gnome & Rhone aero-engine factory at Gennevilliers, a north-western suburb of Paris. This target had been attacked twice in the spring of 1942, the second time on the night before the first "Thousand" raid on Cologne, but had escaped damage on both occasions. Six 83 Squadron crews were detailed, with W/C Deane acting as Master Bomber, and F/L Eggins as his Deputy. They were all safely airborne from Coningsby just before 22.30, and found the target under clear skies with good visibility. The attack opened at 00.24, when W/C Deane was able to visually pick out the aiming point, and confirm the accuracy of the Mosquito-delivered red spot fires. The 83 Squadron crews made a number of passes to drop flares and then bombs, and carried out their part in the proceedings from 8,000 to 10,000 feet between 00.31 and 00.47. All but one returned home to report a successful operation, which was confirmed by photo-reconnaissance. Among the five missing Lancasters was the squadron's ND494, which was hit by light flak at low level, when passing close to Rouen on the way home. F/L Meredith tried to gain height, but the Lancaster was attacked by a night fighter, which set the starboard wing on fire, and a crash-landing was carried out on a hillside between Rouen and Caen, about twenty miles short of the Normandy coast. F/L Meredith DFC was killed, along with the rear gunner, F/Sgt Towse DFM, and the others were taken into captivity, mid-upper gunner, F/O Johnson DFC, who was thirty-seven years old, succumbing to his injuries in a field hospital on the following day.

After a night off, during which attacks were carried out on railway yards at five locations, including one by a 5 Group element at Lille, 83 Squadron was called into action again on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, to target a military camp at Bourg-Leopold in Belgium. S/L Mitchell was appointed as Master Bomber, with F/L McDonald as his Deputy, and nine others from the squadron were divided into three waves of flare droppers, while F/O Jones was designated a backer-up. They were mostly airborne by 22.30, and were late arriving in the target area because of wrongly forecast winds. They were confronted by low cloud and poor visibility, and the scattered flares failed to provide sufficient illumination. The initial Oboe marker was visible only to a few crews, and quickly burned out, and S/L Mitchell called for another Mosquito to drop a red spot fire on the aiming point. Before this was accomplished, however, the main force began to bomb, and ninety-four had done so, before S/L Mitchell abandoned the operation because of the close proximity of civilian residential property.

A period of unfavourable weather helped to keep the squadron off operations, thereafter, until the 19<sup>th</sup>, when twelve crews were called to briefing, where they were joined by W/Cs Jeudwine and Tait of the 5 Group Master Bomber fraternity, the former as Master Bomber and the latter as his Deputy. Railway installations at Amiens and Tours were the Group's objectives for the night, and it was those in the centre of the latter that were of interest to the 83 Squadron crews. Because of the close proximity of residential districts, extreme care was to be taken to avoid collateral damage, even if that meant dallying in the target area, while the Master Bomber assessed the accuracy of the marking. W/C Northrop was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty, as they departed Coningsby shortly after 22.00, and set off to join forces with ninety-nine other Lancasters and four Mosquitos. F/O Kennedy lost his H2S and Gee along with various other functions, and turned back while still over England. The others arrived to find the target under clear skies, with ground haze, but the two aiming points were well illuminated by the flare force, and the first markers went down fifty yards west of one and two hundred yards north-east of the other. W/C Jeudwine's VHF became unreliable, so W/C Tait assisted as required, and the operation proceeded more or less according to plan. The 83 Squadron crews delivered their flares from around 14,000 feet, before descending to around 8,000 feet to bomb between 00.36 and 01.01. W/C Jeudwine called a halt to bombing a minute later, as the haze and smoke prevented him from properly assessing its fall. It seemed that a number of loads had been dropped wide, one at 01.03, after the order to stop had been issued, particularly so. This left a couple of 83 Squadron crews with a full load, which they brought home. Despite spending longer than normal in the target area, no night fighters appeared, and all aircraft returned safely. Reconnaissance confirmed severe damage to the yards, but also revealed a few errant bombs to the west of the target.

5 Group joined forces with elements of 1, 3 and 8 Groups to raid Duisburg on the night of the 21/22<sup>nd</sup>, for the first attack on this city since the Ruhr campaign a year earlier. 83 Squadron did not take part, but fifteen crews attended briefing on the following day, to learn that Brunswick would be their target that night. W/C Jeudwine was to be Master Bomber, with W/C Northrop acting as one of his Deputies, and the rest of the squadron divided into three flare waves and one skymarker wave. S/L Dunn would be undertaking his first operation since joining the squadron, and was assigned to the flare force. They took off either side of 22.30, and set off to join up with 209 other Lancasters and ten Mosquitos, for entry into Fortress Europe over the Frisians. ND824 was shot up by a night fighter, forcing F/O Banfield to turn back at the Dutch border with northern Germany, jettisoning the J Cluster fire-raising bombs, one of which had been set on fire. At around the same time, ND963 blew up about fifteen miles to the south-west, flinging clear W/O Lane and three of his crew, who survived to join the ever-growing ranks of



*Fresh from the factory, ND924 leaves the Avro facility at Chadderton for final assembly at Woodford.*

captured squadron personnel. The others pushed on to find the target, not under clear skies as had been forecast, but eight-tenths cloud with tops between 8,000 and 15,000 feet, along with intermittent rain. Therein lay the one major flaw in the 5 Group marking method. Cloud prevented the flares from lighting up the target for the low-level Mosquitos, and also hid the spot fires from the main force high above. The first flares fell to the east of the city, and, as the Mosquitos were unable to mark, W/C Northrop, who had taken control from W/C Jeudwine, after the latter's VHF had failed, ordered a Wanganui attack to be substituted. Unfortunately, the main force had already begun to bomb on flares and H2S, and the attack became scattered, before seeming to improve a little towards the end. The 83 Squadron crews went in at 15,000 to 18,000 feet, making a number of runs to deliver flares, markers and bombs between 01.06 and 01.35, and all but W/O Lane and crew returned. Apart from F/O Banfield, W/C Northrop and S/L Dunn reported combats with night fighters, but no claims were made. A reconnaissance aircraft arrived an hour after the attack, when the skies had cleared, and most of the bombing was seen to have fallen outside of the city. It was a bad night for W/C Jeudwine, who, in addition to losing his VHF, had his bombs hang-up also.

The main target on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup> was Aachen, where the railway yards at Aachen-West and Rothe-Erde to the east provided the aiming points. Other smaller-scale operations were mounted also, including one by forty-four Lancasters and seven Mosquitos of 5 and 8 Groups against the Ford motor factory at Antwerp. W/C Tait was appointed Master Bomber for this operation, with W/C Deane as his Deputy, and nine others made up three waves of the flare force, while newcomers, F/O Hatcher and crew, acted as a supporter. They were all safely airborne by a little after 23.00, and reached the target to find good bombing conditions. The Oboe markers went in first at 00.30, and were followed by the first flares, which illuminated the aiming point for the low-level Mosquitos, and the first red spot fire fell within fifty yards of it. The Master Bomber called for it to be backed up, but the backing-up was two hundred yards wide, and required a correction order to be issued. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 15,000 feet with flares, and around 8,000 to 12,000 feet with bombs between 00.32 and 00.47. The first bombs appeared to be on target, but smoke hampered an assessment, and photo-reconnaissance revealed that the intended target was undamaged, and that most of the bombs had fallen on the General Motor Works nearby.

On the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>, the crews were in their aircraft and just two minutes from taking off for Stuttgart, when the unexpected cancellation came through. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, twelve crews assembled in the briefing room, to hear that ten of them would be attacking a railway junction and workshops at Nantes, a city a few miles inland from the Loire Estuary in western France, as part of a force of a hundred Lancasters and four Mosquitos. W/C Northrop was the senior 83 Squadron representative on the operation, and would act as Deputy to Master Bomber, W/C Tait. S/L Mitchell and W/O Erritt and their crews learned that they would be part of a force of sixty 5 Group Lancasters assigned to a gun battery at Morsalines on the Normandy coast, situated to the north of D-Day's planned Utah landing grounds for the American 1<sup>st</sup> Division, and would act as Deputy Master Bomber to W/C Jeudwine. These were just

two of numerous operations on the night, in which over eleven hundred sorties were dispatched. The Nantes contingent took-off first, either side of 22.30, on a night of favourable weather conditions with moonlight, and all reached the target area to find clear skies and unlimited visibility. W/C Northrop was the first to drop flares, after which, a Mosquito delivered a red spot fire onto the aiming point at 01.27. Accurate bombing then took place, which obscured the marker, and prevented another Mosquito from re-marking. The 83 Squadron flare force went in at 15,000 feet, before making a second run at around 10,000 feet to deliver their bombs, and they were over the target between 01.28 and 01.53. With the aiming point now totally obscured, and the target utterly destroyed, the Master Bomber called a halt to proceedings at 02.06, and half of the force returned home with their bombs. The Morsalines element had departed Coningsby at 23.00 for their destination, 180 miles to the north of Nantes, where favourable conditions also prevailed. The attack opened at 00.46, with a yellow Oboe TI, after which, the first illuminator flares went down, and the low-level Mosquitos put red spot fires within a hundred to two hundred yards of the aiming point between 00.52 and 00.54. W/O Erritt bombed from 8,000 feet at 01.01, two minutes after S/L Mitchell, but smoke and debris made it difficult to assess the outcome.

The build-up to the invasion continued on the following night, with further attacks on coastal batteries at three sites. Nine Lancasters from 83 Squadron were made ready to operate against a long-range, four-gun installation at St Martin de Varreville, which overlooked Utah Beach. W/C Tait was appointed as Master Bomber, and the crews were split equally among three waves of flare-droppers, with S/Ls Dunn and Mitchell the senior pilots on duty. They took off either side of 22.30, as part of a force of sixty-four Lancasters and four Mosquitos, and reached the target area under clear skies and in good visibility. S/L Dunn delivered flares at 00.16 from 10,000 feet, and then stood off to await further instructions, and it was not until 00.49 that he was given permission to bomb. The others from the squadron carried out their part in the operation between 00.17 and 00.55, also from around 10,000 feet, although the order to stop bombing and go home was issued at 00.49. They returned safely to report much smoke over the target, and photo-reconnaissance confirmed that three of the four guns had been destroyed.

The night of the 31<sup>st</sup> brought operations against railways, radio stations and coastal batteries, involving more than eight hundred sorties. Nine 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, to learn that their target was a railway junction at Saumur, a town in western France between Nantes to the west and Tours to the east, and that they would be part of a Lancaster force of eighty-two. W/C Tait was to be Master Bomber, and W/C Northrop was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty. They began taking off at 23.30, but F/L Eggins suffered severe icing problems, with resulting instrument failure, and, despite trying four times to climb through or over the cloud, he was forced to turn back. The others pressed on, and, as they left England behind, the weather conditions began to improve. At the target, the first flares went down on time, and were backed-up immediately, and the first red spot fire fell within seventy-five yards of the aiming point. The aiming point was clearly visible from miles away, and the 83 Squadron crews bombed from 10,000 to 15,000 feet between 02.17 and 02.32. Some of the bombing became a little careless, which put adjacent residential districts at risk, and Tait called a halt to proceedings before all had dropped their loads. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the target had been destroyed. W/C Johnson had now concluded his tour, and was posted from the squadron at the end of the month. The ORB states that, "the whole squadron regrets the departure of W/C A.S. Johnson DFC, DFM and bar, the jovial commander of B Flight. We all wish him the best of luck in his new position as chief instructor at 11 O.T.U." During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 128 sorties on fourteen operations, for the loss of four aircraft and crews.

## June 1944

Operations at the start of June were directed at targets that might, in some way, compromise the invasion, now just days away. Radio-listening, jamming and signals stations, coastal batteries, particularly those in the Pas-de-Calais area to maintain the deception, and railways, by means of which, enemy forces could be transported to the beachhead, would all come into the bomb sights, and 83 Squadron's first outing of the new month brought a return to Saumur on the night of the 1/2<sup>nd</sup>. Whether it was to attack the same railway junction as twenty-four hours earlier, or another, is not clear, but ten 83 Squadron crews were briefed, with W/C Deane the senior squadron pilot on duty, and first Deputy to Master Bomber, W/C Jeudwine. They took off either side of 22.30 to join up with forty-seven other Lancasters, and flew to within twenty miles of the target over ten-tenths cloud, which dispersed completely to leave clear skies and good visibility under a three-quarter moon. The flare force was almost superfluous in the conditions, but the first wave was called in to release from 15,000 feet at 01.08, and the first red spot fire from a marker Mosquito fell bang on the aiming point two minutes later. Bombing took place from 7,000 to 10,000 feet between 01.08 and 01.38, and, apart from a few scattered sticks to the north, and on an island in the Loire to the south, it seemed to be accurate. This was confirmed by photo-reconnaissance, which showed severe damage, with lines torn up.

The squadron was not involved in operations on the following night, and some of the more athletic members took part in a sports meeting during the afternoon. The first week of the month was not blessed with fine weather, and this was causing concern among those about to launch D-Day. The night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup> also seemed about to pass by without operational activity, until a late call came through, for a single crew to support an attack by over ninety 5 Group Lancasters on the important German signals station at Ferme-d'Urville, close to the invasion area. It had been attacked two nights earlier by 4 Group Halifaxes, but cloud and haze had spared it. P/O Meggeson took off at 23.00 to join up with ninety-five other Lancasters from the group, and, on approach to the target, observed what was taken to be a dummy red TI burning on the beach. The first Oboe red went down at 00.50, followed by a second one seven minutes later, and P/O Meggeson's green TIs were delivered with those from other aircraft shortly afterwards. All aircraft returned safely to report that the bombing was within a five hundred yard radius of the aiming point, and the signals station had ceased to exist.

The night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup> was D-Day Eve, and during the course of the night, a record number of more than twelve hundred sorties would be flown against coastal defences, and in support and diversionary operations. A new record for 83 Squadron of nineteen crews attended briefings, where no direct reference was made to the invasion, but, unusually, they were given strict altitudes at which to fly, and were told not to jettison bombs over the sea. They also learned that they would be among more than a thousand aircraft targeting coastal batteries overlooking the landing beaches. Their specific objective was at la Pernelle, the most north-westerly, and closest to Utah Beach, where the plan called for a flare force, to be led by W/C Northrop as Deputy Master Bomber and F/L Eggins as second Deputy, with four other crews. P/O Meggeson was to be the squadron's only backer-up, while the remaining twelve crews would be part of the main force. In all, 122 Lancasters and four Mosquitos were involved at this site, and the Coningsby contingent began taking off at 01.26, behind W/C Jeudwine, the Master Bomber. They arrived in the target area to find it under clear skies, one of only two aiming points on the night to be free of cloud, and the Oboe markers went down at 03.32, to be followed by the first flares thirty seconds later. Low-level Mosquitos backed up the Oboe markers at 03.36, and the first bombs were dropped

before W/C Jeudwine gave the order. The Master Bomber described the bombing as appalling, and called for a halt at 03.45, to allow re-marking to take place, but the main force, as usual, took no notice. Another red spot fire was delivered within thirty yards of the aiming point at 03.51, and the order was given to continue bombing at 03.57. Ten minutes later, after cloud had rolled in, W/C Jeudwine called a halt to proceedings, but some elements of the main force again took no notice. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target performing their respective briefed duties at 8,000 to 12,000 feet, between 03.31 and 04.04, the flare force members making two runs, and the bombers one, to drop their eleven 1,000 pounders and four 500 pounders. Any homeward-bound crews looking down through the occasional gaps in the clouds, were rewarded by the incredible sight of the greatest armada in history, ploughing its way sedately southwards towards the French coast.

The Command committed similar numbers to the battle on D-Day Night, to help establish beachheads through the bombing of communications targets at nine different locations. A record number of twenty 83 Squadron crews were briefed for two targets, fifteen for Caen, where S/L Mitchell was to act as Deputy Master Bomber to W/C Tait, and F/L McDonald as second Deputy, and five to join 97 Squadron at Argentan, some thirty miles to the south, where W/C Deane was to be Master Bomber. The latter element took off first, shortly before 23.30, and arrived in the target area to find cloudy conditions, and the nearest flares five miles away. Despite this, the illumination was adequate, and the three railway-related aiming points were identified for the low-level marking to proceed. The first marker was assessed as one hundred yards east, and this was backed up and corrected. The whole operation ran a little late, but W/C Deane called the main force down to below the 7,000 foot cloud base, and, apart from a few scattered sticks, the bombs fell where intended. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 2,500 to 5,500 feet between 01.11 and 01.21, after orbiting, while W/C Deane assessed the accuracy of the marking, and all returned safely to report a concentrated attack.

The Caen contingent took off either side of 00.30, and among them was F/L Foote, who had returned to start his second tour. They also encountered cloud as they approached the target, and whether or not that was responsible, W/C Tait did not see any Oboe markers, and suspected that none was delivered. However, the illumination was good, and the low-level marking of the road bridge was accomplished punctually and largely accurately, despite smoke drifting across from a fire to the north of the town. The twelve 83 Squadron crews of the illuminator force delivered their flares from 12,000 feet, before joining their supporter colleagues at between 3,500 and 6,000 feet for a bombing run, and were over the target between 02.32 and 02.59. All but one returned safely to report a concentrated attack, which had cost six Lancasters, caused largely by the need to orbit while the markers were assessed, and then having to fly at just a few thousand feet over masses of enemy armour. There were also some light flak batteries on an airfield to the west, which may have come into play. 83 Squadron's ND467 failed to return, after crashing in the target area, and F/O Kennedy RNZAF died with all but his rear gunner, who ultimately evaded capture.

The squadron was on stand-by all day on the 7<sup>th</sup>, and again for much of the 8<sup>th</sup>, until an operations order came through in the late afternoon for an attack on a railway at Pontaubault, a town at the mouth of the Selune River in the Gulf of St Malo, south-west of the beachhead. This was one of five similar targets to receive attention, to prevent enemy reinforcements from reaching the battle area. W/C Jeudwine was to act as Master Bomber in a Mosquito, and direct the efforts of three other Mosquitos and fifty-two Lancasters, and W/C Deane was the senior pilot on duty among the 83 Squadron contingent of seven.

While this operation was in progress, another of great significance would be taking place 125 miles to the south at the Saumur railway tunnel, for which four 83 Squadron crews would provide the illumination. 617 Squadron was about to drop the first Barnes Wallis-designed 12,000lb Tallboy earthquake bombs, in a hurriedly arranged operation to prevent the passage through the tunnel by train of a Panzer unit. The Pontaubault element got away first, either side of 22.30, while F/Ls McDonald and Pidding, F/O Drinkall and W/O Erritt followed close on their heels, and were airborne by 23.00 with further to fly. There was eight-tenths cloud over the French coast, with a base at around 8,000 feet, and another thin layer lower down. W/C Deane reported the flares going down at 00.35, (H-10), but they were a little too far to the west, and reserves were called in. The first red spot fire went down at H-8, and the main force was called down to between 4,000 and 6,000 feet, where some began to bomb before the order was given, and while backing-up was still in progress. W/C Deane made a number of dummy runs before dropping his twelve 500 pounders at 01.09, and the others from the squadron bombed between 00.44 and 01.00, before returning home confident that their efforts had counted.

Meanwhile, at Saumur, ten-tenths cloud was encountered, with a base at 9,000 feet, but good visibility below, and the first flares were delivered at 01.57. Cheshire complained that they were dropped too far to the south and the east, and called for more at 02.06. In the illumination from these, he delivered his spot fires, after diving onto the southern aiming point from 3,000 feet down to 500 feet. Sometime later, F/L Fawke dropped three red spot fires by Mosquito onto the northern end of the tunnel, where the bridge was situated, and had time to witness the bombing of Cheshire's markers before his fuel situation demanded he turn for home. Cheshire reported copious amounts of smoke as a result of the bombing, but considered that further backing up would not improve the situation. He observed 50% of the bombs falling within a hundred yards of the markers, with just one or two very wide of the mark. S/L Les Munro, Cheshire's deputy flying in a Lancaster, recorded that the markers were in the cutting, and that most of the bombs fell around them, and he saw one direct hit. A direct hit on the bridge was reported by one crew, and another thought the last three bombs of their stick fell directly onto it. One direct hit was scored on the tunnel, which blew a hole in the roof, and, it was hoped that this might have brought tons of earth crashing down onto the track. Three of the 83 Squadron crews bombed between 02.16 and 02.27, but F/O Drinkall had a defective bomb sight, and brought his stores home. Photographic reconnaissance showed an 85-foot diameter crater in the roof of the tunnel, and a total of seventeen others of varying dimensions within 220 yards of the southern entrance. The tracks were cut around one hundred yards from this entrance, while a near miss on a road/rail intersection some distance away, had cut all tracks and damaged the road. There was also a large crater blocking a road 180 yards east of the northern entrance.

The squadron did not participate in a 5 Group attack on a railway junction at Etampes on the night of the 9/10<sup>th</sup>, when over four hundred houses were destroyed in the process, while elements from the other Groups bombed airfields south of the beachhead. Railway targets dominated on the night of the 10/11<sup>th</sup>, and marshalling yards and a junction at Orleans, some seventy miles south of Paris, were assigned to a 5 Group force of 108 Lancasters and four Mosquitos. 83 Squadron provided eight Lancasters, with the newly-promoted S/L Eggins as Deputy to W/C Tait, and S/L Dunn second Deputy. F/O McLean led them away at 22.10, and the others were off the ground within ten minutes and heading for the Sussex coast. They arrived in the target area to find clear skies with ground haze, and the flare force went in at 7,000 to 15,000 feet between 00.31 and 00.38. The low-level marking went according to plan, after

which, the squadron element bombed from 4,300 to 8,000 feet between 00.42 and 00.49, and returned to report that bombing had been concentrated around the markers.

The Group had a night off before returning to operations on the 12<sup>th</sup>, to participate in attacks on communications targets at six locations. 5 Group dispatched two forces of equal size to Caen and Poitiers, the latter in western France, where the main railway station was the specific target. 112 Lancasters and four Mosquitos were detailed, but only F/L Meggeson was called to arms from 83 Squadron, and he took off at 22.29, delivered his flares at 01.42, and his bombs six minutes later, before returning to confirm a highly accurate and concentrated attack. Photo-reconnaissance revealed the Paris to Bordeaux line to have been cut in seven places. This was the night on which a new oil campaign began at Gelsenkirchen, at the hands of three hundred aircraft of 1, 3 and 8 Groups, and all production at the Nordstern plant was halted for several weeks. The first daylight operation since the departure of 2 Group from Bomber Command a year earlier, was mounted against E-Boats at Le Havre on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup>, by over two hundred Lancasters and Mosquitos drawn from 1, 3, 5 and 8 Groups. The operation was highly effective in vastly reducing the numbers of fast, light craft available to harass Allied shipping supplying the beachhead.

Later that night, 337 aircraft from 4, 5 and 8 Groups were sent against enemy troop and vehicle concentrations at Aunay-sur-Odon and Evrecy. The former, situated twenty miles south-west of Caen, was assigned to 5 Group, for which 83 Squadron contributed nine aircraft to an overall force of 214 Lancasters and five Mosquitos. W/C Northrop was to be Deputy Master Bomber to W/C Jeudwine, who would be in a Mosquito, with S/L Mitchell second Deputy, and they took off either side of 22.15. The weather was generally clear with some low cloud, but this did not hamper the marking process, which proceeded punctually and accurately. W/C Northrop made four passes over the target, at 00.30 at 8,000 feet, 00.41 at 10,000 feet, and at 00.54 and 01.00 at 11,000 feet, dropping clusters of flares on the first two, green TIs on the third and red TIs on the fourth. Four of the 83 Squadron crews were carrying five 1,000 pounder each, which were delivered from 9,000 to 10,000 feet between 00.43 and 00.56, and all returned safely from what was a very effective operation. Boulogne was given the same treatment as le Havre on the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup>, and, while the operation succeeded in destroying many enemy craft, the town also suffered extensive damage. 83 Squadron was not involved, and now embarked on a week of non-operational activities. The 54 Base sports day was held on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and involved 83 Squadron from Coningsby, 106 Squadron from Metheringham, and 617 and 627 Squadrons from Woodhall Spa. 617 Squadron was favourite to lift the trophy, but in a closely-contested affair, in which every point was vital to the outcome, 83 Squadron gained a narrow victory. The month's second new campaign, against flying bomb launching and storage sites, began on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, and this would dominate proceedings for the next two months. 5 Group sent a contingent on this night, and then had little to do until becoming involved in the oil campaign.

It was on midsummer's night that two largely 5 Group forces were despatched to carry out simultaneous attacks on synthetic oil refineries at Wesseling, on the southern fringe of Cologne, and Scholven-Buer on the northern edge of Gelsenkirchen. 83 Squadron briefed ten crews for the former, and they would be part of an overall force of 128 Lancasters and six Mosquitos from 5 Group, and five ABC Lancasters of 1 Group's 101 Squadron. W/C Tait was to act as Master Bomber, with W/C Deane leading the squadron contingent, supported by S/L Dunn. W/C Deane took off at 23.16, closely followed by the others, and they headed towards what would develop into one of 5 Group's blackest nights. W/C Deane noted night

fighter activity as soon as the Dutch coast was crossed, and saw many combats. He arrived in the target area expecting to find clear skies, and conditions ideal for the 5 Group low-level marking method, but found, instead, ten-tenths low cloud and accurate predicted heavy flak. This meant that low-level marking was not an option, and faced with this situation, W/C Tait ordered a blind attack, forcing the Lancaster crews to bomb on H2S alone. W/C Deane called up his two Deputy Master Bombers at 01.32, but S/L Dunn did not respond. At 01.37, on his second run, W/C Deane released red TIs from 16,500 feet, after which, he observed three red glows on the ground, two close together, including his own, and another a mile to the south-east. He then called W/C Tait by VHF and W/T, but could not raise him, and, assuming that he was out of action, took control himself at 01.39. Convinced of the accuracy of his marker, he called the main force to aim for it, but recognised that confusion had already taken hold. This was caused by a number of factors, a bomber crashing and creating an orange glow, a backer-up releasing green TIs on the glow of searchlights, and the widely-spaced original reds. The bombing became very scattered, and widely dispersed among the various reference points visible through the clouds, but W/C Deane believed the main weight fell on the original markers, which, in his view, were the most accurate. A large explosion at 01.46 was observed by a number of crews.

W/C Deane left the target at H+10, and, in deference to the abundance of night fighters, decided to hit the deck, as he had done on return from Mailly-le-Camp in May. He flew back low over France, having positioned his crew at every vantage point to warn of ground obstacles. When the others returned, they told stories of a torrid time, particularly on the way out. P/O Hegarty was attacked by a night fighter as he crossed the Dutch coast over the Maas Estuary, and, unknown to the crew, the electrical circuitry to the bomb release gear was severed. This was only discovered over the target, when the bomb doors were opened to release the flares, and the bombing panel failed to light up. They were heavily engaged by flak at this time, and hit, and while orbiting in preparation to attempt a bombing run, were hit again. On the second run the bomb doors refused to open, even after pumping, so they set course for home and were hit again by flak in the starboard wing, when passing north of Aachen. Weaving pushed them off track, and they were attacked by a BF110 north of Antwerp, which knocked out an engine, smashed all navigational and communications equipment and some flying instruments, along with the Perspex in the mid-upper turret and the astrodome, and wounded the navigator and wireless operator. Somehow, they made it to the emergency landing strip at Woodbridge, on the Suffolk coast, where only one wheel locked down, and that eventually collapsed. F/O Saunders and crew endured a running battle with enemy fighters for much of the way to the target, including a JU88, which fired rockets at them, but the gunners retaliated, and claimed their assailant as damaged.

The enemy succeeded in hacking down thirty-seven Lancasters, 27.8% of those dispatched, and 44, 49, 57 and 619 Squadrons each lost six aircraft. 83 Squadron suffered two casualties, one of them JB180, which was shot down in the target area with no survivors from the crew of S/L Dunn DFC. It was a highly experienced crew, which included two other holders of the DFC and one of the DFM. ND551 exploded, following an attack by a night fighter over Holland when outbound, and crashed in open country between Eindhoven and the Belgian frontier. As sometimes happened on such occasions, the pilot alone of his crew was catapulted into space to survive. After successfully evading capture for a few weeks, F/L Walker DFC, MiD, did eventually fall into the hands of the Gestapo, who subsequently murdered him at Tilburg on July the 9<sup>th</sup>. Every member of his crew had been decorated, either with the DFC or DFM. There was not even the consolation of a successful outcome, after photo-reconnaissance revealed little new damage, and any loss of production was quickly made up. Cloud had also interfered

with the Scholven operation, but the presence of some 8 Group aircraft allowed Oboe skymarking to be employed, and the operation was a little more successful than Wesseling, at a cost of eight Lancasters.

83 Squadron entered the flying bomb campaign on the night of the 24/25<sup>th</sup>, for which eleven crews were briefed, six to attack Pommereval, south-east of Dieppe, and four Prouville, east of Abbeville. W/C Tait was Master Bomber at the former, but there were no senior pilots on duty among the squadron element. It was a night of heavy activity, with 739 aircraft involved in attacks on seven separate sites. The Pommereval contingent took off first from Coningsby to join up with the other ninety-five Lancasters and four Mosquitos, and were all safely airborne before 22.30. The others, with less distance to travel, were away just before 23.00, as part of a force of 103 Lancasters and four Mosquitos. Weather conditions were favourable as W/C Tait approached the target, and the Oboe marker went down on time at 23.50, but was five hundred yards south of the aiming point. Another was much closer, and the flare force illuminated it for the low-level Mosquitos, before the main force came in and concentrated the bombing around the aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews delivered their flares from 12,000 feet between 23.52 and 23.57, and those with bombs on board, made a second run from 9,000 to 11,000 feet at 00.06. At Prouville, there were clear skies with ground haze, but the main problem was the presence of night fighters, searchlight glare and flak. The Oboe marking was punctual, but the low-level Mosquitos were hampered by the enemy activity, and this delayed the bombing while the aiming point was sought out. Ultimately, all of the illuminator flares were used, and the backing up of the markers had to be carried out on instruments. Some main force crews began to bomb ahead of the markers, and the whole affair was somewhat chaotic. The 83 Squadron quartet was each carrying eighteen 500 pounders, two in every load with a 36-hour delay fuse, and these were delivered from 12,500 to 14,100 feet between 00.36 and 00.41. The raid was scattered and largely ineffective, and cost thirteen Lancasters, and there were also four missing from Pommereval, although all from 83 Squadron returned safely.

The final operation of the month for 83 Squadron took place on the night of the 27/28<sup>th</sup>, when another large effort by 721 aircraft was directed at six flying bomb sites. Nine crews were briefed at Coningsby to attack Vitry-le-Francoise, a few miles to the north-west of St Dizier, in company with ninety-four other Lancasters and four Mosquitos. They took off either side of 22.00, and arrived in the target area to find five-tenths cloud between 5,000 and 8,000 feet. The initial markers were well-placed, but quickly became obscured by smoke before they could be backed up, and re-marking proved impossible. As a result, the attack became somewhat chaotic and the bombing scattered, and the Master Bomber cancelled the final wave of bombers. F/Ls McDonald and Banfield, who were not carrying bombs, brought their flares and TIs home, after orbiting awaiting instructions, and making a number of passes across the target. Some of those with bombs on board delivered them from 6,000 to 8,000 feet between 01.47 and 01.54, but the outcome was inconclusive. There was a well-earned DFC for W/C Northrop during the month in which 113 sorties were dispatched on fourteen operations, for the loss of three Lancasters and crews.

## July 1944

July would bring an even heavier involvement in the campaign against flying bomb sites, but 83 Squadron spent the first week engaged mostly in sporting activities, and preparing for operations, which were ultimately scrubbed. A flying bomb storage facility in caves at St Leu d'Esserent, north of Paris, formerly used to grow mushrooms, received the first of a number of attacks by 5 Group on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup>, when a Tallboy raid was delivered by 617 Squadron, and followed up by other elements, predominantly from 5 Group. The bombing was accurate, but enemy night fighters brought down thirteen Lancasters, and this would continue to be a dangerous destination. S/L Mitchell was posted from the squadron to 62 Base on the 6<sup>th</sup> at the end of his tour, and his presence would be missed. The operation at St Leu d'Esserent was to be repeated on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, and provided the squadron with its first outing of the new month. A force of 208 Lancasters and thirteen Mosquitos included nine of the former from 83 Squadron, and they would be led by S/L Eggins, with F/L Pidding undertaking the final operation of his tour. They took off either side of 22.45, and arrived in the target area to find medium-level cloud, which prevented the moonlight from providing illumination. Below the cloud level the visibility was good, and S/L Eggins watched the Oboe yellow TI fall at 01.06, to be followed by the first stick of flares four minutes later. The first red spot fire went down at 01.08, a hundred yards south of the aiming point, but in line with the direction of the bombing run, and backing-up by red and green TIs continued until 01.13. The marking was assessed as sufficiently accurate to call in the main force at 01.15, and some of the 83 Squadron Lancasters made two runs, firstly to deliver flares and then the bombs. Most were carrying five 1,000 pounders each, some of them containing a six hour delayed fuse, and they were delivered from around 15,000 feet between 01.17 and 01.20. The Master Bomber's VHF was indistinct, so S/L Eggins assumed control, and sent the force home at 01.25. Twenty-nine Lancasters and two Mosquitos failed to return, after night fighters got amongst them, and this represented 14% of the force. 83 Squadron's ND966 crashed about twenty-five miles west of Paris, presumably on the way home, killing F/O Griffiths DFC and four of his crew. The wireless operator and mid-upper gunner survived, and the latter evaded capture. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that both ends of the tunnel complex had collapsed, as had a section in the middle, and the approach road and rail links were heavily cratered and blocked.

A 1 Group attack on the night of the 12/13<sup>th</sup>, against a railway junction at Revigny, a hundred miles east of Paris, had been thwarted by cloud, and abandoned with the loss of ten Lancasters. A second attempt was scheduled for the 14/15<sup>th</sup>, the night on which 83 Squadron returned to the fray after a week away from operations. 5 Group was assigned to the previously-attacked marshalling yards at Villeneuve-St-Georges on the southern edge of Paris, for which 83 Squadron briefed eleven crews, with W/C Northrop acting as Deputy to W/C Jeudwine, who would be flying in an American P38 Lightning. F/L Drinkall led them away at 22.00, to join up with a hundred other Lancasters and six Mosquitos, and they arrived in the target area to find a large amount of cloud with a base at 5,000 feet, but clear conditions below. W/C Jeudwine was having compass trouble, and would arrive on target twelve minutes late, so contacted W/C Northrop to take matters in hand. Joe could clearly see the target, and judged the Oboe marker to be within fifty yards. The TIs all went down within the yards, and the operation appeared to be proceeding smoothly and precisely according to plan. Bombing took place from 15,000 feet between 01.36 and 01.50, and some of it hit the yards, but a proportion also fell outside to the east. Meanwhile, ground haze forced the Revigny raid by 1 Group to be abandoned again before any bombing could take place, and this time seven Lancasters were lost for no gain. It would fall to 5 Group to finish the job a few nights hence.

The 16<sup>th</sup> was devoted to training exercises, and a cricket match in the afternoon between 83 and 617 Squadrons. F/O Hegarty RAAF and crew took off late to carry out a night bombing exercise, and were just a few minutes out, when all four engines failed at 23.48. ND464 crashed three miles south-east of Coningsby, and the bodies of the pilot and two others were found in the wreckage. Thankfully, the rest of the crew had managed to take to their parachutes, and all landed safely, but there was great sadness at the loss of Hegarty, who had made a name for himself as a first rate blind marker and “press-on” type. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, W/C Northrop bade farewell to Coningsby, and returned to 8 Group, much to the pleasure of AVM Bennett, who had been trying unsuccessfully for some time to wrest him from the grasp of AVM Cochrane. He was posted to Graveley in Hertfordshire, to assume command of 692 Squadron, a Mosquito unit of 8 Group’s Light Night Striking Force, a post he would hold until the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1945, after which, he would become Chief Flying Instructor at the Pathfinder Training Unit at Warboys.

At dawn on the 18<sup>th</sup>, over nine hundred aircraft were involved in tactical support of the British Second Army, which was about to launch an armoured break out under Operation Goodwood. Five fortified villages to the east of Caen were the targets for RAF and American forces, and 5,000 of the 6,000 tons of bombs delivered fell from RAF aircraft. 83 Squadron did not take part, and the men occupied themselves with sporting activities, until orders came through at teatime for an operation that night. Ten crews attended briefing, to learn that they would be going to Revigny as part of a force of 115 aircraft, to try to rectify the expensive 1 Group failures of the past week. It was to be a busy night of operations, which included another railway and two oil targets, along with support and diversionary activities involving a total of 972 sorties. They were all safely airborne just before 23.00, with F/L Saunders acting as second Deputy Master Bomber, and arrived in the target area to find clear skies but ground haze. This target continued to present problems, beginning with the first wave of flares, delivered at about 01.30, which were too far to the east. More flares were ordered, and the bombing was put back by five minutes, while Wanganui markers were dropped by Mosquito, and the situation was assessed. The whole attack seemed chaotic, and the use of many delayed-action bombs, meant that it was difficult to see what was happening on the ground. The 83 Squadron crews were over the target at 10,000 to 15,000 feet between 01.30 and 01.49, and made a number of runs to carry out their assigned tasks. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the operation had been successful in cutting the railway link to the battle front, but had cost twenty-four Lancasters, 22% of those dispatched, although none from 83 Squadron.

On the following evening, only F/Ls Banfield and Meggeson were required to operate, as part of a force of 103 Lancasters and two Mosquitos bound for a flying bomb storage site at Thiverny, just north of St Leu d’Esserent. The attack was to take place in daylight, and the 83 Squadron duo were airborne shortly after 19.30. The weather was clear, but ground haze made identification of the aiming point difficult, while communications problems added to F/L Banfield’s frustrations. He was unable to raise the Master Bomber to obtain instructions, and reported the Oboe marking to be late. The bombing started at around 21.29, and was very scattered, and F/L Banfield was among the first to let his go, more in hope than in expectation. F/L Meggeson hung around, but ultimately decided it was too late to bomb, and jettisoned his 1,000 pounds safe.

In preparation for a night of heavy activity on the 20/21<sup>st</sup>, against oil, flying bomb and railway targets, briefings took place at Coningsby for two operations, the main one at Wizernes, the site of a huge construction works dedicated to V-Weapon storage, while a spoof attack went ahead against Alost

marshalling yards (*unable to find location*), in support of the night's largest operation, which was to be directed at a triangular junction and marshalling yards at Courtrai in north-eastern France. Eight crews were assigned to Wizernes, located twenty-five miles south-east of Calais, where they were to illuminate the target for 617 Squadron to attack it with Tallboys. They were all in the air by a little after 23.30, and arrived in the target area to encounter eight to ten-tenths low cloud with a base at 500 feet, and despite the deployment of seventy-two clusters of seven-inch flares, it proved impossible to locate and mark the target, and no bombing took place. Meanwhile, at Alost, F/L Drinkall, F/O Jennings and W/O Birdling and three Lancaster crews from another squadron dropped flares from 15,000 feet, and were followed in by Mosquitos at low-level, to give the impression of a large-scale raid. Afterwards, they joined in the bombing at Courtrai, and came home with the main bomber stream.

After an uneventful morning on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, orders came through for fourteen Lancasters to be bombed up and flown down to Wyton to operate with 8 Group. The briefing would take place at Wyton, where the crews learned that Kiel was to be the target for a force of more than six hundred aircraft. It would be the first time for two months that the bomber force had gone to Germany in numbers. S/L Eggins was the senior pilot on duty as the last of the 83 Squadron element left the ground shortly after 22.30, and headed for the rendezvous point, behind an elaborate RCM screen laid on by 100 Group. This enabled the force to appear suddenly and unexpectedly in Kiel airspace, leaving the enemy controller confused and unable to bring his night fighter resources to bear. F/L Verran did not quite make it that far, after his starboard-outer engine seized up fifty miles out from the west coast of Denmark, and forced him to turn back at 00.25. Kiel was covered by a veil of thin cloud with tops at 4,000 feet, and a skymarking plan was put into action, which enabled the main force to bomb on the glow, first of the flares, and then of fires. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 15,000 to 18,000 feet between 01.13 and 01.26, and contributed to the town's most destructive raid of the war, which inflicted heavy damage on the port and shipyards, and cut off water supplies for three days and gas for three weeks. Many delayed-action bombs had been dropped, and these continued to cause problems for some time. Some crews landed back at Wyton, and were still there when the time came to take-off for their next operation.

Briefings took place on the 24<sup>th</sup>, for what would be the first of a series of three raids in five nights on Stuttgart. Thirteen 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready at Coningsby and Wyton, to join an overall force of 614 Lancasters and Halifaxes. They began taking off shortly after 22.00, with S/L Eggins the senior pilot on duty, but F/L McLean got as far as Hampshire, before engine trouble forced him to turn back. The others reached the target to find nine to ten-tenths cloud cover with tops at around 7,000 feet, and it was necessary to employ Wanganui flares to mark the target. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from an average of 18,000 feet, between 01.38 and 01.52, and all but one returned fairly satisfied with the outcome in view of the conditions, although it was impossible to make an accurate assessment. ND922 failed to return home with the eight man crew captained by the squadron's most experienced primary visual marker, F/L Banfield DFC RAAF, and there were no survivors. This was one of twenty-one missing aircraft, and crashed at 01.45, about thirty miles south of the target after bombing. Most again landed at Wyton, and were told to return to Coningsby on the following day, once it was clear that they would not be involved in that night's return to Stuttgart.

Orders came through at teatime on the 26<sup>th</sup>, for an operation by the group against railway yards at Givors, just south of Lyon in eastern France. 178 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos were made ready, but contradictory entries in the 83 Squadron ORB make it difficult to work out how many the squadron

dispatched. The summary section states fifteen aircraft represented the squadron, four of which turned back early because of severe icing conditions. The detail section, however, lists only ten crews taking off between 20.58 and 21.10, two of which abandoned their sorties. Bad weather had been anticipated, but the conditions during the outward leg over France were even worse than forecast, with icing and electrical storms, and fourteen aircraft turned back in all. F/O Kelly abandoned his sortie at 01.05, when, according to his co-ordinates, he was at 8,000 feet a hundred miles west of the target, and F/O Young was apparently even further west at 4,000 feet, but the squadron record for this operation is unreliable. The flare force element from the squadron made a number of runs across the target, between 01.42 and 02.07, and orbited in between, awaiting instructions. There were occasional glimpses of the ground, but the Master Bomber was experiencing great difficulty in getting Mosquito TIs onto the two aiming points. Eventually, one of the Deputies managed to put a green TI onto the southern aiming point, and the main force began to bomb at around 02.00. The attack was scattered, but photo-reconnaissance revealed that the tracks to the north of the junction were closed, and some damage was evident to the locomotive sheds. It was a sad night for 83 Squadron, when it became clear that ND856 would not be returning home with the crew of S/L Eggins. The Lancaster crashed somewhere deep inside France, killing all on board, among whom were the proud bearers of a DSO, five DFCs and a DFM. The navigator, acting W/C "Georgy" Georgeson, DSO, DFC, was normally in the crew of W/C Deane, who was away on leave, and had issued strict instructions to him not to fly, but S/L Tommy Blair had reported sick, and good-natured "Georgy" had volunteered to replace him.

The squadron spent the next few nights at home, and was not called into action for the third and final Stuttgart operation on the 28/29<sup>th</sup>, when Hamburg was also targeted. In contrast to the squadron's recent experience, France was blessed with clear skies and bright moonlight for the flight out to southern Germany, and night fighters took full advantage to help bring down thirty-nine Lancasters. These had to be added to twenty-two missing from Hamburg, as night fighters infiltrated the bomber stream on the way home, but, as over eleven hundred sorties had been dispatched on the night's various operations, the loss of sixty-one represented a sustainable 5.4%. Over the three raids, Stuttgart's central districts had been reduced to rubble, most of its public and cultural buildings had been destroyed, and over eleven hundred people had lost their lives.

W/C Deane returned from leave to learn of the loss of his friend, and immediately put himself on the Order of Battle. He had lost his navigator, and S/L Tommy Blair had lost his crew, so it seemed fitting that they should team up for this breakfast-time attack on enemy positions facing largely American ground forces in the Villers-Bocage and Caumont area, south-west of Caen. The aiming point for the six 83 Squadron Lancasters, among a total 5 Group force of 184 Lancasters and a Mosquito, was at Cahagnes. The station commander, G/C "Tiny" Evans-Evans, desperately wanted to be "one of the boys" and get in on the action, and commandeered the crew of F/L Meggeson for this operation. Just how much say F/L Meggeson or his crew had in the matter is unknown, and Meggeson was probably on leave, but there was almost certainly a degree of trepidation among the occupants of ND930, as it raced towards lift-off. Evans-Evans was a large man, in his early forties, and too much time behind a desk had combined with good living to provide him with an expansive girth, which must have made access to a Lancaster cockpit problematic. He had commanded 3 Group's 115 Squadron for a spell back in the Wellington days of 1941, but his experience on operations in Lancasters was limited to say the least. While his desire to face the enemy head-on was commendable, it was ill-advised, and not only would it cost him his life in February 1945, but also the lives of all but one of his highly experienced crew. On

this morning, however, he took off at 05.51, and was two minutes from the target when the Master Bomber aborted the operation at 07.59, and sent everyone home. He had found ten-tenths cloud with a base at around 3,500 feet, which prevented any markers from being seen, and only six aircraft bombed before he called a halt. On return, both Deane and Evans-Evans expressed the belief that the Master Bomber should have called the crews down to below the cloud level, from where an accurate attack could have been made.

On the following day, six crews were called to briefing for another daylight operation, this time in the evening, against a flying bomb storage tunnel at Rilly-la-Montagne, some five miles south of Reims. A 5 Group force of ninety-seven Lancasters and three Mosquitos included sixteen Lancasters of 617 Squadron, led by its recently appointed successor to Cheshire, W/C James "Willie" Tait. They would be carrying Tallboys to use against the tunnel entrances, while the main force tore up the approach road and rail links with conventional bombs. The 83 Squadron crews, all of eight men, were safely airborne by 17.34, and formed into two vics, one at 15,000 and the other at 18,000 feet, to lead the force to the target under a fighter escort. Weather conditions at the target were clear, and it could be identified visually, but once the tallboys went down, dust and smoke made it difficult to assess the outcome, and the use of delayed fuses added to that problem. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from their approach altitudes between 20.18 and 20.21, and it was at the latter time that F/O Jupp reported a Lancaster breaking up and going down over the target, with three parachutes plainly visible. This was the 617 Squadron Lancaster of F/L Bill Reid VC, which had been hit by bombs from above. He was one of two survivors, who were taken into captivity. The risk of falling victim to bombs from above was ever present, and F/L Foote watched a Tallboy pass within two hundred yards of his starboard wing tip. Photo-reconnaissance confirmed that both tunnel entrances had caved in, after direct hits or near misses from Tallboys, and that the approaches were well-cratered. The 83 Squadron participants enjoyed this operation, and looked forward to many more of a similar nature. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched fourteen day and eighty-four night sorties on eleven operations, and lost four aircraft, three crews and a pilot.

## August 1944

The squadron's losses since the harrowing events of January had been steady but relatively light, but August would see them soar again to almost rival those at the start of the year. The main focus of operations for the first half of the month would remain on flying bomb sites and fuel dumps, and daylight operations would be mounted on each of the first six days. A source of joy for 83 Squadron, was the return on the 1<sup>st</sup> of S/L Neville Sparks from the PRU at Morecambe. It will be recalled that he had been shot down in early May during the Maily-le-Camp operation, and had evaded capture. W/C Deane was rewarded at this time for his outstanding leadership of the squadron with promotion to acting group captain. Over seven hundred aircraft were committed to operations against numerous flying bomb-related sites on the afternoon of the 1<sup>st</sup>, although there were serious doubts about the weather conditions, which were poor over England. Six 83 Squadron crews were briefed to take part in an attack on a target at la Breteque, situated between Rouen and the coast, for which a total of fifty-three 5 Group Lancasters was made ready. F/L Meggeson was to lead the formation, with F/Ls Kelly and McLean in close attendance, while three other crews flew with the main force. They were in the air by 16.30, and, although conditions became clear over the Channel, the target was found to be under nine-tenths cloud. As a Deputy Master Bomber, F/L Meggeson took the decision upon himself to turn back, and almost at the same time, 18.33, received a confirmatory call by VHF from the Master Bomber.

On return, F/L Kelly had a few issues to get off his chest. *“EA-T (49 Sqdn) came up and got between me and the formation leader, and flew along about six feet from my port wing, same level, until I waved him away. Had to wave him away several times. The same aircraft afterwards flew ahead 100 yards, same level, and his slipstream was dangerous. Three more, EA-P, EA-A and ZN-T (106 Sqdn) persisted in flying just ahead of the formation, and their slipstream made formation-keeping difficult and dangerous. There was also another, possibly LE-F (630 Sqdn) who did the same. At one time about half the force was ahead of the leaders. Over the target four to eight guns were firing, and aircraft began to weave as if over a target like Berlin. One aircraft dropped its bombs<sup>10</sup> about one mile from the French coast on the way out on tracks of a village. A direct hit right in middle of village.”* F/L Kelly also had to contend with a splintered wind screen courtesy of the flak.

On the following afternoon, 5 Group contributed 194 Lancasters, two Mosquitos and a P38 Lightning to operations by 394 aircraft against one flying bomb launching and three supply sites. Six 83 Squadron crews were briefed for a storage site at Trossy-St-Maximin, situated north of Paris and close to St-Leu d'Esserent. They were part of a heavy force of ninety-four Lancasters, and took off either side of 14.15, carrying a mix of 1,000 and 500 pounders, some with a delay fuse of up to thirty-six hours. They found three to seven-tenths patchy cloud over the target, but the Oboe proximity markers went down on time, and were backed up with TIs. Once the bombing started, the defences opened up with accurate flak, but the formation passed over the aiming point and plastered it. The first vic of 83 Squadron crews bombed from 15,000 feet at 17.01, and the second from 18,000 feet a minute later, and the impression of a successful attack was confirmed later by photo-reconnaissance.

Despite the effectiveness of the operation, the same site was included among targets for more than eleven hundred aircraft on the following day. The reason given to the seven 83 Squadron crews at

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<sup>10</sup> I.e. jettisoned the delayed-fuse 1,000 pounder.

briefing was that the importance of the site to the Third Reich demanded that no building be left intact, and one or two may have escaped damage during the previous day's attack. S/L Sparks was the senior pilot on duty, as they began taking off shortly before noon to join up with a further 180 Lancasters from the group. They were to attack about fifteen minutes after 1 Group, and as they reached the target, smoke could be seen rising to 8,000 feet, this combining with a fierce flak defence to challenge the crews. The 83 Squadron participants bombed from 16,000 to 18,700 feet between 14.31 and 14.33, prevented by the smoke from seeing the markers, but F/L McLean did see two aircraft go straight down, without being on fire. F/L Foote lost an engine to flak, and picked up further assorted damage to the front turret, fuselage and starboard wing, and three others from the squadron brought back bent and torn Lancasters. On return, F/O Edgar made the point that most crews departed the target area with obscene haste, leaving the "lame ducks", like F/L Foote, with no protection. F/L Foote had asked the Master Bomber to reduce the speed of the returning stream to allow him to keep up, and the Master Bomber complied, although many crews ignored his calls. Photo-reconnaissance was unable to confirm that the site had been obliterated, and it would need to be attacked again. This would happen on the 4<sup>th</sup>, in the absence of 83 Squadron, which spent the day at home, and welcomed the arrival of the very experienced S/L Williams from 106 Squadron at Metheringham.

The squadron was back in action on the following morning, with eight crews heading out for St-Leu d'Esserent, as part of an overall 5 Group contribution of 189 Lancasters and a Mosquito. S/L Sparks was the senior pilot on duty, as they took off either side of 10.30, and headed towards a target partly



*The V1 was a major threat to Southern England which required a robust response by Bomber Command. German troops are shown here manoeuvring a flying bomb in preparation for launch.*

protected by four to five-tenths patchy cloud. This prevented the Master Bomber from picking up the aiming point until thirty seconds from it, which meant a very late course change to bring the bombers into position. This was achieved, however, although smoke and cloud hid the markers from view, and most crews picked up the aiming point by means of ground features. The 83 Squadron crews bombed from 17,500 to 18,000 feet at 13.32, and returned to report a fairly concentrated attack, which PRU photos seemed to confirm with views of fresh damage, and heavily cratered approaches.

The campaign continued on the 6<sup>th</sup>, with further attacks on previously bombed sites at Bois de Cassan and Foret de Nieppe, the former a flying bomb launching site, assigned to ninety-nine 5 Group Lancasters, of which nine belonged to 83 Squadron. They took off shortly after 09.00 led by G/C Deane, who began to experience problems with his navigation homing equipment as he crossed the English coast outbound, and decided to hand over to F/L Drinkall as his Deputy. He contacted him at 11.35, using the TR1196 transceiver, and asked if he would like to swap places in the formation. Before an answer was forthcoming, the intercom went dead, and remained so for seven minutes, during which period F/L Drinkall assumed the lead, and G/C Deane dropped back into his position. About forty miles inland, a large cumulus cloud barred the way up to 20,000 feet, and F/L Drinkall communicated his intention to take the force below it, descending to 16,000 feet. G/C Deane warned him not to go below 15,000, and advised him not to enter the cloud, but to turn to starboard. However, they were immediately enveloped in cloud, and G/C Deane did his best to hang on to F/L Drinkall's tail, as he continued to descend, and the two eventually became separated. Emerging on the other side of the cloud, Deane saw a large formation in the distance, and followed it. Passing through the cloud caused the formation to become widely scattered, and it could not be reformed. Thirty-eight aircraft bombed, including five of the 83 Squadron contingent, after picking up the aiming point visually, but fifty-eight others did not, and all had to contend with a fierce flak and fighter defence.

Adding to the confusion were contradictory instructions via TR1196 and VHF. F/L Nall watched as a Lancaster shot down a BF109, the pilot of which took to his parachute. This became the intention of F/L Kelly and his eight-man crew, (all were carrying an extra gunner to man all three turrets) after PB140 was set upon by nine FW190s, two of which focussed their attention exclusively upon it. Violent corkscrewing contributed to the wireless operator breaking his ankle, before the rear turret was set on fire, and the port-inner engine began to belch smoke. With all control lost, F/L Kelly gave the order to abandon aircraft, but the rear gunner was wounded, and both he and the front gunner were unable to get out of their turrets. The mid-upper gunner did leave the aircraft, and his parachute was seen to open, but it is believed that he failed to survive. Rather than save himself, the bomb-aimer went to the aid of the two trapped gunners, and, while he was trying to extricate them, F/L Kelly regained control of the Lancaster, and cancelled the bale-out order. After trying for about ten minutes, the bomb-aimer succeeded in releasing the front gunner, and then did the same for the rear gunner, before manning the rear turret himself. The wireless operator dragged his broken ankle into the mid-upper turret, and F/L Kelly nursed the battered aircraft to Ford on the south coast, where he landed with no flaps, and only one wheel, which collapsed as they slid to a halt. F/L Kelly was, understandably, full of praise for his crew. They were more fortunate than their colleagues in ND930, which was brought down by fighters about ten miles north-west of Paris, killing F/L Drinkall and his crew. Photo-reconnaissance revealed some fresh damage to the eastern side of the target, but two large buildings on the main roadway immediately south of the aiming point remained intact, and further operations would be required.

The night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup> was devoted to tactical support for Allied ground troops in the Normandy battle area, and more than a thousand sorties were launched against five aiming points. 83 Squadron was asked to provide six aircraft, and these lined up for take-off shortly after 21.30, led by G/C Deane. The target for the 5 Group force of 179 Lancasters and a Mosquito was a fortified village called Secqueville, located between le Havre and Rouen. It lay under clear skies as the bombers approached, although haze shrouded ground detail to an extent. Star shells were fired from the ground to illuminate the aiming point, and this enabled Pathfinder aircraft to drop red TIs onto it. The 83 Squadron Lancasters were each carrying eleven 1,000 and four 500 pounders, and these were delivered from 6,500 to 8,500 feet between 23.19 and 23.21. The first phase of bombing was concentrated and lasted fifteen minutes, after which, smoke began to obscure the markers, and the Master Bomber called a halt to proceedings and sent everyone home. The 83 Squadron crews all landed safely at Enstone in Oxfordshire, before continuing on to Coningsby, where the 8<sup>th</sup> was spent training in the morning, followed by sports activities in the afternoon, and a party in the interrogation room in the evening.

Training continued until lunch time on the 10<sup>th</sup>, after which, sporting activities kept the crews busy until orders came through at teatime for an operation to bomb oil storage facilities at Bordeaux. Sixty-two Lancasters and five Mosquitos were made ready by 5 Group, of which nine of the former were provided by 83 Squadron. S/L Sparks was the senior pilot on duty, as they took off either side of 18.30 to act as the flare and marker force, but he had equipment failure almost from the start, and handed over his Deputy role to F/L Saunders at 19.30. The flight out was in daylight, and F/L Saunders found the formation to be somewhat disorganized. There were about twenty main force aircraft ahead of the flare force, and the remainder behind to starboard, but catching up, and veering further and further to starboard, until they were some ten to twenty miles off track. The situation rectified itself, however, and within thirty seconds of the flares illuminating the ground in the target area, the TIs were burning close to the aiming point. Bombing took place a little after 22.30, and returning crews were confident of a successful attack, but, as few explosions were observed, it was difficult to accurately assess the outcome.

The group was switched to communications targets on the night of the 11/12<sup>th</sup>, with a maximum effort attack on two aiming points at Givors, about twenty miles south of Lyon. The northern aiming point was the town's marshalling yards, and the southern one a junction, for which 83 Squadron contributed fifteen crews, in an overall force of 175 Lancasters and ten Mosquitos. They departed Coningsby either side of 20.45, but F/O Norbury turned back when twenty-five miles off Portland Bill, after experiencing problems with his vision. The others arrived in the target area to find favourable conditions, followed by the seemingly usual organized chaos of contradictory or confusing instruction via VHF and W/T. Despite this, both aiming points were well-illuminated and marked, and the bombing was concentrated in the correct place. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned illuminating, marking and bombing tasks from 15,000 feet between 00.50 and 01.15, and returned to home airspace critical of some aspects of the raid, but confident that it had been concluded successfully. F/L Saunders overshot his landing at 04.58, writing off ND465, and destroying all the logs pertaining to the operation, but he and his crew were able to walk away, and would face an even more testing experience a week hence. Photo-reconnaissance revealed heavy damage to both aiming points, with the ground badly-cratered and many tracks severed, and the middle span of the railway bridge over the River Rhone had received a direct hit.

The crews enjoyed a lie-in on the 12<sup>th</sup> until the afternoon, when all but four, who were sent on training exercises, spent the afternoon swimming at Dogdyke in the River Witham, two miles south-west of the

airfield. An operations order was put together at 16.00, and eight crews were called to briefing, to learn that they would be part of a force of 379 Lancasters and Halifaxes bound for Brunswick. The purpose of the operation, was to determine the ability of a force to identify and hit a target on H2S alone, without Pathfinder support. S/L Sparks was the senior pilot on duty, as they departed Coningsby shortly after 21.00, on a night of heavy Bomber Command activity at numerous locations, which involved more than eleven hundred sorties. This did not weaken the enemy night fighter defences, however, and powerful elements of the Nachtjagd were waiting at the coast. Night fighter flares were in evidence from then until the coast was crossed again on the way home, and it would prove to be an expensive night for the Command as a whole. The Brunswick force found the target under nine to ten-tenths cloud, as expected, and it is believed that all of the 83 Squadron participants managed to reach it, to bomb from 17,000 to 18,500 feet between 00.04 and 00.12. Only five returned to Coningsby, however, as the night fighters took a heavy toll of twenty-seven aircraft, 7.1% of those dispatched. PB230 would appear to have been homeward bound, when shot down by a night fighter at 00.10, twenty miles north-west of Celle. F/O Erritt was killed with four others of his crew, and only the navigator and rear gunner managed to save themselves to fall into enemy hands. PB138 was also attacked by a night fighter on the way home, and the rear gunner was mortally wounded. F/L Keeling DFM and the remaining five crew members abandoned the stricken Lancaster, which crashed at 00.40 south of Celle, and about twenty-five miles north-west of the target, and they, too, all became PoWs. PB240 was probably shot down at around the same time, and crashed in the Hanover area, killing the entire crew of F/O Young RNZAF. The heavy losses were not compensated for by a successful raid, as the limited photo-reconnaissance pictures revealed only scattered damage, some of which occurred up to twenty miles from the target. One of the other operations on this night took place at Falaise, against enemy troop concentrations and a road junction north of the town. At the last minute, F/O Coop was ordered to take part as the sole 83 Squadron representative, and he successfully delivered his eleven 1,000 and four 500 pounders from 6,000 feet at 02.18, before returning safely from the successful attack.

The main activity during the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> was an operation in support of Canadian divisions in the Falaise area, which involved 805 aircraft targeting seven enemy troop positions. 5 Group took part, by sending sixty-one Lancasters to the village of Quesnay, having begun the day with an attack by elements of 617 and 9 Squadrons on the derelict French cruiser Gueydon at berth at Brest, which, it was believed, the enemy might sink strategically along with other ships in the harbour, to render it unusable if liberated. In the evening, 128 Lancasters and two Mosquitos were sent back to Brest for another go at the Gueydon and a tanker, and among those taking part were a dozen 83 Squadron aircraft, led by S/L Sparks. They took off either side of 17.30, and arrived over the port to find clear skies and excellent visibility. There was also a fierce flak defence, and a number of aircraft would return bearing the scars of battle. The squadron bombed from 16,700 to 18,000 feet between 20.23 and 20.26, and a number of direct hits were observed on both vessels, and smoke issuing out of the tanker. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the tanker had settled on the bottom, and the cruiser had slipped out of sight under the surface. The squadron's ND854 was one of two Lancasters missing as a result of this operation, and this contained the eight man crew of F/L McLean DFC RAAF. His was the only body recovered from the water, and his loss, along with that of the rest of this leading blind-marker crew, was keenly felt at Coningsby.

In preparation for his new night offensive against Germany, Harris called for operations against enemy night fighter airfields in Holland and Belgium. In response, a list of nine such targets was prepared for

attention by daylight on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and they would involve a thousand aircraft. The 83 Squadron ORB celebrated "*A great day for Bomber Command*", and mentioned over four thousand British and American aircraft taking part. The squadron briefed fourteen crews, including those of G/C Deane and the new B Flight commander, S/L Williams. Their target was to be Gilze-Rijen in southern Holland, one of two airfields assigned to 5 Group, and the squadron commander led them away at 09.57 to join up with eighty-seven other Lancasters from the group, along with four Mosquitos and a P38 Lightning containing S/L "Count" Ciano and W/C Guy Gibson. They found the target under clear skies in excellent visibility, and were able to identify the aiming point visually. The 83 Squadron Lancasters were each loaded with eleven 1,000 and four 500 pounders, which they dropped from 16,000 to 18,000 feet between 12.03 and 12.09, and many bomb bursts were observed on the runways.

Eight 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing early on the 18<sup>th</sup>, to learn that they were to lead attacks on two flying bomb dumps at L'Isle Adam, north of Paris. Five crews were assigned to the western aiming point, and three to the eastern one, in an overall force of 158 Lancasters, six Mosquitos and the P38 Lightning. S/L Sparks was the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/L Williams, and they were all safely airborne by 11.34. When over the mid-point of the Channel at 13.15, F/L Verran and crew watched sixty or seventy Liberators pass across their bows heading east a thousand feet higher, prompting the lead Lancaster to change course. On arrival in the target area, identification of the aiming points was hampered by five to seven-tenths cloud, and the crews were told not to bomb unless they had a clear view of the target. All from 83 Squadron managed to drop their eleven 1,000 pounders, and two or four 500 pounders from 10,000 to 14,000 feet between 14.09 and 14.11, but it was not possible to assess the outcome, particularly if they were taking avoiding action in the face of a spirited flak defence. On the way home at 14.37, F/O Coop's ND696 was hit in the port undercarriage housing by flak, and, at the same time, this crew watched the squadron's OL-W being hit by another flak burst between the starboard-inner engine and the fuselage. They saw the propeller falling away, and also observed a hole in the fuselage and the engine beginning to pour smoke. The Lancaster was still clearly under the pilot's control, however, as it descended in a gentle dive, south-east of Rouen. As W continued towards the coast, still shedding altitude, three parachutes were observed, and then the Master Bomber reported that the Lancaster had crashed. Later, a Mosquito flew over at 200 feet, and was waved at by two men standing by the wreckage, while two others were lying nearby. F/L Saunders had skilfully put PB362 down in a field of stubble within ten miles of the Seine Estuary, east of Honfleur, and the occupants were able to scramble clear, with only the flight engineer sustaining a nasty shrapnel wound to his foot. S/L Saunders RAAF and both gunners would ultimately evade capture, but their crew mates soon found themselves in enemy hands. The fun wasn't yet over for F/L Verran and crew, who were letting down through cloud near Peterborough at 145 knots with wheels extended, when the gyro toppled. The pilot was unaware of this, and obeyed his artificial horizon until emerging from the cloud to find the Lancaster in a half-roll at 2,500 feet, and diving towards the ground. Both gunners and the wireless operator decided not to wait to see if their pilot could recover the situation, and they took to their parachutes, while the Lancaster landed safely. Photos taken by squadron aircraft suggested that the attack had overshot to the north, and this was confirmed by PRU pictures.

Persistent rain and low cloud kept 83 Squadron on the ground for most of the following week, but some daylight training was possible on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, and conditions on the 25<sup>th</sup> allowed unlimited day and night flying. Seven crews were called to briefing on the 25<sup>th</sup>, to learn that Darmstadt was to be the target that night for a force of 190 Lancasters and six Mosquitos exclusively from 5 Group. Located about

fifteen miles south of Frankfurt in southern Germany, this city had been attacked before, but not in numbers. The operation was just one of many taking place on this night, which would produce a new record number of sorties of 1,311. The largest effort of the night would be at nearby Rüsselsheim, fifteen or so miles to the north-west, where the Opel motor works was the objective. S/L Williams was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty as they began to roll at 21.00, and he had been appointed to be one of two Deputy Master Bombers. The target area was free of cloud, but ground haze was present, although this was not responsible for matters going awry early on. The Master Bomber had been forced to return early, and VHF communication was weak, which made it difficult to pass on instructions. F/L Foote dropped his flares from 14,000 feet at 01.05, and saw four more aircraft do likewise, but, it seems, they were too far to the west, and the low-level Mosquitos reported at 01.07 that they were unable to find the aiming point. H-hour was pushed back to 01.22, although bombing actually began at 01.19, and, soon after, someone left their VHF on transmit, creating such a noise that Foote switched his off. W/T was jammed, and in the absence of further instructions, he decided to head for home. One of the Deputies was heard indistinctly instructing the crews to "bomb on the box" (H2S), and the main force did its best to comply. The other 83 Squadron crews were over the target at around 14,000 feet between 01.08 and 01.32, and five returned safely to report on the lack of communication and generally unsatisfactory attack. The failure was partly due to the early return of the Master Bomber, and the loss of his two Deputies, one of which, was S/L Williams. PB345 crashed close to Mosbach, some forty miles south-east of the target, and it is difficult to understand why it would be at that location. The most plausible explanation is that the Lancaster was damaged over the target, and S/L Williams remained at the controls, keeping to a straight and level course to allow his crew to save themselves. Four survived to be taken into captivity, but S/L Williams DFC, his flight engineer and mid-upper gunner lost their lives. Also failing to return was ND455, containing the crew of F/L Meggeson DFC, and it, likewise, crashed in southern Germany, with only the wireless operator and mid-upper gunner surviving. This was one of the squadron's most experienced crews, and would be sorely missed at Coningsby.

On the following night, the Group prepared for the first of two raids on the distant port of Königsberg, through which the enemy's eastern front was being supplied. Situated to the east of Gdansk, it was the most north-easterly urban target visited by the Command, and the extreme range of the 1,900 mile round trip meant a reduction in bombs in favour of extra fuel. A 5 Group force of 174 Lancasters was made ready, of which ten were provided by 83 Squadron. Having been briefed for this target twice before without going, there was some doubt as to whether or not they would be going back, but at 20.16, the first Lancaster began to roll down the runway at Coningsby. S/L Verran, the B Flight deputy commander, was the senior pilot on duty for this ten-hour marathon, for which most of the squadron's Lancasters were carrying assorted flares and TIs in 250lb bomb casings, but F/Os Birdling and Jupp, and F/L Hatcher each had eight red TIs in 1,000lb casings. When they arrived in the target area almost five hours later, the skies were clear and the visibility good, and the 83 Squadron members of the flare force went in at 14,000 to 15,000 feet between 01.05 and 01.12, while the marker crews delivered their loads from 7,500 to 8,500 feet between 01.08 and 01.18. Returning crews were fairly enthusiastic about the outcome, and fires could be seen from a hundred miles into the return journey. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the main weight of the attack had fallen in the town's north-eastern districts, where fire had ripped through many building blocks. Only four Lancasters failed to return, but among them was PB292, which crashed in western Denmark, killing five of the crew of S/L Verran, who survived with his bomb-aimer and became a PoW. The 83 Squadron contingent had landed on the 3 Group station at Tuddenham

in Suffolk, and it was early afternoon before they were all back at Coningsby. Having endured more than eighteen hours operational flying in two nights, they were given a well-deserved rest.

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, G/C Deane was posted from the squadron at the end of his highly successful tour, and would take command of the Pathfinder Navigation training Unit (NTU). He was succeeded at 83 Squadron by W/C Ingham, who came in from 97 Squadron, and would be the squadron's last wartime commanding officer. Also on this day, S/L Twiggs was posted in from 49 Squadron to fill one of the vacant flight commander positions. It was clear that a decisive blow had not been delivered on Königsberg and, at 17.30 on the 29<sup>th</sup>, eleven crews attended briefing to learn that S/L Sparks, F/L Hatcher and F/O Birdling were to act as primary visual markers, F/L Matheson as a visual backer-up, while the remainder were part of the flare force. They were to be part of a 5 Group force of 189 Lancasters, and took off either side of 20.30, before W/O Price was forced to turn back from a position about a hundred miles off the west coast of Denmark at 21.56, because of engine trouble. An early return had become something of a rare event of late. There was eight to ten-tenths cloud over the target with a base at around 10,000 feet, and the Master Bomber, having decided on a visual attack, instructed the first flare force wave to drop below it. F/L Foote was experiencing severe icing, which reduced his approach speed, and he arrived at the target five minutes after the first flares had gone down. The marking took place, and F/L Matheson was preparing to back-up, when he had to make a sudden and violent manoeuvre to avoid a collision, which caused his bomb sight to topple. This rendered him unable to perform his part in the operation, but he was able to log the events as he awaited further instructions.

The first flares had gone down at around 01.05, and had continued at regular intervals thereafter from 13,500 feet. At 01.24 the third flare force wave was instructed to illuminate the red spot fire, and a minute later an instruction was given to overshoot by 400 yards to the east of the aiming point. At 01.26 a marker aircraft was told to run over the red marker and overshoot by 300 yards, while, at 01.27, another was ordered to overshoot by 600 yards east of the aiming point, before the visual backers-up were sent to track over the reds and greens and overshoot by 300 yards. The flare force was invited to go home at 01.30, and, at 01.34, the visual backers-up were instructed to back up the greens by 600 yards on a westerly heading. At 01.36 the backers-up were told to back-up the concentrations of reds and greens, and, at 01.52, the main force bombing was completed and the crews sent home. S/L Sparks was last heard on VHF over the target at 01.37, but failed to appear at Coningsby. It was learned later that PB249 had been hit by flak, which killed the mid-upper gunner, F/O Wilkinson DFC RAAF, but that S/L Sparks, for the second time in under four months, had survived with four others of the eight men on board, only this time he failed to evade capture. The operation was an outstanding success, which destroyed over 40% of the residential and 20% of the industrial buildings at a cost of fifteen Lancasters, most of which fell victim to night fighters. During the course of the month the squadron carried out seventy-five day sorties and sixty-seven by night on sixteen operations, losing twelve Lancasters and ten crews.

## September 1944

September would be devoted largely to the liberation of the three French ports, le Havre, Boulogne and Calais, which were still in enemy hands. 83 Squadron would not be involved in the six attacks on enemy positions around le Havre in the first eleven days of the month, despite 5 Group's participation in the final two on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. 83 Squadron did not carry out any operations until the second week, and, in the meantime, S/L Osborn was posted in from 5 Lancaster Finishing School (5LFS) on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. He would need to complete training courses, at the Pathfinder NTU, among them, before he could undertake operations. S/L McDonald left the squadron on the 8<sup>th</sup>, with fifty-eight sorties to his credit. He had broken a leg a few weeks earlier, after jumping a fence while out rambling, and he was the latest of many recent departures from the squadron of long-serving members, either through loss or posting.

Mönchengladbach was to provide the first objective for the squadron of the new month, and the briefing of eleven crews took place at Coningsby at 01.30 on the 9<sup>th</sup>. They learned that they would be part of a force of 113 Lancasters and fourteen Mosquitos of 5 and 8 Groups, who were to attack the centre of this town, which, with Operation Market Garden looming, was expected soon to be within striking distance of the advancing Allied forces. S/L Twigg was the senior pilot on duty, and was undertaking his first sortie since joining the squadron. Take-off for this short-range trip took place either side of 03.00, but F/O McNeill turned back after crossing the enemy coast at Ostend, when his rear gunner reported sick. The others reached the target to find clear skies and good visibility, and the first flare force went in a little early at 05.05 until 05.08 at 15,000 feet, and their efforts were backed up at 05.11 and 05.14, at which point the marker crews were sent home, and the main force called in to attack. Fires could be seen from up to eighty miles away, and photo-reconnaissance revealed a highly successful raid, which left the town centre in ruins.

There were always new crews to train, and with squadron strength now rebuilt to twenty-seven, every opportunity was taken to get them into the air. Twelve crews assembled in the briefing room on the 11<sup>th</sup> to hear that they would be returning to Darmstadt that night, the scene of a less-than-satisfactory raid towards the end of August. This time it would be a 5 Group maximum effort of 221 Lancasters and fourteen Mosquitos. By the time that the 83 Squadron contingent took off either side of 21.00, led by S/L Twigg, the German garrison at le Havre had surrendered to British forces, following further bombardment by elements of the Command on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. The 83 Squadron crews arrived in the skies over southern Germany to find them clear of cloud, and, despite some ground haze, the visibility was good, and the flare force went in at 17,000 feet at 23.52, homing in on a green Mosquito-laid TI. The Master bomber seemed satisfied with the illumination, and required no further flares, leaving the backers-up to drop their TIs over the ensuing four minutes. The squadron crews, who were carrying exclusively flares and target indicators, were over the target at 17,000 feet between 23.52 and 23.57, and were ordered to go home at 23.59. The main force followed up with extreme accuracy and concentration, and set the city on fire, the glow from which, some claimed, could be seen from the French coast, 250 miles away. It was learned after the war that the attack had resulted in a genuine firestorm, only the third to be recorded after Hamburg and Kassel in 1943. Over twelve thousand people died in the inferno, and a further seventy thousand were made homeless, out of a total population of 120,000.

Twelve Lancasters failed to return, and Bill Chorley states in Bomber Command Losses for 1944 that an 83 Squadron aircraft, ND740, captained by W/C Walker AFC, DFM, was among the missing, and that

he died along with three of his crew, while the survivors were captured. There is no reference to either this aircraft or W/C Walker in the 83 Squadron ORB for this operation, but it does list the crew members, other than the pilot, as being posted to War Casualties Dept. on the 12<sup>th</sup>. The 5 Group ORB mentions a W/O Walker of 83 Squadron as failing to return from this operation, and one must assume that the absence of this crew from the list for the operation was an oversight by the 83 Squadron record-keeper. Bill Chorley provides some career history for W/C Walker, stating that he joined the RAF in 1934 as a Class F reservist, and served with 99 Squadron, with which unit he earned his DFM in 1940. If this is, indeed the pilot of ND740, it would seem possible that he was on the staff of 54 Base at Coningsby, and, keen to get an operation under his belt, persuaded his like-minded station commander, G/C "Tiny" Evans-Evans that it was a good idea. Whatever the truth, this would be the squadron's only loss during the month.

Nine of the crews participating in the Darmstadt operation, found themselves on the Order of Battle for a return to southern Germany twenty-four hours later. The target for 204 Lancasters and fourteen Mosquitos, mostly of 5 Group, was Stuttgart, while 1, 3 and 8 Groups sent 378 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos to Frankfurt, a hundred miles to the north. 83 Squadron made ready a dozen aircraft, which took off either side of 19.00, with F/L Foote the senior pilot on duty, supported by F/Ls Kelly, Siddle and Matheson, who, respectively, had completed forty-five, thirty-nine and two-thirds, thirty-eight and a third and thirty-six sorties. They were all part of flare force one, and, like the other 83 Squadron crews taking part, their bomb bays contained only flares and target indicators. They arrived in the target area to find clear skies, moderate visibility and ground haze, and they carried out their assigned tasks from 16,000 to 19,500 between 22.59 and 23.11. The marking was very accurate, and the main force bombing was concentrated upon the city centre, with a slight tendency to creep back towards the north-eastern district of Bad Canstatt, and beyond into Feuerbach. Returning crews reported a huge explosion at 23.25, which lasted for about five seconds, and when a PRU aircraft photographed the city on the following morning, the entire centre was obscured by the smoke from numerous and widespread fires. Local reports described the central districts as "erased", and it seems that a firestorm erupted, and almost twelve hundred people lost their lives, the highest death toll ever in this much-bombed city.

There would be no operations for the squadron over the ensuing few nights, and training continued when the weather allowed. W/C Ingham held a meeting with all crews on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and displayed the new Base Bombing Trophy, which was to be presented to the squadron with the best bombing results each month. It was currently held by 617 Squadron, but W/C Ingham and bombing leader, S/L Brewer DFC, made it clear that this situation was not to continue. It required just one heavy attack on Boulogne on the 17<sup>th</sup>, in the absence of 83 Squadron, and three thousand tons of bombs, to persuade the German garrison to surrender, and this left only Calais still under enemy occupation. Before attention turned there, 5 Group prepared to employ its low-level marking method at Bremerhaven on the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup>, for which nine 83 Squadron crews were briefed as part of an overall force of 206 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos. The senior pilot on duty was S/L Hatcher, whose arrival at the squadron is not logged in the ORB, and whose stay would be fairly brief. He had served as a sergeant pilot with 78 Squadron in 1941, and he and his crew had successfully baled out of their Whitley over Herefordshire on return from Cologne on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup> of May. Thereafter, he was commissioned, and was awarded a DFC and AFM as he rose through the ranks. F/L Kelly led the departure from Coningsby at 18.17, and they arrived in the target area to find favourable weather conditions and good visibility. Six of the crews were carrying flares and TIs, and three had ten 1,000 pounders on board with a half-hour delay fuse. They carried out

their assigned tasks from 17,000 feet between 20.31 and 20.57, and returned home entirely confident in the quality of their work. Two large explosions were reported, at 21.04 and 21.14, and the glow from the fires could be seen from 150 miles away. This first major attack on the port, which was situated on the east bank of the Weser, thirty-five miles north of Bremen, was carried out by what, at the time, could be considered to be a modest force, which produced a knock-out blow, and reduced over 2,600 buildings to rubble for the loss of a single Lancaster and a Mosquito.

Twelve crews assembled for briefing at Coningsby on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and learned that they were to be part of a predominantly 5 Group attack on the twin towns of Mönchengladbach and Rheydt. This represented a shallow penetration into Germany, just ten minutes from the Dutch border, and, therefore, a short round trip of four-and-a-half to five hours, followed by a night in bed. S/Ls Hatcher and Twigg were the senior pilots on duty as they began taking off shortly after 19.00, as part of an overall force of 227 Lancasters and ten Mosquitos, all but ten of the former representing 5 Group. Master Bomber for the operation was W/C Guy Gibson VC, DSO, DFC, who, it will be recalled, had begun his war with 83 Squadron, before moving on to night fighters and then back to Bomber Command as commanding officer of 106 Squadron, and, most famously, 617 Squadron. He was driven the three miles from Coningsby to Woodhall Spa to collect his 627 Squadron Mosquito, which, for whatever reason, he rejected, and swapped with F/L Mallender, causing a degree of resentment. Gibson had already set the tone for the evening by rejecting the advice of W/C Charles Owen, who had been Master Bomber at this target ten nights earlier. Owen had advised him to leave the target by a south-westerly route, and cross north-eastern France to the coast, and also to observe orders to remain above 10,000 feet. Gibson insisted that he would fly home via a direct route across Holland at low level, and would not be dissuaded. He took off ahead of the 627 Squadron element at 19.51, to meet up with the main force over the target, where two aiming points were to be marked.



*By now a Wing Commander, Guy Gibson was highly decorated, well-regarded by Churchill, Harris and the British public. His luck ran out in unexplained circumstances when he was lost flying as Master Bomber in a Mosquito, directing an attack on Mönchengladbach and Rheydt in Germany.*

The 83 Squadron contingent was part of the flare force, and they were carrying no bombs. As they made their way to the target, they encountered icing cloud at around 9,000 feet, which S/L Twigg chose to keep below, before climbing fast to 15,000 feet as the cloud dispersed. The marking was complex, with a

green marker to be dropped on a factory in a western district of Mönchengladbach, and a yellow marker on railway yards in the north, while a red marker was to be placed on railway yards in Rheydt, two miles to the south. It would have been a demanding plan even for an experienced Master Bomber, which Gibson was not, but, even so, his instructions were heard clearly. All seemed to be going to plan, with accurate and punctual marking for the green and yellow forces, but late, though accurate marking for the red force, and some of the red force crews were diverted to the green aiming point. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 13,500 to 15,400 feet between 21.33 and 21.42, and all returned safely home, having contributed to a highly destructive attack on both towns. Gibson returned low over Holland, as he said he would, and crashed on the outskirts of Steenberg in south-western Holland, with fatal consequences for him, and Coningsby's recently appointed station navigation officer, S/L James Warwick. Much has been speculated and written about Gibson's final flight, but it is not part of the 83 Squadron story.

The first of six operations against Calais was mounted on the 20<sup>th</sup>, by a force of more than six hundred aircraft, but 83 Squadron stayed at home, and it was not until the 23<sup>rd</sup> that the next briefing took place at Coningsby. Twelve crews attended, and learned that they would be part of a 113-strong 5 Group force attacking the Handorf night fighter airfield to the north-east of Münster, as a diversion for a simultaneous operation by 136 Lancasters and five Mosquitos from the group against the aqueduct section of the Dortmund-Ems Canal south of Ladbergen. The main operation on this night would be conducted by 549 aircraft from 1, 3, 4 and 8 Groups seventy miles to the south-west at Neuss, which would, hopefully split the enemy defences. S/Ls Hatcher and Osborn were the senior pilots on duty, as F/L Kelly led them away at 19.04, six of them carrying flares and markers, and the others, either five 1,000 pounders and TIs or ten 1,000 pounders. In the event, the squadron contingent bombed the town of Münster as an alternative to the airfield, doing so from an average of 15,000 feet between 21.33 and 21.55, while F/O Bates returned only to discover that he had bombed Osnabrück from 17,000 feet all on his own. Only twenty-two bombed the airfield, and photo-reconnaissance revealed no fresh damage. The Dortmund-Ems Canal operation was successful in draining a six-mile stretch of the vital waterway, largely through direct hits from 617 Squadron Tallboys, but fourteen Lancasters were lost, 10% of the Lancaster force.

The second of the series of raids on enemy positions around Calais was mounted by 188 aircraft on the 24<sup>th</sup>, when complete cloud cover led to a third of the force returning home with its bombs. It was a similar story on the following day, when only a third of more than eight hundred aircraft were able to deliver their bombs, before the Master Bomber called a halt to proceedings. F/O Jupp DFC was posted out to a training unit on the 25<sup>th</sup> at the completion of a straight-through tour of forty-eight sorties, and his navigator, F/L Boase, was posted to 106 Squadron on the following day, also after being declared tour-expired on forty-four sorties. At Metheringham, his brief was to help form a Pathfinder 5 Group training squadron, so that new crews would arrive at 83 Squadron operationally ready, rather than under training. That afternoon eleven 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, and learned that the night's operation was to be against Karlsruhe in southern Germany, for which 216 Lancasters of 5 Group were made ready, along with ten from 101 Squadron and eleven Mosquitos. The senior pilots on duty were F/Ls Kelly, Gordon and Cornish, who, between them, had 119 sorties to their credit. F/L Kelly was to act as primary visual marker (PVM), with eight others in the three waves of the flare force, and two supporting the main force. It was a late take-off, either side of 00.45, but they all got away safely, until F/O Williams lost his port-outer engine shortly after crossing the enemy coast, but continued on anyway, and arrived at the target

half an hour late. The plan was to bomb through cloud on H2S, and F/L Kelly arrived on time to deliver his TIs and eleven 1,000 pounders from 15,000 feet at 03.50, and saw a red TI cascade above the cloud at 03.54. The other 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 15,000 feet between 03.50 and 04.06 (F/O Williams), and all returned safely, having contributed to the devastation of large parts of the city.

The Calais campaign continued on the 26<sup>th</sup>, with two separate raids against seven enemy positions, involving more than seven hundred aircraft. This time the conditions were favourable, and bombing was observed to be concentrated around the aiming points. The following morning brought a further attack, when the Master Bomber ordered the 340-strong force to come below the cloud cover to bomb visually, and it was another successful operation. Later that day, eight 83 Squadron crews attended briefing for an operation that night against Kaiserslautern, an historic city on the edge of the Palatinate Forest, some thirty miles west of Mannheim. It would be the first major attack of the war on this location, for which a force of 217 Lancasters, including some from 101 Squadron, and ten Mosquitos was made ready. W/C Ingham was to lead the squadron for the first time, supported by S/L Hatcher, with F/L Cornish acting as primary blind marker, and all of the others as part of the flare force. They were all safely airborne by 22.00, and arrived in the target area to find some cloud. On his first run across the target at 00.50, F/L Cornish's H2S operator was unable to identify the aiming point until too late, so orbited to make a second run at 15,000 feet at 00.55. At that point, a green TI was visible in the centre of the town, but his own red TI was not observed because of the cloud. By this time, the first elements of the illuminator force had delivered clusters of seven-inch flares, and, at 00.58, the Master Bomber called for a halt to illuminating, and for the main force to bomb on the green TIs in the city centre. F/L Cornish was carrying seven 1,000 pounders with half-hour delay fuses, and two other crews from the squadron had three each, which were delivered from around 7,000 feet. Two yellow explosions were seen at 01.02, and fires were beginning to take hold as the force retreated towards the west. Reconnaissance revealed massive damage within the city, caused by more than nine hundred tons of bombs, and an estimated 36% of the built-up area was reduced to ruins.

Later on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the final operation against the Calais area took place, when almost five hundred bombers targeted four enemy positions, and six coastal batteries at Cap Gris Nez, after which, the region was taken by Canadian forces. The squadron launched ninety-nine sorties during the course of the month on eight operations, for the loss of a single aircraft and crew. It had also built up its strength to thirty crews, with two more under training.

## October 1944

October would see a greater emphasis placed on oil targets, and the start of a new Ruhr campaign with some of the heaviest raids of the war to date. There would be a fairly low-key first week, with 5 Group's first major outing coming in daylight on the 5<sup>th</sup>, when an attempt was made to bomb Wilhelmshaven through ten-tenths cloud on H2S. 83 Squadron remained at home training, but detailed nine crews for an operation against Bremen on the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>. The main target for more than five hundred aircraft from the other groups on this night was Dortmund, in what would be the opening salvo of the new Ruhr offensive. S/L Twigg was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty, as they departed Coningsby shortly after 17.30, to join up with 237 other, mostly 5 Group, Lancasters and seven Mosquitos bound for northern Germany. They were all assigned to the flare force, and only F/O Pereira was carrying any high explosives, three delay-fused 1,000 pounders, in addition to his flares and TIs. They found the target area to be free of cloud, and illuminated by a three-quarter moon, which presented the city on a plate to the bombers. The 83 Squadron element was over the target at 18,000 to 20,000 feet between 20.16 and 20.22, and the crews carried out their part in the operation in the face of many searchlights and the usual flak response, but none was unduly troubled, and all returned safely. The outcome of the largely incendiary attack was testimony to the effectiveness of the 5 Group low-level marking method, and local authorities reported a huge area of fire, and listed almost five thousand buildings as destroyed or seriously damaged.

A/C Sharp left 54 Base on the 7<sup>th</sup> for pastures new, and, although the 83 Squadron ORB commented that his fine work would stand behind him for a long time, he was deeply unpopular because of his arrogant and belittling attitude towards the crews, and his departure was more likely a cause for celebration. S/L Tommy Blair, or Theodore Widdowfield Blair, to give him his proper name, was posted to the Pathfinder NTU at Upwood on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and was rewarded for his outstanding service to bomb-aiming with a Bar to his DFC. His ebullient character would be missed at Coningsby. Weather conditions on the Continent curtailed operations for the next week, and the lull allowed intensive training to continue. Other elements of the group did take part in operations against enemy positions on Walcheren, which had begun in earnest on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and continued on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. They also joined in attacks on gun batteries at other locations in the Scheldt Estuary.

At first light on the 14<sup>th</sup>, a thousand aircraft launched Operation Hurricane, which was a series of massive raids by British and American bomber forces designed to demonstrate to the enemy, the overwhelming superiority of the air forces ranged against it. Duisburg was selected to host this first operation, and 4,500 tons of bombs were poured into the already devastated city shortly after breakfast time. That night, similar numbers returned to press home the point about superiority, bringing the total weight of bombs over the two raids to 9,000 tons from 2,018 sorties. The only involvement by 5 Group were single sorties by a Lancaster and a Mosquito to conduct a photo-reconnaissance of the operation. However, 5 Group took advantage of the evening activity over the Ruhr to return to Brunswick, the scene of quite a number of past failures. A force of 232 Lancasters and eight Mosquitos was made ready, of which ten Lancasters represented 83 Squadron. F/L Matheson was the senior pilot on duty, and was about to embark on his forty-first operation. He and F/O Duncan were assigned to the primary blind marking (PBM) role, with seven crews in the flare force and F/O McNeil supporting the main force. They took off either side of 23.00, and arrived in the target area to find conditions ideal for low-level marking. Approaching the target at 18,000 feet from the south-west over Hallendorf/Salzgitter at 02.15,

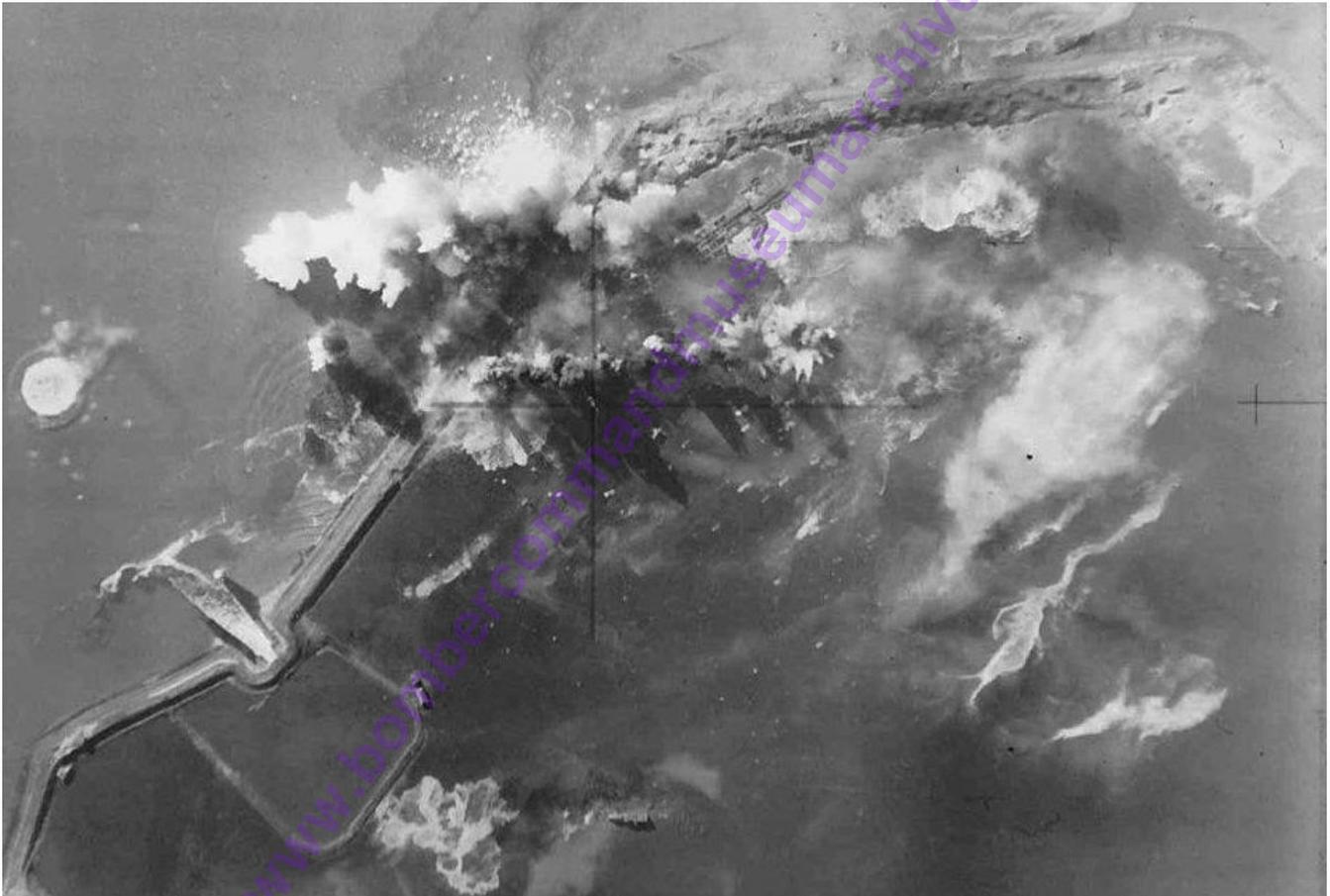
F/O Price was coned by eighteen searchlights, and subjected to heavy flak for three minutes. Evasive action brought him to a position north of the city, from where he performed an "S" turn, and, on arrival, found it to be already well alight, and he withheld his flares. The others from the squadron carried out their assigned tasks from 18,000 feet between 02.19 and 02.25, before returning home safely to report a highly successful operation. F/O Price also complained that main force crews were jettisoning incendiaries all the way back as far as the Rhine, and thereby illuminating the track for any stalking night fighters. In the event, only a single Lancaster failed to return from what was, indeed, confirmed to be an outstanding result. The entire centre of this historic city had been wiped out, and almost every districts had sustained damage.

5 Group sent a small force to bomb the sea wall at West Kapelle on the island of Walcheren on the 17<sup>th</sup>, but 83 Squadron was not invited to take part. Ten crews were called to briefing on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and given details of the operation that night against Nuremberg, which was to be a 5 Group affair, while 560 aircraft from the other groups tried their hand at Stuttgart, some ninety miles to the south-west. 263 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos represented 5 Group, and the 83 Squadron contingent began taking off shortly after 17.30, only for S/L Hatcher and F/L Jennings to turn back with H2S failures. The others pressed on, to find the target covered by a wedge of eight to ten-tenths cloud between 3,000 and 10,000 feet, with poor visibility below. Bombing had to take place on the glow of markers seen through the cloud, which were seen to be somewhat scattered. F/L Matheson had been assigned to primary blind marking duties, but his H2S also broke down, forcing him to drop back into the flare force. He made his first run at 17,500 feet at 20.53, to deliver flares on top of others already going down, and his second run came two minutes later to drop green TIs on top of other greens. The remaining 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 16,500 to 17,000 feet between 20.43 and 20.53, and returned home uncertain as to the outcome. The aiming point was to have been the city centre, but the bombing fell mostly into the more industrial southern districts, where almost four hundred houses were destroyed, along with forty-one industrial buildings.

83 Squadron would spend the ensuing nine days away from the operational scene, during what was a very quiet period for 5 Group generally. Another small-scale operation was conducted against a gun battery at Flushing on Walcheren on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and it was the 28<sup>th</sup>, before eleven 83 Squadron crews found themselves assembled once more in the briefing room. In the meantime, over a thousand aircraft had attacked Essen with devastating results on the 23/24<sup>th</sup>, and this was followed up by daylight on the 25<sup>th</sup> by a force of 770 aircraft. Then it was the turn of Cologne to face over seven hundred aircraft on the afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup>. During the course of that day, 5 Group prepared a force of 237 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos to attack the U-Boot pens in the Norwegian port of Bergen. Of the 83 Squadron element, F/L Cornish was to be a primary blind marker, with six crews in the flare force and four supporting the main force. They were all airborne by 22.31, and headed for the target, where they had been told to expect clear conditions. There were doubts about the forecast, however, and the crews were greeted by complete cloud cover, with a base as low as 4,000 feet. The Master Bomber called for the main force to descend, but most were unable to pick out any markers. F/L Cornish had dropped a green TI from 15,000 feet at 01.43, and then, because of intermittent VHF reception, flew up and down the coast acting as a communications link between the Master Bomber and the main force. The flare force contingent did what they could between 12,500 and 15,000 feet, and the main force supporters flew as low as 4,500 feet, without being able to identify the target, but the operation was abandoned after only

forty-seven aircraft had bombed. Three Lancasters were lost, but all from 83 Squadron returned safely to complete a loss-free month.

The final operations against Walcheren took place on the 30<sup>th</sup>, and Canadian and Scottish ground forces went in on the following day to begin a week of heavy fighting, before the island was finally taken. It would take a further three weeks to clear the Scheldt of mines, and make it safe for shipping to reach the much-needed port of Antwerp, and the first convoy would arrive for unloading on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November. Cologne hosted two heavy raids, the first by nine hundred aircraft on the 30/31<sup>st</sup>, and the second by almost five hundred aircraft twenty-four hours later, both in the absence of a 5 Group contribution, and further heavy damage resulted. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched forty sorties on four operations.



*A series of attacks on Walcheren, at the mouth of the River Schelde, breached the dykes and flooded the low-lying island. This neutralised the German gun batteries which were holding out and threatening Allied units trying to liberate the port of Antwerp.*

## November 1944

The new month began with a daylight operation on the afternoon of the 1<sup>st</sup>, against the Meerbeck synthetic oil plant at Homberg, on the north-western outskirts of Duisburg. 83 Squadron briefed four crews as part of an overall 5 Group force of 226 Lancasters and two Mosquitos, with fourteen 8 Group Mosquitos to provide the Oboe marking. F/L Matheson was the senior pilot on duty, as the squadron quartet took off shortly before 14.30 to join up with the rest of the force. They found the target to be completely covered by cloud, with tops at between 6,000 and 9,000 feet. F/L Matheson identified the target by H2S from 18,500 feet, and confirmed it with a visual sighting of a built-up area through a chink in the cloud. Wanganui flares from earlier arrivals were well-scattered, over a circle of about ten miles radius, so Matheson dropped a yellow TI over the built-up area, in the hope of attracting some bombing. The problem seemed to be that the crews early over the target had seen no markers, or were past them by the time they became evident, and had taken their bombs home. Ultimately, the conditions rendered the whole attack ineffective, and, although 159 crews released their bombs, it is unlikely that any hit the intended target.



*The Rhein-Preussen synthetic oil plant at Meerbeck, Homberg received prolonged attention from Allied bombing forces. The plant was eventually destroyed on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1944, after a raid by 3 Group (courtesy Victoria RSL).*

5 Group had a long association with the Dortmund-Ems Canal section south of Ladbergen, and about thirty-five miles from the border with Holland at Enschede. It stretched back to the summer of 1940, when 83 Squadron was among the Hampden units targeting the twin aqueducts carrying the waterway over the low-lying farmland. It will be recalled that Gibson's close friends, Mulligan and Ross, had been lost raiding it, and Rod Learoyd had earned a VC against it. Now that Germany's railways were being pounded, the Dortmund-Ems and the nearby Mittelland Canal, took on a greater significance as vital components in the transportation system, particularly with regard to the movement of raw materials to and from the Ruhr region. Nine crews were briefed on the 4<sup>th</sup>, as part of an overall force of 174 Lancasters and two Mosquitos, and they began taking off shortly after 17.30, with F/Ls Cornish and Matheson acting as primary blind markers, carrying only flares and TIs. S/L Osborn led the others as part of the flare force, and their bomb bays contained only reconnaissance and seven-inch cluster flares. They

would sneak in under cover of a raid by over seven hundred aircraft on Bochum in the Ruhr, and, hopefully, avoid the attentions of night fighters. F/L Cornish was the first to arrive at the target at 19.19, after making a GPI run (ground position indicated) by means of H2S from Münster, and he encountered clear skies but ground haze. He dropped a green TI blind from 15,000 feet, and watched it burst on the canal bank four hundred yards short of the aiming point, and F/L Matheson followed up a minute later, although not as accurately. The flare force went in at between 10,000 and 15,000 feet from 19.20 to 19.28, and red TIs were observed to fall between the two aqueducts, after which, the Master Bomber cancelled the third wave of flares and sent them all home to leave the way clear for the main force. The first bombs tended to overshoot, but, thereafter, the main force produced an accurate and concentrated attack, which left the canal breached and drained.

Two nights later, attention turned upon the Mittelland Canal at Gravenhorst, a point about a mile north of das Nasse Dreieck, the “Wet Triangle” at Bergeshövede. This was a triangular basin, where the two waterways converged about ten miles north of Ladbergen, before the Dortmund-Ems continued on to the west, and the Mittelland north and then to the east. Fourteen crews underwent briefing at Coningsby, all apparently eager to be involved, with F/Ls Cornish and Matheson again acting as primary blind markers, S/L Hatcher leading the three waves of the flare force, and five crews supporting the main force. They were off the ground early, either side of 16.30, as part of a large 5 Group force of 235 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos, and represented the night’s main operation. F/L Cornish reached the target area at 19.19 at 14,000 feet, and saw some flares going down. No attempt was made to drop his green TIs, as his H2S had failed, but he was called in by the Master Bomber at 19.22 to deliver his flares, and complied with six seven-inch clusters over the aiming point six minutes later. F/L Matheson was also unable to mark because of a malfunctioning H2S box, and he dropped flares also in accordance with instructions from the Master Bomber. S/L Hatcher dropped his flares by H2S from 15,000 feet at 19.19, and could clearly see the aiming point illuminated. He was at a loss to explain why the Mosquito marking proved to be so difficult, although it would be established later that one red marker had fallen into the canal and was extinguished. Ultimately, the Master Bomber called a halt to proceedings after only thirty-one aircraft had bombed, but four of the five 83 Squadron supporters had, by then, each delivered their ten 1,000 pounders with half-hour delay fuses. F/O Cassidy made a timed run on the nearby town of Rheine, where a small diversion was taking place, and dropped his hardware there. The operation failed at a cost of ten Lancasters, most of them probably falling victim to night fighters, although no combats were reported by returning crews.

Training occupied the ensuing few days until the 11<sup>th</sup>, when fourteen crews assembled in the briefing room, to learn that they would be attacking the Rhenania-Ossag synthetic oil plant at Harburg, on the south bank of the Elbe opposite Hamburg. 237 Lancasters and eight Mosquitos were to take part in an all-5 Group show, while elements of 1 and 8 Groups targeted a similar plant at Dortmund. Another early take-off had them airborne either side of 16.30, led by W/C Ingham, with S/L Twiggs in support. The blind markers were F/L Cornish and F/O Duncan, while ten others were assigned to the four elements of the flare force, and two to supporting the main force. W/C Ingham and S/L Twiggs were carrying only flares and TIs, while the others had between two and eight 1,000 pounders in their bomb bays, with delay fuses ranging from half an hour to twelve hours. S/L Twiggs lost his rear turret hydraulics, and was forced to turn back at 18.18, when at 18,000 feet some sixty miles off the north German coast. The others reached the target area to find clear conditions, other than a thin layer of stratus, and they identified the aiming point either by H2S or green TIs. They carried out their assigned tasks from 16,000

to 18,700 feet between 19.10 and 19.33, in the face of a spirited flak defence. F/L Cornish was at 17,000 feet over the target, when his Lancaster, PB458, was hit by flak, which damaged the bomb bay, severed all hydraulic lines on the port side and the rudder trimming, and left holes in the fuselage and dome Perspex. The bomb doors would not close, or the port undercarriage deploy, and it became necessary to perform a crash-landing at base, which was accomplished without crew casualties. PB188 failed to return with the crew of F/L Jennings RAAF, who, apart from the rear gunner, P/O Mathews DFC, survived to become PoWs. It is not known whether or not the oil plant was hit, but local reports describe heavy damage in the town's residential and industrial districts.

F/O McNeil and crew took off for a training flight in PB702 on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>, and were reported overdue at Coningsby. News came through later that they had come down on a sandbank in the Wash, and had been picked up safe and well by a pilot boat that landed them at Boston at around 18.45. They had collected a number of minor injuries, which saw them remain in Boston hospital overnight, where they were visited by their squadron and flight commanders in the evening. On the following day, JB181 and PB452 were involved in a taxiing incident with F/Os Tutton and Duncan at the controls, and both aircraft sustained damage. The 16<sup>th</sup> was devoted to the erasure from the map of the three small towns of Düren, Jülich and Heinsberg, located in an arc north to east of Aachen, and close to the German lines being approached by American forces. 5 Group joined elements of 1 and 8 Groups at the first mentioned, and over three thousand people were killed. 83 Squadron did not take part, and was in the middle of an extended break from operations, which would last until the 21<sup>st</sup>. In the meantime, the other groups were engaged in operations, mostly against oil targets, but a major attack was launched against Münster by 470 aircraft in daylight on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

Seventeen 83 Squadron crews were called to briefing on the 21<sup>st</sup>, to be told that they were going back to the Dortmund-Ems Canal, on a night of multiple operations involving 1,345 sorties. Three operations, each by 270 aircraft, were to be directed at railway yards at Aschaffenburg, situated about twenty miles south-east of Frankfurt, and oil plants at Castrop-Rauxel and Sterkrade in the Ruhr. 5 Group prepared two forces of 138 and 123 Lancasters respectively, with Mosquito support, for the Mittelland and Dortmund-Ems canals, and a whole host of minor operations completed the Order of Battle. The PBMs were F/L Matheson and F/Os Birdling, Duncan and Norbury, with W/C Ingham and S/L Twiggs the senior pilots in the three waves of the flare force. They took off either side of 17.30, and arrived in the target area to find variable amounts of cloud from four to nine-tenths with a base at around 4,000 feet. F/O Duncan identified the target by H2S, and dropped a 1,000lb green TI from 15,000 feet at 20.48, which helped the other PBMs to find the aiming point over the succeeding few minutes. None of the 83 Squadron crews was carrying high explosives, and, with the marking appearing to be accurate, not all were called upon to deliver their flares. Those who did completed their assigned tasks from 15,000 feet between 20.50 and 20.56, and heard the Master Bomber call the main force down to below the cloud base. All from the squadron returned safely, one or two with slight flak damage, and awaited news of the results of their efforts. Reconnaissance revealed that the left-hand channel, which was the only one repaired since the last attack, had been breached again, where it crossed the River Glane, and the river had been unable to cope with the volume of water released, leading to extensive flooding on both sides of the canal. The attack on the Mittelland canal was equally successful, and led to a thirty-mile stretch running dry, and the consequent stranding of fifty-nine barges.

The weather was mainly responsible for curtailing operations over the next few days until the 26<sup>th</sup>, when briefing took place at 20.00. The sixteen attending crews learned that Munich was to be their target for a 5 Group affair involving 270 Lancasters and eight Mosquitos, which represented a maximum effort. F/Os Duncan and Birdling were to act as PBMs, with W/C Ingham, S/L Hatcher and F/O Price in flare force 1, and two crews each in flare forces 2 and 3. An emergency wave of two aircraft and five supporters completed the squadron's contribution, and they took off either side of 23.30, with F/O Fenning last away at 23.59. Sadly, he was forced to turn back over France three hours later, after his starboard-inner engine failed. The others continued on to find the target area under clear skies and good visibility, and F/Os Birdling and Duncan identified the aiming point by means of H2S. They delivered their green TIs and four 1,000 pounders each from 18,000 feet at 04.49 and 04.50 respectively, and noted that the Mosquito-laid red TIs were accurate. The other squadron crews carried out their part in the plan also from 18,000 feet, between 04.48 and 04.58, and so satisfied was the Master Bomber that he sent some crews home with their loads intact. Returning crews were enthusiastic in their assessment of the outcome, and this seemed to be confirmed by reconnaissance, which singled out railway installations as particularly hard-hit. This was the final operation of the month for 5 Group, but among operations taking place before the end, was an attack by 1 and 8 Groups on Freiburg in southern Germany, which was a minor railway centre within thirty-five miles of advancing American and French ground forces, and was thought to be harbouring large numbers of enemy soldiers. The force of over 330 Lancasters delivered 1,900 tons of bombs, missing the railway yards, but destroying two thousand houses and killing over two thousand inhabitants. During the course of the month the squadron mounted four day and sixty-nine night sorties on six operations, for the loss of two Lancasters and one crew.

## December 1944

The weather was responsible for delaying 5 Group operations at the start of the month, until the night of the 4/5<sup>th</sup>, when two major operations were conducted on cities in southern Germany. While 1, 6 and 8 Groups sent over five hundred aircraft to Karlsruhe, 5 Group dispatched 282 Lancasters and ten Mosquitos to Heilbronn, to deliver its one and only raid of the war. Situated twenty-five miles due north of Stuttgart on a north-south railway, and with the River Neckar running through it, the city had no genuine strategic importance, and would not have been expecting to be targeted. 83 Squadron had briefed sixteen crews, of which two were assigned to PBM duties, twelve as illuminators, divided equally among the three flare forces, and three as supporters. They began taking off at 16.15, with S/Ls Twiggs and Osborn the senior pilots on duty, and there were no early returns as they made their way across France in good conditions, to find three to five-tenths thin stratus over the target. The aiming points were the marshalling yards and the town, which P/O Pereira identified from 15,000 feet by H2S, on his arrival at 19.18 as a blind marker. He let a green TI go, which was backed up by F/O Duncan two minutes later, and the flare force went in between 19.19 and 19.31, mostly at 15,000 feet. The low-level Mosquitos dropped red TIs for the visual markers to aim at, and the marshalling yards were marked with yellows, which the main force element was unable to distinguish in the burgeoning fires. They focussed on the town instead, adding to the general destruction, and as the force retreated westwards, 82% of the city's built-up area was in the process of being destroyed, by what probably amounted to a firestorm. The three 83 Squadron participants carrying ten 1,000 pounders each, delivered them between 19.18 and 19.25 from 13,000 to 15,000 feet, and returned safely to report a successful outcome. The post-war British Bombing survey estimated 351 acres of destruction, and a death toll of at least seven thousand people.

The town of Giessen was the Group's objective on a night of heavy Bomber Command activity on the 6/7<sup>th</sup>. Other operations centred on the oil refinery at Leuna (Merseburg), which was the target for 475 Lancasters of 1, 3 and 8 Groups, while 450 aircraft from predominantly 4 and 6 Groups attacked railway installations at Osnabrück. 83 Squadron briefed fifteen crews as part of an overall 5 Group heavy force of 255 Lancasters, and they set off either side of 17.00, with S/L Osborn the senior pilot on duty. Their destination lay some eighty-five miles south-east of Cologne in west-central Germany, and thirty-five miles north of Frankfurt. The main force crews had been assigned to two aiming points, two-thirds of them to the town, and the remainder to the marshalling yards, and, on arrival in the target area, they found clear skies and good visibility. F/L Cornish and F/O Birdling were the PBMs, and they arrived at 15,000 feet to deliver the contents of their bomb bays at 20.04 and 20.05 respectively, the former noting that the flares had started three minutes early and were west of the target. F/L Cornish's green TI and ten 1,000 pounders went down onto the town, and he saw the red Mosquito TIs fall close to the aiming point. The squadron's flare force and supporter crews carried out their duties from 15,000 feet between 20.03 and 20.10, and all returned safely to report another successful raid, which was confirmed by reconnaissance photos.

The Urft Dam was one of a number of similar structures in the beautiful Eifel region of western Germany, close to the Belgian frontier. There was a fear that the enemy might strategically release flood water to hamper the American advance into Germany, and it was decided to attempt to breach the dam, to allow any excess water to drain away. The first of a number of attacks on the region began on the 3<sup>rd</sup> at Heimbach, the small town nestling against the northern reaches of the reservoir, but the 1 and 8 Group



*The cruiser Emden was the subject of a number of attacks by Bomber Command, eventually being scuttled outside Kiel in 1945.*

force failed to identify it, and no bombs fell. On the following day, a small 8 Group effort against the dam was unsuccessful, as was a 3 Group attack on the nearby Schwammenauel Dam on the 5<sup>th</sup>. The job was handed to 5 Group on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and 205 Lancasters took off, only to be thwarted by cloud, which caused the attack to be abandoned after 129 had bombed, and prevented any assessment of results. The next attempt by 5 Group was planned for the 10<sup>th</sup>, for which a force of 217 Lancasters was made ready, of which fourteen represented 83 Squadron. They took off either side of 04.30 on a cold and frosty morning, but were recalled before reaching the English coast. Finally, a force of 233 Lancasters and five Mosquitos set off at lunchtime on the 11<sup>th</sup>, without an 83 Squadron presence, and managed to score some hits on the dam, but did not create a breach.

Intelligence revealed that the German cruisers Emden and Köln were at berth in Horten Fjord, south of Oslo in southern Norway. The former was launched in 1925, as the only ship in her class, and spent most of her life as a training vessel, while the latter, launched in 1928, was one of three light cruisers in the Königsberg class. A maximum 83 Squadron effort of eighteen Lancasters was made ready to join up with thirty-four others from the group, along with seven Mosquitos. W/C Ingham was the senior pilot on duty, having been left frustrated by the recall on the 10<sup>th</sup>, and he led them away from Coningsby at 15.27 with S/L Osborn in support. The visibility in the target area was good, but identification of the aiming point was determined by H2S, and the first green TIs went down at 18.51, to be backed up by three more two minutes later. W/C Ingham dropped his flares and observed a red TI, and heard the Master Bomber state that both ships were clearly illuminated. Bombing began shortly before 19.00, but W/C Ingham could make out no vessels where they were supposed to be, and saw only bomb splashes. He reported gunfire coming from a warship laying a smoke screen off islands to the north of the harbour, and aimed his five 1,000 pounders at this at 19.10. S/L Osborn spotted a vessel inside the harbour, which was clearly a warship, and was firing off flak from half a dozen batteries. At that moment, the Master bomber announced, "There you are, you can see the target now", upon which the bombs were released. The quality of the illumination diminished as the crews sought out their quarry, and the Master Bomber ultimately called, "Raid unsuccessful", and "Return to base". It was not possible to positively identify

the vessels attacked, and the Köln was ultimately sunk by American bombers at Wilhelmshaven in March 1945, although she lay on the bottom with her batteries intact and above water for use in the defence of the town. The Emden was run aground outside Kiel as the war ended.

Munich had become something of a 5 Group preserve during the year, and a further operation against it was planned for the 17/18<sup>th</sup>, which turned out to be another night of heavy Bomber Command activity. The main raid was to be by more than five hundred aircraft, predominantly of 4 and 6 Groups, on Duisburg, while 1 Group targeted Ulm with over three hundred Lancasters, and 5 Group sent 280 Lancasters to Munich. 83 Squadron briefed fourteen crews, F/L Matheson and F/O Pereira as PBMs, with a load of TIs and six 1,000 pounders, eight illuminators with flares only, and four supporters each carrying five or seven 1,000lb bombs. They began taking off shortly after 16.00, and all reached the target to find generally clear skies and good visibility. The PBMs identified the target by H2S and dropped green TIs from 16,000 feet, and the flares, although a little scattered, provided good illumination. From that point the operation proceeded according to plan, and the resultant fires were visible from a hundred miles into the return journey. No local report was available, but the Command claimed severe widespread damage to the city.

The distant port of Gdynia was selected as the target for a 5 Group force of 236 Lancasters on the night of the 18/19<sup>th</sup>, for which seventeen 83 Squadron crews were briefed. The intention was to catch elements of the German fleet at anchor, in particular the Lützow, and also to destroy harbour installations, as well as cause damage within the town<sup>11</sup>. W/C Ingham was to lead, with S/L Osborn riding shotgun, and the commanding officer had put himself down as one of three PVMs, with F/L Matheson and F/O Pereira fulfilling a blind backing-up role. Four others were to support the main force, while the remainder slotted into the four waves of the flare force. They were airborne by shortly after 16.30, and all reached the target area to find clear skies and good visibility. Initial identification was by H2S, but the harbour and town could be picked out visually until a smoke screen was activated. The illumination and marking proceeded according to plan, and the 83 Squadron crews played their part from around 15,000 feet, during an eleven minute slot to 21.59. It was difficult to assess the outcome, but the Lützow definitely survived, while the port and town sustained extensive damage. Many returning crews reported seeing a V-2 being fired from a site in northern Denmark, and leaving a trail in its wake.

Thick fog kept the crews on the ground on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and threatened to do so also on the 21<sup>st</sup>, but an operation was called on the basis that the weather over Scotland after midnight would be clear for returning aircraft, even if Lincolnshire remained fogbound. Seventeen crews assembled in the briefing room, to learn that their target would require them to retrace their recent steps to Germany's eastern Baltic region, although the Wintershall oil refinery at Politz, situated less than ten miles north of the port of Stettin, was some two hundred miles short of their trip to Gdynia. S/Ls Hatcher and Twiggs were to be the squadron's senior pilots on duty, the former one of three PVMs, and the latter occupying a position in the first of four flare forces. F/Os Duncan and Norbury were designated as PBMs, while F/Os Cartwright and Cassidy supported the main force. They took off either side of 16.30, with the airfield still shrouded in fog, and each Lancaster had disappeared into it before their wheels became unstuck. They joined up with 190 other Lancasters from the group over the North Sea, including, unusually, an element from 617 Squadron carrying Tallboys, before heading slightly north of east for the Danish coast.

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<sup>11</sup> The original Lützow was actually never completed, and was sold to the Russian navy in 1940 as a hull minus superstructure. The pocket battleship, Deutschland was renamed Lützow, to avoid humiliation for the nation should she be lost in battle.

Icing conditions east of Denmark caused problems for some, and delayed their arrival in the target area, but the attack opened on time in clear weather conditions with some haze, although this might have been a smoke screen. F/Os Duncan and Norbury identified the aiming point by H2S, delivered their TIs and ten 500 pounders each, and, having no reason to hang around, set course for home. S/L Twigg observed a pair of yellow TIs going down at H-12½, before the flare force lit up the area, inadvertently causing a dazzle that obscured ground detail. The visual markers began to deliver red and green TIs at about 21.56, but these were assessed by the Master Bomber as three hundred yards north of the aiming point, and he called for backing-up. It seems that no backers-up were available, and the Master Bomber eventually declared, "Target attacked - failure in my opinion." A large explosion was witnessed at 22.08, but, otherwise, it was difficult to assess the outcome, and most crews returned with the feeling that the operation had proceeded according to plan, and, apart from the icing conditions between Denmark and Sweden, it had been an incident-free trip. Weather conditions over Lincolnshire were better than anticipated, although not universally clear, and it was decided to bring the aircraft home, rather than divert them. However, the situation changed at the last minute, and four of the squadron did put down in Scotland, while the others were diverted to Metheringham, the home of 106 Squadron, about six miles to the west of Coningsby across the fenland, where the F.I.D.O. fog dispersal system had been installed. S/L Hatcher DFC, AFM was letting down through the fog in PB533, when he crashed on the airfield at 02.46, and the wreckage caught fire. Only the rear gunner of the eight men on board survived, and he, P/O Ingmire, sustained a broken arm and fractured shoulder. It was a popular and well-respected crew, who would be missed. Reconnaissance of the target revealed the collapse of the power station chimney, and other damage across the plant, but no knockout blow.

Fog persisted over the ensuing days, and it was late afternoon on the 23<sup>rd</sup> before some of the diverted aircraft began to land at Coningsby. The final wartime Christmas was celebrated in traditional style, with the officers waiting on the other ranks at lunch, and crews were sent by road on Boxing Day to collect the final stragglers from Metheringham and Strubby, although it would be the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup>, before they finally reached Coningsby. The first operations in support of Allied ground forces facing the German breakout in the Ardennes took place on the 26<sup>th</sup>, when elements from all groups participated. What became known as the Battle of the Bulge had begun on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, as a major surprise to the Americans, and the Germans had made impressive gains before running out of steam. A briefing was held at Coningsby on the 27<sup>th</sup>, to inform crews that five of them would be on permanent readiness for any operations which might come through.

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, four were told that they would be part of a 5 Group force of sixty-seven Lancasters targeting shipping, specifically the cruiser Köln, at Horten in Oslo Fjord. F/Os Bates, Cassidy, Phillips and Price took off either side of 20.00, but F/O Bates was immediately compromised by engine problems, resulting in a longer-than-normal take-off run and a reluctance to climb. At 10,000 feet, the port-outer engine had to be feathered, the starboard outer began to stutter shortly afterwards, and the starboard-inner was running roughly, all of which necessitated a swift jettisoning of seven of the ten 1,000 pounders and an early return. The others pressed on, and reached the target area in clear conditions with excellent visibility. F/O Price saw Wanganui and marine markers going down at 23.41, and backed them up at 23.45. At 23.50 a W/T message was received to "bomb ships to east", and two minutes later, "complete bombing and return to base". F/O Cassidy made three runs across the target at 8,600 feet, at 23.44 and 23.50 to back up, and at 23.56 to deliver his ten 1,000 pounders at the centre of the flame floats, and watched them fall in the wake of what might have been a large vessel. F/O Phillips also made three runs

to back up and bomb from 9,000 feet between 23.41 and 23.47, but, like the others, without making a positive identification of the Köln. The operation was inconclusive, with no claims of direct hits and no losses.

At noon on New Year's Eve, orders came through for a return to Horten, to continue the hunt for the Emden and Köln. Eight 83 Squadron crews were to act as the flare force for twenty other 5 Group Lancasters, including a dozen from 617 Squadron carrying Tallboys, and under the leadership for the first time of G/C Johnny Fauquier. The Tallboys had been fused to detonate a hundred feet below the surface. The 83 Squadron contingent departed Coningsby shortly before 20.00, arriving in the target area under clear skies with excellent visibility assisted by bright moonlight. F/O Shand's account of the operation stated; "Target was identified visually, and on our approach from the north, a warship was seen at 00.00, which was firing light flak. We did not illuminate it or drop a Wanganui, as we wished to make certain that it was a warship. As we were passing it, we saw a Wanganui drop at approximately 00.02, and Marker 4 gave "Tally Ho". We called up the controller for permission to illuminate, which we did with four clusters of flares at 00.17½, but owing to the speed of the ship and the wind, it passed through the illumination quickly, and the flares were almost useless. Several attempts were made, but owing to the absence of the controller, (available by W/T but not yet physically present) there was a lack of co-ordination. He was not in a position to identify until 00.20, by which time the flares were expended. While we orbited, one aircraft (F/O Brown) fired Verey cartridges over the ship to draw attention, and more flares were asked for. The controller then gave permission for independent bombing, so we dropped ours, which fell 300 yards to starboard side of the ship." It was only when the controller arrived and deemed the vessel to be large enough that he called in the Tallboys. As F/L Weber bombed, a Tallboy passed to starboard, and its detonation swung the target vessel, which caused his bombs to fall to port and astern. The whole action was somewhat confused, and no direct hits were scored. PB134 was the only failure to return, after crashing into the sea between Horten and Moss on the eastern shore of the fjord, and there were no survivors from among the eight man crew of F/O Duggan RAAF. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched three day and 133 night sorties on nine operations, for the loss of two aircraft and crews.

It was a sad end to a highly successful year for the squadron and the Command as a whole, and while the unmistakable scent of victory was wafting through the air from the Continent, much remained to be done, before the resolute enemy finally laid down its arms. Its defences were by no means spent, and they would continue to claim Bomber Command lives almost to the end of hostilities.

## January 1945

The New Year started with a bang on the Continent, when the Luftwaffe launched its ill-conceived, and, ultimately, all-fated Operation Bodenplatte at first light on New Year's Morning, in an attempt to destroy elements of the Allied air forces on the ground at the recently liberated airfields in Holland, Belgium and France. The limited success gained was dwarfed by the loss of around 250 of its own aircraft, many of whose pilots were killed, wounded, or fell into Allied hands, and this was a setback from which the enemy day fighter force (Tagjagd) would never recover. 5 Group was also active that morning, when sending 102 Lancasters and two Mosquitos to attack the recently repaired Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen. S/Ls Osborn and Twiggs and F/Os Norbury and Price were the 83 Squadron representatives to lead the operation, and they were all safely airborne from Coningsby by 08.00. S/L Osborn was three minutes late reaching navigation point A, but had made it up by point B, after making smoke at the English coast to attract the other participants. The 54 base aircraft fell in line, and the 55 base aircraft were seen to join the gaggle about three miles behind. A third section was sighted some twenty miles back, and they were allowed to catch up, which put the force two minutes behind schedule at point C. It was between points C and D that the fighter escort was expected to join them, and, although it was not immediately apparent, it did eventually put in an appearance. The gaggle held together fairly well, although S/L Osborn would later complain that the legs were too short to keep the gaggle tight, and some aircraft were seen to break formation. When about eight minutes from the target, smoke from a red Mosquito-laid TI could be seen, which was assessed as being on the southern tip of the island between the two branches of the canal. It was clearly visible to all crews, who were able to home in on it without difficulty. A six gun flak battery greeted their arrival with accurate salvos, but this did not inhibit the bombing runs, and S/L Osborn's eleven delay-fused 1,000 pounders fell on the eastern bank of the western channel, to be followed by the others. The use of delay fuses prevented an immediate assessment of the results, but photo-reconnaissance revealed that the canal had been breached again, and the surrounding fields were flooded.

By the time they landed, between 13.19 and 13.31, briefings were taking place for a second operation, this one against the Gravenhorst section of the Mittelland Canal a few miles to the north. Ten 83 Squadron crews were to be involved, F/Os Gamble and Pereira as PBMs, and the others divided among the three flare forces. They took off in the minutes leading to 17.00 to join up with 142 other Lancasters from the group, and reached the target to find similar clear conditions as those earlier in the day. So accurate were the initial TIs and illumination, delivered visually or by H2S that the third flare force was not required and was sent home. The main force was called in ahead of H-Hour at around 19.10, and a highly successful operation ensued, from which the entire force returned without loss.

A controversial attack was mounted against the small French town of Royan in the early hours of the 5<sup>th</sup>, in response to requests from Free French forces, which were laying siege. Situated on the east bank at the mouth of the Gironde Estuary, it was occupied by a German garrison, and was in the way of an advance towards the port of Bordeaux. The inhabitants had been offered an opportunity by the German garrison commander to evacuate the area, but around two thousand had declined, and would suffer the consequences. A 1, 5 and 8 Group force of 347 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos was made ready, of which eleven represented 83 Squadron. Four were to act as PBMs, with the others as part of the flare force, and they were all on their way by 01.01, as the first of two waves separated by one hour. They reached the target area to find clear but hazy conditions below 15,000 feet, and the PBMs identified the

aiming point by H2S. They made a number of runs across the target, first to deliver TIs, after which, the illuminators dropped flares, many of them scattered and ineffective. The early marking was inaccurate, a green TI being seen at 03.48 about a thousand yards west of the town, which would have put it over the sea or a wooded area slightly to the north. The main force element was held back for two minutes, until the problem had been rectified, and a red TI went down at 04.01, very close to the aiming point. Another fell in the middle of the town, near the beach, and the PBMs made their second runs for the purpose of releasing their seven 1,000 and three 500 pounders each. This first phase bombing produced a number of large explosions, and the resultant fires acted as a beacon to the 1 Group force following on. The attack destroyed about 85% of the town, and between 500 and 800 people lost their lives. In the event, the town was not taken, and it was mid-April before the garrison surrendered.

A rushed battle order came through at 18.30 on the 6<sup>th</sup>, for an attack by 5 Group on a German supply line at Houffalize in the Ardennes. Four 83 Squadron crews were briefed, and they took off at around 00.30 as part of a force of 131 Lancasters and five Mosquitos. F/L Falls found the target to be largely covered by cloud at 4,000 feet, but he was able to identify it visually, and watched the first red Mosquito-laid TIs go down, close together. He delivered his greens at H-3, and they were backed up to leave a compact group of reds and greens visible by their glow through the clouds. He consulted the Master Bomber, who was at 10,000 feet, about descending to gauge the accuracy of the markers in relation to the aiming point, but it was concluded that they were close enough for the main force to be called in to bomb. Afterwards, F/L Falls descended to 3,500 feet between the cloud layers, where he saw two large columns of smoke, the source of which he could not identify. The operation was successful, although a third of the main force withheld their bombs, possibly through not being able to positively identify the target.

Thirteen crews attended briefing on the 7<sup>th</sup>, to be told that Munich was to be their target that night, in company with others from 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups, in an overall force of 645 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos. W/C Ingham was the senior pilot on duty, as the squadron element departed Coningsby either side of 17.00, but F/L Bates was forced to turn back at 19.25 with severe icing problems, when approaching Reims. The others reached the target area safely, where W/C Ingham made a visual identification, and watched the first two PBMs deliver their TIs at the same time thirty seconds early. The flare force went in immediately afterwards, and illuminated the city very effectively, allowing ground detail to be identified. Red TIs went down west and east of the River Isar, bracketing the aiming point, and the Master Bomber ordered the backers up to drop their TIs between the reds, after which, the next batch of flares formed a circle around the aiming point. The main force was called in, and dropped their bombs accurately within the specified area, causing severe damage in central and some industrial districts. This would prove to be the final large-scale attack of the war on Munich.

W/C Ingham received the congratulations of the squadron on his promotion to group captain on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Snow continued to fall over the next few days, until a slight thaw set in on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Orders came through on the 13<sup>th</sup> for operations that night, and fifteen crews attended briefing, to be told that the Wintershall oil refinery at Politz was to be the target for a 5 Group force of 218 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos. The previous attack in December had caused damage, but production had not been halted. Two Lancasters developed technical faults and did not take off, but the remaining thirteen departed Coningsby either side of 16.45, and arrived in the target area on time to find clear skies with slight haze. The PBMs identified the target by means of H2S, and delivered their green TIs in a line approaching the target shortly after 22.00. The illuminators then dropped their flares, and ground detail stood out, highlighted by the snow

on the ground. A blind-bombing attack had been planned, but, because of the excellence of the conditions, Mosquitos were able to go in at low level. The rest of the squadron contingent was able to identify the aiming point visually, and once the main force was called in, the fate of the plant was sealed. Photographic reconnaissance confirmed that the site was badly damaged, but it was not certain that its ability to produce had been ended.

On the following day, fifteen crews were again called to the briefing room, where they learned of an operation to bomb the oil refinery at Leuna, near Merseburg, a dozen miles west of Leipzig. S/L Osborn was the senior 83 Squadron pilot on duty, and was one of nine assigned to the illuminator role, while F/L Cornish was the senior of four PBMs, and three other crews were to form an emergency wave, carrying eleven 500 pounders each, with half-hour delay fuses. They took off in a twenty-four minute slot to 16.29, as part of a 5 Group force of 210 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos, which would be followed three hours later by a further 363 Lancasters and five Mosquitos of 1, 6 and 8 Groups. There were no early returns among the 5 Group contingent, and they reached the target area to find unfavourable conditions of five to seven-tenths cloud with poor visibility. The PBMs positioned themselves over the aiming point by H2S, and delivered their TIs from 18,000 feet, after which, the first element of the flare force went in. The Master Bomber called for ground marking only, and, by 20.50, was satisfied and sent the marker aircraft home. S/L Osborn assessed the visibility at twelve miles, saw no cloud, and identified the target by TIs, before delivering his flares from 18,000 feet at 20.52. The main force produced what appeared to be concentrated bombing, and they left behind a beacon for the second wave, which added to the massive destruction that effectively put the plant out of action for the remainder of the war.

Three oil plants were selected for attention on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, at Zeitz, near Leipzig, Wanne-Eickel in the Ruhr, and Brůx in Czechoslovakia, and it was for the last-mentioned that seventeen 83 Squadron crews were briefed as part of a 5 Group force of 224 Lancasters and six Mosquitos, with seven 101 Squadron ABC Lancasters in support. They took off either side of 18.00, with S/L Twiggs the senior pilot on duty, and he was one of eleven illuminators, with four others acting as PBMs and two as emergency cover. F/O Tutton turned back with engine trouble when near Saint Quentin in eastern France, but the others pressed on to encounter nine to ten-tenths low cloud, which interfered with the low-level marking system. The four PBMs identified the target by means of H2S, and dropped green TIs, and they were followed by S/L Twiggs, who was the first illuminator to arrive, at 22.20, and he also relied on H2S to deliver his flares. It seems that a number of Mosquitos managed to get below the cloud base to put red TIs on the aiming point, and reported that the greens were among the oil tanks. However, the reds were not generally visible through the clouds, and the Master Bomber called for skymarking, while informing flare force 3 that it would not be required. The main force produced concentrated bombing, and returning crews reported large columns of black smoke rising through the clouds. Photo-reconnaissance confirmed that massive damage had been inflicted upon the plant, and a severe setback delivered to the enemy's oil production. Snow became a regular feature of the weather for the remainder of the month, and there would be no further operations for 83 Squadron. S/L Parry arrived on posting from 106 Squadron on the 25<sup>th</sup>. During the course of the month, the squadron dispatched eighty-nine sorties on eight operations.

## February 1945

The weather at home and on the Continent continued to be challenging during the first week of the new month, which began operationally for 83 Squadron immediately. A high wind during the night had cleared the snow, and fifteen crews were called to briefing on the 1<sup>st</sup>, to learn of their next target, which turned out to be marshalling yards in the town of Siegen, situated some fifty miles east of Cologne. This was a 5 Group show, involving a force of 271 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos, and was one of three major operations planned for the night, the others, by larger forces, taking place at Ludwigshafen and Mainz further south. The recently-promoted S/L Matheson was the senior pilot on duty, as they began departing Coningsby shortly after 16.00, and all reached the target area shortly after 19.00, to encounter heavy cloud between 3,000 and 7,000 feet. S/L Matheson and F/L Cornish were unable to get a clear picture on their screens, and did not deliver their green TIs, but F/L Duncan ran in a few seconds later, and dropped his at 19.05 from 15,000 feet, and their glow was visible through the clouds. This prompted the first flares, followed by an attempt to mark at low level with red TIs. These were not visible through the clouds, and when the Master Bomber called for skymarking at 19.10, the remaining illuminators were superfluous to requirements, and were sent home. The bombing phase was put back by four minutes until 19.20, but, once underway, it became widely scattered, possibly because of the skymarkers drifting quickly with the strong wind, or because of dummy markers and a decoy fire site. Some damage was inflicted upon the railway station, but local reports suggest that most of the bombing fell into nearby wooded country.

Thirteen crews were called to briefing at 15.00 on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, for an operation to Karlsruhe in southern Germany, which was another 5 Group effort by 250 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos, and, was again, only one of three major operations taking place. Wiesbaden was to receive its one and only major raid of the war at the hands of almost five hundred aircraft, while a 320-strong predominantly Halifax force dealt with an oil plant at Wanne-Eickel in the Ruhr. The recently-promoted W/C Osborn was the senior pilot on duty, supported by S/L Matheson, as the 83 Squadron contingent took off either side of 20.00. The winds turned out to be lighter than forecast, causing a change in route, which now took the force direct from Reading to the target, which meant straddling the Franco-Belgian frontier all the way to Germany, where they encountered heavy cloud between 3,000 and 15,000 feet. The 83 Squadron crews arrived over the target at 17,500 to 18,500 feet between 23.03 and 23.28, and tried to perform their assigned tasks in difficult conditions, some with malfunctioning H2S boxes. The Mosquitos tried to establish an aiming point, but the illumination was not getting through to the ground, and even had they dropped red TIs, it is unlikely that they would have been visible. At 23.11 the Master Bomber called for skymarking, and sent the Mosquitos and remaining illuminators home. The operation was a complete failure, and this turned out to be the final raid of the war on this city.

The German frontier towns of Goch and Cleves found themselves in the firing line on the night of the 7/8<sup>th</sup>, as Allied ground forces advanced towards them. A total of 750 aircraft was divided between them, while a 5 Group force of 177 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos returned to the Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen with delayed-action bombs. Eleven 83 Squadron crews attended briefing, with the newly-promoted W/C Twiggs the senior pilot present. He put himself in the flare force, while S/L Matheson and F/L Duncan were assigned to PBM duties. They took off either side of 21.00, and reached the target area to find seven to nine-tenths thin cloud. W/C Matheson dropped two green TIs from 15,000 feet at 23.48, but they disappeared through the cloud, and F/L Duncan followed up a minute later, reporting that

he could see a red TI burning to the west of the target. W/C Twigg went in seconds later, also at 15,000 feet, to deliver flares, and the main force was called in on schedule at 23.54, and, as far as the crews were concerned, the operation seemed to be successful, although the use of delayed action fuses prevented an accurate assessment. Five Lancasters failed to return, and among them was 83 Squadron's PB181, which is believed to have collided with 97 Squadron's ND961 on the way home, and crashed at Best, a short distance north-west of Eindhoven in southern Holland. The pilot, F/L Weber, was thrown clear as the aircraft broke up, and landed by parachute with unspecified but not serious injuries, and he would soon return to Coningsby. The other seven men on board lost their lives, as did all eight from the 97 Squadron aircraft. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the fields around the canal were cratered, but that the operation had failed to create a breach.

Thirteen crews found themselves being briefed on the following day, for a long round trip to the Wintershall oil refinery at Politz, as part of a 5 Group force of 227 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos. They were to act as the first wave in a two-phase attack, which would be completed two hours later by 248 Lancasters from 1 and 8 Groups. S/L Matheson was the senior pilot on duty, and he was assigned to PBM duties with F/L Duncan, while nine others would perform as illuminators and two as emergency back-up. They took off either side of 17.00, and reached the target to find clear skies and excellent visibility. The 83 Squadron crews went in at 13,000 to 14,500 feet between 21.03 and 21.15, and carried out their assigned tasks in the face of an ineffective smoke screen, but more seriously, fierce night fighter activity on approach to and over the target. They retreated westwards confident in the quality of their work, but ten would not arrive back in home airspace. Among the missing was 83 Squadron's ND696, which was shot down in the Berlin defence zone, and only the two gunners survived as PoWs from the crew of the experienced F/L Bates. The second phase of the operation also proceeded according to plan, and the plant was put out of action for the remainder of the war. Later on the 9<sup>th</sup>, NG453 and PB478 were destroyed at Coningsby, after a bomb fell off a trolley and detonated, killing two air cadets.

Briefings took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> for the first round of Operation Thunderclap, the Churchill inspired offensive against Germany's eastern cities, beginning with Dresden. W/C Twigg was the senior pilot present, but the most experienced in terms of sorties was F/L Norbury, with fifty-three to his credit, closely followed by F/L Siddle with fifty-one and F/L Duncan with fifty. It was to be another two-phase affair, with a 5 Group force of 246 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos leading the way, to be followed three hours later by 529 Lancasters of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups. It had proved to be a successful policy, with the 5 Group low-level marking system and main force attack providing a beacon for the second force, for which 8 Group would provide any necessary marking from high level. The 83 Squadron contingent took off either side of 18.15, with absolutely no concept of the ramifications of the operation, both in terms of its outcome on the ground, and the hysterical aftermath that would unjustly sour the reputation of Bomber Command in general, and ACM Arthur T Harris in particular, and continues to do so even today.

W/C Maurice Smith of 54 Base was Master Bomber for the 5 Group attack. He had formerly served with 619 Squadron, before being posted to Coningsby for his current role. He lifted off the runway a few minutes before 20.00 hours in Mosquito KB401 AZ-E, a 627 Squadron aircraft on loan, and was followed away by eight others from 627 Squadron. Meanwhile, shortly after crossing into Germany, F/L Cartwright lost his starboard-outer engine to a fire, when just north of Cologne, and, after checking the likely e.t.a. at Dresden, concluded that he would arrive too late to be of use. He turned back, and dropped

his six 1,000 pounders and single 500 pounder on what, according to a Gee-fix, was Cologne's south-western corner. The others arrived in the target area at the same time as the Mosquitos, to encounter three layers of cloud, between 3,000 and 5,000 feet, 6,000 to 8,000 feet and 15,000 to 16,000 feet, but otherwise the visibility was good. F/L Norbury was the first from the squadron to make a run, which he did to deliver green TIs from 15,000 feet at 22.03, and he was followed in by the flare force, which lit the way for the Mosquitos. The other squadron aircraft carried out their assigned tasks from 15,000 feet between 22.06 and 22.14, before the main force went in to deliver eight hundred tons of bombs in a moderately successful attack, the fires from which were visible from a hundred miles into the return journey.

By the time the second force of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Group Lancasters arrived three hours later, the skies had cleared, and the fires created by 5 Group provided the expected beacon. A further eighteen hundred tons of bombs rained down onto the historic and beautiful old city, setting off the same chain of events, which had devastated parts of Hamburg in July 1943, and a number of other cities since. Dresden's population had been swelled by masses of refugees fleeing from the eastern front, and many were engulfed in the ensuing firestorm. Initial estimates put the death toll at 250,000 people, but a more realistic figure of twenty-five thousand has been settled upon. The destruction of Dresden has been used by some as a weapon to beat Bomber Command and Harris, and label them as war criminals. To this day, in Germany, survivors claim that RAF aircraft strafed civilians in the streets and open spaces, an accusation absolutely without foundation. Bomber crews at this stage of the war had one aim after an operation, and that was to get home as quickly as possible, and they certainly would not want to put themselves at risk by dallying over the target to wait for night fighters to show up. It should also be remembered that American bombers arrived over the city on the following morning, under the umbrella of escort fighters, which were far more suitable for strafing, but no accusations have been levelled at them. It should also be understood that Harris had no interest in attacking Dresden, and had to be nagged by Chief-of-the-Air-Staff Portal to fulfil Churchill's wishes. The aircrew simply did the job asked of them, and Dresden was no different from any other attack on a city. The death toll at Hamburg was much higher, and yet, there has been no outcry. The legacy of this operation served to deny Harris and the men under his Command their due recognition for the massive part they played in the ultimate victory, and only in recent times has a campaign medal been struck, sadly, far too late for the majority. Churchill, with his eyes set on a peacetime election, betrayed Harris and the Command in a typical politically motivated U-turn, leaving Harris as the only commander in the field not to be honoured.

Thunderclap moved on to Chemnitz on the following night, situated forty miles to the south-west of Dresden, and within thirty miles of the Czech frontier. Briefings took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> involving 717 crews from 1, 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups, while 224 Lancaster and eight Mosquito crews of 5 Group learned that they would be heading for Rositz, a small town containing an oil refinery, twenty-five miles south of Leipzig and thirty miles north-west of Chemnitz. A dozen 83 Squadron crews were detailed, with F/Ls Duncan and Pereira acting as PBMs, eight others, including G/C Ingham, as illuminators, and the final two in the emergency wave. G/C Ingham led them away at 17.06, and they were all safely airborne within twenty minutes. The intention was to pass south of the target, and turn to the north-west over Altenburg, four miles away, but F/L Duncan's H2S operator slightly misread the image on his screen, and they were on top of Altenburg before they knew it. This ruined any chance of accurate blind marking, and while orbiting to deliver bombs only, the H2S box broke down, and in the absence of any flares or TIs, Duncan abandoned his sortie. There was six to ten-tenths thin cloud in the target area in

two layers, one at 6,000 to 8,000 feet, and the other at 10,000 to 12,000 feet, but F/L Pereira made a good run on H2S at 15,000 feet at 20.48 to drop green TIs and five delay-fuse 1,000 pounders, and the illuminators followed up between 20.51 and 20.58 from a similar height. The main force was called in at 21.07, and the raid was completed four minutes later. It was established afterwards that the southern part of the oil plant had been damaged, but it would be necessary to return to finish the job. The Chemnitz raid was compromised by adverse weather conditions, and it would be March before success was achieved against this target.

W/C Osborn and Gunnery leader, S/L Poole, had been away from the squadron since the 9<sup>th</sup>, visiting American 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force stations to fly the RAF flag in R5868, S-Sugar, which had done 125 trips. They returned to Coningsby on the 19<sup>th</sup> for a rest, before continuing the tour on the following day. According to the ORB, they spoke very highly of the American allies. 5 Group's involvement in the oil campaign continued on the 19<sup>th</sup>, when 254 Lancaster and six Mosquito crews were called to briefing, to learn the details of that night's attack on a refinery at Böhlen, another of the oil plants, with Leuna, Zeitz and Rositz, located in an arc west to south of Leipzig. A dozen 83 Squadron Lancasters were made ready, with the usual suspects, F/Ls Duncan and Pereira, fulfilling the PBM role, and the others all acting as illuminators. They took off either side of midnight for the three-and-a-half-hour flight out, and would meet up with the later-departing Mosquito element at the target. Master Bomber for the occasion was W/C Benjamin, who was flying the same Mosquito that W/C Smith had used at Dresden six nights earlier. There was ten-tenths cloud over the target in two layers at 5,000 to 8,000 feet and 10,000 to 14,000 feet, and this would introduce a challenging element to the operation. For the second raid running, F/L Duncan was unable to drop his green TIs, after arriving too early at the target, and overshooting while trying to lose time. He made a second "bearing and distance" run from Leipzig, five miles due north of the target, but again failed to find the aiming point, and eventually bombed from 15,000 feet at 04.21, as instructed, on the glow of markers through the cloud. F/L Pereira had also been unable to identify the aiming point, and had held back until the bombing phase, delivering his five 1,000 pounders with half-hour delayed-fuses from 15,000 feet at 04.18. The illuminators went in at around 15,000 feet between 04.05 and 04.13, and the VHF chatter suggested that a Mosquito had been able to mark a factory building with a red TI, which was backed up, before the main force was called in. W/C Benjamin's VHF was suddenly cut off, and his Deputy took over. It would later be established that the Master Bomber's Mosquito had been shot down by flak, and that W/C Benjamin DFC & Bar had died alongside his navigator. Post-raid reconnaissance revealed only superficial damage to the site.

On the following night, a further attempt was scheduled against the Mittelland Canal at Gravenhorst, for which ten 83 Squadron crews were briefed, as part of an overall 5 Group force of 154 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos. W/C Twiggs was the senior pilot on duty, and F/L Duncan would be undertaking his fifty-fourth and final operation. F/O Astbury was last away at 22.03, and all reached the target area, to find ten-tenths cloud separating them from the aiming point. This time, F/L Duncan was able to deliver two green TIs by H2S, from 12,000 feet at 00.53, and they fell on the starboard side of the canal. After the flare force went in, the Mosquito element descended to 4,500 feet, but could not identify the aiming point, and, just before H-Hour, the Master Bomber sent the markers home, to be followed almost immediately by the main force as he abandoned the operation. It was rescheduled for twenty-four hours later, and a force of 165 Lancasters and twelve Mosquitos was made ready. Among those attending briefing at Coningsby was G/C Evans-Evans, the station commander, who would be taking the bulk of G/C Ingham's highly experienced crew. The ten 83 Squadron participants took off either side of 17.00,

and reached the target area to find clear skies with some ground haze. S/L Matheson and F/L Pereira were the PBMs for this operation, the former failing to identify the aiming point on H2S, and the latter dropping his green TIs two minutes late, because of a change in the wind. They fell about a mile south of the aiming point, quite close to the Wet Triangle meeting point of the Mittelland and Dortmund-Ems Canals, and, after the flare force had done its job, the Mosquitos delivered their reds. These were backed up, and the main force was called in at 20.25, although the use of long-delay fuses prevented an immediate assessment of the results.

On the way home, NE165 was intercepted by a night fighter, and crashed close to a farmhouse at 20.45 at De Rips, ten miles north-east of Eindhoven in southern Holland, and only the rear gunner, F/L Eddie Hansen RAAF, escaped with his life of the eight men on board. The pilot was the forty-three-year-old G/C "Tiny" Evans-Evans, who became one of the oldest men in Bomber Command to lose his life on operations. In contrast, his navigator, S/L Wishart, DSO, DFC & Bar, was just twenty-three years of age, and late of 97 Squadron, and had undertaken seventy-nine operations, including eleven to Berlin, and eighteen as right-hand-man to a Master Bomber in a Mosquito. There is no suggestion that the outcome would have been different had another officer occupied the pilot's seat, but Evans-Evans's participation was the result of a whim, and involved others, who had already served their country and the cause of victory with distinction, and shouldn't have been exposed to further, unnecessary danger. Post-raid reconnaissance showed the canal to be completely unnavigable, and it would remain so for the rest of the war.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 5 Group detailed seventy-three Lancasters and ten Mosquitos for an attack on shipping in the port of Horten in Oslo Fjord. There was no mention in the ORB of specific vessels, which suggests that the briefing also outlined a general attack on the port, and anything lying at anchor within it or nearby. Bomber Command War Diaries mentions a possible U-Boot base, and, with all of the French and Dutch ports no longer available, it is reasonable to assume that Horten might be utilized for that purpose. Ten 83 Squadron crews were briefed, and they took off either side of 17.00, to all reach the target under clear skies and in good, if hazy, visibility. F/L Pereira and F/O Gamble dropped their green TIs by H2S almost simultaneously from 12,000 feet at 20.31, and the first elements of the flare force went in at a similar altitude at 20.32, to provide illumination for the Mosquitos. Illuminating continued until 20.52, and the main force produced accurate and concentrated bombing, which caused much destruction in the port, where a shipyard was severely damaged by fire, and a tanker and floating crane were hit, the latter capsizing.

W/C Twiggs and F/L Siddle were sent to join another 5 Group attack on the Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen on the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup>, when 617 and 9 Squadrons were present with Tallboys, but cloud over the target persuaded the Master Bomber to call it off at 16.33, while the force was still outbound. This proved to be the final operation of the month for 83 Squadron, which had launched 112 sorties on nine operations for the loss of five aircraft and three crews, from which one pilot returned home.

## March 1945

March would prove to be another loss free month for the squadron, as the Command bludgeoned its way across Germany, concentrating on oil, rail and road targets, along with the few towns still boasting a built-up area. Cologne was raided for the last time on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, firstly by a force of seven hundred aircraft, which inflicted huge destruction across the city, particularly west of the Rhine, and later by a 3 Group force, of which only fifteen bombed because of a faulty G-H station in England. The city ceased to function thereafter, and fell to American forces four days later. 5 Group was barely involved in the main operation, and, at Coningsby, the afternoon had been spent in a hockey match, the final of the Base Commander's Trophy, in which 83 Squadron defeated 97 Squadron 3-2, having lost to Woodhall Spa the day before by a single goal.

The Group prepared a force of 212 Lancasters and ten Mosquitos for a return to the Ladbergen aqueduct section of the Dortmund-Ems Canal on the night of the 3/4<sup>th</sup>. Sixteen crews attended briefing, with F/L Pereira and F/O Gamble assigned to PBM duties, and the remainder as illuminators. They took off either side of 18.30, and encountered eight to ten-tenths cloud in the target area at between 3,500 and 6,000 feet, but H2S allowed F/L Pereira and F/O Gamble to locate the canal and deliver their green TIs from 14,000 feet at 21.47 and 21.49 respectively. The first illuminators went in a minute later, to light the way for the Mosquitos, after which, a large red glow could be seen through the clouds. At 21.59 the Master Bomber called in the main force, and it created two breaches, which rendered the waterway unnavigable, and it was out of action for the remainder of the war.

Thirteen crews were called to briefing on the 5<sup>th</sup>, to learn that the group would be sending 248 Lancasters and ten Mosquitos back to Böhlen, near Leipzig, for another crack at the oil refinery. A simultaneous operation by a Thunderclap force of 760 aircraft would attempt to redress the recent failure at Chemnitz, some thirty-five miles to the south. F/Ls Norbury and Pereira were to be PBMs, with all of the others assigned to illuminator duties, and they took off either side of 17.00, prepared to adopt either a low-level or skymarking plan, dependent upon the prevailing conditions on arrival. They encountered layers of cloud between 2,000 and 11,000 feet, and F/L Norbury made his first run at 14,000 feet to drop green TIs at 21.40. He did not see them burst because of the cloud, but thought that the illuminator flares were well-placed. Some of the Coningsby crews had H2S difficulties, and not all were able to pinpoint on Leipzig for the run-in. This meant that they were unsure of their position, and when the Master Bomber called for Wanganui flares at 21.45, they withheld them, rather than risk dropping them inaccurately and attracting some of the bombing. F/L Norbury witnessed a large explosion at 21.50, before making a second run three minutes later to deliver his four 1,000 pounders and Wanganui flares. F/O Brown saw another large explosion at 21.57, and brought his entire load home after failing to positively establish his position. The Master Bomber called a halt at 22.01 and sent everyone home, leaving evidence of fires and smoke behind them. Post-raid reconnaissance revealed extensive damage to the coal-drying plant, and some hits in other areas of the plant, but it was not a knockout blow. Meanwhile, the Thunderclap force did succeed in inflicting severe fire damage in central and southern districts of Chemnitz.

On the night of the 6/7<sup>th</sup>, 5 Group sent a force of 150 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos back to a region with memories of heavy casualties sustained in August 1943. The small port of Sassnitz was on the island of Rügen, about thirty miles north of Peenemünde on the Baltic coast, and the two-fold purpose of

the operation was to destroy its installations and facilities, and sink shipping, to render it unusable as a port. S/L Matheson was the senior pilot on duty among the thirteen 83 Squadron crews, and, with F/O Gamble, was designated a PBM. They took off either side of 18.30, but F/O Gamble was forced to turn back for an unspecified reason, when about two hours out. The others found five to nine-tenths drifting cloud in the target area, and S/L Matheson made a run at 22.50 to drop green TIs over the port from 12,000 feet, and then waited for ten minutes before delivering flares across the outer harbour to illuminate any ships. The other squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 12,000 to 12,800 feet between 22.52 and 23.16, and, apart from a short break, when cloud slid across the aiming point, the markers remained visible to the main force crews. Three large ships were identified in the harbour, and these were attacked, and, according to post-raid reconnaissance, sunk. There was also extensive damage in the northern part of the town.

The popular Australian, F/L Cornish, was posted to 29 O.T.U., on the 7<sup>th</sup> at the conclusion of his tour, and would, therefore, miss the squadron's next operation, which was a 5 Group show that night against the oil refinery at Harburg, south of Hamburg. Ten crews were briefed at 14.30, and told that they were to be part of a force of 234 Lancasters and seven Mosquitos, while over a thousand aircraft were engaged in other major and minor operations. They took off either side of 18.00, with S/L Matheson, F/L Pereira and F/O Gamble assuming their usual role as PBMs. They reached the target area to find some thin cloud, but nothing that would interfere with the attack, and F/L Pereira, who had lost his port-inner engine over the Danish coast, was first from the squadron to run across the target to deliver TIs and flares in one go from 14,000 feet at 21.47. F/O Gamble wasn't satisfied with his run seven minutes later, and decided to drop back into the flare force, while S/L Matheson dropped his greens and four 1,000 pounders at 21.59, also from 14,000 feet. The illuminators went in with their flares and 1,000 pounders between 21.51 and 22.00, and the Master Bomber was heard to call in the main force at 21.56, ordering them to bomb the northern tip of the Mosquito-laid red TI. Enemy night fighters were active in the target area and on the way home, and fourteen Lancasters were lost, in return for which, the target had sustained much new damage, particularly to storage tanks, and a nearby rubber factory had also been severely afflicted.

83 Squadron now enjoyed a week's rest, during which, a milestone was set on the 11<sup>th</sup>, when a new record force to a single target of 1,079 aircraft took off in the late morning to raid Essen for the last time. The record stood for a little over twenty-four hours, and was surpassed, when 1,108 aircraft departed their stations in the early afternoon for Dortmund. Canadian, F/L Duncan, was posted to the RCAF on the 14<sup>th</sup>, having completed his tour. The Group's next objective was the Wintershall oil refinery at Lützkendorf, another site to the west of Leipzig and south-west of Leuna.<sup>12</sup> The briefing of 244 Lancaster and eleven Mosquito crews took place on the 14<sup>th</sup>, fourteen of the former representing 83 Squadron. W/C Twiggs was the senior pilot on duty, as they departed Coningsby either side of 17.00, and headed out to cross Germany south of Cologne. They reached the target area to be met by four to seven-tenths cloud with a base at 14,500 feet, and F/Os Judge and Tutton both arrived to deliver their green TIs at 21.49 from 14,000 feet. The illuminators began to go in immediately afterwards between 21.51 and 22.00 with flares and bombs, and the low-level Mosquitos did their job to accurately mark the aiming point. Large explosions were seen, but an assessment was rendered impossible by the smoke drifting across the target, and rising to 7,000 feet. Reconnaissance revealed a partially successful raid,

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<sup>12</sup> Lützkendorf no longer exists on a map of Germany, and is now known as Krumpa.

gained for the loss of eighteen Lancasters, 7.4% of the force, mostly to night fighters in the target area and on the way home.

Fifteen 83 Squadron crews assembled in the briefing room at 14.00 on the 16<sup>th</sup>, to learn that they were to attack the virgin target of Würzburg, some sixty miles south-east of Frankfurt. A 5 Group force of 225 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos was made ready for an early-evening take-off, with S/L Matheson the senior pilot on duty. While this operation was in progress, a similar-sized force, drawn from 1 and 8 Groups, would be delivering the final attack of the war on Nuremberg, fifty miles to the south-east. Take-off from Coningsby was completed by 17.50, and all reached the target area to find clear skies with ground haze. The 83 Squadron crews carried out their assigned tasks from 12,500 to 15,500, but mostly from 13,500, between 21.25 and 21.34, and were able to identify the ground features where the markers and bombs were falling. All returned without incident to report a successful operation, which had lasted just seventeen minutes. During that period, 1,127 tons of bombs had fallen into the historic old cathedral city, destroying an estimated 89% of the built-up area and killing four to five thousand people. The Nuremberg operation had also been highly destructive, but had cost 1 Group twenty-four Lancasters, thus proving that the enemy defences, while not able to protect the whole of Germany, could still give the Command a bloody nose.

There was still business to attend to at the Böhlen oil refinery, and 5 Group prepared a force of 236 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos on the 20<sup>th</sup>, to deal what was hoped to be the knockout blow. Briefing at Coningsby began at 20.00, and was attended by fourteen 83 Squadron crews, with W/C Twiggs the most senior pilot present. He would be one of nine illuminators, while F/L Norbury and F/O Gamble would act as PBMs, F/O Dodson as a supporter, and F/Os Phillips and Inniss formed an emergency wave. They were all safely airborne by a minute after midnight, and set out on the now familiar path to eastern Germany. F/O Gamble lost the use of his H2S box at 08.30°E, and could not, therefore, perform as a PBM, but opted to continue on and deliver his bombs visually. Conditions in the target area were fairly good, with three to six-tenths cloud, and F/L Norbury was the first to deliver green TIs, at 03.33, which he watched fall 750 yards south of the plant. W/C Twiggs was a little early as he undertook the final leg to the target, and reduced speed to lose time. This he achieved, but a stronger than anticipated tail wind caused him to gain another ninety seconds, which he would also have attempted to lose, had circumstances not overtaken him. At H-16, a yellow TI burst on the ground two miles short of the target. As W/C Twiggs started his flare-run, a cluster of illuminator flares ignited ahead, in the light of which, the bomb-aimer saw that a smoke screen had been activated and was generating much smoke. Rather than delay, and make it harder for the Mosquito markers, he dropped his flares early at 03.34 from 14,000 feet, and then orbited in case his Wanganui marker flares were required. The other 83 Squadron crews also reported arriving ahead of schedule, and carried out their assigned tasks from around 14,000 feet, between 03.33 and 03.46, and by the time they retreated westwards, the Mosquitos had deposited red TIs, and the main force had been called in. A few dummy TIs attracted a number of bomb loads, but most were concentrated around the target, and numerous explosions were witnessed. The operation put the plant out of action, and was still idle when American forces moved in a few weeks later.

There was a very late briefing for thirteen crews at Coningsby on the 21<sup>st</sup>, at 22.30, when they were informed that the Deutsche Erdölwerke refinery at Hamburg was to be their target that night, in company with another 138 Lancasters and eight Mosquitos from the group. Take-off took place either side of 01.30, with F/L Norbury and F/O Gamble again assigned to the PBM role, nine as illuminators and two

forming an emergency wave, and carrying ten 1,000 pounders each in addition to illuminator flares. They approached the target from the north, and found thin stratus cloud at around 2,000 feet. F/L Norbury's H2S set had begun to develop problems at the Danish coast, and could not be relied upon for blind marking, although it was sufficient for blind bombing. F/O Gamble had no such problems, and dropped his green TIs on H2S from 14,000 feet at 03.55. The first illuminators went in thirty seconds later, and continued to light up the aiming point until 04.01, by which time the Mosquitos had marked it, and the main force was called in at 04.05. Many fires were seen, and a large explosion occurred at 04.11, producing red flame and black smoke, and another was reported at 04.16. It was clear that the attack had been successful, and post-raid reconnaissance would confirm that twenty storage tanks had been destroyed.

This proved to be the final operation of the month for 83 Squadron, but the group continued to send forces to Germany to bomb railway bridges at Bremen by daylight on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the frontier town of Wesel on the night of the 23/24<sup>th</sup>. The latter was the last of a series of raids over the past five weeks on this town, mostly by 3 Group, and it was now 97% destroyed. After the war it would claim to be the most completely destroyed town in Germany. The Group's final operation of the month was carried out by ninety-five aircraft against an oil storage depot at Farge on the River Weser, north of Bremen, on the 27<sup>th</sup>. 617 Squadron was also present, dealing with the largest concrete structure then in existence, the U-Boot bunker. This massive structure, designed to house U-Boats, and test them in a giant tank, was still under construction, and close to completion. The 23-foot-thick concrete roof had only just been poured, but had not yet had time to set, when two Grand Slams penetrated it, and brought down thousands of tons of concrete, ending any future for the site. During the course of the month the squadron dispatched 108 sorties on eight operations without loss.

## April 1945

There was a delayed start to April's operations for 83 Squadron, with the first briefing taking place on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a scheduled take-off at around 18.00. It was cancelled shortly before, however, and the crews received the news badly, having carried out no offensive duties for two weeks. The month began for the Group with a raid on what was believed to be a military barracks at Nordhausen on the 4<sup>th</sup>, following on the heels of a 1 Group attack on the day before. It was, in fact, a camp for forced workers at the underground secret weapons factory, established after Peenemünde, and heavy casualties were inflicted on these friendly foreign nationals. 83 Squadron was not involved, and the same frustration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> was played out again on the 5<sup>th</sup>. The process was repeated on the 7<sup>th</sup>, only this time, the operation went ahead for sixteen crews, who were briefed for an operation to a Benzol plant at Molbis, yet another site near Leipzig, situated south of the city, and less than two miles east of Böhlen. A 5 Group force of 175 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos was made ready, and the 83 Squadron contingent was all safely airborne by 18.36. They reached the target to find clear skies with ground haze, or, perhaps, a smoke screen in operation, and the two 83 Squadron PBMs, F/Ls Judge and Tutton, were the tip of the spear, the former identifying Zeitz on his H2S, and making the ten-mile north-easterly run from there to the target. He released his green TIs from 15,000 feet at 22.48, and F/L Judge followed within seconds. W/C Twiggs was making his approach to drop illuminator flares, when he saw the greens burst ahead. He didn't see much else, after being coned in searchlights at the start of the run, and having to lower his seat to preserve his night vision. His flares dropped away from 15,000 feet at 22.51, and the other members of the flare force came in between 22.50 and 22.57 also at 15,000 feet. Red and green TIs could be seen among the chimneys of the plant, and the main force plastered it with high explosives, leaving the crews in no doubt that the operation was a complete success. This was confirmed by photo-reconnaissance, and no further production would be possible on the site.

On the following day, fourteen crews were briefed for a return to the refinery at Lützkendorf, which had been damaged in mid-March, but had not succumbed to a knockout blow. A 5 Group force of 231 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos was made ready, and W/C Osborn was now back in harness at 83 Squadron, after his spell of special duties as an ambassador. He was the senior pilot on duty, as they departed Coningsby either side of 18.00, with F/Ls Judge and Tutton once more performing the PBM role. F/O Phillips had his starboard-outer engine cut immediately after take-off, and, although it picked up again, it surged and belched black smoke, which persuaded him to turn back. The others reached the target, where conditions were as they had been twenty-four hours earlier, with clear skies, and either ground haze or generated smoke. The PBMs ran in at 14,000 feet at 22.33, and F/L Judge delivered his green TIs, but F/L Tutton did not register a clear enough H2S image to risk dropping, and orbited to starboard, before coming in again ten minutes later. The illuminators were over the target mostly at 14,000 feet, a few a little higher, between 22.35 and 22.42, after which the main force was called in to bomb the accurately placed and clearly visible red TIs. F/L Norbury attacked at this time, noting a very large explosion at 22.47, and an even larger one two minutes later. All returned home safely, confident that it would not be necessary to return to that particular target. The crews landed at Litchfield, after weather conditions closed Coningsby, and it was after lunchtime on the 9<sup>th</sup>, before they got home. The complete destruction of the site was confirmed by photo-reconnaissance, and it would remain out of action for what remained of the war.

Five 83 Squadron crews attended briefing on the 10<sup>th</sup>, to be told that they were to be part of a seventy-six-strong 5 Group Lancaster force with eleven Mosquitos and seven other Mosquitos from 8 Group. Their target was the Wahren railway yards, north-west of Leipzig's city centre, and the 83 Squadron element was to provide illumination. F/L Cartwright led them away at 18.15, and they reached the target to find clear skies and excellent conditions for bombing. There were many ineffective searchlights, but flak was light, probably because of a heavy night fighter presence. The 83 Squadron crews delivered their flares onto green TIs from 13,300 to 14,500 feet between 22.51 and 22.57, and it was clear that the marking was well placed and concentrated. At some time during the operation, ME423 was hit by flak in the bomb bay, while the flares were still inside, and ignited them. The crew took to their parachutes over Allied-held territory, leaving the Lancaster to crash a dozen or so miles east of Fulda, about 130 miles from the target. F/L Shand and six others arrived safely on the ground, but the second air-bomber, F/O Naylor, who was first to leave the aircraft, apparently slipped out of his harness and fell to his death. The survivors landed back at Coningsby in a Dakota at 16.00 on the 14<sup>th</sup>, after a direct flight from France, and they were the last from the squadron to go missing. Photo-reconnaissance confirmed serious damage to the marshalling yards, and the eastern half was assessed as destroyed.

Beginning on the night of the 16/17<sup>th</sup>, the Group embarked on a series of even more distant attacks on railway targets, the first of which was at Pilsen in Czechoslovakia. Thirteen crews attended briefing in the evening, to be given details of the attack by 222 Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos of 5 Group. W/C Osborn led them away at 23.21, but it was 00.05 before F/O Gamble brought up the rear. They found clear skies in the target area, and only slight haze, and F/L Pereira was the first of the squadron's three PBMs to deliver his green TIs, which he did from 14,000 feet at 03.38. F/Ls Judge and Tutton were ten minutes behind, before the flare forces went in at around 14,000 feet between 03.51 and 03.56. The main force was called in at 03.58, having plenty of markers to aim at, and the operation was concluded successfully, with a large explosion reported at 04.00, and a number of smaller ones afterwards.

Twenty-four hours later, the marshalling yards target for ninety 5 Group Lancasters and eleven Mosquitos was at Cham, on Germany's border with Czechoslovakia, for which eleven 83 Squadron crews were briefed. F/L Norbury and F/O Gamble were assigned to PBM duties, with the remainder performing as illuminators. They took off in a seventeen-minute slot from 23.30, and arrived more than four hours later, to find clear skies and slight ground haze. F/L Norbury dropped the first green TIs on H2S from 14,000 feet at 03.47, and F/O Gamble followed up three minutes later, before the flare forces went in between 03.51 and 03.54. The marking was seen to be very concentrated, but the use of delay-fused bombs meant that no immediate assessment was possible. Photo-reconnaissance later confirmed that tracks had been torn up and rolling stock damaged, and it was another success for the group.

The 18<sup>th</sup> was devoted to a massive assault by daylight on the installations and defences on the island of Heligoland. 969 aircraft took part, although none from 83 Squadron, and the two-phase operation left the island with the appearance of a cratered moonscape. That night 83 Squadron returned to action with a raid on railway yards at Komotau, or Chomutov, as it was renamed, situated ten miles inside what is now the Czech Republic, and ninety miles south-east of Leipzig. Eleven 83 Squadron crews were briefed, as part of a 5 Group force of 114 Lancasters and nine Mosquitos. W/C Osborn was the senior pilot on duty, as they all got away safely from Coningsby by 23.32, and after more than four-and-a-half hours flying, reached the target to find a layer of broken cloud at 6,000 feet and another at 10,000 to 12,000 feet. F/L Tutton had his H2S fail as he ran in on the target, so could not fulfil his blind marking function, but F/L

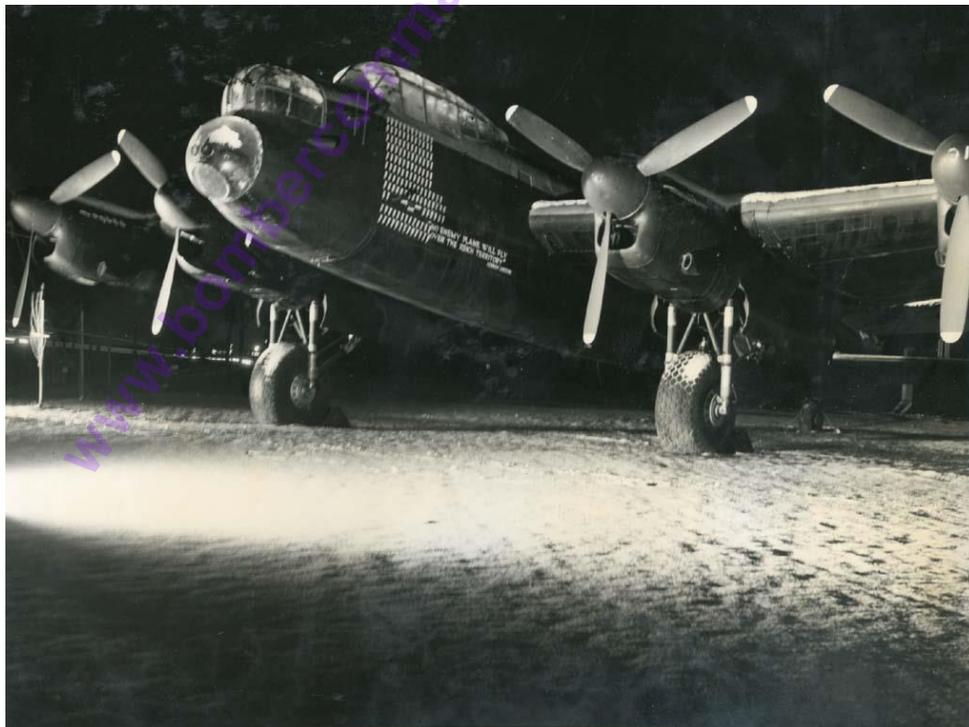
Pereira was on hand to deliver his green TIs from 14,500 feet at 03.49. The flare force began illuminating a minute later, and was sent home by the Master Bomber at 03.56. The Mosquito element took care of the precision marking, allowing the Master Bomber to call in the main force, to bomb a plentiful array of markers on or near the aiming point. The attack was entirely successful, and was completed without casualty, and the 83 Squadron crews put down at Tangmere on the Sussex coast, because of poor visibility at base.

The squadron and the Group operated for the final time on the 25<sup>th</sup>, in the morning against the SS barracks at Hitler's Eagles Nest retreat at Berchtesgaden, for which 83 Squadron was not required, and that night to bomb the oil refinery at Tonsberg in southern Norway. Eleven crews were briefed as part of a force of 107 Lancasters and twelve Mosquitos, which were led off the ground by F/L Norbury at 20.03. They could not have known that this was to be their final offensive action of the war, but, as discussions had already been taking place about the programme on and after VE Day, they guessed the end was close. W/C Osborn was the senior pilot on duty, as they made their way in a north-easterly direction, across the North Sea to Oslo Fjord and the refinery, situated a few miles to the south of the recently-visited Horten. There was eight to ten-tenths cloud between 7,500 and 10,500 feet, but this did not prevent F/L Norbury from pinpointing visually on the Norwegian coast, after his H2S began to play up, and F/O Dodson was also experiencing technical difficulties, which, fortunately, cleared sufficiently for him to drop his TIs blind from 14,000 feet at 23.34. The flare force went in at 23.35 to 23.38, and the subsequent marking and bombing was carried out accurately and successfully. F/O Astbury and crew had the honour of being the last from 83 Squadron to touch down from an operation, and at 02.56, the war effectively ended. During the course of the month the squadron undertook seven operations, and launched eighty-one sorties for the loss of a single Lancaster and one crew member. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, G/C Ingham led an element of six 83 Squadron Lancasters to Brussels to help in the repatriation of prisoners of war under Operation Exodus.

83 Squadron was one of those units present in Bomber Command on the very first day of the war, and, apart from a short detachment to Coastal Command in early 1940, remained at the forefront of the Command's campaigns until the end. It served with distinction throughout, and was graced by some of the great characters that a war always causes to rise to the top. From Britain and the Empire they answered the call to arms, and their influence helped to mould the unit's Esprit de Corps, which was always evident. Whether a squadron of the line or a Pathfinder unit, its standards were always of the highest order, and its record of service ranks among the highest.



*Now preserved for posterity at the RAF Museum in Hendon, London, 83 Squadron's faithful R5868 stands as a testament to the duty and sacrifice of the men and women of Bomber Command. The Lancaster was the first RAF heavy bomber to reach its century and in total survived 137 ops. The photograph above shows the celebrations when the aircraft completed her 100<sup>th</sup> operational sortie.*



[www.bombercommandmuseumarchives.ca](http://www.bombercommandmuseumarchives.ca)

## Section Two: Key Facts about 83 Squadron

### Stations

<b>SCAMPTON</b>	14.03.38. to 15.08.42.
<b>LOSSIEMOUTH (Detachment)</b>	21.02.40. to 20.03.40.
<b>WYTON</b>	15.08.42. to 18.04.44.
<b>CONINGSBY</b>	18.04.44. to 05.11.46.

### Commanding Officers

<b>WING COMMANDER R B JORDAN</b>	21.08.39. to 06.10.39.
<b>WING COMMANDER L S SNAITH AFC</b>	06.10.39. to 09.06.40.
<b>WING COMMANDER J C SISSON</b>	09.06.40. to 03.12.40.
<b>WING COMMANDER D A BOYLE AFC</b>	03.12.40. to 16.02.41.
<b>WING COMMANDER W W STAINTHORPE</b>	16.02.41. to 28.02.41.
<b>WING COMMANDER R A B LEAROYD</b>	28.02.41. to 18.06.41.
<b>WING COMMANDER H V SATTERLY</b>	18.06.41. to 06.09.41.
<b>WING COMMANDER S O TUDOR</b>	06.09.41. to 14.04.42.
<b>WING COMMANDER M D CRIGHTON-BIGGIE</b>	14.04.42. to 10.02.43.
<b>WING COMMANDER J R GILLMAN</b>	10.02.43. to 09.05.43.
<b>WING COMMANDER J H SEARBY</b>	09.05.43. to 05.11.43.
<b>WING COMMANDER R HILTON</b>	05.11.43. to 22.11.43.
<b>GROUP CAPTAIN J H SEARBY</b>	23.11.43. to 04.12.43.
<b>WING COMMANDER W ABERCROMBY</b>	04.12.43. to 03.01.44.
<b>WING COMMANDER L C DEANE</b>	03.01.44. to 28.08.44.
<b>(GROUP CAPTAIN from August 1944)</b>	
<b>WING COMMANDER J A INGHAM</b>	28.08.44. to 10.06.45.
<b>(GROUP CAPTAIN from January 1945)</b>	

### Aircraft

<b>HAMPDEN</b>	11.38. to 01.42.
<b>MANCHESTER</b>	12.41. to 06.42.
<b>LANCASTER I/III</b>	05.42. to 07.46.

## Operational Record

### Overall

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
623	5521	143	2.6

### Category of Operations

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
524	90	9

### Operations with 5 Group

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
456	2881	87	3.0

### Category of Operations

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
357	90	9

## Hampdens

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
283	1987	43	2.2

### Category of Operations

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHERS</b>
205	72	6

## Manchesters

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
33	152	9	5.9

### Category of Operations

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
21	10	2

## Lancasters - Overall

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
307	3382	91	2.7

### Category of Operations

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHERS</b>
298	8	1

## Lancasters – 5 Group

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
140	1642	35	2.1

### CATEGORY OF OPERATIONS

<b>BOMBING</b>	<b>MINING</b>	<b>OTHERS</b>
131	8	1

## 8 GROUP LANCASTERS (Operations all bombing)

<b>OPERATIONS</b>	<b>SORTIES</b>	<b>AIRCRAFT LOSSES</b>	<b>% LOSSES</b>
167	1740	56	3.2

## Aircraft Histories

### HAMPDEN. To January 1942.

<b>L4048</b>	To 14 OTU.
<b>L4049</b> OL-L	FTR Berlin 23/24.9.40.
<b>L4050</b> OL-L	To 16 OTU.
<b>L4051</b> OL-M	FTR Berlin 14/15.11.40.
<b>L4053</b> OL-N	From 49Sqn. FTR Ludwigshafen 8/9.8.40.
<b>L4054</b>	Abandoned over Yorkshire on return from patrol 6/7.4.40.
<b>L4055</b>	Crashed in Yorkshire on return from operations against communications targets 23.5.40.
<b>L4057</b> OL-F	FTR Berlin 14/15.11.40.
<b>L4058</b>	To 16 OTU.
<b>L4059</b>	Crashed while landing at Newton while training 18.5.40.
<b>L4066</b>	From 49Sqn. Crashed in Essex on return from Frankfurt 7/8.7.40.
<b>L4069</b> OL-O	Crashed in Lincolnshire on return from the Ruhr 15.5.40.
<b>L4070</b> OL-C	To 14 OTU.
<b>L4071</b>	Crashed on take-off from Scampton during training 30.10.39.
<b>L4093</b> OL-J	FTR Kiel 3/4.11.40.
<b>L4094</b> OL-R	FTR Dortmund-Ems Canal 25/26.7.40.
<b>L4095</b> OL-R	FTR Danzig 10/11.11.40.
<b>L4104</b>	From 61Sqn. Abandoned over Yorkshire on return from Hamburg 18/19.10.40.
<b>L4106</b>	From 61Sqn. Crashed on approach to Scampton during training 18.8.40.
<b>L4124</b>	From 144Sqn. To 25 OTU.
<b>L4133</b>	From 144Sqn. To 14 OTU.
<b>L4152</b> OL-S	From 76Sqn. FTR from mining sortie 14/15.4.40.
<b>P1171</b> OL-P	From 61Sqn. FTR Kiel 1/2.7.40.
<b>P1178</b> OL-H	FTR Emmerich 3/4.6.40.
<b>P1183</b> OL-K	From R.A.E. FTR Le Havre 18/19.9.40.
<b>P1334</b>	Crashed on landing at Scampton following early return from Gelsenkirchen 29.8.40.
<b>P1348</b>	FTR Hamburg 5/6.6.40.
<b>P1354</b> OL-Y	From 144Sqn. Ditched in the Wash on return from Berlin 25/26.8.40.
<b>P1355</b> OL-W	To 5BGS.
<b>P1356</b>	To 50Sqn.
<b>P2096</b>	Crashed on approach to Scampton while training 27.9.40.
<b>P2097</b> OL-S	Crashed near Abingdon on return from Lorient 28.12.40.
<b>P2125</b> OL-L	Crashed on take-off from Scampton when bound for Cologne 27.11.40.
<b>P2126</b>	Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 455Sqn.
<b>P2138</b>	To 16 OTU.
<b>P4340</b>	FTR Dortmund-Ems Canal 12/13.8.40.
<b>P4376</b> OL-E	Crashed near Scampton after early return from Hanover 2.8.40.
<b>P4380</b> OL-Z	Ditched off Grimsby on return from Berlin 25/26.8.40.
<b>P4381</b>	Crashed in Lincolnshire during training flight 3.11.40.
<b>P4392</b> OL-P	Abandoned over Lincolnshire on return from Lorient 27/28.9.40.
<b>P4398</b>	From 61Sqn. To 106Sqn.
<b>P4402</b> OL-D	Abandoned over Lincolnshire on return from Munich 9.11.40.

**P4410** OL-H FTR Dortmund-Ems Canal 12/13.8.40.  
**P4412** To 25 OTU.  
**P5322** From 7 AAU. To 14 OTU.  
**P5324** From 7 AAU. To 49Sqn.  
**P5393** OL-T From 7 AAU. Destroyed at Scampton when bomb load exploded following taxiing collision with Hampden AE374 (83Sqn) when bound for a mining sortie to Brest 14/15.12.41.  
**X2895** Crashed in Co Durham on return from Berlin 26.8.40.  
**X2897** From 44Sqn. Ditched off Lincolnshire coast on return from Berlin 29.8.40.  
**X2898** To 44Sqn.  
**X2899** OL-D FTR from mining sortie 6/7.4.41.  
**X2901** OL-B Force-landed on Southwold beach on return from Magdeburg 15/16.10.40.  
**X2904** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 455Sqn.  
**X2905** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 489Sqn.  
**X2964** OL-X Crashed on take-off from Scampton when bound for Lorient 10.11.40.  
**X2969** To 144Sqn.  
**X2972** To 14 OTU.  
**X2974** To 16 OTU.  
**X2977** Crashed on approach to Hemswell after early return from Gelsenkirchen 5.10.40.  
**X2978** OL-K Crashed in Lincolnshire during air-test 3.11.40.  
**X2990** OL-Z FTR from mining sortie 26/27.10.40.  
**X3053** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 144Sqn.  
**X3059** OL-A Crashed near Scampton while training 3.7.41.  
**X3061** To 44Sqn.  
**X3062** OL-Z Shot down off Lincolnshire coast by intruder during operation to Hamburg 8/9.5.41.  
**X3116** To 25 OTU.  
**X3118** OL-J FTR Essen 7/8.8.41.  
**X3119** OL-R FTR Cologne 20/21.4.41.  
**X3121** OL-F Collided with Hampden AD967 (49Sqn) near Scampton during an operation to Düsseldorf 25.8.41.  
**X3122** To 420Sqn.  
**X3123** To 5 AOS.  
**X3124** OL-H Crashed in Staffordshire on return from Cologne 27.2.41.  
**X3131** To 106Sqn.  
**X3132** OL-L FTR from mining sortie 20/21.3.41.  
**X3139** OL-V FTR Hamm 8/9.7.41.  
**X3144** OL-N FTR from mining sortie 2/3.9.41.  
**AD722** OL-X Crashed on approach to Finningley on return from Bremen 11/12.2.41.  
**AD731** OL-M FTR Wilhelmshaven 16/17.1.41.  
**AD734** OL-K Abandoned over Birmingham on return from Bremen 12.2.41.  
**AD740** To 25 OTU.  
**AD744** To 49Sqn.  
**AD748** OL-M Crashed in Devon on return from mining sortie 4.4.41.  
**AD794** To 144Sqn.  
**AD795** To 50Sqn.  
**AD796** OL-D FTR Hamburg 26/27.4.41.  
**AD800** OL-X FTR from mining sortie 29/30.3.41.  
**AD829** From 185Sqn. To 44Sqn.  
**AD835** OL-G FTR Hanover 25/26.7.41.

**AD837** OL-E Ditched off Northumberland coast on return from Bremen 18.8.41.  
**AD850** OL-L From 16 OTU. FTR from mining sortie 5/6.11.41.  
**AD859** OL-O From 6BAT Flt. FTR Cologne 31.8/1.9.41.  
**AD865** OL-I To 49Sqn.  
**AD870** To 408Sqn.  
**AD898** OL-K Crashed soon after take-off from Scampton for a transit flight 21.5.41.  
**AD907** OL-K FTR Kiel 19/20.8.41.  
**AD911** OL-M FTR Essen 10/11.10.41.  
**AD912** OL-Y FTR Cologne 31.8/1.9.41.  
**AD916** OL-Z FTR Düsseldorf 30.6/1.7.41.  
**AD934** OL-T Crashed on landing at Swanton Morley on return from Mannheim 23.10.41.  
**AD935** OL-U Crashed in Worcestershire while training 14.8.41.  
**AD964** To 49Sqn.  
**AD969** OL-X FTR Bremen 22/23.6.41.  
**AD978** OL-C Crashed in Norfolk on return from Berlin 3.9.41.  
**AE131** OL-W FTR Brunswick 14/15.8.41.  
**AE133** OL-X FTR Wilhelmshaven 10/11.1.42.  
**AE154** OL-H Ditched in the North Sea on return from Kiel 2/3.8.41.  
**AE155** To 455Sqn.  
**AE156** OL-A Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 489 Sqn.  
**AE187** OL-L FTR Cologne 31.8/1.9.41.  
**AE188** OL-D Crash-landed near Boscombe Down on return from Kassel 9.9.41.  
**AE191** OL-Z FTR Aachen 7/8.12.41.  
**AE223** OL-V Exploded on the ground at Scampton on return from Wesel 25.8.41.  
**AE237** OL-B From 49Sqn. To 408Sqn.  
**AE312** To 455Sqn.  
**AE314** To 420Sqn.  
**AE315** OL-X FTR from mining sortie 2/3.9.41.  
**AE319** OL-J FTR from mining sortie 6/7.9.41.  
**AE356** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 144Sqn.  
**AE358** OL-U FTR Kiel 1/2.11.41.  
**AE359** To 144Sqn.  
**AE362** OL-S Crashed while landing at Scampton on return from Hamburg 15/16.9.41.  
**AE363** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 144Sqn.  
**AE364** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 144Sqn.  
**AE365** OL-N Crashed while landing at Scampton on return from Le Havre 15/16.9.41.  
**AE366** To 420Sqn.  
**AE371** Converted for use as torpedo bomber. To 144Sqn.  
**AE374** OL-R Collided with P5393 while taxiing at Scampton when bound for Brest and destroyed in the ensuing explosion 14/15.12.41.  
  
**AE388** To 50Sqn.  
**AE389** To 420Sqn.  
**AE420** To 50Sqn.  
**AE421** To 49Sqn.  
**AT110** To 144Sqn.  
**AT112** To 49Sqn.  
**AT127** OL-L Crash-landed in Lincolnshire on return from Brest 9.1.42.  
**AT129** To 49Sqn.

**MANCHESTER.****From December 1941 to June 1942.**

**L7285** From 207Sqn. No operations. To R.A.E.  
**L7286** From 207Sqn via 61CF. No operations. To 1660CU.  
**L7289** To 50Sqn.  
**L7293** From Rolls Royce. To 49Sqn.  
**L7297** From Rolls Royce. To 1661CU.  
**L7382** From 207Sqn. Training only. To 44Sqn.  
**L7385 OL-C** To 44Sqn.  
**L7387 OL-A** To 49Sqn.  
**L7389** To 49Sqn.  
**L7394** To 106Sqn.  
**L7397** To 49Sqn.  
**L7423 OL-S** From 97Sqn. FTR Cologne 13/14.3.42.  
**L7426 OL-D** From 61Sqn. FTR Essen 8/9.3.42.  
**L7427 OL-Q** From 97Sqn. FTR Hamburg 8/9.4.42.  
**L7453 OL-K** From 97Sqn. To 44Sqn.  
**L7457** From 97Sqn. To 106Sqn.  
**L7465 OL-H** From A.V.Roe. FTR Essen 25/26.3.42.  
**L7484** From 207Sqn. To 49Sqn.  
**L7522 OL-N** From 97Sqn. FTR Stavanger 21/22.2.42.  
**L7525 OL-O** From 97Sqn. To 50Sqn.  
**R5768** From A.V.Roe. To 1656CU.  
**R5772** From 49Sqn. Conversion Flt only.  
**R5775** From 49Sqn. To 1654CU.  
**R5779 OL-G** FTR Essen 8/9.3.42.  
**R5780 OL-D/X** To 106 Sqn and back. To 49 Sqn.  
**R5781 OL-R** FTR Lübeck 28/29.3.42.  
**R5783** From 97Sqn. SOC 8.42.  
**R5788** From 207Sqn. To 49Sqn.  
**R5790 OL-F** From 207Sqn. To 44CF.  
**R5793** From 49Sqn. Training only. To 1656CU.  
**R5830 OL-L** From A&AEE. To 1656CU.  
**R5831 OL-I** FTR Essen 25/26.3.42.  
**R5833 OL-N** From 207 Sqn. To 50 Sqn.  
**R5835** From 207 Sqn. To 49 Sqn.  
**R5836 OL-T** To 49 Sqn.  
**R5837 OL-R** FTR from leafleting sortie to the Paris area 8/9.4.42.  
**R5838 OL-S** Ultimate fate unrecorded.

**LANCASTER.****From May 1942.**

**L7540 OL-U** From 44Sqn. To 207Sqn.  
**L7566** From 44Sqn. Training only. To 207Sqn.  
**L7568** From 44Sqn. Returned to 44Sqn.  
**R5484 OL-V** From 44Sqn. FTR Pilsen 16/17.4.42.  
**R5542 OL-E** From 44CF. To 1667CU.  
**R5564 OL-P** FTR Essen 1/2.6.42.  
**R5565 OL-K** To 61Sqn via NTU.

**R5566** OL-B From 83CF. FTR Genoa 6/7.11.42.  
**R5567** OL-D From 83CF. Destroyed by fire at Wyton 25.9.42.  
**R5569** OL-E From 97Sqn. Returned to 97Sqn.  
**R5570** To 207Sqn.  
**R5610** OL-G FTR Frankfurt 24/25.8.42.  
**R5619** OL-S FTR Duisburg 25/26.7.42.  
**R5620** OL-H FTR Bremen 25/26.6.42.  
**R5621** OL-R FTR from mining sortie 11/12.6.42.  
**R5622** OL-C FTR Pilsen 16/17.4.43.  
**R5623** OL-C FTR Frankfurt 24/25.8.42.  
**R5625** OL-O To 50Sqn and back. To 622Sqn.  
**R5626** OL-M To 50Sqn and back. FTR Essen 3/4.4.43.  
**R5629** OL-J FTR Dortmund 4/5.3.43.  
**R5630** OL-T FTR Berlin 17/18.1.43.  
**R5636** OL-K FTR from mining sortie 11/12.6.42.  
**R5640** OL-D FTR Essen 8/9.6.42.  
**R5659** OL-B FTR Essen 8/9.6.42.  
**R5667** To 1656CU.  
**R5669** OL-E To 44Sqn.  
**R5670** OL-R Crashed while trying to land at Mildenhall on return from Genoa 7.11.42.  
**R5671** OL-F/K To NTU.  
**R5672** OL-L From 97Sqn. To 1656CU.  
**R5673** OL-L FTR Genoa 6/7.11.42.  
**R5686** OL-G From 207Sqn. FTR Münster 11/12.6.43.  
**R5743** OL-H FTR Wilhelmshaven 19/20.2.43.  
**R5747** OL-H From 50Sqn. Returned to 50Sqn.  
**R5754** OL-K FTR Berlin 29/30.3.43.  
**R5850** No operations. To 49CF.  
**R5852** OL-Y From 207Sqn. To 1654CU via 83CF.  
**R5855** To 49CF.  
**R5856** To 106Sqn.  
**R5857** OL-F Crashed soon after take-off from Mildenhall in transit following return from Genoa 7.11.42.  
**R5868** OL-Q To 467Sqn.  
**R5907** Conversion Flt only. To 9Sqn.  
**R5911** OL-C FTR Kiel 13/14.10.42.  
**R5913** OL-G FTR St Nazaire 28.2/1.3.43.  
**W4103** OL-S To 1668CU.  
**W4104** OL-A From 49Sqn. FTR Düsseldorf 10/11.9.42.  
**W4123** OL-P/A To 576Sqn via NTU.  
**W4138** Conversion Flt only. To 1654CU.  
**W4162** OL-H/E From 44Sqn. To 460Sqn via NTU.  
**W4191** OL-Z No operations. To 207Sqn.  
**W4193** OL-A To 1662CU.  
**W4231** OL-P/U To 101Sqn via 1662CU and 1667CU.  
**W4260** Conversion Flt only. To 1654CU.  
**W4799** OL-S FTR Düsseldorf 31.12/1.1.43.  
**W4846** OL-S FTR Cologne 26/27.2.43.  
**W4847** OL-V FTR Essen 5/6.3.43.

**W4904** OL-C To 1667CU.  
**W4905** OL-M/S To 50Sqn.  
**W4928** OL-S FTR Essen 12/13.3.43.  
**W4953** OL-W To 1656CU.  
**W4955** OL-R FTR Duisburg 12/13.5.43.  
**W4957** OL-B To 61Sqn via NTU.  
**W4959** OL-X To 207Sqn.  
**W4981** OL-A FTR Pilsen 13/14.5.43.  
**W4982** OL-O FTR Mülheim 22/23.6.43.  
**ED311** OL-X/K FTR Stuttgart 22/23.11.42.  
**ED312** OL-F FTR Stettin 20/21.4.43.  
**ED313** OL-B FTR Stuttgart 11/12.3.43.  
**ED334** OL-R FTR Essen 3/4.4.43.  
**ED353** OL-N FTR Duisburg 20/21.12.42.  
**ED368** OL-L To NTU.  
**ED372** OL-O To 101Sqn.  
**ED420** OL-A To 9Sqn.  
**ED439** OL-N Crashed near Sleaford while training 18.6.43.  
**ED594** To 57Sqn.  
**ED599** From SIU. To 156Sqn.  
**ED601** OL-T To 207Sqn.  
**ED602** OL-F From 467Sqn. To 49Sqn.  
**ED603** OL-L From SIU. FTR Bochum 12/13.6.43.  
**ED861** To 57Sqn.  
**ED876** OL-V From SIU. FTR Nuremberg 27/28.8.43.  
**ED907** OL-H From SIU. FTR Cologne 16/17.6.43.  
**ED908** OL-J From SIU. To 15Sqn via NTU.  
**ED974** OL-Y From SIU. FTR Berlin 20/21.1.44.  
**ED984** OL-A From SIU. FTR Berlin 23/24.8.43.  
**ED989** To 57Sqn.  
**ED997** OL-R From SIU. FTR Krefeld 21/22.6.43.  
**EE119** To 7Sqn.  
**EE120** OL-L/T To 97Sqn.  
**EE121** OL-K FTR Krefeld 21/22.6.43.  
**EE129** To 7Sqn.  
**EE175** OL-C From 7Sqn. To 207Sqn.  
**EE201** OL-N/D To NTU.  
**JA677** OL-H/U To 7Sqn.  
**JA678** To 7Sqn.  
**JA682** To 7Sqn.  
**JA686** OL-K Blew up at dispersal at Wyton 26.11.43.  
**JA693** To 7Sqn.  
**JA701** OL-E FTR Leipzig 20/21.10.43.  
**JA705** OL-M To 617Sqn.  
**JA712** OL-B From 7Sqn. To 166Sqn.  
**JA913** OL-G FTR Berlin 26/27.11.43.  
**JA920** To 405Sqn.  
**JA924** To 405Sqn.  
**JA927** OL-O FTR Berlin 23/24.8.43.

**JA928** OL-W From 101Sqn. FTR Schweinfurt 26/27.4.44 after completing 11 operations to Berlin.  
**JA940** OL-T/E Crash-landed in Huntingdonshire on return from Berlin 29.1.44.  
**JA967** OL-S FTR Berlin 28/29.1.44.  
**JA972** OL-D FTR Kassel 3/4.10.43.  
**JB114** OL-Q FTR Berlin 2/3.1.44.  
**JB118** OL-R FTR Mannheim 5/6.9.43.  
**JB154** OL-A FTR Leipzig 20/21.10.43.  
**JB180** OL-H/T From 405Sqn. FTR Wesseling 21/22.6.44.  
**JB187** OL-R Abandoned over Norfolk following early return from Bochum 29.9.43.  
**JB232** To 97Sqn.  
**JB284** OL-C FTR Berlin 23/24.11.43.  
**JB302** OL-V From 156Sqn. Returned to 156Sqn.  
**JB304** To 156Sqn.  
**JB309** OL-N From 156Sqn. To 207Sqn.  
**JB344** OL-O Crashed at Wyton on return from Berlin 17.12.43.  
**JB345** To 7Sqn.  
**JB351** OL-D To 61Sqn.  
**JB352** OL-J/C From SIU. FTR Berlin 30/31.1.44.  
**JB355** OL-J From SIU. FTR Berlin 2/3.1.44.  
**JB365** OL-A/Z/G From A.V.Roe. FTR Magdeburg 21/22.1.44.  
**JB402** OL-R From SIU. FTR Mailly-le-Camp 3/4.5.44.  
**JB412** OL-X/B From SIU. FTR Berlin 28/29.1.44.  
**JB414** From SIU. To 7Sqn.  
**JB424** OL-B FTR Berlin 22/23.11.43.  
**JB453** OL-F<sup>2</sup>/F FTR Berlin 2/3.1.44.  
**JB455** OL-H To 7Sqn.  
**JB459** OL-T From 97Sqn. FTR Berlin 26/27.11.43.  
**JB461** OL-N/L From SIU. FTR Berlin 20/21.1.44.  
**JB472** To 156Sqn.  
**JB476** To 156Sqn.  
**JB488** OL-X From 7Sqn. FTR Magdeburg 21/22.1.44.  
**JB538** To 7Sqn.  
**JB553** To 156Sqn.  
**JB706** OL-M/F/H To 97Sqn.  
**JB708** To 97Sqn.  
**JB711** To 156Sqn.  
**JB719** To 7Sqn.  
**JB724** OL-V From SIU 1.44. FTR Berlin 27/28.1.44.  
**LM302** OL-H FTR Essen 3/4.4.43.  
**ME311** OL-B/C  
**ME354/G** OL-K From 514Sqn.  
**ME358/G** OL-M From 514Sqn.  
**ME363** OL-P From 514Sqn.  
**ME364/G** OL-S From 514Sqn.  
**ME417** OL-Q  
**ME423** OL-C FTR Leipzig 10/11.4.45.  
**ME525**  
**ME527** OL-Y  
**ME528** OL-T

**ME620** From SIU. To 35Sqn.  
**ME621** From SIU. To 35Sqn.  
**ND330** OL-E/O FTR Berlin 2/3.1.44. (405Sqn crew).  
**ND333** OL-F From 97Sqn. To 106Sqn.  
**ND354** OL-A From 7Sqn. FTR Berlin 1/2.1.44.  
**ND387** OL-H To 7Sqn.  
**ND389** OL-A FTR Aachen 11/12.4.44.  
**ND390** OL-U To 97Sqn.  
**ND395** OL-A/E From 7Sqn. FTR Aachen 11/12.4.44.  
**ND400** OL-Q FTR Schweinfurt 26/27.4.44.  
**ND414** OL-K FTR Berlin 20/21.1.44.  
**ND418** From Rolls Royce. No operations. To 7Sqn.  
**ND442** OL-O To 1666CU.  
**ND448** OL-K/S From 97Sqn. FTR Leipzig 19/20.2.44.  
**ND455** OL-U From 635Sqn. FTR Darmstadt 25/26.8.44.  
**ND464** OL-S From 405Sqn. Crashed near Coningsby while training 16.7.44.  
**ND465** OL-L From SIU. Crashed on landing at Coningsby on return from Givors 11/12.8.44.  
**ND467** OL-L/B FTR Caen 6/7.6.44.  
**ND469** OL-C FTR Munich 24/25.4.44.  
**ND494** OL-G FTR Gennevilliers 9/10.5.44.  
**ND499** OL-J From SIU. FTR Schweinfurt 26/27.4.44.  
**ND505** OL-T FTR Leipzig 19/20.2.44.  
**ND507** From SIU. To 405Sqn.  
**ND523** From SIU. To 7Sqn.  
**ND524** From SIU. To 405Sqn.  
**ND529** OL-D From 405Sqn.  
**ND551** OL-V From SIU. FTR Wesseling 21/22.6.44.  
**ND591** OL-A To 156Sqn. Returned to 83Sqn.  
**ND646** To 35Sqn.  
**ND696** OL-H/O From 35Sqn. FTR Pölitz 8/9.2.45.  
**ND740** OL-H From 97Sqn. FTR Darmstadt 11/12.9.44.  
**ND818** OL-T From 35Sqn. FTR Lanveoc 8/9.5.44.  
**ND824** OL-B/G To 97Sqn.  
**ND840** OL-A From 156Sqn. FTR Brest 14.8.44.  
**ND854** OL-G/F FTR Givors 26/27.7.44.  
**ND856** OL-E To 5LFS.  
**ND858** OL-A To 61Sqn.  
**ND865** OL-L From 106Sqn.  
**ND907** FTR Stuttgart 24/25.7.44.  
**ND922** OL-J FTR Bois de Cassan 6.8.44.  
**ND930** OL-Q FTR Brunswick 22/23.5.44.  
**ND963** OL-H FTR St Leu d'Esserent 7/8.7.44.  
**ND966** OL-C From 405Sqn. To 44Sqn.  
**ND974** OL-T  
**ND979** OL-G/K/Q To Rolls Royce. Returned to 83Sqn. FTR Mittelland Canal at Gravenhorst 21/22.2.45.  
**NE165** OL-Y Destroyed at Coningsby when bomb detonated after falling from its trolley 9.2.45.  
**NG453** OL-M  
**NG454** OL-E  
**PB134** OL-R/N From 35Sqn. FTR Horten 23/24.2.45.

**PB135** From 582Sqn.  
**PB138 OL-D** From 156Sqn. FTR Brunswick 12/13.8.44.  
**PB140 OL-H** From 635Sqn. Crash-landed at Ford on return from attacks on flying bomb sites 6.8.44.  
**PB157** From 97Sqn.  
**PB181 OL-C** From 97Sqn. FTR Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen 7/8.2.45.  
**PB182** From 44Sqn. To 582Sqn.  
**PB188 OL-A** From 405Sqn. FTR Harburg 11/12.11.44.  
**PB230 OL-V** From 582Sqn. FTR Brunswick 12/13.8.44.  
**PB240 OL-J** From 156Sqn. FTR Brunswick 12/13.8.44.  
**PB249 OL-C** From 635Sqn. FTR Königsburg 29/30.8.44.  
**PB292 OL-S** From 405Sqn. FTR Königsburg 26/27.8.44.  
**PB341 OL-J**  
**PB345 OL-Q** FTR Darmstadt 25/26.8.44.  
**PB362 OL-W** From 35Sqn. FTR L'Isle Adam 18.8.44.  
**PB367** From 35Sqn.  
**PB368 OL-S** From 35Sqn.  
**PB376 OL-F** From 97Sqn.  
**PB438** From 97Sqn.  
**PB452 OL-W** From 405Sqn.  
**PB458**  
**PB470 OL-F** To 9Sqn.  
**PB478 OL-E** From 635Sqn. Destroyed at Coningsby when NG453 blew up 9.2.45.  
**PB533 OL-Q** Crashed while landing at Metheringham on return from Pölitz 21/22.12.44.  
**PB616 OL-A** From 156Sqn.  
**PB694 OL-T**  
**PB697** From 635Sqn. To 149Sqn.  
**PB702 OL-G** Crashed in the sea off Skegness while training 14.11.44.  
**SW261OL-N** From 50Sqn.  
**SW262OL-R** From 50Sqn.

#### HEAVIEST SINGLE LOSS:

31.08/01.09.41. Cologne. 3 Hampdens FTR.  
 02/03.01.44. Berlin. 3 Lancasters FTR.  
 20/21.01.44. Berlin. 3 Lancasters FTR.  
 26/27.04.44. Schweinfurt. 3 Lancasters FTR.  
 12/13 08.44. Brunswick. 3 Lancasters FTR.

## Key to Abbreviations

<b>A&amp;AEE</b>	Aeroplane and Armaments Experimental Establishment.
<b>AA</b>	Anti-Aircraft fire.
<b>AACU</b>	Anti-Aircraft Cooperation Unit.
<b>AAS</b>	Air Armament School.
<b>AASF</b>	Advance Air Striking Force.
<b>AAU</b>	Aircraft Assembly Unit.
<b>A/C</b>	Air Commodore
<b>ACM</b>	Air Chief Marshal.
<b>ACSEA</b>	Air Command South-East Asia.
<b>AFDU</b>	Air Fighting Development Unit.
<b>AFEU</b>	Airborne Forces Experimental Unit.
<b>AFTDU</b>	Airborne Forces Tactical Development Unit.
<b>AGS</b>	Air Gunners School.
<b>AMDP</b>	Air Members for Development and Production.
<b>AOC</b>	Air Officer Commanding.
<b>AOS</b>	Air Observers School.
<b>ASRTU</b>	Air-Sea Rescue Training Unit.
<b>ATTDU</b>	Air Transport Tactical Development Unit.
<b>AVM</b>	Air Vice-Marshal.
<b>BAT</b>	Beam Approach Training.
<b>BCBS</b>	Bomber Command Bombing School.
<b>BCDU</b>	Bomber Command Development Unit.
<b>BCFU</b>	Bomber Command Film Unit.
<b>BCIS</b>	Bomber Command Instructors School.
<b>BDU</b>	Bombing Development Unit.
<b>BSTU</b>	Bomber Support Training Unit.
<b>CF</b>	Conversion Flight.
<b>CFS</b>	Central Flying School.
<b>CGS</b>	Central Gunnery School.
<b>C-in-C</b>	Commander in Chief.
<b>CNS</b>	Central Navigation School.
<b>CO</b>	Commanding Officer.
<b>CRD</b>	Controller of Research and Development.
<b>CU</b>	Conversion Unit.
<b>DGRD</b>	Director General for Research and Development.
<b>EAAS</b>	Empire Air Armament School.
<b>EANS</b>	Empire Air Navigation School.
<b>ECDU</b>	Electronic Countermeasures Development Unit.
<b>ECFS</b>	Empire Central Flying School.
<b>ETPS</b>	Empire Test Pilots School.
<b>F/L</b>	Flight Lieutenant.
<b>Flt</b>	Flight.

<b>F/O</b>	Flying Officer.
<b>FPP</b>	Ferry Pilots School.
<b>F/S</b>	Flight Sergeant.
<b>FTR</b>	Failed to Return.
<b>FTS</b>	Flying Training School.
<b>FTU</b>	Ferry Training Unit.
<b>G/C</b>	Group Captain.
<b>Gp</b>	Group.
<b>HCU</b>	Heavy Conversion Unit.
<b>HGCU</b>	Heavy Glider Conversion Unit.
<b>ITW</b>	Initial Training Wing.
<b>LFS</b>	Lancaster Finishing School.
<b>MAC</b>	Mediterranean Air Command.
<b>MTU</b>	Mosquito Training Unit.
<b>MU</b>	Maintenance Unit.
<b>NTU</b>	Navigation Training Unit.
<b>OADU</b>	Overseas Aircraft Delivery Unit.
<b>OAPU</b>	Overseas Aircraft Preparation Unit.
<b>OTU</b>	Operational Training Unit.
<b>P/O</b>	Pilot Officer.
<b>PTS</b>	Parachute Training School.
<b>RAE</b>	Royal Aircraft Establishment.
<b>SGR</b>	School of General Reconnaissance.
<b>Sgt</b>	Sergeant.
<b>SHAEF</b>	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.
<b>SIU</b>	Signals Intelligence Unit.
<b>S/L</b>	Squadron Leader.
<b>SOC</b>	Struck off Charge.
<b>SOE</b>	Special Operations Executive.
<b>Sqn</b>	Squadron.
<b>TF</b>	Training Flight.
<b>TFU</b>	Telecommunications Flying Unit.
<b>W/C</b>	Wing Commander.
<b>Wg</b>	Wing.
<b>WIDU</b>	Wireless Intelligence Development Unit.
<b>W/O</b>	Warrant Officer.