

1,500 TONS ON MANNHEIM

Fifteen hundred tons of high explosive and incendiaries were dropped on the great industrial city of Mannheim-Ludwigshafen last night. Night photographs so far plotted show that the bomb-aimers had the target dead in their sights and all crews were very enthusiastic about the results of the bombing.

Huge fires which were quick to take hold were visible from 180 miles on the return journey. By the end of the attack a great cloud of smoke, rising at times nearly four miles high, hung over the city.

The weather was very clear, with no trace of cloud over the target, and visibility up to 30 miles. Crews identified bends in the Rhine and the buildings of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen on each side of the river.

The attack began shortly before eleven o'clock and lasted three quarters of an hour. Bombing was not timed to be quite so rapid as in some earlier attacks - thirty-three tons a minute as opposed to fifty tons a minute in recent attacks on Berlin and Hamburg.

In the midst of the fires many of the crews saw a number of particularly violent explosions. "I saw one of them," a pilot said, "when we were still 20 miles from the target. Its flash not only lit up the whole countryside but even at that distance it lit up the inside of our aircraft. This was my 16th trip, but I have never seen anything like this explosion before." Crews over the target saw huge puffs of black smoke rise up to them from other explosions.

The enemy used every kind of defence. "The searchlights seemd to have been doubled since the last raid," a pilot said. They made a complete circle round the city, with their main concentrations towards the north and south of Mannheim. But the crew of one of the last bombers to attack reported that they had nearly all been dowsed by them. Instead of 150 and more there were only 28 in the last few minutes. It was the same with the flak, which was extremely violent at first but was eventually crushed by the weight of the bombing.

A Lancaster's squadron commander said that when he was 20 minutes from Mannheim he could see a great deal of flak going up from the target, but when he reached it there was scarcely any.

Most of the anti-aircraft gunfire was confined to the sky immediately over Mannheim, leaving the outer area free for fighters. These were on patrol in great numbers round the target.

But the fighters also went into the barrage. A Halifax rear-gunner described how he watched a sharp exchange of fire between a bomber and a fighter right over the target. He saw both aircraft catch fire. The bomber first went down, but the rear-gunner was still firing, and hit the fighter, which then crashed in flames.

In a great many instances fighters were sighted and outmanoeuvred without combat, but there were also many air battles. Combat reports, always difficult to assess when the fighting is in darkness, have not yet been sifted at headquarters, but it is known already that at least eleven of the enemy were destroyed. One Lancaster intercepted an enemy fighter which was already on fire after an earlier combat, and at once destroyed it.

A Halifax shot down a Me.110 which first made two determined attacks, then swooped up again for a third attack, when the rear-gunner fired. The fighter's nose went down, and it dived away, first with smoke and then with flame pouring from it. Five of the Halifax crew saw it hit the earth. Stirlings also shot down three fighters.

Another Halifax was hit by fighters' cannon-shells and machine-gun bullets and, though it then got away from the fighter, one of the petrol tanks caught fire. "We had just turned for home when I saw a burst of tracer come at us, and a small fire broke out towards the end of the starboard wing," said the pilot, F/Sgt. M.C. Foster, of Kirton, near Boston, Lincolnshire. "It didn't seem so bad at first, and it looked as if the fire might not extend beyond the starboard outer engine. But gradually it increased, and flames began to spread over the wing. It seemed as if a petrol tank was on fire and there was nothing we could do about it. Fortunately the tank was nearly empty.

"The fire went on for one-and-a-half hours and was still burning when we reached the French coast. All the way back I kept diving to try to blow out the flames but it didn't do any good. I told the crew to have their parachutes ready lest we had to bale out. Then suddenly there was an explosion as one of the petrol tanks blew up, and the whole aircraft shook. The starboard aileron was buckled, and the aileron control was almost useless. But to our surprise the explosion blew out the flames and we carried on.

"We shone an Aldis lamp on to the wing to look at the damage, and there didn't seem to be a very big hole. I didn't know until we got back that there was a hole three to four feet across on the under side of the wing. Just before we landed one of the engines stopped, but we got down all **right**."

The rear-gunner said that the hole was large enough to put a dining-room table in.

Both its war industries and its communications make the double city of Mannheim-Ludwigshafen a high priority target. One-third of the working population of Mannheim are employed in the electrical and engineering plants of the city, some of the most important in all Germany and greatly developed in recent years. The Moterenfabrik plant makes Diesel engines for submarines and warships. The Heinrich Lanz works, and also the Josef Voegle factory in Ludwigshafen, make armoured fighting vehicles and their components. Other works turn out products as various as turbines, electrical motors and pumps for U-boats, valves, gauges, and precision tools.

One-third of Ludwigshafen's working population are employed in the chemical factories, especially the I.G. Farbenindustrie's enormous Badische Anilin works, which make Germany's main chemical manufacturing centre. Heavy damage here would cause a serious shortage of explosives.

About Mannheim, the Rhine is no longer navigable by large barges. Their cargoes are therefore transferred, in this, the second largest inland port in Germany, to smaller barges or to railway trucks. Much of this traffic goes on to Italy.

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