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Toughest Air Job

Planning and Execution of Raids on Berlin
Call for Utmost in Skill and Daring

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London, Sept. 1.—The aerial onslaught now being levelled against Berlin is not only one of the most powerful blows yet struck by the Royal Air Force in the war, but a magnificent example of what careful planning, split-second timing and the co-operation of every one, from the youngest airman to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur T. Harris, commander-in-chief of the Bomber Command, can produce in modern war.

The difficulties confronting the Bomber Command in performing their sombre act of retribution dwarf anything encountered by the Luftwaffe three years ago when it launched its blitz on London. Consider some of them: distance, a round trip of a minimum of 1,150 miles; weather, always variable because of the length of the flight, with sudden changes that can cut the effectiveness of a raid in half; enemy opposition, the most powerful night fighter concentration on the Continent, thousands of heavy anti-aircraft guns and hundreds of searchlights.

Planning and Secrecy.

Only meticulous preparation of men and planes, preliminary attacks against German airfields and great secrecy enabled the Bomber Command to conquer these difficulties and loose the present assault.

When you next read of an attack on Berlin consider it as an air battle, a battle comparable in scope to one fought on a front of from 100 to 400 miles. For the Baltic is 105 miles northeast of Berlin, the shortest route to the German capital from the sea. Once the bombers are over land they are in action and their route may take them four or five times as many miles over hostile territory as this hypothetical journey.

The geographical distance is the first of the hurdles facing the raiders. Few air attacks are made on a straight line. The Lancaster does not fly as the crow flies.

For each raid new courses must be chosen with due allowance made for the strength of various German fighter bases and anti-aircraft artillery concentrations. Sometimes bombers strike southeast from Britain, then swing to the northeast. At other times they fly across Denmark and over the Baltic, choosing a different point on Germany's north coast each night to start their aerial invasion.

Weather complicates navigation. Even with latest meteorological reports supplied by Mosquitos that skip over Germany before a raid to get a look at the weather to forecast probable conditions not only over Berlin but over the routes to and from the German capital, the weather is an ever-present enemy to the airmen.

Once the bombers drone in from the sea to cross the coast of France or Belgium or Holland or Denmark or Germany, the enemy comes up to meet them. Today the German system of defense against night raiders is one of the most formidable in the world, lacking only one thing, night fighters as sure and swift as the Beaufighter.

With Teutonic thoroughness the Germans have worked out an observer scheme that sprawls across Europe. Its members send reports of approaching bombers to airfields and gun and searchlight positions of civil defense units. Then the defense system swings into action. The bombers pitch like ships in an angry sea as bursts of flak buffet them. Searchlights pick them out of the sky and pin them in columns of light as targets for more flak.

Some nights the anti-aircraft lessens as the bombers approach the target. Then the airmen know the second phase of the air battle has begun, an attack by a German night fighter force.

Night Fighting a Science.

The Germans are using their newest and most powerful day fighters

for night work, as well as a large number of fast, heavily armed Junkers 88's, the Luftwaffe plane of all work.

Night fighting, a catch-as-catch-can type of combat three years ago, has developed into an exact science over Britain and Germany, with operations officers on the ground directing the fighters.

Through all this hell-bursting flak, searchlights fingering the sky remorselessly to catch hold of some bomber, and darting enemy fighters—the bombers reach the target.

They have been preceded by pathfinders. These bombers sweep in at maximum speed and outline the target with colored incendiaries. The color changes with each operation, sometimes with each area, to be bombed.

Waves of bombers come over the lighted areas and prepare for the toughest time of all, the moment when, harried by fighters, they must make their "run" or, as the United States Army Air Force calls it, "pass" at the target. Here again circumstances beyond the control of any man often interfere to add to the difficulties.

The wind rolls vast clouds of smoke over the target area and sudden leaps of fire shift the target itself. For the bombardiers are aiming for the centre of the burning circle left by the pathfinders among them.

But the bombs drop, the plane pulls up and heads for home, to run the gauntlet again of flak, fighters and searchlights, until sometime at dawn the crew sees beneath them the velvet fields and soft hills of England.

To all these difficulties add another enemy—fatigue.

Danger in Fatigue.

The navigator nods over his charts, the radio operator's eyelids drop, the cramped gunners see fighters where none are. The pilot fights fatigue the hardest and turns control of the plane over to the co-pilot when it becomes overpowering, and reaches for a thermos bottle and a cigaret.

The timing of a raid is worked out long before the bombers depart. It is vitally important in the concentrated modern raids that aim at overwhelming the enemy's ground defenses in a half hour's thunderous attack. It is a problem that must be overcome in the offices of the staff.

The navigators get their routes and time schedule. There is more than a suggestion of railroading in "the Berlin run." To the gunners is given some idea of the number of fighters they will meet. They also get reports on the latest Jerry tactics in night fighting. The pilot and navigator study reports on enemy anti-aircraft concentrations, never wholly reliable, for the Germans like to shift many batteries, leaving flak towers to cover the approaches to principal targets. These towers are concentrations of anti-aircraft guns well protected against blasts and, according to the enemy, invulnerable to anything except a direct hit.

While the intelligence officers' voices rise and fall in the "school" out on the field, mechanics are swarming over the big black planes. Each bit of machinery must be tested for any raid.

Personnel checkups are strict, too. The airmen are watched for nervous, physical or mental weariness at all times, but especially those chosen for the long Berlin raid. Only the fittest can go, but no one laughs at a man ordered to stay behind.

"On this trip," a pilot said, "you've got to be 'right.' If you are not, you may kill every one else in the plane. No one can be 'right' all the time."

While the airmen are finishing the briefing, long lines of bombs are trundled out to the planes, where

they are lovingly stowed away by the ground crews. As a summer evening falls across the field all things are ready and the airmen eat their rations, for food is a great ally in the fight against fatigue in the wait for the takeoff.

On other airfields an integral part of the attacking force which never sees Berlin is already taking off. This force, composed of light bombers and night fighters, goes across the Channel early to assault German fighter airdromes with bombs and gunfire.

Enemy Airfields Seared.

They spread fire and death across the airfields and fight enemy interceptors in the dusk while the great armada of heavy bombers roars out over England toward the Continent.

Each of the problems of the Berlin offensive for that night has been tackled and provided for by the time the crews are in the planes. Information has been given on every detail of the raid and men and planes checked. Some immediate problems can be dealt with only on the firing line, as when a machine gunner looses his fire on a particularly offensive searchlight battery or a bombardier lets go at a flak tower. But this, like everything else that is done on the raid, is the result of training.

Almost everything that happens on the raid has been foreseen. When the Germans tried to halt Monday's attack with a string of fighters in attacks from the coast inland, no airman was astonished. It was something he had been told to watch for, and did. The result was that it was not an overwhelming stratagem that threw the whole attack out of line, as the enemy had hoped, but just an expected variation, which was accepted and overcome.

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