

ANOTHER THOUSAND ON THE WESTERN FRONTFIRES IN THE RUHR

The organisation which put a thousand bombers over Cologne on Saturday night was ready and waiting to do it again. One night of resting because of bad weather, and the whole force, mobilised and prepared in every detail, set off the night after to strike as formidable blow against that narrow strip of ground, less than twice the area of Berlin, without whose mines and factories Germany could scarcely wage war. With Essen as the main focus of attack bombers in swift succession invaded the air over the string of industrial towns which merge into one another on the ground which is packed with coal and iron as nowhere else in Europe. This is not a target like Cologne, a single city on a river with rich country around it. The Ruhr is all canals, railways, great industrial buildings - a bewildering maze of landmarks.

It is a test for navigators, as its defences are a test of the persistence and courage of bomber crews. The tactics had therefore to be different from those which proved so successful over Cologne.

It was still possible to saturate the defences of the area by getting swarms of bombers over at one time. It was still possible to send intruders at the moment of the main attack to keep the German ^{night} fighter squadrons engaged over their aerodromes and to prevent a large number of them from converging on the Ruhr. But last night both the nature of the target and the state of the weather - there were low clouds about though by no means continuous, with much industrial haze as well - meant that the crews had to make a careful search for the vital objectives. There could be no question, even though fires were visible from the Dutch coast, of sweeping in over a whole industrial area fiercely ablaze.

What it was like has been well described by the pilot of a Lancaster who left the Ruhr towards the end of the attack.

"To those of us who had often been over the Ruhr before it seemed a pretty good snack at the place. Not a great blaze like Cologne, but in the industrial region of Essen there were really large fires when I left. Great buildings were alight and the streets marked dark lines around the burning area. There was an even larger fire a little farther away."

This pilot spent 37 minutes over the Ruhr and in that time he saw hundreds of smaller fires. "After my tour of the districts," he said, "I should say there was no doubt that widespread damage has been done. We saw the fires from the coast on the way back: they were reflected on to a sheet of cloud over the Ruhr."

Many other pilots gave similar accounts of their careful search of the Ruhr, flying during periods of anything up to an hour over the hottest defences that Germany can offer.

The casualty list was under three and a half per cent. The diversionary attacks could not be expected to ground all the night fighter squadrons, and in fact there are reports of considerable enemy activity over the Ruhr and on the way there and back. But, as always, our bombers fought back and gave a good account of themselves.

/ A. Messerschmitt

A Messerschmitt 109 and a Focke Wulf 190 are known to have been destroyed, and a Messerschmitt 110 was seen to go down with its port engine on fire. A Stirling was nearing the Dutch coast on the way back when three or four red flares blazed in front of it and in a minute the rear gunner saw what was probably a Junkers 88 attacking from the port quarter. The enemy passed underneath after firing a long burst and then came up to attack again. This time both the rear and mid-upper gunners each fired a steady burst. Their bullets converged in two streams on the enemy, first hitting one engine and then tearing up all the length of its belly. A sheet of flame and black smoke poured from the fighter and it was last seen over on its back and falling quickly. But the enemy's fire had done some damage to the Stirling, and the outer starboard engine caught fire. The Flight Engineer switched off the petrol and the automatic fire extinguisher put out the flames. After a while the engine began to vibrate heavily and the propeller flew off. "I thought we were done for", said the observer, "I was afraid the propeller would hit our aircraft, but it went twirling away in front of us. The Stirling hardly seemed to miss one of its engines and got back safely on three, though part of its tail plane was shot away".

Though the concentration of bombers certainly had its effect on the guns of the Ruhr, long searches over the district were not without hazard. A young flight sergeant, the navigator of a Halifax, who won the D.F.M. recently showed himself unruffled in the face of the most intensive opposition. Just after bombing Essen he was looking out through one of the bulbous side windows which are called blisters when a shell burst close by. A splinter came through the window and struck him on top of the head. He was stunned for some minutes and when some of the others carried him back into the body of the Halifax they found that his head was bleeding badly. They bandaged him and then he insisted on going back to his navigation table. "He stuck it all the way back," said his captain, "and he kept us dead on course without the slightest complaint. When we landed he was taken to sick quarters, but all he needs is rest."

The captain of a Stirling was over the Ruhr for three quarters of an hour and all the while there was flak bursting beneath him. "On the way back after bombing", he said, "a great mass of flak came up all round us, tracer bullets flashing up on every side. Then something hit the fuselage and burst inside with a roning crack. I called up the rear gunner and got no answer. The flight engineer went back and found him lying on the cat-walk near the rear turret. He had seven or eight scalp wounds. He was laid down on the rest bed, and though in pain was wonderfully cheerful all the way back. His turret was in pieces and there was a great hole in the fuselage".

Whether or no a bomber was hit, whether or no it had to do battle with night fighters, there was the same resolution in each of the thousand and more crews. All were alike determined to make this, a more difficult operation than the devastation of Cologne, an equally wounding attack on a region that works day and night for war.