

Air Ministry News Service

Air Ministry Bulletin No. 11278

BERLIN'S HEAVIEST ATTACK

1,700 TONS OF BOMBS IN 50 MINUTES

Last night's attack on Berlin was one of the most concentrated attacks that Bomber Command has yet made, and by far the biggest that the German capital has had. More than 1,700 tons of heavy explosives and incendiaries were dropped in about 50 minutes.

The crews themselves were very confident about the results of their massive bombardment of the capital. They spoke of huge fires which they could see when they were 200 miles from Berlin on their way home, of several very big explosions, and of a pall of smoke that was three miles high.

At 8.30 this morning a reconnaissance pilot flew over the city and remained there for 20 minutes. When he was first asked by the intelligence officer at his station what he had seen he replied "Just smoke. And then smoke. And then more smoke." It had reached a height of four miles, he reported. He made several attempts to take photographs of the devastation, but time after time he could find no clear gap, and, it was only after 20 minutes that he was able to take some photographs.

The Germans had long prepared their plans to meet the attack which they knew would come as soon as the nights were long enough to enable our aircraft to get to Berlin and back in darkness. They knew roughly when zero hour would be.

The German plan appeared to be to engage our bombers all along the route and to turn scores of fighters on to them right over the city in an effort to break up a concentrated attack. The first part of the plan could not have come up to their expectations, for there was sufficient cloud all the way to protect our aircraft. The searchlights in the defended areas went into action, but they were unable to pierce the clouds and illuminate our bombers for the ground gunners.

A short distance from Berlin the cloud cleared, and over the target the night was crystal clear. Our pilots had expected an even heavier barrage than they had met over Essen and Hamburg, but flak was to play only a small part in the German plan. The ground gunners had evidently been ordered to keep their fire down and to leave most of the defence to the searchlights and the fighters.

The sky seemed to be swarming with enemy aircraft. One of our pilots saw 14 of them in the space of three minutes.

/Reports

Reports of the many combats are still being sifted at headquarters of Bomber Command, but it is already known that at least 12 fighters were destroyed.

W/Cdr A.D. Frank, D.S.O., D.F.C., of Alderley Edge, Cheshire, said that as he came out of the clouds he saw about 20 cones of searchlights in and around the capital. "I made for one of the gaps", he said, "and was 'batting' through it as hard as I could go when one of the searchlights swung round and picked us up. It seemed for a moment that scores of beams were concentrated on us, although actually I suppose there were not nearly as many as I thought. We got through the searchlights alright and I had a chance to have a look around. Fighters were all over the place. I could see them darting about over Berlin, some with their navigation lights on."

W/Cdr Frank was one of the first to arrive over the target. F/O E. Thompson, navigator of a Stirling, said he arrived over Berlin when the attack had been in progress for about 20 minutes. "The fires looked as if they had got completely out of control", he said "great clouds of smoke came rolling up from the capital, but every now and then they swung away and I could see streets and buildings by the light of the flames and the bomb bursts. I saw several factory buildings burning fiercely. One of them was already a skeleton with the roof gone and only the walls left. Most of the fires were massed in one large area, but to one side of this there were three big fires in a line which looked as if some big oil tanks were blazing".

Just as one of the Halifaxes were levelling out in its bombing run, an Me 110 came swooping in from starboard, firing its cannon and machine guns. Within six minutes this bomber was attacked three times, probably by the same fighter. Cannon shells smashed the tail turret of the bomber, blasting away all the glass and wounding the rear gunner in the leg and arm, but despite his wounds the gunner stayed at his post and kept on firing. A bullet hit the Flight/Engineer in the ribs but he, too, remained where he was until the bombing run was over. The inter-comm. system was shot away with the first burst from the fighter, but the mid upper and rear gunners told the pilot where the fighter was by signalling to him with their emergency lights.

The last attack was made when the fighter was immediately over the Halifax. The mid-upper gunner had it full in his sight when he fired and is sure that he hit it.

/ MORE

While all this was going on, the bomb-aimer was calmly waiting to pick out his target. As the fighter disappeared, he released his bombs. The wireless operator had meanwhile gone to the help of the flight/engineer whose clothing had caught fire. Sparks were coming from his flying suit and the wireless operator had to turn an extinguisher on to him before he could put out the flames.

The crew of a Stirling watched one of the most dramatic incidents of the attack. They were about five miles from the target when they saw a big four-engined bomber held in a cone of searchlights. Flak was being fired up the beams and suddenly the bomber caught fire. The pilot, however, managed to get out of the searchlights, and he went on across the target, levelled out, and then the watchers saw the bombs go down.

The pilot of one Stirling, F/Sgt. S. Mason, of Middle Herrington, nr. Sunderland, celebrated his 21st birthday over Berlin. The crew made their bombing run just before midnight and no sooner had the bomb-aimer given the signal of "bombs gone" than the crew all wished F/Sgt. Mason a happy birthday over the inter-comm. They drank his health in orange juice on the way home.

Group Capt. Hughie Edwards, V.C., D.S.O., who now commands a station where there is an Australian squadron, was out last night with the squadron and said that in his experience - and he has taken part in most of the big raids of the war - the attack was an outstanding success.

"We had every reason to believe that the Germans would put a very heavy barrage around Berlin," said Group Capt. Edwards. "We know that they have hundreds of light and heavy anti-aircraft guns there for they have often fired at us. But last night the Berlin ground gunners took second place. The first place was taken by what seemed to be as many fighters as the Germans could muster. They were obviously sent up to stop a concentrated attack and they failed. I saw many other bombers fighting their way through the searchlights and past the fighters to the target. I myself was not engaged by a fighter. The Australian squadron at my station certainly put up an excellent show and I am proud of them."

Berlin had a population of over 4,000,000 in 1938. It is the fourth largest city in the world and the most important railway centre in Central Europe. Its goods traffic, carried by railway and canal, makes it the largest inland port in Germany after Duisburg. The capital in many ways is the centre of German economic life. All the principal firms have offices in the city and many of them have large manufacturing plants in the suburbs. The chief industries are electrical equipment, general engineering, aircraft components and assembly, and aero engines. Siemens, A.E.G., Osram, Daimler-Benz, Henschel, Dornier, Heinkel, and Focke-Wulf all have factories in the Berlin area.