

The Battle of Hamburg 24/25 July to 03 Aug. 1943

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It should be recalled that when Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris became Bomber Command Commander in February 1942, he had proposed 1000 bombers in a concentrated raid on major targets.

Hamburg, the second largest city in Germany with a population of two million had been his first choice but a poor weather forecast had changed the target to Cologne, the third largest German city.

Hamburg was the largest port in Europe and the Blohm & Voss shipyards were famous for the building of the 50,000 ton Blue Riband liner Europa, the battleship Bismark, the heavy cruiser Hipper and U-boats were being produced more than one per week.

The decision to launch the Battle of Hamburg was taken at 9:15 am on Thursday 22 July 1943. The "Pointblank" directive pointed out that cities involved in U-boat construction were to be attacked. The Hamburg code name was "Operation Gomorrah". Two Met flights were made by Mosquitoes on the 24th. who stated that the weather would be clear for both take-off and landing.

The navigation aid "Gee" had just been introduced and this would be followed by H2S. "Window" which would confuse the German radar controllers had been available since April 1942 but the Air Ministry was afraid to use it in case the Germans used it against England, Harris was furious and fought to get it from the beginning. The Germans never really found the complete answer to it. It consisted of a brown paper bag in each bomber containing 2,200 coarse black paper strips with thin aluminum foil stuck on one side. Each strip was 27cm long by 2 cm wide. When sufficient of these strips were released by a force of bombers, the German radar was swamped with false echoes.

The city proper is situated almost entirely north of the quarter mile wide River Elbe. Through the centre of the city runs the small River Alster which was dammed up near its mouth to create an extensive lake and also to keep full the numerous flets or canals that are found in so many parts of Hamburg. The Elbe was navigable inland as far as Czechoslovakia and the newly built Kiel Canal linked the Elbe with the Baltic.

When Hitler came into power, he split Germany into 42 administrative areas called Gaue and Hamburg became one of these. Hitler sent Karl Otto Kaufman to be the Gauleiter of Hamburg. The office of Gauleiter was a powerful one and the holders were all friends and early supporters of Hitler. The Rathaus in the Altstadt became Adolf Hitler Platz.

On the eve of the July 1943 raids, Hamburg had 54 batteries of heavy flak consisting of 166-88mm guns; 96 -105 mm guns and 16- 128 mm guns in conjunction with 24 batteries of searchlights all radar controlled. Hamburg was too large for it to be seriously damaged in one flight so it was divided into four sectors. The first raid took place on 24/25 July. The weather was perfect with a light wind and clear moonlit skies. Zero hour was set at 1 :40 and the raid scheduled to last for 50 minutes.

791 Aircraft: 347 Lancasters; 246 Halifaxes, 125 Stirlings and 73 Wellingtons containing 5,475 aircrew took off. 1,300,000 gallons of 100 octane fuel was pumped into the aircraft. The effect of Window was amazing and only 12 aircraft were lost, most on the way home. General Kamhuber who was in charge of the German defence said: "Dieganze Abwehr war mit einem Schlag blind." (The whole defence was blinded in one stroke). Photos taken by the bombers showed that the raid was a complete success.

BGen Anderson of the USAAF flew in a Lancaster to see the effect of the raid.

The second raid took place on 27/28 July. 787 aircraft, 353 Lancasters, 244 Halifaxes, 116 Stirlings and 74 Wellingtons. 17 were lost. BGen. Anderson again flew in a Lancaster.

On arrival over Hamburg, there was no cloud and no wind. Bomber Command was not often presented with such a favourable set of conditions for bombing. The attack would begin at 1 :00 am and would last for 45 minutes. Tuesday was even hotter than the preceding days. Bomber Command also carried five station commanders for experience. G/Capt H. Edwards VC from Binbrook, S.C. Elworthy from Waddington, H.L. Patch from Coningsby and A.D. Ross from Middleton St. George. The Lancaster in which BGen Anderson carried out his two flights, R5868 is now preserved in the RAF Museum at Hendon. It had made 137 operational flights with 83 Squadron and 467 RAAF Squadron.

This was the night of the Firestorm, which started through an unusual chain of events. The temperature was particularly high; 30C at 6.00 pm and the humidity was only 30 % compared with 45 % usual for this time of the year. There had been no rain for some time and everything was dry. The fire vehicles were still on the other side of town damping down smoldering fires from the raid three nights earlier. About halfway through the raid the fires started joining together and competing with each other for the oxygen in the surrounding air. Suddenly the whole area became one huge fire with air being drawn in by 150 mph winds. The bombing

continued for another half hour, spreading the firestorm area eastwards. The firestorm raged for about 3 hours and only subsided when all burnable material was consumed. 40,000 people died, most of them by carbon dioxide poisoning when all the oxygen was drawn out of their basement shelters. 1,200,000 people fled the city in fear of further raids.

29/30 July, Raid Number Three 777 aircraft, 340 Lancasters, 244 Halifaxes, 119 Stirlings and 70 Wellingtons. 28 would be lost. The marking was again all by H2S. The raid was from the north and bombed those areas which so far had not been bombed. 707 aircraft dropped 2,318 tons of bombs and started further large fires.

The worst incident was in the shelter of a large department store where the building collapsed and blocked the exits from the shelter, which was in the basement of the store. 370 people died, poisoned by carbon monoxide fumes from a burning coke store nearby. The Germans tried to use red decoy markers to fool the bombers but they were using yellow and green markers that night.

2/3 August, Raid Number Four 740 aircraft set out: 329 Lancasters, 235 Halifaxes, 105 Stirlings and 5 Mosquitoes. The weather was not favourable this time when the aircraft encountered large thunderstorms over Germany and 33 aircraft were lost due to icing, turbulence or were struck by lightning. The Pathfinders were unable to do any marking. Many aircraft turned back or bombed alternative targets. The raid was not considered a success.

Harris would now turn to Berlin a far larger target with a population of 4,500,000 and fiercely defended. The fighters would stay high and shoot down the bombers as they were silhouetted below. Window would get them to the target safely but the fighters would be waiting..

2,592 bombers dropped 8,344 tons of bombs on Hamburg. 1,172 Lancasters took part; 39 were lost; 803 Halifaxes took part; 29 were lost; 378 Stirlings took part; 11 were lost and 239 Wellingtons took part; 8 were lost.

227 bombers had to return early because of mechanical problems. 552 crew were killed; 65 became POW's and 7 were interned in Sweden. 70% of Hamburg was destroyed in the four raids

The RAF lost 8,655 aircraft in Bomber Command from September 1939 to May 1945. 50,136 aircrew were killed and 9,784 became POW's. Of the aircrew, only 33% that flew in 1943 would survive their first tour and only 16% would survive both first and second tour. Luck played an important part. The more experience you had, the more luck you had

Compiled from the Bomber Command War Diaries.