

218 (GOLD COAST) SQUADRON



MOTTO: **In Time**

Codes **HA XH**

First formed on the 24th of April 1918 as a light bomber unit, 218 Squadron moved to France in late May, and conducted daylight operations against enemy bases in Belgium and France until the end of hostilities.

The inter-war years

218 Squadron remained in France during the immediate post war period, moving from its base at Reumont to Vert Galand on the 16th of November. Major Wemp relinquished command on the 29th of December in favour of Capt A W E Reeves, who was himself succeeded by Major W E Collison on the 9th of January 1919. The latter's tenure was also brief, he making way for Major C H Hayward on the 30th of January. The squadron departed France on the 7th of February, but would return to this battle-torn land a little under twenty-one years hence to face the same enemy, although under far less favourable circumstances. The squadron's new home was at Hucknall in Nottinghamshire, where it would remain for only a matter of months. The end of the Great War had left Britain with a massive Air Force boasting some 22,000 aircraft, most of which were now superfluous to requirements. The savage cutbacks were to see the service contract to a fraction of its former size, and many battle-honoured squadrons fell victim to the cull. Among them was 218 Squadron, upon whose neck the axe fell on the 24th of June 1919. It was destined to remain as just a number on the shelf until the 16th of March 1936.

By this time, Hitler had been chancellor in Germany for three years, and alarm bells had been ringing all over Europe ever since his accession to power. Even so, Britain was slow to re-arm, and the development of new military aircraft types had been stifled by a false sense of security created by adhering to a ten year plan. This was a rolling period in which peace could be assumed, and should war be considered a possibility many years hence, the plan would allow sufficient time to re-arm. By 1936, Germany was seen to have expansionist ambitions, and the mounting tension of the period persuaded some of the need to reappraise the situation with regard to the armed services. Many of the RAF's disbanded First World War Squadrons were resurrected at this time, including 218 Squadron, which was created by hiving off C Flight from 1 Group's 57 (B) Squadron at Upper Heyford. On the

16th of March 1936, F/L B M Cary and P/O Olney, along with one flight sergeant, two sergeants, five corporals and nine aircraftsmen, were transferred to form the nucleus. Cary was appointed as acting commanding officer, but the unit effectively remained part of 57 Squadron, and it would be some time yet before the umbilical cord was severed. The squadron was equipped with the sleek and admittedly beautiful Hawker Hind biplane, a type representing the pinnacle of bomber design in Britain. Never-the-less, it harked back to the Great War, and the question was; would the new monoplane designs currently on the drawing board or under development be ready in time?

With 218 Squadron in tow, 57 Squadron departed Upper Heyford on the 27th of March to undergo annual armament training at North Coates Fitties in Norfolk, and this lasted until the 25th of April. Three more sergeant pilots were posted to 218 from 57 Squadron on the 1st of May, and later in the month, F/L Cary was sent off to the School of Air Navigation at Manston. From the 28th of May to the 31st of July 57 and 218 Squadrons were affiliated to the Air Fighting Development Establishment at Northolt. Further postings-in over the ensuing months swelled 218 Squadron's ranks, and among the new arrivals in August was P/O A H Smythe, who would eventually accede to the command of 214 Squadron between July 1942 and March 1943. In September, acting P/O T B Morton came in from 7 Squadron, and also would progress through the ranks, although he would have to wait until March 1945 before finally gaining his own command at 100 Squadron. On the 4th of October, as F/L Cary was posted to RAF Calshot, the two squadrons were attached once more to the



armament training camp at North Coates Fitties. Two days later, 218 Squadron's K5516 suffered structural failure while recovering from a dive at Theddlethorpe Range Lincolnshire during bombing practice, and Sgt Dodsworth and his observer, Sgt Devail, were killed in the ensuing crash. Restrictions were immediately placed on the diving of Hinds, and when strong winds prevented any prospect of further useful flying training, the squadron returned to Upper Heyford on the 20th, four days earlier than intended. Also on this day, F/L Christian was posted to the squadron from Uxbridge to assume temporary command. Related to Fletcher Christian of Mutiny on the Bounty fame, Arnold Christian possessed many of the characteristics associated with his ancestor, including a stubborn determination. He would prove to be an inspirational commanding officer with 105 Squadron, until losing his life in a Norwegian fjord, while leading his men from the front on a shipping strike in May 1941.

On the 24th of October 218 Squadron finally became independent of 57 Squadron, although both units remained at Upper Heyford. F/L Christian moved on, and S/L Shales was posted in

from 40 (B) Squadron at Abingdon on the 2nd of November to take command. 1937 began with an influx of fresh blood from 8 FTS on the 4th of January. Among the new arrivals were acting P/O Crews, who would distinguish himself with the squadron during the early days of the approaching conflict, and P/O Oxley. The latter was to develop a reputation as a “Hun-hater”, and he would earn a DSO and DFC during a successful operational career with 5 Group. This culminated in a twelve-month tour as commanding officer of 50 Squadron, where, between October 1941 and 42, he used pre-operational briefings to whip up anti-Nazi feelings among his crews. The previously mentioned P/O Smythe departed the squadron on the 13th of January to take up duties as personal assistant to the AOC 1 Group, while another posting took P/O Morton to 9 (B) Squadron on the 15th of March.

Nothing of particular interest was recorded in the squadron’s Operations Record Book over the remainder of the winter, but with the onset of spring 218 was sent north on the 24th of April. The destination was West Freugh in Scotland, where No 4 Armament Training Camp was situated. Here was a bombing range, which remains in use to this day, and the squadron carried out box formation bombing for the first time on the 4th of May. This was the time of the shock abdication of King Edward, and with the coronation of King George VI scheduled for the 12th, P/O Daish was dispatched to London on the 7th to carry out duties in connection with the event. When the great day arrived, 218 Squadron attended a coronation parade at West Freugh. The squadron returned to Upper Heyford on the 24th, and two days later was informed, that F/L Cunningham was being posted in, ultimately to assume command. He was an experienced officer, who had commanded 49 Squadron from February to July of the previous year. On the 29th of May, Empire Air Day, 218 Squadron took part in a display at Upper Heyford, demonstrating dive-bombing techniques. F/L Cunningham reported for duty on the 1st of June, and was immediately promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader. P/O Oxley was posted to XV (B) Squadron a few days later, and S/L Cunningham officially took command on the 14th. Other than postings in, there was little for the adjutant to record in the ORB until the 16th of September, when K6628 hit a wall after force-landing during an attempted overshoot at Barnard Castle. The pilot was P/O Mahoney, who had joined the squadron at the end of June, and he survived this incident with cuts and bruises, while his observer, Cpl Davies, sustained a broken ankle. A more serious accident occurred on the 26th of November, however, when K6632 suffered engine failure while descending out of cloud off the Cumberland coast. It seems, that P/O Hunt was attempting to force-land on a beach near Workington, but the Hind went into the sea, and the pilot and his observer, AC2 Thomas, were killed.

The New Year brought changes to 218 Squadron, firstly in the form of a new commanding officer, and secondly in equipment. S/L Cunningham was posted to Staff College Andover for a course, and after promotion to wing commander, he was appointed to the command of 5 Group’s 144 Squadron just in time to participate in the opening shots of the Second World War. On the 29th of September 1939 he led an armed reconnaissance operation by twelve of the squadron’s aircraft in two sections of six, flying independently to the Heligoland area. One of his section returned early, and the other five were shot down. Cunningham was killed, and was the second bomber squadron commander to be lost in action in the war. He was replaced at 218 Squadron on the 4th of January 1938 by S/L Duggan. The new Fairey Battle light bomber was being issued to both 1 and 2 Groups at this time, re-equipment having begun in the spring of 1937. 218 Squadron became the fourth unit in 1 Group to

exchange its Hinds for the new monoplane design, receiving its first example of the type from Fairey Aviation on the 17th of January 1938. Others arrived over the ensuing weeks until the 11th of February, by which time sixteen were on hand, four of them in reserve.

Working up on the new type progressed without incident until the 29th of March, when K7652 suffered engine failure, and had to be belly-landed at Upper Heyford. No entry was made in the squadron ORB, and it must be assumed that the crew walked away uninjured. The squadron moved to Boscombe Down on the 22nd of April, where it would share the facilities with the existing resident unit, 88 Squadron. On the 18th, K7661 was damaged beyond repair during landing at Boscome Down. On Empire Air Day, the 28th of May, the squadron provided aircraft for static display at Upper Heyford, Cranfield, Hatfield, Lympne and Northolt, before attending annual practice camp at West Freugh for the entire month of June. The official opening of Luton airport on the 16th of July provided the squadron with an opportunity to show off its flying skills, and it was shortly after this, that talk of imminent war reflected the rising tensions in Europe. From mid July to mid August the squadron



Before the Storm RAF Boscombe Down 1938

participated in Observer Corps exercises, and from the 5th to the 7th of August home defence exercises. On the 12th, 17th and 18th, two aircraft were based with the AA Brigade at Alton, and then on the 29th, the squadron was partially mobilized, war markings were painted on the aircraft, and all personnel were

inoculated. Two days earlier, K7657 had been written off, when its undercarriage collapsed on landing at Boscombe Down. The international crisis surrounding the German seizure of the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland reached a peak in September and October. Boscombe Down's Station HQ, and the resident units, 88 and 218 Squadrons, had by then been designated 75 Wing. On the receipt of mobilization orders they would be required immediately to proceed overseas, ready to operate as part of the Advanced Air Striking Force. Personnel from both squadrons were catching up on annual leave during September, and both squadron commanders were recalled to duty on the 17th.

They were joined on the 26th by all other officers and airmen, by which time all aircraft had been made serviceable by the available ground staff. All aircraft identification numbers were obliterated, and wives and children in station married quarters were prepared for possible evacuation. The crisis ended with the signing of the Munich Agreement, and

initially at least, “peace in our time” appeared to have been won. Never-the-less, a directive was issued on the 9th of October increasing the establishment of aircraft per squadron.

The 9th of October was also the day on which the station commander, W/C Oddie, was posted away to become Fleet Aviation Officer at HMS Nelson, and S/L Duggan was appointed as his temporary replacement. The recent scare had concentrated minds on just how close war with Germany had been, and station exercises were held at Boscombe Down later in the month, involving the resident units, including 150 Squadron, which had been reformed there in August. The squadron’s Merlin I powered Battles were transferred to 185 Squadron between the 10th and 13th of October, and it received in exchange a full complement of Merlin II powered aircraft. Five new Merlin II Mk Is were collected from Fairey Aviation’s plant at Ringway between the 20th and 26th in accordance with the directive, and the squadron’s strength now stood at sixteen front line aircraft with five in reserve. On the 6th of December during the AOC’s annual inspection, AVM Playfair presented the squadron crest, which depicted an hourglass with the motto, “In time”.

1939 was to be a tumultuous year as the European crisis deepened again, and war became almost inevitable. On the 1st of January the establishment of the squadron was changed to reflect the increased size of bomber squadrons generally and the number of personnel contained therein. This meant that the commanding officer was now to be a wing commander, with squadron leaders or flight lieutenants as flight commanders. Boscombe Down’s station records tell us that 218 Squadron was sent to 5 ATS for training on the 8th, and that it remained there until the 28th. All squadrons of 1 Group took part in an exercise on the 16th of February, and another was mounted on the 24th. It was the 1st of March before the squadron’s Operations Record Book’s next entry confirms its affiliation to Weston-Super-Mare. Empire Air Day fell in this year on the 20th of May, and 218 Squadron demonstrated its skill in formation flying by performing at Netheravon, Winchester, Guildford, Kenley, Hanworth, Reading and Odiham in a diamond configuration of twelve aircraft. The squadron also carried out a simulated low-level bombing attack on Boscombe Down airfield. Authority was received from the Air Ministry on the 27th of June to expand 88 and 218 Squadrons with the addition on paper of a third flight. Eleven new aircraft were collected by 218 Squadron from the Austin works at Birmingham between the 3rd and 14th of July, and this brought the complement to thirty-two, eight of which were in reserve. Regional air exercises were held between the 7th and 9th of July involving the whole of Bomber Command and 11 Fighter Group. 88 and 218 Squadron aircraft acted as both friendly and enemy bombers, and flew to within three miles of the French coast. On the 11th, the squadron took part in a fly-the-flag exercise over France with elements of 103 Squadron, visiting Le Treport, Orleans, Le Mans and Harfleur. The flight took place at an average of 3,000 feet, and lasted for five hours and five minutes. A second exercise over France took place on the 25th, and this time Paris was included in the itinerary.

August, the final month of peace for almost six years, began with preparations for the impending conflict. A major tactical exercise took place on the 5th and 6th, and one for home defence followed between the 8th and 11th. It was during the latter, on the 11th, that the squadron lost a crew to the sort of accident, which would become all too common during the years ahead as young men prepared themselves for war. Acting F/L Kinane and his crew were part of the “attacking” force, carrying out a simulated low-level raid in K9328 in

formation with a second Battle. The first aircraft cleared a fifty-foot high electricity pylon at Carlton, ten miles north-west of Bedford, but that flown by Kinane struck the top of the structure and pulled down the uppermost steelwork along with two cables. Flame was seen to stream from the Battle's damaged wing, and as the stricken aircraft came to earth, it collided with and uprooted a tree. A fierce fire ensued, and rescuers were able only to pull clear the wireless operator, who was severely injured and still strapped to his seat. Twenty-one year old Kinane and his twenty-eight year old observer, Sgt Allan, were killed instantly, and AC1 Roberts succumbed to his injuries at Cranfield sick quarters two days later. On the 19th, the squadron paid an official visit to Weston-Super-Mare in a fly-past by twelve aircraft in formation.

At 23.00 hours on the 23rd, 218 Squadron received orders to mobilize as part of 75 Wing, Advanced Air Striking Force, with W/C Duggan in command and S/L Warrington as second in command. All personnel were recalled from leave on the morning of the 24th. The flying strength of the squadron was to be sixteen aircraft and pilots, with four more pilots in reserve, and the remaining aircraft would be dispersed among other units. The following eight days were spent preparing the aircraft for war, packing stores and equipment and receiving reservists, while the station defence scheme was put into action. By 10.00 hours on the 31st, the station and its resident units were declared ready to face any emergency. At 13.45 on the 2nd of September, the day after German forces began their assault on Poland, and the day on which 1 Group ceased to exist, the forward sea party of forty-three airmen left for Auberieve, France under the command of F/O Hughes. Forty-five minutes later, W/C Duggan led the sixteen Battles from Boscombe Down in two cruising formations of eight aircraft, the leading flight joined by a single Battle from 88 Squadron. The 218 Squadron aircraft were; K9251, K9252, K9254, K9255, K9256, K9273, K9323, K9324, K9325, K9326, K9327, K9329, K9353, K9355, K9356 and K9357. All of the aircraft arrived safely at their destination of Auberieve on this final day of peace, and were dispersed around the perimeter of the airfield according to plan.

The Boscombe Down station commander, G/C Wann, had already been appointed to command 75 Wing, and he departed for his HQ at Auberieve in an Imperial Airways Ensign aircraft at 09.05. Auberieve had Mourmelon-le-Grand as a satellite airfield, and 88 Squadron was to move there on the 12th. At 11.13 hours on the 3rd, Britain declared war on Germany, and this news was broadcast to the nation in doleful tones by the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. Boscombe Down continued to dispatch stores and equipment to France by civil aircraft until the 16th, as a line of communication between the station and HQ at Auberieve was firmly established.

The squadron conducted its first operation on the 10th, when W/C Duggan led a section of three aircraft to carry out a reconnaissance of the Reims, Nancy, Bitche, Sierck areas, to enable the crews to familiarize themselves with the lay of the land. P/O Freeman led a further reconnaissance outing by two aircraft on the 15th, and on the 17th, F/L Daish and two others reconnoitred the Franco-German frontier as far as Lauterbourg, and became the first 218 Squadron crews to enter enemy air space. W/C Duggan, in K9254, led a further six aircraft on the 20th, in what was supposed to be an escorted incursion, pushing ten miles into German air space at 23,000 feet. In the event, the French fighters did not appear, complete cloud cover invalidated the reconnaissance aspect of the operation, and the crews

had to put down at the aero-club at Gray, returning home on the following morning. Two sections of three carried out separate reconnaissance flights over the frontier on the 22nd, and on the 28th, F/L Daish led six aircraft twenty miles into Germany for high level unescorted reconnaissance at 23,000 feet. P/O Freeman had to return early when the oxygen system failed in K9355, but the others pressed on, and encountered no opposition. What the Americans dubbed the "Phoney War" provided a gentle introduction to hostilities for most squadrons of the AASF, but two incidents served to banish any complacency, and ultimately served to restrict daylight operational activity for the remainder of the year. On the 20th, 88 Squadron lost two out of three aircraft to BF109s, and on the 30th, 150 Squadron had four out of five Battles shot down in identical circumstances. From this point on, the crews were involved in a boring round of training flights and exercises with the army, and it was during this period, that the squadron suffered its first loss of an aircraft and crew. P/O Thynne and his crew were engaged in a high level dive bombing practice over the airfield in K9356 on the 13th of November, when the Battle's port wing was torn off while pulling out of a near vertical descent. The outcome was inevitable, and P/O Thynne, Sgt Pike and AC1 Richardson became the first to have their names inscribed in the squadron's wartime Roll of Honour. As December progressed, a particularly harsh winter began to set in, and opportunities to fly became even more limited. Meanwhile, the home-based squadrons of Bomber Command had been active over the North Sea in search of enemy warships, and had suffered a number of bruising encounters. Unfortunately, lessons were not learned, and insufficient account was taken of the threat posed by enemy fighters. This arose largely out of the pre-war belief, that the self-defending bomber formation would always get through to its target by daylight, even against the most determined fighter opposition. Two 3 Group efforts, on the 14th and 18th of December, proved so costly, that the decision-makers were forced to re-evaluate the feasibility of daylight operations, and ultimately, to commit the Command, with the exception of 2 Group, to waging war by night.

1940

The winter seemed to deepen as the new year ground on, and it would be towards the end of February before the freezing conditions loosened their grip sufficiently to allow unrestricted flying. The squadron sustained its first casualty of the year by way of a training accident involving K9357, which crashed at Pommiers during anti-shipping practice on the 12th, but the crew of P/O Crane was unhurt. On the 15th, a re-organisation took place, which removed the AASF from Bomber Command control, and made it an independent entity under AM "Ugly" Barratt. The five Wings were reduced to three, and 103 Squadron joined 88 and 218 Squadrons to make up the new 75 Wing, with HQ at St Hilaire. Landing after a training flight in K9329 on the 23rd, F/O Richmond collided with K9327, badly damaging both machines, and they would be abandoned during the withdrawal in May. The Phoney War continued to drag on, as both sides did their utmost to avoid civilian casualties and damage to non-military property for fear of reprisals. February passed without incident for 218 Squadron, but on the 1st of March, K9252 crashed in bad weather some distance north of Dijon, during a cross-country exercise, and only the pilot, F/O Hulbert, got out alive, albeit with a broken ankle. It was almost inevitable, that the first bombs to kill a civilian and trigger a reprisal would be dropped unintentionally, and thus it was. A stray Luftwaffe bomb intended for elements of the Royal Navy at Scapa flow on the 17/18th, inadvertently slew a civilian on the island of Hoy, and two nights later, fifty Whitleys and Hampdens attacked the

seaplane base at Hörnum on the island of Sylt. The operation was conducted over a six hour period, and the returning crews claimed great success, which was enthusiastically reported in the press. When photographic reconnaissance was finally possible on the 6th of April, it failed to detect any signs of damage, and this problem of over optimistic claims would be a recurring theme in the future. On the 23/24th, F/L Rogers and Sgt Dockrill carried out a reconnaissance of the Rhine, and dropped what a future C-in-C would refer to as toilet paper on Mainz. On the following night, F/O Shaw and P/O Imrie dropped their nickels, or leaflets, on Wiesbaden and Frankfurt respectively.



218 Squadron over France before the massacre of May 1940

At dawn on the 9th of April, German forces marched unopposed into Denmark, and began landings by sea and air in southern Norway. The British and French responded by launching an expedition to Narvik in northern Norway, and Bomber Command was ordered to slow the enemy advance by attacking shipping on the routes from Germany, and the airfields at Oslo and Stavanger. The AASF took no part in the campaign, which was ill-fated from the start, and occupied itself instead with further reconnaissance and leafleting sorties. 218 Squadron's few losses to date had all been incurred during training, but its next was the first from an operational sortie. At 20.55 on the 20th, P/O Wardle, a Canadian serving in the RAF, took off for southern Germany in P2201, one of four crews briefed to carry out a reconnaissance of the Rhine, and to deliver nickels to the residents of Mainz and Darmstadt. The other Battles and pilots were L5237 Sgt Horner, who was forced to return early, L5235 F/O Newton, and P2192 F/L Drews. At 00.45, P2201 was shot down by a nightfighter captained by Feldwebel Schmale of the IV/NJG/2, and P/O Wardle alone of the three-man crew survived to be taken into captivity. After frequenting a number of PoW camps, he took up residence at Colditz Castle, from where he escaped on the 15th of October 1942. Three

days later he was in Switzerland, and he finally arrived in England via Gibraltar on the 6th of February 1944. Five aircraft were sent to the same region on the 22/23rd to fulfil similar tasks, and this time, all returned safely home. The gallant failure at Narvik demonstrated that the Scandinavian affair had already effectively run its course, when events elsewhere grabbed the attention of the world. At first light on the 10th of May, German forces began their advance across the Low Countries, triggering a week of unimaginably furious fighting, in which the AASF would be all but annihilated. Its squadrons, and those of the home-based 2 Group of Bomber Command, would be thrust into the unequal contest against marauding BF109s, and be required to fly into the teeth of flak defences in prepared positions.

On the afternoon of the 10th, the squadron despatched four aircraft to attack a troop column on the Luxembourg to Dippach road, and all returned showing the scars of battle, L5402 being deemed to be beyond repair. At 09.30 on the following morning, four more aircraft were sent off to attack a bridge near St Vith, and not one of them returned. Approaching the target over the densely wooded Ardennes, the formation came under intense ground fire, and F/O Crews, in P2326, had his instrument panel shatter in front of him. Hit again, flames and smoke entered the cockpit, and it was clear that the aircraft was finished. They were too low to bale out safely, but a forced-landing was prevented by trees stretching endlessly around them. F/O Crews dragged the last inch of altitude out of the failing Battle, and all three men jumped clear, Crews and his observer, F/S Evans, finding themselves instantly among the tree-tops, where their parachutes snagged and arrested their descent. Sadly, Sgt Jennings, the gunner, fell between trees, his parachute only partially deployed, and he was killed. The two survivors were unable to evade capture, and once in captivity, Crews made a number of unsuccessful attempts to escape. Eventually, by feigning illness, he managed to get himself repatriated in September 1944. F/O Hudson and his crew all survived the demise of K9325, and were taken prisoner, a similar fate overtaking P/O Murray and his crew in P2249, but Sgt Dockrill and his crew all perished, when P2203 crashed in Luxembourg. Early on the 12th, the Luftwaffe paid a visit to Auberive, but failed to inflict significant damage. At 16.30 that afternoon, three aircraft, captained by F/S Horner, P/O Bazalgette and P/O Anstey, took off to attack enemy columns near Bouillon, and two of them failed to return. K9353 was hit by flak at a thousand feet, and lost its starboard wing tip, before crashing in flames near the Belgian/Luxembourg border. Sadly, there were no survivors from the crew of F/S Horner. P2183 came down in France, killing P/O Bazalgette, while his two colleagues managed to evade capture and return to the squadron.



**Battle L5235 HA-W flown by Pilot Officer A Imrie RAF hit by flak while attacking Troop columns May 14th
1940**

The squadron was not called into action on the 13th, but the afternoon of the 14th was to prove disastrous. Seven aircraft departed Auberive to bomb troop columns on the Bouillon-Givonne road, while four others were sent to target the Douzy bridge near Sedan, which was also the alternative objective for the first mentioned. It seems that most of the aircraft were carrying a two man crew, but the squadron's records were lost during the subsequent withdrawal, and it is not possible to determine either the circumstances of the losses, or the names of all those taking part in the operation. Certainly, ten of the eleven Battles failed to return, and the following details are known. L5232 was shot down over France with a three man crew, and only the pilot, P/O Harris, survived to return to the squadron in an injured condition. L5235 and L5422 also came down in France, P/O Imrie surviving in enemy hands from the former, while his gunner was killed, and F/O Crane in the latter losing his life, while his gunner also became a PoW. P/O Foster and his gunner survived the loss of P2324, P2360 was lost without trace with the crew of P/O Buttery, and according to Sidney Shail in his superb book, the Battle File, the other five missing aircraft were probably K9251, K9273, L5192, P2189 and P2192. The Luftwaffe returned on the 15th, and hit a fully loaded Battle, which exploded, and later in the day, the squadron moved out, and set up temporary lodgings at Moscou Ferme. On the following day, a further move was undertaken to St Lucien Ferme, Rheges, but the squadron had effectively been knocked out of the battle, and would take part in only two more operations. On the 19th, the squadron contributed to attacks on enemy troop columns, and flew some night sorties on the night of the 20th, before its remaining aircraft were deposited with 103 Squadron on the 21st. All personnel proceeded to No 2 Base area at Nantes, where they remained until evacuation to England. The dismantling of the original squadron began on the 6th of June, when some of the senior NCOs, together with a number of wireless operators and air-gunners were posted to other squadrons. The ground crews proceeded to the UK at this time, settling in at Mildenhall, and by the 14th, they had been joined by the rest of the squadron.

A new era began for 218 Squadron on the 24th, when it was informed that it would convert to Blenheims and join 2 Group. Three days later, the first four Mk IV Blenheims were taken on charge, and on the 28th, W/C Combe was posted to the squadron to familiarize himself before assuming command two weeks hence. Working up to operational status would take until mid August, and in the meantime, the inevitable training accidents cost a number of aircrew lives. W/C Combe officially took command on the 13th of July, three days after W/C Duggan's posting to Oakington as the station commander. It was also on the 13th, that the squadron registered its first Blenheim casualty, when R3597 crashed in Bedfordshire during a cross-country exercise, and F/O Newton and the only other occupant were killed. On the 14th, the squadron began the process of departing Mildenhall to take up residence at Oakington, and the move was completed by the 18th. The squadron now had a full complement of nineteen Blenheims on charge, and spent the remainder of July and the first two and a half weeks of August continuing its march towards operational readiness. As this was in progress, the Battle of Britain was gaining momentum overhead, and the Command was committing ever greater resources to eliminating the barges and other marine craft being assembled in the occupied ports in preparation for the intended invasion. The squadron's training period came to an end with a tragic incident on the 18th of August, while B Flight was conducting a formation flying exercise. L9264 and T1929 collided in the air, the

former spinning in inverted, and the latter spiraling in flames into the ground. P/O Wheelwright and F/L Newton respectively died with the other five occupants, one of whom was a member of ground crew.

On the following day, the squadron was declared operational, and ready to participate in operations under the 2 Group Operations Order 11, which called for daylight cloud-cover raids on oil and railway targets, to maintain the pressure applied by the night bombers. The ever-changing war situation often thwarted the plan, as other considerations became the priority. During August, G.O.O.11 was only a small part of the Group's remit, as the threat of invasion called for day and night raids on airfields and long range batteries along the Pas-de-Calais coast, and for North Sea sweeps. 218 Squadron was initially assigned only to the first mentioned, and at 05.30 hours on the 19th, F/L Richmond took off in T1996 to carry out the squadron's first sortie, an attack on the aerodrome at Vlissingen. He returned two hours later having completed his assigned task, registering the squadron as a fully-fledged member of 2 Group. Although for 218 Squadron, the time on Blenheims would be only a brief interlude in a long and varied wartime career, any association with 2 Group operations should be looked upon with pride. Throughout the battles for the low countries and France, 2 Group had shared with the AASF the responsibility of trying to stem the irresistible enemy tide, and had suffered the most horrendous losses.



The "courage by daylight" displayed by its crews then, and in the time to come before its departure from Bomber Command, was inspirational and unsurpassed, and never were crews asked to undertake more hazardous operations, with such little prospect of survival. The first operational loss of a 218 Squadron Blenheim was not long in coming, and resulted from a raid on Brugges on the 23rd. Taking off at 11.35 hours, the Blenheim was shot down by a fighter over the Pas-de-Calais, killing S/L House and his observer, while the wireless operator/gunner fell into enemy hands. The squadron flew a modest seventeen sorties during the month, and in comparison with some of the Group's other squadrons, it would continue to be under-employed.

September would bring the climax of the Battle of Britain, and with invasion fever still gripping the nation, an even greater number of sorties were sent against invasion transports, making it 2 Group's busiest month until 1944. The squadron registered its second and final loss of a Blenheim on the 8/9th, when Sgt Clayton and his crew took L8848 on a reconnaissance flight, and crashed in the North Sea with no survivors. During this, its first fully operational month with 2 Group, the squadron despatched fifty sorties, compared with a hundred or more by seven other squadrons, with three others in the eighties. In October, the squadron was to share in the continued assault on the Channel ports, while conducting night raids on airfields, daylight armed reconnaissance sorties and roving commissions. The last but one mentioned began on the 3rd, when Sgt Morley headed for

Reiszholz in N6183, but was forced by inadequate cloud cover to bomb an alternative target, selecting instead fifty barges on the Maas. It was a similar story for S/L Ault, who abandoned his attempt to reach Bremen, was also thwarted at Soesterburg aerodrome, and ultimately bombed the docks at IJmuiden, while Sgt Adams attacked those at Rotterdam. On the 5th, ACM Portal relinquished his post as Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, and became Chief-of-the-Air-Staff. He was succeeded by AM Sir Richard Peirse, an officer of great ability, whose period of tenure would be dogged by misfortune, and the general inadequacies obtaining at the time with regard to equipment and the expectations of the exalted. On the 9th, F/L Shaw was persuaded by the weather to seek alternative employment when bound for Homburg. He found and attacked three ships in the Maas, and on the way home, he and his crew mixed it with a Heinkel 111, before being forced to call off the fight when the guns jammed one by one. It was F/L Shaw who flew the squadron's first roving commission sortie on the 21st, and having been given a free hand under an operations order issued on the 17th, he selected Dunkerque, which he approached in poor visibility. He was unable to pick up the harbour, but spotted a fourteen ship convoy under an E-Boat escort, which was duly attacked from behind. To the amazement of all on board the Blenheim, the object of the attack was seen with its decks awash, and to be on the point of capsizing. The squadron operated Blenheims for the last time on the 31st of October, F/L Shaw and crew taking off at 10.20 hours on a roving commission, during which they attacked Soesterburg aerodrome from six hundred feet, before returning safely at 13.05. The fifty seven sorties flown during the month demonstrated a more equal share in the Group's activities, but it was once more time to move on.

On the 5th of November, 218 Squadron joined 3 Group, with which it would remain for the rest of the war, and this involved it in flying its third aircraft type in six months. On the following day, L4293, a dual-control Wellington, was delivered, and that afternoon, a brand new Mk Ic, R1009 arrived, and was flight tested by F/L Richmond. On the 7th, Czech pilots flew in two more Wellingtons, R1008 and R1025, and these were followed by N2844 and T2801 on the 13th, along with another dual control Mk Ia. N2937, R1183 and T2885 arrived on the 14th, and R1210 on the 15th. On the 23rd, the squadron again began the upheaval of changing address, and completed its move to Marham on the 27th. W/C Combe was on ten days leave from the 20th, and the burden of overseeing the transfer fell on S/L Gillam. The squadron began its operational career on Wellingtons on the 20th of December, when two aircraft were despatched to bomb the docks at Ostend. S/L Richmond and F/O Anstey took off shortly before 04.40 hours in R1009 and R1210 respectively, and returned safely to land a few minutes after 07.00. On the 22nd, three crews, those of S/L Richmond in R1009, S/L Ault in R1008 and F/L Shaw in R1025, were sent to attack Flushing, but cloud over the target persuaded S/L Ault to bomb the docks at Calais as an alternative.

1940 was the most difficult year of the war to categorize, having begun with the unreality of the Phoney War, before erupting into unimaginable fury as the low countries and then France were swallowed up by the advancing German military machine. Most of the pre-war conceptions had been swept away in the final quarter of 1939, and those that remained in 1940 were subject to rigorous reappraisal. The first attempts at strategic bombing had been attended by great enthusiasm on the part of the crews, and their efforts were much heralded in the press, but in truth, little had been achieved, other than to present a belligerent and defiant face to the, as yet, all-conquering enemy. Bomber Command had

played its role in the Battle of Britain, and its crews had shown commendable gallantry in flying into the teeth of those defending the invasion embarkation ports. However, the whole situation was attended by a backs-to-the-wall, survival mentality, which did not bespeak the Command's offensive purpose. Fortunately, with the postponement of Hitler's invasion plans, it was already clear that a long war was in prospect, and as far as Bomber Command was concerned, the longer it went on the better. It desperately needed time to develop the aircraft, weaponry and electronic wizardry, which were essential if Britain were ever to go onto the offensive.

1941

A second successive harsh winter restricted flying at the start of the year, and those operations which were mounted, were directed largely at German and French ports. The year began with raids on Bremen on the first three nights, two of which were reasonably effective for the period. The Tirpitz was berthed at Wilhelmshaven, and this situation prompted a number of operations to be mounted from the 8/9th, and on the 9/10th, a record 135 aircraft were sent to Gelsenkirchen to attack its synthetic oil plants. Wellingtons made up almost half of the force, and now that 1 and 3 Groups were fully equipped with the type, it would continue to be the mainstay of the Command in numbers until well into 1942. Remarkably, 218 Squadron did not lose a single Wellington during the conversion and working up period, but this fine loss-free record could not last indefinitely. On the 12th, F/O MacLaren, an Australian, was posted in from 9 Squadron with over six hundred hours on all types to his credit. On the 15th, he undertook his first solo flight in a Wellington, but sadly, P9207 crashed in Norfolk, and he was killed. This was the day on which a new Air Ministry directive was issued, stating an assumption, that the German oil position would be passing through a critical period during the next six months. It was suggested, that a concerted assault on the centres of Germany's domestic oil production would have a material effect on the enemy's war effort. A list of seventeen sites was drawn up accordingly, the top nine of which, represented 80% of production. It would be February before Peirse could put his orders into effect, and in the meantime, Wilhelmshaven continued to be the main focus of attention for the remainder of the month. 218 Squadron registered no further casualties from either training or operations during this time.

February began with a change of commanding officer, after W/C Combe was posted to Bomber Command HQ on the 2nd. He was replaced by W/C Amison, whose period of tenure would be reasonably brief. The Wellington squadrons were kept busy targeting ports along the occupied coast during the first week and a half, until the month's "big" night was directed at Hanover on the 10/11th, when a record 222 sorties were launched against industrial targets. A secondary operation on this night was an attack on oil storage tanks at Rotterdam by over forty aircraft, including three Stirlings, on the type's offensive debut. 3 Group set a new record by launching 119 aircraft in total, the first time that any Group had reached, let alone exceeded, a hundred aircraft in one night. On the following night, over seventy Wellingtons, Hampdens and Whitleys took off for Bremen, but only twenty seven crews reported bombing the target. Although no losses were incurred as a result of enemy action, twenty two aircraft crashed or were abandoned by their crews on encountering thick fog on return, and two 218 Squadron aircraft were involved. R1210 arrived over Westmorland with empty tanks, and was left to its fate by F/O Anstey and his crew, while

Sgt Adams force-landed T2885 in Gloucestershire, but happily, no serious injury was sustained by either crew. Peirse put the oil plan into effect on the 14/15th, when refineries at Gelsenkirchen and Homberg were targeted, but few crews were able to identify the aiming point. It was similar fare on the following night at Sterkrade and Homberg again, before the Command embarked on nine nights of minor operations, mostly against French ports. Typical of the effectiveness of operations at this stage of the war was a raid on Düsseldorf on the 25/26th, for which eighty aircraft took off. The city authorities recorded around seven bomb loads falling within the city, and damage was slight in the extreme. 218 Squadron's R1009 was damaged during a brush with a nightfighter, and had to be crash-landed in Norfolk by Sgt Hoos and his crew, three of whom sustained injuries. Over 120 aircraft were despatched to Cologne twenty four hours later, and again, just a few bombs fell onto western suburbs, the remainder finding open country and outlying communities. The month's activities ended with another tilt at the Tirpitz at Wilhelmshaven on the night of the 28th, but the raid was sufficiently inaccurate to warrant no mention in the town's diary.

March began with a return to Cologne on the 1/2nd, an operation which produced some useful damage to the dock areas on both banks of the Rhine. A less convincing attack on this city on the 3/4th preceded a period of minor operations, most of which were directed at ports along the occupied coast. On the 9th, a new Air Ministry directive brought a change in emphasis, in response to the mounting losses of Allied shipping to U-Boats in the Atlantic. From now on, this menace, and its partner in crime, the Focke-Wulf Kondor long range maritime reconnaissance bomber, were to be hunted down where-ever they could be found, at sea, at their bases, at their point of manufacture and in the component factories. A new target list was drawn up, which was headed by Kiel, Hamburg, Vegesack and Bremen, each of which contained at least one U-Boat yard, while the last mentioned was also home to a Focke-Wulf factory. The French ports of Lorient, St Nazaire and Bordeaux were also included in the hit list, for their part in providing U-Boat bases and support facilities. The new campaign began on the night of the 12/13th, when three major operations were mounted, to Hamburg and Bremen in line with the directive, and to Berlin. The 218 Squadron contingent of nine Wellingtons joined forty five others of the type to attack the Focke-Wulf factory at Bremen, while Blenheims targeted the city generally. Twelve high explosive bombs found the mark for the loss of two Wellingtons, one of which belonged to 218 Squadron, and was the first Wellington from the squadron to fail to return from an operation. R1326 was shot down by a nightfighter over Holland at 21.45 hours, killing F/O Crosse and three of his crew, while the two survivors were taken into captivity. The pilot had been with the squadron since June, and was on his 14th operation. In 1972, the wreckage of the aircraft was recovered by the Royal Netherlands Air Force. The raid on Hamburg inflicted some useful damage on the Blohm & Voss ship yard, but the Berlin force failed to achieve anything of significance. Another effective operation took place against Hamburg on the following night, when the Blohm & Voss yard sustained further damage, and thirty large fires erupted in the city. A raid on Gelsenkirchen on the 14/15th caused loss of production at the Hydriewerk refinery at Scholven, and then it was back to matters maritime from the 17/18th. Attacks were mounted against Bremen and Wilhelmshaven on the 17/18th, Kiel on the 18/19th, and an assortment of occupied and German ports thereafter until the end of the month. On the 29th, the German cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau were reported to be off Brest, and by the following morning, they had taken up

residence, thus beginning an eleven month long saga, which would be a major and costly distraction for the Command. That night, 109 aircraft took off to attack them, but no hits were scored.

On each of the first three days of April, small forces were sent to Brest, but were recalled before bombing. The Wellington brigade was not involved, and its turn came on the night of the 3/4th, when fifty one of the type set out for the port and its guests in company with thirty nine other aircraft. The warships proved difficult to locate, and again no hits were scored. A further attempt on the 4/5th left an unexploded bomb in the dry dock occupied by the Gneisenau, and on the following morning, its captain decided to move out into the harbour while it was dealt with. There the ship was attacked by a lone Beaufort of Coastal Command, whose torpedo caused extensive damage, although the crew, aware of the suicide nature of the mission, all died, and the pilot, F/O Campbell, was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. After another unsuccessful tilt at Brest on the 6/7th, Kiel was raided to good effect on consecutive nights from the 8/9th, the first attack hitting mainly the docks area, and the second the town itself. A force of eighty aircraft headed for Berlin on the 9/10th, while the maritime campaign continued at the hands of small numbers of aircraft at Vegesack and Emden. Wellingtons made up the bulk of the force returning to Brest on the 10/11th, and this time, four bombs struck the Gneisenau, killing fifty men. The single missing aircraft was the squadron's R1442, which crashed into the sea in the target area, and took with it the crew of Sgt Plumb. For the remainder of the month, Brest and Kiel were the most frequently visited destinations, the former featuring on the 12/13th, 14/15th, 22/23rd, 23/24th and 28/29th, and the latter on the 15/16th, 24/25th, 25/26th, and 30th. It proved to be an expensive final third of the month for 218 Squadron, which welcomed a new commanding officer on the 22nd. W/C Amison was posted to 12 OTU at Benson on the 22nd, to be replaced by W/C Kirkpatrick, who was posted in from his flight commander's post at 9 Squadron. He presided over his first operation and casualties that night, when the squadron contributed to the raid on Brest mentioned above. L7798 crashed in France, and only a gunner in Sgt Swain's crew escaped with his life to be captured, while Sgt Adams and his crew all survived the abandonment of R1368 over Norfolk, after it ran out of fuel. Two nights later, T2958 crashed while trying to land at Marham on return from Kiel, but Sgt Chidgey and his crew were able to walk away. During the following night's operation to the same target, R1507 crashed into the North Sea, killing F/O Agar and his crew.

There was a busy start to May, with a major operation almost every night for the first two and a half weeks. It began at Hamburg on the 2/3rd, when a force of under a hundred aircraft achieved very modest damage and thirteen large fires. A force of similar size produced only superficial damage at Cologne on the following night, while a small predominately Wellington effort kept up the pressure on Brest. Brest was the main target on the 4/5th, when hits were claimed on the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, but were unconfirmed. 141 aircraft took off for Mannheim on the 5/6th, when complete cloud cover all the way to southern Germany prevented the crews from seeing the ground, and only around twenty five bomb loads fell within the city, causing superficial damage. The disappointing series of major raids continued at Hamburg on the 6/7th, when damage was again slight, and further hits were claimed on the German cruisers at Brest on the 7/8th, but these were also unconfirmed. The largest effort of the month thus far, comprising 188 aircraft, brought a return to Hamburg on the 8/9th, two-thirds of the crews briefed to attack the ship yards, while the others were to concentrate on the city. This time, the results were

more encouraging, and the city authorities reported thirty eight large fires, and the destruction of ten apartment blocks in one street. The death toll of 185 people was the highest of the war to date at a target in Germany.



No.218 Squadron RAF Marham 1941

A simultaneous raid on Bremen by over a hundred aircraft produced widespread bombing in the town, but no hits on the U-Boat yards. The total number of sorties for the night was a new record, surpassing February's "big" night at Hanover by a clear ninety nine.

Mannheim had always featured prominently on the Command's target list, and would continue to do so for the remainder of the war. One of its attractions, as the bomber force increased in strength, was its geographical proximity to Ludwigshafen, which nestled opposite Mannheim on the western bank of the Rhine. Any attack on Mannheim with an approach from the west, would inevitably lead to the bombing spilling over into Ludwigshafen, and in time, this would be incorporated into the plan of attack. On the 9/10th, 146 aircraft were despatched for a joint raid on these twin cities, and for the period, a reasonably successful outcome was achieved. A little over fifty buildings were destroyed, but a substantial number sustained damage, and over three and a half thousand people were rendered homeless, although some only temporarily. The assault on Hamburg in line with March's directive continued on the 10/11th and 11/12th, and the two operations resulted in a combined total of over two hundred fires, seventy of them classed as large. Mannheim and Ludwigshafen came into the bomb-sights again on the 12/13th, but the earlier success was not repeated, and many crews bombed alternative targets. The on-going hectic round of operations took a hundred aircraft to Hanover on the 15/16th, before raids on Cologne on the following two nights produced only modest damage. Kiel also escaped

lightly on the 17/18th, and this was the final major operation of the month. Later on the morning of the 18th, P/O Lymbery and his crew took W5448 for a training flight, during which, the dinghy broke loose and fouled the tailplane. The Wellington dived into the Norfolk countryside, killing all but one of the crew on impact, and the surviving gunner succumbed to his injuries two days later. It was a tragic accident, and was the only blemish on the squadron's otherwise loss-free month.

The performance of the Command over the next two months was to have a significance, of which the crews were unaware. Photographs taken during the period's night operations were to be used to assess their effectiveness, and a civil servant, Mr D M Butt, was charged with the responsibility of producing a report for the War Cabinet. The month's operations began at Düsseldorf on the 2/3rd, and the raid failed to achieve more than light, scattered damage. Small-scale operations then held sway until the 10/11th, when over a hundred aircraft were employed against Brest, where the Prinz Eugen had now joined its sister ships. No hits were scored on this occasion, and it was the same story on the 13/14th, when haze and the very efficient smoke screen hampered the next attempt. In between on the 11/12th, Düsseldorf and Duisburg were the intended targets for forces of ninety two and eighty aircraft respectively, but it seems that neither was troubled by falling bombs. Cologne, on the other hand, reported a significant number of bombs, some of which caused substantial damage to the main railway station, while others fell into the docks area. Pre-empting a new directive a month hence, the night of the 12/13th was devoted to attacks on railway targets at Soest, Schwerte, Hamm and Osnabrück, the two latter assigned to forces of Wellingtons. The attack on Hamm, one of Germany's most important railway centres, was disappointing, but only one Wellington was lost from the 150 despatched for all the night's activities. Cologne, Düsseldorf and Bremen dominated the remainder of the month, and the first two mentioned were attacked simultaneously on no fewer than eight nights by forces of varying sizes. Not one of the raids produced significant results, and attacks on other targets, including Bremen on the 18/19th, 22/23rd, 25/26th, 27/28th and 29/30th, and Kiel on the 20/21st, were equally ineffective and disappointing. It was during the Kiel raid, that 218 Squadron registered its first losses of the month, when two aircraft failed to return. R1339 crashed into the sea, taking with it the crew of Sgt Jillett, and R1713 presumably suffered a similar fate, no trace of it or the crew of Sgt Fraser ever coming to light. The Bremen raid on the 27/28th had resulted in a new record night loss of fourteen aircraft, eleven of them Whitleys, and this target claimed a 218 Squadron aircraft two nights later. T2806 failed to return, and it was later established, that there had been no survivors from the crew of P/O Bryant.

July would begin as June had ended, with the accent on Bremen, but the month's first operation was by fifty Wellingtons against Brest. During the course of the attack, a bomb exploded inside the Prinz Eugen, causing considerable damage, and killing sixty sailors. A predominately Wellington force returned to Bremen on the 2/3rd, and returning crews claimed good results, despite the presence of cloud and haze. Essen was to gain a reputation for being almost impossible to identify and hit, a situation which would not be rectified until 1943. In a foretaste of the Command's experiences in 1942, against this most important industrial centre and home of the giant Krupp armaments works, a raid on the 3/4th by ninety Wellingtons and Whitleys sprayed bombs over a wide area of the Ruhr, and few on the intended target. Bremen was also visited again on this night by Hampdens and

Wellingtons, and effective bombing was reported by returning crews. Wellingtons were the dominant type attacking Brest on the 4/5th and Münster and Bielefeld twenty four hours later, and Wellingtons returned unsuccessfully to Münster on the 6/7th, while playing a minor role at Brest and Dortmund. On the following night, 114 Wellingtons took off for Cologne, and those reaching the target delivered upon the city its most destructive raid of the year. Residential property was badly effected, dehousing almost five and a half thousand people, a number of railway lines were cut, and seven industrial buildings sustained serious damage. Also on this night, Wellingtons returned to Münster with a degree of accuracy, while contributing to an ineffective raid on Osnabrück. A new Air Ministry directive was issued on the 9th, which referred to Germany's transportation system, and the morale of its civilian population as its most vulnerable points. C-in-C Peirse was now ordered to direct his forces against the major railway centres ringing the Ruhr, to inhibit the movement in of raw materials, and the export of finished products. The precision nature of such targets dictated that moonlight conditions prevail, while on moonless nights, the Rhine cities of Cologne, Düsseldorf and Duisburg would be easier to identify. When less favourable weather conditions obtained, attacks were to be carried out against more distant urban targets in northern, eastern and southern Germany.

The first large raid of the war on Aachen employed eighty two aircraft on the 9/10th, when central districts sustained particularly heavy damage. Almost seventeen hundred dwelling units were destroyed or seriously effected, and scores of commercial premises were hit. Wellingtons played only a minor role, the majority of those operating going instead to Osnabrück, where they entirely missed the target. Almost a hundred of the type were sent to Cologne in poor weather conditions on the 10/11th, and they and a Hampden element managed to find the mark with only three high explosive bombs. After a night's rest, Wellingtons began a six night stretch of operations, beginning at Bremen on the 12/13th, again in company with Hampdens. An all-Wellington force of sixty nine aircraft set off for Bremen, Vegesack and Emden on the following night, but thick cloud and icing conditions reduced the number reaching their assigned targets to seventeen. A predominately Wellington force was back over Bremen on the 14/15th, returning crews reporting the whole town to be ablaze, and many fires were also claimed to have resulted from a simultaneous raid on Hanover, to which twenty one Wellingtons contributed. On the 15/16th, a raid on Duisburg by over thirty Wellingtons was hampered by cloud and flak, and R1536 failed to return to Marham. It was later learned that it had been shot down by a nightfighter over Holland, and that none had survived from the crew of F/L Stokes. Hamburg came next on the 16/17th, Wellingtons constituting half of the hundred-strong force, only 50% of which bombed in the target area for little reward. The Cologne authorities reported no serious damage on the 17/18th and 20/21st, and the first major raid on Frankfurt was equally ineffective on the 21/22nd. A force of Wellingtons and Halifaxes was sent to Mannheim on this night, and the same two cities featured twenty four and forty eight hours later, on each occasion with inconclusive results.



Wellington Mk.Ic R1448 HA-L had a long operational career with the squadron and was favoured by the flight commanders.

A plan had been prepared for a major assault on the German cruisers at Brest, and this was to take place by daylight on the 24th. On the 23rd, the Scharnhorst was spotted at La Pallice, two hundred miles further south, and it was decided, that she should be attacked by Halifaxes, while the original plan went ahead at Brest. Three Fortresses from 2 Group's 90 Squadron were to lead the operation by bombing from very high level. It was hoped that they, and a diversion by Hampdens under a Spitfire escort at a less rarified altitude, would draw off sufficient enemy fighters, to allow seventy nine Wellingtons from 1 and 3 Groups to bomb unopposed. In the event, the fighter and flak opposition was more fierce than anticipated, and the Wellington crews had to run the gauntlet as they made their final approach. In return for six unconfirmed hits on the Gneisenau, ten Wellingtons were shot down, and one of them was a 218 Squadron aircraft. R1726 was observed to carry out an attack, before crashing into the sea in the target area, killing P/O Jolly and three of his crew, while two others survived to be taken into captivity. It was P/O Jolly's nineteenth operation. The squadron had contributed six aircraft, along with three from 115 Squadron, to form three sections, but F/O Ralph was forced to return early in R1497, and landed at Portreath. S/L Gibbs led the squadron contingent in R1108, which was engaged by two BF109s, one of which was claimed as destroyed, and the Wellington also sustained flak damage. In fact, all of the squadron's participants underwent fighter attacks or were hit by flak, R1601 taking punishment from both sources, but Sgt Banks and crew made it home to claim a hit on the Gneisenau. Sgt Chidgey and his crew survived their brush with a BF109 in Z8781, while P/O Pape landed his damaged R1598 at Harwell. Meanwhile, the Halifax brigade managed to cause sufficient damage to the Scharnhorst to necessitate her return to Brest, where better repair facilities existed, and this would at least ensure that she posed no threat to Allied

shipping for some time. During the remainder of the month, Wellingtons were involved in fairly minor operations against Kiel on the 24/25th and Hamburg on the 25/26th, before representing over half of the force of 116 aircraft bound for Cologne on the 30/31st. The crews encountered bad weather, and the raid almost entirely missed the city. During the course of the month, a representative of the government of the Gold Coast visited the squadron with a view to adopting it, and henceforth, it became officially titled 218 (Gold Coast) Squadron.

The August account was opened at Hamburg on the 2/3rd, where railway installations were the targets for eighty aircraft, including fifty eight Wellingtons. A further forty of the type, together with a handful of Stirlings and Halifaxes, carried out a simultaneous raid on Berlin, where haze hampered the bombing. On the following night, a number of 218 Squadron crews set out for Hanover as part of a force of thirty four Wellingtons. Shortly after taking off, X9747 developed instrument failure, and P/O Maxwell and his crew were ordered to abandon the aircraft. Four did so safely, but the pilot and a gunner were still on board when it crashed in Norfolk thirty two minutes after take off, and they failed to survive. Those crews reaching the target area encountered complete cloud cover, and it was not possible to determine whether the attack was accurate. Just one aircraft failed to return, and this was the squadron's Z8781, containing W/C Fletcher and his crew, of whom only the observer and a gunner survived in enemy hands. W/C Fletcher was one of numerous wing commanders to pass through the squadron without any explanation in the ORB for their presence. As he does not appear to have been decorated, it seems possible that his wartime service had been undertaken in a non-operational post. The most likely scenario is, that he was gaining operational experience prior to being granted a command with a 3 Group squadron, and it is not beyond the realms of possibility, that he was being groomed to replace W/C Kirkpatrick. A busy night of operations on the 5/6th involved Wellingtons at three targets, Mannheim, Karlsruhe and Frankfurt, the first mentioned sustaining some quite serious damage in a number of districts. Railway targets were raided at the same locations on the following night, before an attempt to hit the Krupp works at Essen on the 7/8th caused only light damage within the city. Hanover was the main objective on the 12/13th, while forty Wellingtons were joined by Halifaxes, Stirlings and Manchesters at Berlin. Neither operation caused much damage, but one of the Gee trials Wellingtons was lost during the former, although the equipment did not fall into enemy hands. Wellingtons were involved at Hanover and Magdeburg on the 14/15th to attack railway targets, and two 218 Squadron aircraft failed to return from the former. X9753 crashed into the sea off the French coast, killing P/O Wilson and all but one of his crew, and there were no survivors at all from the crew of P/O Mitchell in R1008, one of the squadron's longest serving Wellingtons.

It was on the 18th, that the Butt Report was completed, and its disclosures were to send shock waves reverberating around the Cabinet Room and the Air Ministry. Having studied around four thousand photographs taken on night operations during June and July, Mr Butt concluded that only a tiny fraction of bombs were falling within miles of their intended targets. This swept away at a stroke any notion, that the Command's attacks were having a material effect on Germany's war effort, and it demonstrated the claims of the crews to be over enthusiastic. The report would forever unjustly blight the period of tenure as C-in-C of Sir Richard Peirse, and would provide ammunition for those calling for the dissolution of an

independent bomber force, and the redistribution of its aircraft to other theatres. Typical of the claims of success was a raid on Cologne on the night of the report's release, when crews returned with eye-witness accounts of many fires, while the city records show just one building damaged. Only three Wellingtons took part in this operation, and the squadron's W5457 was the sole missing example of the type. This was one of the Merlin powered Mk II aircraft, which were being delivered in small numbers to most squadrons, to provide them with the means to deliver the 4,000lb "Cookie". Sgt Huckle and four of his crew survived to be taken prisoner, and it seems that the sixth occupant, a gunner, had already been killed. While this operation was in progress, forty one other Wellingtons were sent to attack railway installations at Duisburg. The squadron's N2844 was shot down by a nightfighter into the IJsselmeer, and it took with it to their deaths the crew of Sgt Sheering. The weather continued to cause problems, and heavy cloud and icing conditions completely nullified an intended attack on Kiel on the 19/20th. Crews returning from Mannheim on the 22/23rd claimed many fires, but the authorities reported only one house seriously damaged. Storms and thick cloud ruined an attempt on Karlsruhe on the 25/26th, but even when there was clear visibility, as at Cologne on the 26/27th, only a few bombs found the mark, and damage was negligible. The final few nights of the month brought plenty of activity, but little improvement at Mannheim on the 27/28th and 29/30th, Duisburg on the 28/29th, and Cologne and Essen on the 31st.

It is likely, that many of the fires reported by crews were decoys, and this was the case at Cologne on the 1/2nd of September, when only one house was damaged despite the optimistic claims. On the following night, Frankfurt and Berlin were the main objectives, while a handful of Wellingtons and Whitleys were sent to Ostend. The squadron's X9810 was hit by flak, and was ditched off the Belgian coast by S/L Gibbes, who together with his crew, paddled their dinghy for three days, before eventually coming ashore near Margate in Kent. A major effort against the warships at Brest originally involved 140 aircraft on the 3/4th, but worsening weather conditions forced a recall of all but the 3 Group crews, who pressed on to deliver an inconclusive attack through a smoke screen. Almost two hundred aircraft set off for Berlin on the 7/8th, over half of them Wellingtons, while others of the type were active at Kiel and Boulogne. Most of the bombs at the Capital fell into districts north and east of the city centre, and a moderate amount of damage for the period resulted. S/L Price arrived back over England with an engine fire, and he was forced to crash-land W5449 in Norfolk, doing so without injury to the crew. The first large raid of the war on Kassel was mounted on the 8/9th, when a number of important industrial premises were hit, along with the main railway station. The 10/11th brought a change of scenery for over seventy crews, with a trip across the Alps to Turin, where the Fiat works was among the objectives. Wellingtons targeted shipyards at Kiel on the 11/12th, before forming more than half of the 130 strong force heading for Frankfurt on the 12/13th. The bombing was scattered over a wide area, and the town of Mainz, some twenty miles away, reported many bombs and some fatalities. Only two aircraft were lost, both Wellingtons, and one of them was the squadron's X9670, from which the entire crew of Sgt Dare escaped with their lives to become PoWs. The larger-scale raids continued at Brest on the 13/14th, when the warships lay concealed beneath a smoke-screen, and Hamburg on the 15/16th, where a greater degree of damage occurred than had become the norm of late. The squadron lost R3153 to a fire on the ground on the 16th, and this proved to be the final loss of the month, despite a busy schedule of operations. Wellingtons went to Karlsruhe on the 16/17th and

17/18th, and Stettin on the 19/20th. Worsening weather forced a recall to be issued to crews outbound for Berlin and Frankfurt on the 20/21st, and others heading for various targets on the 26/27th found themselves also invited to return early. The month ended with a return to Stettin by 139 aircraft on the 29/30th, ninety five crews claiming to have bombed as briefed, while Wellingtons and Hampdens carried out a modestly effective attack on Hamburg. Twenty four hours later, Wellingtons went yet again to Stettin, and a mixed force took another swipe at Hamburg, starting fourteen fires.

There were no operations at all by Bomber Command between the 5th and the 10th of October, and only fairly minor forays either side. During one of these, to Bordeaux on the 10/11th, the squadron lost R1511 to a crash near the target, in which one of the crew lost his life. The pilot, Sgt Haley, managed to evade his would-be captors, but the other four members of the crew were rounded up. On return from this operation, X9677 crashed into the sea off the Dorset coast, killing three men, while the pilot, Sgt McLean, and two others were rescued unhurt. The slight lull in activity enabled Peirse to prepare his forces for a major night of operations on the 12/13th, for which the main course was to be Nuremberg by a mixed force of 152 aircraft, half of them Wellingtons. While this was in progress, a predominately Wellington effort would be directed at Bremen, and 5 Group crews were briefed to attack a chemicals factory at Hüls. The total number of sorties, 373, represented a new record, but sadly, this mammoth effort was not rewarded with success. The bombing at Nuremberg was scattered over a wide area up to a hundred miles from the intended target, and the other operations were inconclusive in the face of complete cloud cover. The night's losses amounted to thirteen aircraft, not including 218 Squadron's Z8910, which was damaged beyond repair during landing, while in the hands of Sgt McGlashan and his crew. On the following night, Düsseldorf escaped serious damage from a scattered attack by a predominately Wellington force, before eighty aircraft set off to return to Nuremberg on the 14/15th. Extreme weather conditions persuaded most of the crews to bomb alternative targets, and only a few bomb loads found their way into the city. 218 Squadron's Z8865 was one of those returning early, forced to do so when engine problems developed shortly after take-off. On approach to Marham, the Wellington struck trees and crashed just short of the runway, injuring the pilot, Sgt Fisher. Two nights later, F/L Dunham and crew took off with a cookie on board Z8957 to deliver it to Duisburg. On crossing the Norfolk coast outbound, the Wellington lost an engine, and the crew elected to take to their parachutes, all ultimately arriving safely on the ground. Bremen was the main target on the 20/21st and 21/22nd, and then on consecutive nights from the 22/23rd came Mannheim, Kiel, Frankfurt and Hamburg, with Hamburg again and Bremen bringing the month's operations to a close on the night of the 31st. The spate of engine related incidents afflicting the squadron continued on the 29th, when X9833 crashed in Norfolk, although without injury to Sgt Tompkins and his crew, who were on a training flight.

November began with a raid on Kiel by 134 aircraft, only half of which reached the target to bomb through heavy, low cloud on estimated positions. No bombs found the mark, and this situation highlighted by the Butt Report was about to come to a head. No doubt frustrated by the persistently unfavourable weather, which had prevented him from having a real crack at Germany, and anxious to erase the stigma arising from the report, Peirse planned his most ambitious night of operations yet. The original order of battle had allowed for Berlin to be attacked by over two hundred aircraft, while a 1 and 3 Group force went to

Mannheim. There were again doubts about the weather conditions, prompting an objection from the 5 Group AOC, AVM Slessor, who was authorized to withdraw his contribution, and send it instead to Cologne. The total number of sorties for the three main operations and those of a minor nature amounted to a record 392, of which 169 were destined for Berlin, seventy five for Cologne and fifty five for Mannheim. The night's largest contribution was provided by 218 Squadron, whose thirteen Wellingtons were assigned to Berlin, and in the light of the unfolding events, it would prove to be a magnificent effort indeed. The crew captains and aircraft were; S/L Spence in R1346, S/L Price in Z8375, F/L Dunham in R1436, F/L Humphreys in Z8437, F/L Williams in Z1103, P/O Livingston in X9679, Sgt Lamason in X9785, Sgt McGlashan in Z1069, Sgt McKay in Z8965, Sgt McPhail in R1135, Sgt Thompson in Z8853, Sgt Vezina in R1496 and Sgt Webber in X9787. It was to be an ill-fated night for the Command, although in some ways, not for 218 Squadron, all of whose crews were among the seventy three claiming to have reached the target. None succeeded in identifying Berlin in the conditions, and bombing was carried out on estimated positions. A few buildings were hit in Berlin, and fourteen houses were classed as destroyed, but this was a poor return for the effort expended and the loss of twenty one aircraft. 218 Squadron was represented among them by Z1069, but news eventually came through, that Sgt McGlashan and his crew were safe, albeit in enemy hands. The other twelve squadron crews returned without major incident, and this praise-worthy performance was doubtless due in part to the quality of leadership enjoyed by the squadron at this time.

Three of the captains mentioned above were destined for commands of their own, two of them to lose their lives while leading from the front. Immediately after this operation, S/L Spence was posted to Alconbury to oversee the rebuilding of 40 Squadron, after most of its air, ground and administrative personnel had been posted to Malta. On the 26th of November, he was given command of 149 Squadron, a post which he would hold until the following May. S/L Price was to follow in W/C Spence's footsteps in a way, by being promoted to wing commander to take over 156 Squadron on the day of the first one thousand bomber raid on Cologne. This was, in fact 40 Squadron by another name, its rebuilt home echelon having been renumbered 156 Squadron in February. Sadly, W/C Price failed to return from Hamburg at the end of July, and was correctly presumed to have been killed. F/L Dunham would have to wait until February 1945 before gaining his first command, but would enjoy less than three weeks in the post. While leading 90 Squadron in a G-H attack on Wesel on the 19th, his Lancaster received a direct hit from flak, and disintegrated over the aiming point. Returning to the events of this night in November 1941, the 5 Group force fared better in terms of casualties, all of its aircraft returning, but Cologne had also escaped damage, while no bombs at all fell into Mannheim, and seven Wellingtons failed to return. A further nine aircraft were missing from the various minor operations, bringing the total to a massive thirty seven, more than twice the previous highest number in a single night. This was the final straw for the War Cabinet and the Air Ministry, and Peirse was summoned to a meeting with Churchill to make his explanations. On the 13th, he was ordered to restrict further operations, while the future of the Command was considered at the highest level. This edict would be in force into the coming year, and was quite opportune for 218 Squadron, whose time with the venerable Wellington was drawing to a close.

Other than for purposes, the remained on the 10th to the 15th. nine and forty respectively despatched to both of which cloud, and were estimated few aircraft target areas. were lost from and one of those from Kiel was R1135, which North Sea, crew of Sgt



training entire Command ground from the That night, forty seven aircraft were Emden and Kiel, lay under heavy bombed on positions by the reaching the Four Wellingtons each operation, failing to return the squadron's crashed into the taking with it the Cook. Sgt

Forsyth encountered appalling weather conditions over Yorkshire as he brought Z8853 towards Marham, and the Wellington crashed, killing one member of the crew. Wellingtons took part in small-scale operations against Dunkerque on the 23/24th and Cherbourg two nights later, before eighty of the type were joined by Hampdens for a raid on Emden on the 26/27th. It was another inconclusive effort, on return from which, Z1103 was ditched off the Norfolk coast by Sgt Helfer, who was rescued along with the rest of his crew. Fifty two of an original eighty six crews claimed to have reached Düsseldorf on the 27/28th, and started large fires in the railway yards. The city authorities, however, reported only two high explosive bombs and light superficial damage, while over a hundred buildings were hit in Cologne. The month ended with 181 aircraft heading for Hamburg on the night of the 30th, and a further fifty bound for Emden. The former was modestly effective in starting fires, and rendering 2,500 people homeless, but it was achieved at the high cost of thirteen aircraft.

current restrictions provided an ideal opportunity for Peirse to prosecute his campaign against Brest and its lodgers, and no fewer than thirteen operations of varying sizes took place against the port during December. There were, in fact, no operations at all until the 7/8th, when Aachen provided the objective for 130 aircraft. Less than half of them reached the target area, few bombs found the mark, and damage within the town was negligible. A more significant operation that night was directed at Brest by thirty aircraft, the bulk of them Wellingtons. Stirlings of 7 and XV Squadrons made up the numbers, and these were conducting the first operational trials of the Oboe blind-bombing device, which was ultimately to change the face of bombing. In the event, only three aircraft bombed the approximate position of the warships, and the operation was inconclusive. Cologne was the main target on the 11/12th, but no bombs were recorded, and Brest was one of the secondary destinations, to which twenty one aircraft were sent. The squadron's W5727 developed an engine fire while outbound for the latter, and Sgt Brewerton ordered his crew to abandon the Wellington, before he carried out a successful crash-landing at Upavon in Wiltshire. On the 16th, Stirling N6127 arrived at Marham to begin a new era for 218 Squadron, which thus became the fourth 3 Group unit to receive the type after 7, XV and

149 Squadrons. N6126 was taken on charge on the following day, and N6128 on the 23rd, but it would be February before the crews were fully converted and the working up period was completed, and in the meantime, operations with the Wellington would continue. On the evening of the 16th, Wellingtons, Hampdens and Whitleys failed to inflict more than slight damage on Wilhelmshaven, while others carried out minor operations against Brest, Ostend and Dunkerque. 218 Squadron put up seven Wellingtons, six for Brest and one for Ostend, and returning from the former, having bombed the target as briefed, Sgt Vezina was forced to bale out his crew, when X9785's starboard engine failed at 11,000 feet.

Sgt Vezina was an experienced pilot on his 19th operation, and he successfully crash-landed the ailing aircraft in Dorset. As events were to prove, this was the final Wellington to be written off in 218 Squadron service. The year came to an end with another disappointing attack on Düsseldorf on the 27/28th, and a surprisingly effective one on Wilhelmshaven twenty four hours later, which inflicted widespread damage.

It had been a year to forget for Bomber Command, and it ended under a black cloud, with its future hanging in the balance. There had been little significant advance on the performance of 1940, and the three new heavy types introduced into operational service early in the year had all failed to live up to expectations. Each had undergone lengthy periods of grounding as essential modifications were put in hand, and consequently, the re-equipping programme had progressed much more slowly than anticipated. The damning Butt Report had sealed the fate of C-in-C Sir Richard Peirse, who had done his best to fulfil the frequently changing and often unrealistic demands placed upon him by the decision-makers. One bright spot on the horizon was the advent of the Lancaster, which was now in the hands of 44 Squadron, and would soon become operational. The fate of a strategic bomber force also lay in the hands of the boffins, who were working hard to develop the electronic aids to navigation and bombing, without which, it was impossible to envisage any improvement in performance.

1942

218 Squadron began 1942 with a new commanding officer, W/C Kirkpatrick having been posted to 3 Group HQ on New Year's Eve. He was replaced by W/C Holder, who had been awarded the DFC in October. The New Year began as the old one had ended, with the obsession with Brest and its guests. The assault on the port resumed on the night of the 2/3rd of January, and by the end of the month, a further ten operations had been mounted against it, including five on consecutive nights between the 5/6th and the 9/10th. Not one resulted in damage to the warships, but this long, drawn-out epic was shortly to be resolved. Other targets during the month included Wilhelmshaven on the 10/11th, Hamburg on the 14/15th and 15/16th, Bremen on the 17/18th, Hanover on the 26/27th and Münster on the 28/29th, but apart from a number of large fires in Hamburg, this was another disappointing series of operations. There was little major activity during the first half of February, and no operations were completed until the 6th. That night, sixty Wellingtons and Stirlings carried out an attack on Brest, but only a third of the crews claimed to have bombed in the target area. Another twenty aircraft tried again on the 10/11th, and eighteen Wellingtons concluded the eleven month saga on the evening of the 11th.

Within hours of this last attack, the Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen slipped anchor, and headed into the English Channel under an escort of destroyers and E-Boats. The German Admiral had chosen atrocious weather conditions under which to make his audacious bid for freedom, and it was already 10.30 hours on the morning of the 12th before the enemy fleet was first spotted. It was, by this time, well advanced in its passage through the British back yard. The authorities had prepared a plan for precisely this eventuality under the code name Operation Fuller, but it seems that many of those at grass roots level charged with its implementation were not fully appraised of its requirements. Only 5 Group was standing by at four hours readiness when the alarm sounded, and the first were not launched until 13.30 hours. The squally conditions and low cloud made it almost impossible for crews to locate the ships, and even harder to deliver an attack. Aircraft were taking off throughout the afternoon and evening in a desperate attempt to halt the ships' progress, but all to no avail, and they passed through the Straits of Dover into open sea. 218 Squadron's contribution to Operation Fuller was six aircraft in what was a landmark occasion. Three Wellingtons carried out the final sorties by the type in 218 Squadron service, although two returned early, leaving Sgt Griggs and his crew in R1448 to have the honour of completing the very last one. This day also brought the first 218 Squadron Stirling sorties, flown by S/L Kerr in N3700, F/O Allen in N6127 and Sgt Tompkins in N6089, who took off between 14.30 and 15.15 hours. F/O Allen sighted two destroyers through a break in the cloud, but it was only after circling for thirty six minutes that the cruisers were spotted from fifteen hundred feet. An attack was carried out against one of them, but the bombs fell harmlessly into the sea a hundred yards off the starboard quarter. The Stirling was hit in the bomb bay by flak, and was then engaged by three BF110s, one attacking from dead astern, and later from the starboard quarter. After a spirited reposte from the Stirling's gunners, the assailant was seen to break away in a vertical dive, and was lost from sight. N6089 was also attacked by a BF110, but arrived home safely with his bombs, having been unable to locate the ships. S/L Kerr was the last back at 19.00 hours, having caught the briefest glimpse of his quarry before cloud obscured the aiming point. His Stirling was engaged by a Do 217, and sustained slight damage, but both aircraft dived into cloud, and that was the end of the encounter.

Despite the largest daylight effort to date, amounting to 242 sorties, the enemy fleet made good its escape, and although Scharnhorst and Gneisenau struck air-laid mines, which slowed their progress to an extent, all had arrived in home ports by the following morning. It was a sorry day for Bomber Command, which lost fifteen aircraft and crews in the valiant attempt to save the nation's blushes. The whole episode was a major embarrassment to the government, but at least this annoying itch had been scratched for the last time, and the Command could now concentrate more of its resources against suitable strategic targets. On the following day, the squadron gained its first experience of the Stirling malaise, when N3713's undercarriage collapsed on landing at Lakenheath at the end of a training flight in the hands of Sgt Lamason and his crew. This crew took part in the squadron's second Stirling operation, when two were despatched on the 18th to bomb Le Havre and drop leaflets over Paris. Sgt Lamason completed the operation in N3700, but Sgt Gregg and crew returned short of fuel having bombed Le Havre, and as N6089 touched down at Oakington, a 500lb fell off onto the runway without detonating.

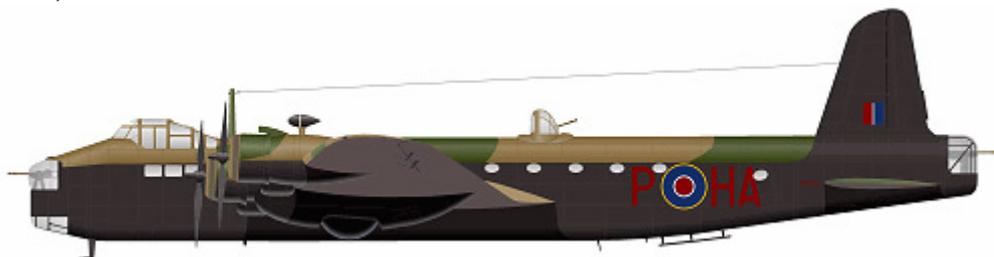
A new Air Ministry directive had been issued to Bomber Command on the 14th, which authorized the blatant area bombing of Germany's towns and cities, and reaffirmed the assault on the morale of the civilian population, particularly the workers. This had, of course, been in progress for a long time, but could now be prosecuted openly, without the pretence of aiming for industrial and military targets. Waiting in the wings was a new leader, who would not only pursue this policy with a will, but also had the strength of character and stubborn self-belief to fight his corner against all-comers. ACM Sir Arthur Harris took up his appointment on the 22nd, and immediately set about the mammoth task of turning Bomber Command into a war-winning weapon. He had always been an advocate of the pre-war theory, that a war could be won by bombing alone, and he arrived at the helm with firm ideas already in place about how this might be achieved. It was clear to him, that to destroy an urban target with acceptable losses, it was necessary to overwhelm the defences and emergency services by condensing an attack into the shortest possible time. This meant pushing the maximum possible number of aircraft across the aiming point in the shortest possible time, and concentrating his strength against a single target, rather than deliver simultaneous pin-prick attacks against multiple objectives. He also recognized, that urban areas are most efficiently destroyed by fire rather than blast, and it would not be long before the bomb loads carried in his aircraft reflected this thinking. This new approach signaled the birth of the bomber stream, and an end to the former practice, whereby crews determined for themselves the details of their sorties. While Harris considered his options, he continued with the small-scale raids on German ports for the remainder of the month, and it was during one of these, that the war threw up one of its ironies. While attacking the floating dock at Kiel on the 26/27th, one of the participating Wellingtons, Hampdens and Halifaxes scored a direct hit on the bows of the Gneisenau, now supposedly in safe haven after enduring eleven months of almost constant bombardment at Brest. 116 of her crew lost their lives, and the ship's sea-going career was ended for good. Later on the 27th, a second undercarriage collapse, this time at Marham, wrote off N3715 after a training sortie, but Sgt Tompkins and his crew emerged unscathed. On the last day of the month, a 218 Squadron Conversion Flight was established at Marham, where it would remain until being absorbed into 1657 HCU at Stradishall in October.

The first unmistakable sign of a new hand on the tiller came at the start of March, in a meticulously planned operation against the Renault lorry works at Billancourt in Paris. Launched on the night of the 3/4th, it involved 235 aircraft, the largest force yet sent against a single target, and was a three wave attack, led by experienced crews, and with extensive use of flares to provide illumination. In the absence of a flak defence, bombing was conducted from low level, both to aid accuracy, and to avoid civilian casualties in adjacent residential districts. 218 Squadron provided four crews, those of S/L Kerr in W7469, F/L Humphreys in N3720, F/L Livingston in W7473 and F/O Allen in N3712, and all completed their part in the operation. The raid was an outstanding success, and left 40% of the factory's buildings in ruins, and halted production for a month. Just one Wellington was lost, and the satisfaction was marred only by the deaths of 367 French civilians, a figure double the previous highest at even a German city target. On return to Marham at 22.55 hours, a bomb fell from N3712 and exploded, and the Stirling was consumed in the ensuing fire. Sgt Laidlaw and P/O Gales, respectively the flight engineer and bomb-aimer, re-entered the blazing bomber to rescue their colleagues, but all seven men sustained injury, to which the wireless operator and a gunner later succumbed.

Essen was to feature prominently in Harris's future plans, and a series of three raids on consecutive nights began on the 8/9th. For the first time, the leading aircraft were equipped with the Gee navigation device, but the ever-present blanket of industrial haze concealed the city from the bomb-aimers high above, and only light damage was inflicted. It was the same story on the succeeding two nights, when bombs also found their way onto numerous other Ruhr locations, and this was to be a frustrating and recurring theme over the next twelve months. The first successful Gee-led raid took place on Cologne on the 13/14th, when over a hundred aircraft left a number of important war industry factories seriously damaged, and also hit fifteen hundred houses. A period of minor operations saw the Command through to the 25/26th, when a new record force of 254 aircraft was despatched for another tilt at Essen. A decoy fire site at Rheinberg drew off a proportion of the bombing, and the remainder was wasted elsewhere, leaving the intended target almost entirely unscathed. There was no improvement on the following night, when a smaller force tried again, but Harris would not give up, and the campaign would resume in April. In the meantime, he sought an opportunity to deliver a telling blow against a German city, to demonstrate just what could be achieved if only his crews could locate their target over a blacked out, hostile country, which was often covered by cloud. He was certain, that if he could provide the crews with identifiable pin-points on the ground, they would do the rest, and the easiest pin-points were coastlines. With this in mind, Harris selected the old city of Lübeck on Germany's Baltic coast, where the defences would be weak, and the narrow streets and half-timbered buildings were ideal for a fire-raising attack. Among the 234 aircraft taking off were nine from 218 Squadron, and the two-thirds incendiary bomb loads reflected Harris's fire-raising intentions. The operation was conducted along similar lines to those employed so effectively at Billancourt at the start of the month, and many crews came down to as low as 2,000 feet to make their attacks. Four hundred tons of bombs rained down onto the historic city, and over fourteen hundred buildings were destroyed, while a further nineteen hundred were seriously damaged. Later photographic evidence suggested that 30% of the built-up area had been reduced to rubble, mostly as a result of fire. Twelve aircraft failed to return, and the squadron's W7507 was almost the thirteenth. Severely damaged by flak and later a nightfighter, the Stirling was nursed back to base by F/L Humphreys and his crew, and was subsequently declared to be beyond economical repair. For their part in bringing the aircraft home, F/L Humphreys received the immediate award of the DFC, and the wireless operator, Sgt Wheeler, the DFM. It had been a good first full month of Stirling operations for 218 Squadron, in which forty six sorties were despatched for the loss of two aircraft at home.

The first major raid in April was delivered on Cologne on the 5/6th, for which a new record 263 aircraft were despatched. Despite the numbers involved, the bombing was scattered across the city with no point of concentration, and a modest ninety houses were either destroyed or seriously damaged. Harris returned to Essen on the 6/7th, but only a third of the force reached the target, and damage was again only light. Yet another new record force, this time of 272 aircraft, set off for Hamburg on the 8/9th, and encountered icing conditions and electrical storms. Almost 190 crews reported bombing as briefed, but only around fourteen bomb loads fell within the city, and this was another major disappointment. Two further attempts on Essen, on the 10/11th and 12/13th repeated the earlier failures, and thus far, 1,555 sorties in eight raids had produced scant damage at a

cost to the Command of sixty four aircraft. Harris turned his attention to Dortmund on the 14/15th and 15/16th, where the results were equally unsatisfactory, but an attack on Hamburg on the 17/18th produced seventy five fires, thirty three of them large. Gee had proved its worth as an aid to navigation, and in consideration of its potential as a blind-bombing device, an experimental raid was carried out on Cologne on the 22/23rd. The entire force of sixty four Wellingtons and five Stirlings carried Gee, but no more than about fifteen bomb loads hit the city. The one real success of late had been the raid on Lübeck, and so Harris selected another Baltic port, Rostock, as the objective for a series of operations beginning on the 23/24th. The presence nearby of a Heinkel aircraft factory was an added attraction, and a proportion of the force was assigned specifically to this. Six 218 Squadron aircraft were among the force of 161 aircraft, but W7473 suffered engine failure, and crashed in Norfolk twenty three minutes after take-off, killing Sgt Davidge and his entire crew. The operation failed to find the mark, and the Heinkel factory escaped damage, but the following night's attack caused heavy damage in the town centre, which was repeated twenty four hours later, when W/C Guy Gibson led a successful 106 Squadron assault on the Heinkel works. Also on this night, the 25/26th, six Stirlings undertook the long trek to Pilsen in Czechoslovakia, to attack the Skoda armaments factory. At least five of them arrived and bombed, but whether 218 Squadron's W7506 was shot down over Germany before or after reaching the target is uncertain. What is known, is that there were no survivors from the eight man crew, and that P/O Millichamp was an experienced pilot on his seventeenth operation. This was the first 218 Squadron Stirling to fail to return from an operation. The Rostock series concluded on the night of the 26/27th, by which time, over seventeen hundred buildings had been destroyed, and 60% of the town's built-up area was deemed to be in ruins. The success was followed up at Cologne on the 27/28th, when fifteen hundred houses and nine industrial premises were damaged to some extent, and all three shipyards in Kiel sustained damage on the 28/29th. The month ended with a failed attempt to hit the Gnome & Rhone aero-engine factory at Gennevilliers in Paris on the following night. The squadron managed a creditable 112 sorties during the month, the highest by any of the four Stirling units, and this had been achieved for the loss of one aircraft and crew.



May began with a raid on Hamburg on the 3/4th, which, despite complete cloud cover, and the relatively small number of fifty four aircraft out of an original eighty one arriving to bomb, was remarkably destructive, and started over a hundred fires, half of them classed as large. The first of a three raid series on Stuttgart on consecutive nights took place on the 4/5th, and was a failure, as were the succeeding two. The Squadron's W7521 was severely damaged by flak, but made it back to a crash-landing in Norfolk, from which Sgt McAuley and the other seven occupants were able to walk away. Also on this night, five Stirlings returned to the Skoda works at Pilsen, and the single loss was the 218 Squadron aircraft N6070, which crashed in Germany, killing F/S Gregg and all but one of the other seven men on board. Among the dead was the previously mentioned Sgt Wheeler, who had been awarded the DFM when flying with F/L Humphreys. S/L Ashworth took a freshman crew on

a “nickeling” trip to France in R9313, which was shot down by RAF fighters over Sussex on return, although none of the eight occupants was seriously hurt. Recent raids on Baltic coastal targets had been a great success, and perhaps this was why Warnemünde and its nearby Heinkel factory were selected for attention on the 8/9th. In the event, the attack was at best only modestly effective, and cost a hefty nineteen aircraft. Thereafter, minor operations occupied the Command for ten nights, and it was during this period, on the 17/18th, that 3 Group mounted a large mining effort in northern waters and around the Frisians. N6071 was hit by flak over Denmark, and had to be abandoned to its fate by F/L Humphreys and his crew. Three of them were hit by shrapnel as they descended, and the Australian bomb-aimer failed to survive, while the rest of the crew fell into enemy hands. Almost two hundred aircraft took off for Mannheim on the evening of the 19th, and as good as wasted their effort by bombing wooded and open country. DJ977 failed to return to Marham, and was lost without trace with the eight man crew of F/S Coggin. This preceded another lull in major operations, while Harris prepared for his master-stroke, and as aircraft from the training units began to arrive on bomber stations from Yorkshire to East Anglia, they gave rise to much speculation and no answers.

When Harris was appointed C-in-C, he asked for four thousand bombers with which to win the war. Whilst there was never the slightest chance of getting them, he needed to ensure, that those earmarked for him were not spirited away to what he considered to be less deserving causes. This was a time, particularly following the Butt Report, when every branch of the Services seemed to be demanding bomber aircraft, among them the Admiralty for use against the U-Boat menace, and the Middle East Air Command to redress recent reversals. Harris knew that he was the only worthy recipient, and needed a major success and, perhaps, a dose of symbolism to make his point. Out of this was born the Thousand Plan, Operation Millennium, the commitment of a thousand aircraft in one night against an important German city, for which Hamburg had been pencilled in. Harris did not have a thousand front-line aircraft, and would need the support of other Command's, principally Coastal, if he were to reach the magic figure. In a letter to Harris on the 22nd, Coastal Command offered a generous contribution, but following an intervention by the Admiralty, this was withdrawn, leaving Harris well short on numbers. Undaunted as always, he, or more likely his able deputy, AM Sir Robert Saundby, scraped together every airframe capable of controlled flight, or something resembling it, and pulled in the screened crews from their instructional duties. Come the night, not only would the thousand be reached, it would be comfortably surpassed. The only question now was the weather, and as the days ticked by inexorably towards the end of May, this was showing no signs of complying. On the 29/30th, Harris allowed an operation to go ahead against the Gnome & Rhone factory at Gennevilliers, which had escaped damage a month earlier. The outcome was the same, however, and it cost 218 Squadron the eight man crew of F/L Jones, who were all killed, when W7535 crashed in the target area.

Harris was acutely aware of the genuine danger, that the giant force may draw attention to itself and compromise security, and the time was fast approaching, when the operation would either have to be launched, or be scrubbed for the time being. It was in this atmosphere of expectation and frustration, that “morning prayers” began at Harris's High Wycombe HQ on the 30th, with all eyes turned on his chief meteorological adviser, Magnus Spence. After deliberations, Spence was finally able to give a qualified assurance of clear

weather over the Rhineland after midnight, with a likelihood of moonlight, while north-western Germany and Hamburg would be concealed under buckets of cloud. Thus did the fickle finger of fate decree that Cologne would host the first one thousand bomber raid in history, and that night, the departure of 1047 began before 23.00 hours and continued until after midnight. Some of the older training hacks took to the air almost reluctantly, lifted more by the enthusiasm of their crews than by the power of their engines. Some of these, unable to climb to a respectable height, would fall easy prey to the defences, or simply drop from the sky through mechanical breakdown. 218 Squadron put up a magnificent nineteen Stirlings, led by the commanding officer, W/C Holder, in W7530, who was carrying as a passenger the most senior officer flying that night. Harris had slapped a ban on AOCs taking part in this momentous operation, but 3 Group's AVM Baldwin chose to ignore it, and worry about the consequences when he got back. The operation was conducted in the now familiar three wave system, and was by any standards an outstanding success. 868 aircraft reached the target to bomb, and they destroyed over 3,300 buildings, and seriously damaged a further two thousand. While living accommodation represented the bulk of the statistics, many public, administrative, industrial and commercial premises were included, along with electricity and telephone installations. The loss of forty one aircraft represented a new record, but in conditions favourable to attackers and defenders alike, and in the context of the size of the force and the scale of success, it was an acceptable figure. 218 Squadron's W7521 was badly damaged by flak, and was ultimately abandoned by three of the crew, two of whom attempted to use a single parachute. The navigator, F/S Borrowdale, clung to Sgt Tate, one of the gunners, but was unable to maintain his hold when the parachute jerked open, and he fell to his death. Sgt Tate and one other survived to be taken prisoner, but P/O Davis and the rest of his crew perished in the crash in Germany. The eight men on board R9311 had known almost from the outset that they faced a belly landing on return, after damaging the undercarriage on take-off. Having successfully completed their part in the operation, Sgt Falconer put the Stirling down safely, and all eight men walked away. It had been an expensive month for 218 Squadron, which lost eight aircraft and five crews from seventy nine sorties.

Harris was anxious to use the thousand force again as soon as possible, and after a night's rest, he ordered it to be prepared for a raid on Essen on the night of the 1/2nd. 956 aircraft were available to answer the call, including fifteen from 218 Squadron, led by the flight commanders, S/Ls Kerr and Ashworth. Sgt McAuley and his crew were forced to return early, when N3753 developed engine problems, and they walked away from the crash-landing. The remainder of the squadron's crews completed their sorties, delivering over 112,000lbs of bombs. Sadly, very few of them fell where intended, as bombs were sprayed over a wide area of the Ruhr, and damage in Essen was light and superficial. It was a tremendous disappointment after the success at Cologne, and a follow-up raid by a conventional force twenty four hours later was equally ineffective. Some compensation was gained at Bremen on the 3/4th, however, when the city authorities reported their heaviest and most damaging raid to date. Among the eleven missing aircraft was the squadron's W7474, which fell victim to a nightfighter over Holland, and only one man survived as a PoW from the eight man crew of P/O Webber. Harris was determined to make his point at Essen, and tried three more times during the month, on the 5/6th, 8/9th and 16/17th, thus bringing the number of sorties during June to 1,607. Out of these, eighty four aircraft had been lost, no industrial damage had been inflicted, and only a modest few houses had been destroyed.

Earlier, on the 6/7th, the first of four raids during the month on Emden had produced an excellent return of three hundred houses destroyed, but this success was not repeated when the Command returned on the 19/20th, 20/21st and 22/23rd. Only the last mentioned resulted in any significant damage, and this and the one on the 20/21st cost the squadron an aircraft. S/L Ashworth died with two of his crew, when W7530 was shot down by a nightfighter over Holland, and the five survivors were taken into captivity. N6078 failed to return on the 22/23rd, and was lost without trace with the crew of P/O Medus.

The final thousand bomber raid took place on the 25/26th with Bremen as the target. Bomber Command was able to amass 960 aircraft, while Coastal Command, ordered by Churchill to participate, sent a further 102 aircraft, in what was classified as a separate operation. Never-the-less, the numbers converging on Bremen on this night exceeded those going to Cologne at the end of May. 218 Squadron contributed fourteen Stirlings to what was a moderately successful operation, which fell well short of Cologne, but far surpassed the debacle at Essen. 572 houses were destroyed, and many important war industry factories sustained damage, as did one of the shipyards, but the cost in bombers was a new record forty eight, including one from 218 Squadron. W7503 was shot down by a nightfighter onto the banks of the IJsselmeer in northern Holland, killing the entire crew. P/O Ball was on his fifteenth operation, and had flown on all of the "thousand" raids, and his wireless operator, Sgt Rogers, had completed twenty four sorties. Three follow-up operations against Bremen on the 27/28th, 29/30th and 2/3rd of July each added to the damage to housing, industry and the docks, but 218 Squadron again suffered casualties. DJ974 was shot down by flak over Germany on the 27/28th, while N3718 was lost on the July raid, and neither produced a survivor from the crews of Sgt Waters and P/O Jeary respectively. The squadron registered a record 113 sorties during the month, but lost six aircraft and five crews in the process.

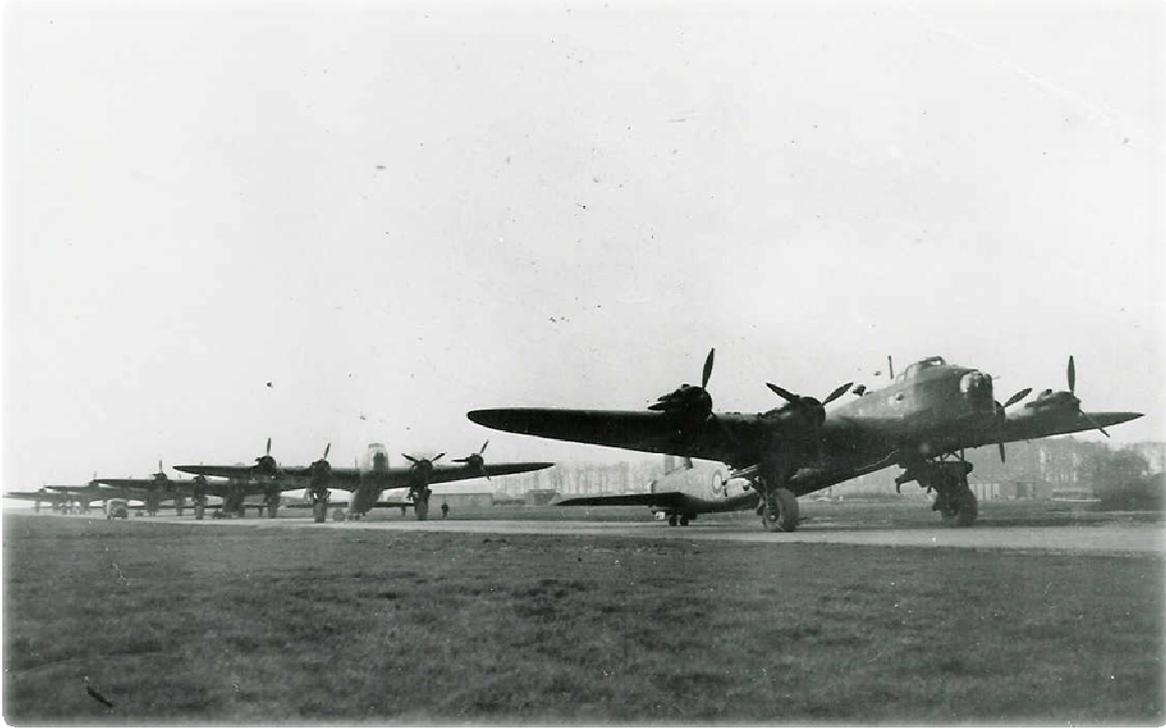
Having failed so dismally at Essen, Harris would turn his attention upon its Ruhr neighbour Duisburg during the second half of July. In the meantime, 218 Squadron left Marham for Downham Market, taking up residence there on the 7th, and participated in a raid by almost three hundred aircraft on Wilhelmshaven on the 8/9th, when many of them wasted their bombs on open country. The first of five raids on Duisburg in less than four weeks was mounted on the 13/14th, by a little under two hundred aircraft. Cloud and electrical storms made conditions difficult for bombing, and the city escaped with the slightest damage. Thirty one Stirlings set off shortly before 19.00 hours on the 16th for an ambitious dusk attack on a U-Boat yard near Lübeck, using cloud-cover to mask their approach across the North Sea and Denmark. All six of the Stirling squadrons provided aircraft, but only eight crews reported bombing as briefed, and 218 Squadron's W7475 was fortunate to survive an attack by five fighters. An operation was mounted against the Vulkan U-Boat yards at Vegesack on the night of the 19/20th in which a further thirty one Stirlings took part, but later photographic evidence revealed that no bombs fell near the town. It was back to Duisburg on the 21/22nd, 23/24th and 25/26th, when a moderate amount of housing damage did not reflect the effort of despatching a combined total of 819 aircraft, thirty one of which failed to return.

218 Squadron was not involved in the losses, and girded its loins for two heavy raids on Hamburg on the 26/27th and 28/29th. The former involved the largest non-1,000 force to

date of 403 aircraft, and those reaching the target delivered a highly effective attack, which started eight hundred fires, over five hundred of them large, and destroyed more than eight hundred houses. Twenty nine aircraft were missing, but 218 Squadron's casualty occurred at home, when R9354 lost its undercarriage on landing, but P/O Savage and his crew were unhurt. The second operation ran into difficulties even before take-off, when bad weather over the 1, 4 and 5 Group stations prevented them from taking part. This left just 3 Group and ninety one aircraft from the training units, although the latter were recalled while still over the North Sea. In the end, just sixty eight crews reported bombing in the target area, and fifteen large fires resulted for the loss of twenty five aircraft. Two of these were from the 218 Squadron Conversion Flight, N6129 and W7464, neither of them producing a survivor from the crews of P/O Farquharson and Sgt Johnson. The squadron also lost a recently appointed flight commander, when BF309 was shot down by flak into the sea off the German coast, and S/L Powell died with two of his crew, while the five survivors were marched off into captivity. A highly effective raid on Saarbrücken on the 29/30th left almost four hundred buildings in ruins in return for a more acceptable loss of nine aircraft, and the month was brought to a close at Düsseldorf on the night of the 31st. Another contribution from the training units swelled the numbers available to take part to 630 aircraft, and 484 crews claimed to have bombed as briefed. As would always happen when a large force targeted this city, some of the bombing spilled over into Neuss, and more than nine hundred fires were started and over 450 buildings were destroyed at the two locations. Losses were again high, however, at twenty nine aircraft, but 218 Squadron came through unscathed. The squadron flew ninety sorties during the month, for the loss of three aircraft and two crews, plus two from the Conversion Flight.

The first major operation in August was undertaken by a force of over two hundred aircraft against Duisburg on the 6/7th. It was another disappointing attack, which managed to destroy only eighteen buildings, giving a tally over the five raids of 212 houses destroyed for the loss of forty three aircraft from 1,229 sorties. Just five aircraft failed to return, among them the squadron's N6072, which was despatched by a nightfighter over Holland, killing four of the crew, while Sgt Laidlaw and two others survived as PoWs. W/C Holder left the squadron on or around the 8th, and was succeeded temporarily by S/L House, the A Flight commander. A lively attack on Osnabrück on the 9/10th left over two hundred houses in ruins, and this was followed by raids on Mainz on the 11/12th and 12/13th. Shortly after take-off for the former, W7568 developed an engine fire and crashed in Suffolk, killing the pilot, P/O Abberton, and his navigator, the other five members of the crew having baled out in time. The operation itself was a success, causing extensive damage in the city centre, and this was added to significantly during the latter raid, when industrial districts were also hit. A new era began on the 15th, with the formation of the Pathfinder Force under the then Group Captain Don Bennett. Harris had always been opposed in principle to an elite target finding and marking force, a view shared by all but one of his Group commanders. However, once overruled by higher authority, he, in typical fashion, gave it his unstinting support, and his choice of Bennett as its leader, although controversial, proved to be inspired. The new force was to lodge somewhat uneasily on 3 Group stations, and fall nominally under its jurisdiction until being granted Group status in its own right. AVM Baldwin was one of those against its formation, and as Pathfinder orders were filtered through him, a lesser man than Bennett might have been fazed. 7 Squadron was selected as the 3 Group founder unit, and the Group's front-line squadrons would be required to provide it with quality crews.

Harris was keen to pitch the Pathfinders into battle at the earliest opportunity, and this arose on the night of the 18/19th, when the west-Baltic port of Flensburg was selected, presumably because of its ease of location on the eastern side of the narrow neck of land where Germany and Denmark meet. Sadly, in an inauspicious beginning to what would become an illustrious career, the fledgling force failed entirely to locate the target, and the only bombs reported fell onto Danish towns. Only four aircraft failed to return, but one of these was the squadron's W7618, which was shot down by a nightfighter off the Danish coast, killing four of the crew, while P/O McDaniel and two others were taken into captivity. Two nights later, the squadron provided crews for a mining effort around the Baltic, and it turned into a disaster costing four aircraft, each with an experienced crew, and there was just one survivor from among the twenty eight men involved. W7573 went down in the target area with the crew of F/O Sanderson, who was on his seventeenth operation, and W7615 also crashed into the Baltic, taking with it P/O McAuley and his crew, who had run out of luck following the two incidents recorded earlier. This was a particularly tragic loss of a pilot on his thirty second operation, and obviously close to the end of his tour. Like McAuley, F/O Bullock and his crew were sowing their vegetables in Kiel Bay, when they were shot down over northern Germany in BF319, on what was the pilot's twenty sixth operation. Finally, F/S Hartley and his crew were briefed for the Kadet Channel when they met their end on their twenty third operation, also over Germany, although one of the gunners from BF338 survived to be taken prisoner. The Pathfinders led their second operation on the 24/25th, but they again found difficulty in identifying the target of Frankfurt, and much of the bombing fell into open country. It was already an expensive month for 218 Squadron, and it got worse on this night with the failure to return of W7562. The Stirling crashed in Belgium, and there were no survivors from the eight man crew of F/S Yates. Three nights later, the Pathfinders registered their first success, when providing good illumination at Kassel for the main force crews to exploit. It was still only a moderately successful operation, with 144 buildings destroyed, but it was a marked improvement on the earlier performances, although a massive thirty one aircraft were lost. The month's misfortunes continued for 218 Squadron, which posted missing two more crews. R9160 was a nightfighter victim over the North Sea, which swallowed up the eight man crew of P/O McCarthy, and BF315 met a similar end over Holland, killing P/O Gruber and four of his crew. Two men did survive to be taken prisoner, but one of these was reported to have died in captivity in April 1945. Nuremberg brought the month's activities to an end on the 28/29th, when the Pathfinders employed target indicator bombs for the first time. Despite this, the bombing was not concentrated, and much of it missed the city by many miles. At least on this occasion, all of the 218 Squadron participants came home, but P/O Du Toit was dazzled by Chance lights as he landed N3717 at Manston, and failed to notice a line of parked aircraft until it was too late. The Stirling was written off in the collision, but the crew emerged unscathed to enjoy what would be a temporary reprieve. It had been the squadron's blackest month since those far-off days in France, and had cost eleven aircraft either failing to return or written off in crashes.



RAF Downham Market 1943, five Short Stirling's stand ideal awaiting the nights activities.

September couldn't be as bad, although the omens were not encouraging, when N3714 was missing from an operation to Saarbrücken on the very first night. The attack, much to the embarrassment of the Pathfinders, and the chagrin of the inhabitants, had actually fallen on the non-industrial town of Saarlouis, which suffered extensive damage. By the time the mistake was discovered, the 218 Squadron Stirling was a shattered wreck on Belgian soil courtesy of a nightfighter, and F/S Ryan and four of his crew lay dead, while two of their colleagues were beginning a period of extended leave as guests of the Reich. This posting of a "black" by the Pathfinders could have portended an unfortunate month generally, but in fact, from this point on, the Command embarked on an unprecedented run of effective operations, which took it through to mid month. 218 Squadron installed a new commanding officer on the 2nd in the form of W/C Read, a Canadian, who possessed great athletic prowess, but had no previous connection with Bomber Command. He was commissioned in 1933, and had been posted to RAF HQ Cairo in April 1939 on promotion to Squadron Leader, where he was eventually seconded to the American Legation after serving with an unidentified squadron. He rose to Wing Commander rank on the 1st of June 1941, and returned to England a year later. Presumably, he attended a HCU on posting to Bomber Command, although there is no mention of him in the 1651 or 1657 Conversion Unit records, and would learn the practicalities of night bombing over Germany "on the job".

The run of successful operations began at Karlsruhe on the 2/3rd, where two hundred fires were seen burning, and continued at Bremen on the 4/5th, when the Pathfinders adopted the three phase system of illuminators, visual markers and backers-up for the first time. 480 buildings were destroyed, including some of an industrial nature, and almost fourteen hundred others sustained serious damage. 114 buildings were destroyed at Duisburg on the 6/7th, and whilst this was a modest haul, it still represented something of a victory at this most illusive of targets. The improvement was halted temporarily at another notoriously

difficult target, Frankfurt, on the 8/9th, but Düsseldorf brought a return to winning ways two nights later, when the training units contributed to the 479 strong force. The Pathfinders employed "Pink Pansies" for the first time, and over nine hundred houses were destroyed in the city and neighbouring Neuss. This was the most destructive operation since the thousand bomber raid on Cologne, but at thirty three aircraft, the losses were also the highest from a non-1,000 effort. The squadron's R9357 had to be ditched in the middle of the North Sea after an explosion shattered the starboard inner engine, ripped away part of the fuselage, and caused a loss of power in both outer engines. F/S Cozens and four of his crew were rescued and returned to the squadron, but the navigator and bomb-aimer lost their lives. BF351 was shot down by a nightfighter over Holland, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/S Milligan.

Bremen was attacked for the second time during the month on the 13/14th, when 848 houses were destroyed, and many important war industry factories suffered varying degrees of damage. This result by around four hundred aircraft surpassed that achieved by the thousand force in June, and this was a sign of the burgeoning effectiveness of the Command. The Wilhelmshaven authorities reported the town's heaviest raid of the war on the 14/15th, when the central districts were those hardest-hit. N3725 was forced to return early with only three good engines, and crashed in Norfolk, killing F/O Frankcombe and five of his crew, the two survivors sustaining injury. Even Essen received what was probably its most destructive raid thus far, when attacked by over three hundred aircraft on the 16/17th. The Krupp complex was hit by fifteen high explosive bombs, and thirty three large fires were reported in the city, but the defenders fought back to bring down thirty nine aircraft, the Wellington brigade proving itself to be particularly vulnerable. It can be no coincidence that this series of effective operations came at a time when the Pathfinder Force was emerging from its unconvincing start, and its crews were coming to grips with the complexities of their demanding role. There was to be no overnight transformation, of course, and failures would continue to outnumber successes for some time to come, but the encouraging signs were there, and it boded ill for Germany in the years ahead. Saarbrücken and Munich were the targets on the 19/20th, most of the Stirlings flying on this night assigned to the latter, and on the 23/24th, twenty four Stirlings were sent to attack the shipyards at Vegesack. Only one failed to return, R9187 of 218 Squadron, which contained the crew of flight commander S/L Raymond, and no clue to their fate has ever been uncovered. A hundred sorties during this month cost the squadron a more tolerable five aircraft, but this still involved the loss of four complete crews.

October began with another small-scale Stirling raid, this time against the U-Boat yards near Lübeck. Three aircraft were lost, and two of them were from 218 Squadron. N3763 crashed in Germany, killing Sgt Griffiths and his crew, while W7613 was brought down over Denmark with the crew of the previously mentioned, and recently promoted, F/L Du Toit. All eight occupants were killed, and flying as second pilot to gain operational experience was W/C Read on only his third trip. The offensive against Germany continued on the 2/3rd, with an operation to Krefeld in the Ruhr by 188 aircraft. This number quickly diminished by one, when the squadron's W7636 swung on take-off and came to grief, although without injury to Sgt Hill and his crew. Within days, Sgt Hill would become F/S Hill, and a few days later, he and his crew would go missing. Krefeld escaped serious damage on this night, and continuing bad weather over Germany helped to spare Aachen on the 5/6th. This was

another operation which began badly for 218 Squadron, when severe local thunderstorms probably caused BF322 to crash in Suffolk twenty minutes after take-off, killing F/S Hall and his crew. A moderately successful attack fell on Osnabrück on the 6/7th, and then came a lull in main force operations, during which extensive “gardening” activities involved the Stirling brigade. W/C Morris undertook his first operation with the squadron on the night of the 10/11th, and on the following night, eighty aircraft took part in wide-ranging mining, when the single missing Stirling was the squadron’s R9190. The previously mentioned F/S Hill and his crew had been briefed to lay their mines in the Baltic, and were shot down into the sea off Denmark by a nightfighter. It seems that the pilot had managed to maintain some control as the aircraft went down, and all were apparently still on board on impact. Those in the front section sustained quite serious injury, and the bomb-aimer succumbed to his two days later, while in captivity. Moderate success was achieved at Kiel on the 13/14th, a decoy fire site probably sparing the town from a more severe pounding, and a similar ruse at Cologne drew away most of the bombs on the 15/16th, so that damage in the city was light.

A new campaign began on the 22/23rd, against the major cities of Italy in support of Operation Torch, the Allied landings in North Africa. It would occupy much of the



Short Stirling R9190

Command’s attention until mid December, and began with 5 Group delivering an accurate and destructive attack on Genoa. 3 and 4 Groups followed up twenty four hours later with a modest force of Halifaxes, Stirlings and Wellingtons, when almost complete cloud cover was encountered. It was only after the

event, that it was discovered that the attack had actually been aimed at the town of Savona,

some thirty miles away, but losses were at least light, and amounted to two Halifaxes and a solitary Stirling. The latter was a 218 Squadron aircraft, which crashed into the sea off the French coast, and took with it the eight man crew of P/O Studd. 5 Group raided Milan to good effect by daylight on the 24th, and that night, seventy one aircraft of 1 and 3 Groups took off to add to the city’s misery. Crossing the Alps was never a picnic for the lower-ceilinged Stirling, and on this night, the crews encountered storms during the outward flight, which prevented almost half of them from reaching the target to bomb. The squadron’s R9241 was still over Suffolk outbound when an engine caught fire, and soon afterwards, the Stirling broke up. It plunged to earth taking F/S Higgott and six of his crew to their deaths, while one of the gunners just managed to escape by parachute at the last second, and was injured in the heavy landing. This effectively concluded a month, which had seen the squadron despatch ninety four sorties, the highest by any Stirling squadron, for the loss of seven aircraft and six crews.

November began quietly for the Stirling squadrons, and they continued with their mining activities. The area chosen for the night of the 6/7th stretched from Lorient to the Frisians, and it was from the Gironde Estuary that the squadron's R9185 failed to return with the crew of Sgt Hyde. The Stirling crashed in France, delivering the pilot and four others into enemy hands, but sadly, the navigator and bomb-aimer, who were both Canadians, lost their lives. The first bombing operation of the month to involve Stirlings came on the 7/8th, when Genoa was the target for a mixed force of 175 aircraft. The attack was successfully concluded for the loss of six aircraft to the defences, while the 218 Squadron casualty occurred in England. BK606 arrived back with empty tanks, and crashed in Cambridgeshire as Sgt Richards was trying to reach Oakington, and one member of the crew received injuries. On the following night, W/C Morris took what was presumably a freshman crew, to deliver "toilet paper" to the residents of the Toulon area of France. On return, and running short of fuel, W7612 clipped trees on final approach to Tangmere and crashed, although all of the occupants were able to walk away. The spate of losses and accidents continued twenty four hours later, when W7475 failed to return from Hamburg with the crew of flight commander S/L Hickling. Some time later, it was established, that the Stirling had crashed in Germany with total loss of life. The Italian campaign went on, with main force Stirling involvement at Genoa on the 15/16th and Turin on the 18/19th and 20/21st, before a force of over two hundred aircraft delivered a disappointing attack on Stuttgart on the 22/23rd. The month's final major effort was against Turin on the 28/29th, which developed into an accurate and destructive attack. 218 Squadron's S/L Hiles and crew were forced to return early, when BK607 suffered engine failure. The Stirling came to grief on landing, but the eight occupants were able to walk away from the scene. It was on this night, that F/S Middleton of 149 Squadron became the first Stirling crewman to be awarded the Victoria Cross. Severely wounded, and in control of a badly damaged aircraft, which was also short of fuel, and which he knew he couldn't land safely, he ordered his crew to bale out. All but two had done so, when the Stirling crashed into the sea, killing the remaining occupants. Eighty sorties by the squadron during the month had seen five aircraft lost, but only two crews.

Frankfurt opened the December account on the 2/3rd, and this was another ineffective operation against a city which rivaled Essen in its elusiveness. 218 Squadron's BF401 experienced a torrid time at the hands of flak and nightfighters, but eventually made it back to base, where the undercarriage collapsed on landing. Perhaps the crew's deliverance was due in part to the efforts of Sgt Holland in the rear turret, a native of Lutterworth on Leicestershire's border with Warwickshire, and one-time home in the thirties to the then Squadron Leader Frank Whittle and his Power-Jet company. Sgt Holland would become a member of the legendary 617 Squadron in 1944, and bear the distinction of being one of a very select band of men to be classed as Master Gunners. Mannheim escaped with all but the most superficial damage on the 6/7th, when the crews were forced by cloud to bomb on estimated positions, and the penultimate operation of the Italian campaign was delivered somewhat disappointingly on Turin on the 9/10th. The 17/18th brought an unusual night of operations, and as events were to prove, a very expensive and unrewarding one. Twenty seven Lancasters of 5 Group were despatched to eight small towns in Germany, while twenty two Stirlings and Wellingtons of 3 Group were sent to attack the Opel works at Fallersleben. It was a night of total disaster, which cost nine of the Lancasters, or 33%, six Stirlings and two Wellingtons. Four of the Stirlings were from 75(NZ) Squadron at

Newmarket, and the other two were 218 Squadron aircraft. W7614 crashed in Germany, killing three of the crew, while F/O Marshall and three others were taken prisoner, and BF403 was shot down by flak to crash into the sea between Texel and the mainland, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/L Shepherd. Only one more major night of activity involved main force stirlings, and this came on the 20/21st, when Duisburg was the objective for over two hundred aircraft. While this was in progress, a simultaneous operation of great significance was taking place almost unnoticed just across the Dutch border to the south-west. Since becoming a founder member of the Pathfinder Force in August, 109 Squadron had been conducting trials with the Oboe blind-bombing device, and marrying it to the Mosquito. This magnificent pioneering work under the squadron's commanding officer, W/C Hal Bufton, would bear fruit spectacularly in the coming year, but much work remained to be done. This night brought the first operational Oboe-aimed bombs, as a calibration exercise to gauge the margin of error. The target was a power station at Lutterade in Holland, and Bufton and two other crews successfully released their bombs, while three others experienced equipment failure, and went on to bomb Duisburg instead. Sadly, the area around the target was found to be pitted with craters from a previous raid on Aachen, and it proved impossible to plot the fall of the Oboe bombs. This was a minor setback, and further trials would take place, to enable the device to be ready for the first major campaign of 1943. 218 Squadron despatched fifty four sorties during December, losing three aircraft and two crews. It had been a testing year for the squadron, and one in which it had lost fifty two Stirlings on operations, more than any other operator of the type. The coming year would be a little more expensive, but a number of other Stirling units would suffer greater casualties, as the type became the bottom layer in the ever-increasing volume of Bomber Command aircraft over the targets.

1943

The New Year began with a continuation of the Oboe trials programme, and this involved 109 Squadron marking for small numbers of 1 and 5 Group Lancasters, with Essen as the target on no fewer than seven occasions during the first two weeks of January, and Duisburg once. The Stirling squadrons would find themselves operating mainly against French targets during the first two months of the year, in line with a new Air Ministry directive issued on the 14th. This called for the area bombing of those ports which were home to U-Boat bases and support facilities, and a list of four such targets was drawn up accordingly. It was headed by Lorient, and the campaign against it was put immediately into action on the night of the 14/15th, when a mixed force of over a hundred aircraft delivered a scattered and only modestly effective attack. It was a different story on the following night, when over eight hundred buildings in the town were destroyed, but fortunately, most of the residents had fled during the day. Stirlings were excluded from two disappointing raids on Berlin on the 16/17th and 17/18th, but they continued with their very profitable mining operations, before returning to Lorient on the 23/24th for another damaging assault. The type played a very minor role at the same target on the 26/27th, and was left off the order of battle altogether at Düsseldorf on the 27/28th, when Oboe ground marking was employed for the first time. Fifty four aircraft were mining around the Frisians and the Baltic on this night, and the single casualty was 218 Squadron's N6077, which crashed into high ground in Germany on the way home, leaving just one survivor from the eight man crew of P/O Gough. No Stirlings were

sent to Lorient on the 29/30th, and the only representatives of the type operating over Hamburg on the 30/31st were 7 Squadron examples, which were participating in the first H2s attack of the war. 218 Squadron was required to launch forty nine sorties during the month, and suffered only the loss of the aircraft and crew just mentioned.

February began with a raid on Cologne on the 2/3rd, during which both Oboe and H2s were used in the continual quest for a reliable and consistent method of target marking. Light damage was scattered across the city, but the vital concentration was again lacking. It was a similar story at Hamburg on the following night, when icing conditions persuaded many crews to return early. It was not a good night for 218 Squadron, which registered the loss of two aircraft with no survivors. BF406 was shot down by a nightfighter over Holland with the crew of Sgt Dodd, and BF408 took the eight man crew of F/S Treves to a watery grave in the Straits of Dover. Fifty Stirlings were included in a force of 188 aircraft bound for Turin on the 4/5th, and those reaching their destination inflicted widespread damage. Lorient was hit yet again on the same night, in the absence of a Stirling contingent, but sixty two of the type took off as part of a three hundred strong force, when the hapless port was targeted once more on the 7/8th. The main force Stirlings sat out a highly destructive raid on Wilhelmshaven on the 11/12th, when a naval ammunition depot went up in spectacular fashion, and laid waste to 120 acres of the town and dockland. The heaviest attack of the series on Lorient took place on the 13/14th at the hands of over four hundred aircraft, which included the first sorties in 218 Squadron hands of the Mk III Stirling, and more than a thousand tons of bombs added to the previous destruction. While the Lancasters of 1, 5 and 8 Groups, (the Pathfinders had attained Group status on the 8th of January), raided Milan on the 14/15th, Halifaxes, Wellingtons and Stirlings achieved only modest results in an H2s based raid on Cologne. Lorient's ordeal concluded with its ninth attack on the 16/17th, by which time it was little more than a deserted ruin. Most of the bombing at Wilhelmshaven on the 18/19th, 19/20th and 24/25th fell into open country, and there was pronounced undershooting at Nuremberg on the 25/26th, which saved the city from sustaining more than modest damage. BF450 failed to return home with the rest of the squadron's participants, and was by this time a wreck on German soil, containing the remains of Sgt White and his crew. Cologne continued to escape with extensive if not telling damage, despite being raided by four hundred aircraft on the 26/27th. Having dealt with Lorient, the Command now turned its attention upon St Nazaire on the last night of the month, and an estimated 60% of the town was destroyed on this one night alone. R9189 was unable to contribute, after crashing on take off in the hands of P/O Cozens, who walked away with his crew. It was a record month for 218 Squadron, with a tally of 124 sorties, the highest among Stirling squadrons, at a cost of four aircraft and three crews.

March would bring with it the first major campaign of the war for which the Command was adequately equipped and prepared. All of the previous campaigns had been forced upon it by the War Cabinet in response to situations brought about by the enemy. The battles for Norway, the low countries and France were lost before they began, and the Command was constantly in the position of having to play catch-up. The anti-invasion operations and the first oil and transportation campaigns called upon the crews to operate against targets requiring a level of precision which was beyond them with the aircraft and aids available. The U-Boat offensive was in support of the navy, the attacks on Italian cities were in support of the army, while the obsession with the enemy warships at Brest was a costly distraction

against unsuitable targets. Although the crews performed magnificently in whatever was demanded of them, it was only when Harris persisted with his strategic offensive against Germany, that any sort of telling blow was struck against her war effort. Now Harris had a predominately four engine bomber force with an unprecedented bomb carrying capacity, and the Oboe device to negate the ever-present industrial haze blanketing the Ruhr, protecting the likes of Essen and Duisburg. Bombers, particularly Lancasters, were rolling out of the factories in large numbers, while the Empire Training Scheme guaranteed an endless supply of new crews, and all of this meant, that the time was right to demonstrate just what the Command could achieve. Before Harris embarked on the Ruhr offensive, he committed his crews to major operations against Berlin on the 1/2nd and Hamburg two nights later. Sixty Stirlings took part in the former, including ten from 218 Squadron, making up a total force of three hundred aircraft. The giant urban sprawl of the Capital presented problems for the H2s operators, who found it difficult to identify the city centre aiming point, and the resultant bombing was scattered over all parts of the city. Never-the-less, Berlin sustained greater damage on this night than on any previous occasion, and suffered the destruction of almost nine hundred buildings. These were mostly houses, but many factories were seriously damaged, and many of the main railway repair workshops were burned out. Seventeen aircraft were missing, and the squadron's BK666 crashed in Norfolk on return, although did so without injury to F/O Berridge and his crew. Similar difficulties with interpretation of the H2s signature led to much of the bombing at Hamburg falling down stream onto the town of Wedel. Even so, the emergency services had to deal with a hundred fires in the city, before going to the aid of their neighbours.

The Ruhr campaign began on the night of the 5/6th, when 442 aircraft were made ready to attack Essen. The main force was to bomb in three waves according to aircraft type, with the Wellingtons and Stirlings following the Halifax brigade, and the Lancasters bringing up the rear. An unusually high number of early returns reduced the size of the force heading towards the target, and 362 crews bombed as briefed. 218 Squadron detailed twelve aircraft, but after early returns and the bombing of alternative targets were accounted for, only eight reached the Essen area. These crews were those of F/L Downey in BK650, F/L Neilson in BK700, F/O Harris in BF446, F/O Saunders in BF440, P/O Davis in R9203, P/O Ratcliffe in R9333, Sgt Hoar in BF447 and Sgt Webb in BK596. R9333 was shot down by flak in the target area without survivors, and it is not known whether this occurred before or after bombing. The remainder contributed to an outstanding success, which devastated 160 acres of built-up area between the city centre and the Krupp works, which itself suffered damage to fifty three buildings. Over three thousand houses were destroyed, while more than two thousand others were seriously damaged, and this was the first time that a telling blow had been inflicted on this much visited city. Before embarking on round two of the Ruhr offensive, Harris turned his attention to southern Germany, and raided Nuremberg, Munich and Stuttgart on the 8/9th, 9/10th and 11/12th respectively. These were all beyond the range of Oboe, and consequently relied upon visual and H2s Pathfinder marking. The first mentioned suffered from an extensive creep-back, a feature of many heavy raids, and much of the bombing undershot the target by some distance. Even so, the attack achieved the destruction of six hundred buildings, and a number of important war industry factories were hit. At Munich, the wind pushed the attack into the city's western half, where almost three hundred buildings were destroyed, and part of the B.M.W aero-engine factory was put out of action for more than a month. The Stuttgart raid was less effective, possibly as a

result of the first recorded use of dummy target indicators, which drew many bomb loads away from the city into open country. BF343 was missing from its Downham Market dispersal on the following morning, having crashed in France with no survivors from the crew of F/S Parkinson.

Keen to capitalize on his success at Essen, Harris returned there on the 12/13th with over four hundred aircraft, and delivered another effective assault. The bombing this time centred on the Krupp works, which sustained 30% more damage than a week earlier, and a further five hundred houses were destroyed. Minor operations held sway for the next two weeks, and the only large foray was by over three hundred aircraft on the 22/23rd, when St Nazaire was attacked in line with the January directive. 3 Group sent out a recall to its Stirling crews, and most of them complied, a handful continuing on to contribute to a concentrated raid. Over four hundred aircraft took off for Duisburg on the 26/27th, which like Essen, had always escaped relatively unscathed. Its seemingly charmed life would continue for a time, however, and on this night, equipment failure among a large proportion of the Oboe Mosquito force led to a scattered and ineffective attack. Only two Stirlings were involved, but the type was out in strength on the following night, when eighty one took part in an operation to Berlin by almost four hundred aircraft. Sadly, the effort was not rewarded with success as the Pathfinders failed to identify the city centre, and most of the bombing fell well short. On the 28th, W/C Morris concluded his tour and was posted away, and in his place was appointed the highly experienced and somewhat mature W/C Saville. Born in 1903 at Portland in New South Wales, Donald Saville transferred from the RAAF to the RAF on a short service commission in 1928. By the end of 1941, he was an acting Squadron Leader and flight commander with 458 Squadron RAAF, having previously served, it is believed, with 12 Squadron earlier in the year. Between August and December 1942 he commanded 104 Squadron in Malta, and this was his last operational post before arriving at 218 Squadron. On the night of his appointment, three hundred aircraft delivered another accurate attack on St Nazaire, and a similar number set out for a return to Berlin twenty four hours later. The result was a little better this time, with over 140 buildings destroyed, but the weather conditions were difficult, and much of the bombing again found open country. It was not a good night for 218 Squadron, which posted missing two of its crews. That of Sgt Hoar all lost their lives, when flak accounted for BK702 over Germany, and BK716 was lost without trace with the crew of F/O Harris. Thus, five aircraft had been lost during the month with four crews, and this was from 122 sorties, the second highest number in the Group.

April would prove to be the least rewarding month of the Ruhr period, but this was largely because of the number of operations to targets in other regions of Germany. It began in encouraging fashion, however, with another successful tilt at Essen on the 3/4th, which destroyed over six hundred buildings. Stirlings sat this one out, but ninety of them were included in a raid on Kiel on the following night, which employed a new record non-1,000 force of 577 aircraft. Cloud, wind and decoy fire sites combined to prevent accurate marking, and almost no bombs fell within the town. Almost four hundred aircraft were sent to Duisburg on the 8/9th, but they again failed to find the mark, and a modest forty buildings were destroyed. Among the nineteen missing aircraft was the squadron's BF502, and no trace of it or the crew of Sgt Tomkins has ever been found. Lancasters tried again on the

following night, and found the city equally elusive, but its time was running out. Ninety eight Stirlings made up a force of five hundred aircraft bound for Frankfurt on the 10/11th, but they wasted their effort entirely, when all but a handful of bombs found open country and outlying communities. The creep-back phenomenon rescued an attack on Stuttgart on the 14/15th, by falling across a number of north-eastern suburbs, where almost four hundred buildings were destroyed. Unusually, Wellingtons represented almost a third of the 462 strong force, while the Stirling was the least populous type, but each lost eight in an overall loss of twenty three aircraft, and this amounted to 9.6% for the Stirling. Harris divided his effort on the 16/17th, when sending the Lancasters and Halifaxes to the Skoda armaments works at Pilsen, while a predominately Wellington and Stirling contingent carried out a diversionary raid on Mannheim. The former was a failure, caused by Pathfinder route markers being confused for target indicators, and although the latter was moderately effective in terms of damage, it failed to prevent heavy casualties from the main operation. Thirty six aircraft were lost from the Pilsen force, eighteen of each type, and when added to the eighteen missing from the diversion, the total of fifty four represented a new record high for a single night. 218 Squadron's BF514 was brought down over France, killing P/O Howlett and four of his crew, but the flight engineer and wireless operator escaped with their lives to evade capture.



The crew of Flying Officer John Harris while at No.1657 Conversion Unit

Over four hundred aircraft were Baltic bound on the 20/21st, 339 of them to Stettin, while eighty six Stirlings targeted the Heinkel aircraft factory at Rostock. Stettin was one of the few cities never to escape lightly, and this night saw the destruction of a hundred acres within its central districts. A smoke screen saved the Heinkel factory, and eight Stirlings, or 9.3%, failed to return home. Sgt Jopling and three of his crew were killed, when BK596

crashed in Denmark, and the three survivors were taken into captivity. The most effective raid of the war on Duisburg to date was delivered by over five hundred aircraft on the 26/27th, when at least three hundred buildings were destroyed. This was still a relatively modest figure, but the Command now had the city's measure, and there would be no failures in the future. The largest minelaying operation of the war took place on the 27/28th, when 160 aircraft were involved off France and the Frisians. This number was surpassed on the following night, however, when 207 aircraft were despatched to sow their vegetables in northern waters, where they laid a massive 593, a figure which would stand to the end of hostilities. Mining often required aircraft to fly low to establish their position, and this made them easy targets for light flak from marine batteries and flak ships, and twenty two aircraft failed to return on this night. It was a harrowing night for the Stirling brigade, which lost seven out of the thirty two taking part, a massive 21.9%, and it was a particularly chastening experience for 218 Squadron, which had three empty dispersals to contemplate at Downham Market. EF356 and BF515 fell to nightfighters over Denmark, with just one survivor from the crew of Sgt Hailey in the former, and none from the crew of F/L Berridge in the latter, the pilots on their fifteenth and twenty second sorties respectively. BF447 also crashed on Danish soil, cause uncertain, and two men survived to be taken prisoner from the crew of P/O Brown, who was on his eleventh operation with the squadron, having previously served with the secret 138 Squadron at Tempsford. The month ended with a moderately useful raid on Essen on the night of the 30th, which did not call upon the services of the Stirling squadrons. The squadron put up a record 127 sorties during the month, and lost six aircraft and crews.

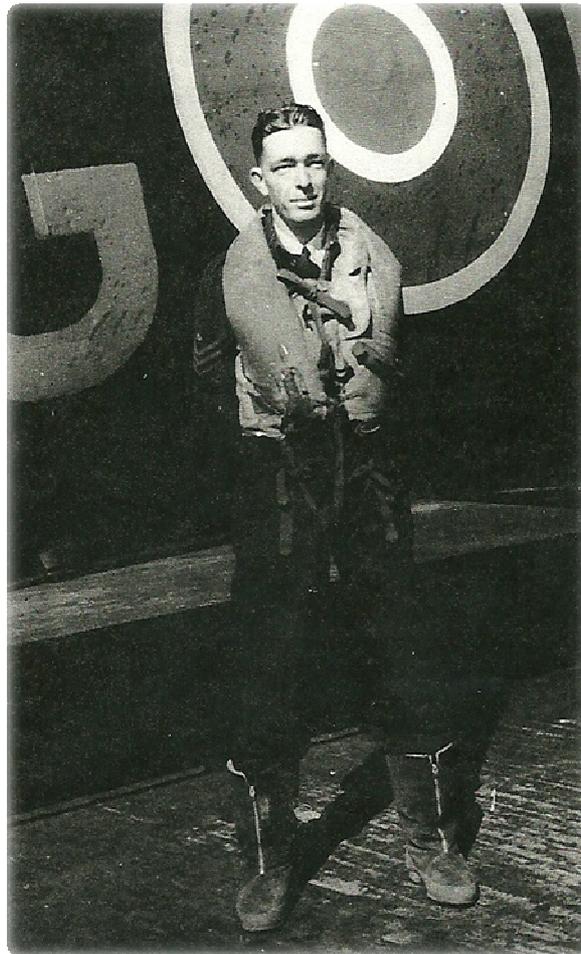
May would bring a return to winning ways, with a number of spectacular successes, and the month began with a new record non-1,000 force of 596 aircraft taking off for Dortmund in the late evening of the 4th. A decoy fire site succeeded in drawing off a good proportion of the force, but the remainder bombed within three miles of the city centre, and left over twelve hundred buildings in ruins, with a further two thousand seriously damaged. The loss of thirty one bombers was the highest to date in the campaign, and from this point on, the Ruhr would exact a very heavy toll of RAF crews. 218 Squadron posted missing the eight man crew of F/L Turner, only three of whom survived the destruction of BF505 by a nightfighter over Holland. It was a week before the next major operation took place, and this was the one which finally ended the charmed life of Duisburg after four earlier attempts during the campaign. The Pathfinder marking was spot-on, and the main force crews followed up with concentrated bombing, to destroy almost sixteen hundred buildings, cause damage to important war industry factories, and sink or severely damage sixty thousand tons of shipping in Germany's largest inland port. The defenders fought back to claim thirty four aircraft, another new record for the campaign, and 218 Squadron was again represented. BK705 was shot down by flak into the North Sea, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Bryans. On the following night, a predominately Lancaster force tried in vain to rectify the previous month's failure at Pilsen, while a mixed force of over four hundred aircraft went to Bochum. Only a proportion of the bombing hit the built-up area after decoy fire sites did their work, but almost four hundred buildings were destroyed for the loss of twenty four aircraft. For the third raid running, 218 Squadron sustained casualties, although both incidents occurred at home. BF480 crashed on landing on return, without injury to Sgt Carney and his crew, but when EF367 crashed at Chedburgh, five of the occupants were killed, while the pilot, Sgt Nicholls, and his navigator were hurt.

A nine day break in main force activity allowed the crews to draw breath, and prepare themselves for the next concerted effort. It was during this period, on the 16/17th, that 617 Squadron wrote its page in history, with the epic attack on the Dams. Evidence of the raid's success was still clearly visible in the form of flood water, when the Command next went to war in numbers on the 23/24th. For the second time in the month, Dortmund hosted a raid by a record non-1,000 force, on this occasion of 826 aircraft, for which the Stirling squadrons managed to put a creditable 120 aircraft into the air, seventeen of them from 218 Squadron. Four of these returned early, but this had little effect on what became a devastating raid, which left extensive damage in central, northern and eastern districts of the city, and destroyed around two thousand buildings. Many important war industry factories were hit and lost production, and six hundred people were killed, but the casualties among the attackers represented a new high for the campaign. Thirty eight aircraft failed to return, among them the squadron's BK706, which crashed in the target area, killing the crew of F/O Phillips, who was on his sixth operation. Another very large force, in excess of seven hundred aircraft, failed at Düsseldorf on the 25/26th, in the face of a combination of cloud, decoy fire sites and dummy target indicators. The disappointment was compounded by the loss of twenty seven aircraft, which included EH887 from Downham Market. The Stirling contained the crew of Sgt Collins, and he was one of seven who died, when it was shot down by a nightfighter over Germany, only the second pilot surviving in enemy hands. Two nights later, the Stirling brigade was excluded from a moderately successful attack on Essen by almost five hundred aircraft. 218 Squadron sent a freshman crew on a mining sortie to the Frisians to gain their first taste of operations, but F/S Mills and his crew were never seen again, and the cause of BF405's demise remains a mystery. The last major raid of the month took place on the 29/30th, and was directed at the town of Barmen, one of the twin towns known jointly as Wuppertal. It was one of those occasions when an operation proceeded according to plan, and both the Pathfinder marking and main force bombing were accurate and concentrated. It was the most devastating raid of the war thus far, laying waste to 80% of the town's built-up area, and the catalogue of destruction included four thousand houses, five of the town's six largest factories, and over two hundred other industrial premises. Unusually, more buildings suffered complete destruction than serious damage, but whatever the statistics, it was a tragedy in human terms, and around 3,400 people lost their lives. The substantial bomber losses continued, however, and thirty three were missing on this night, two of them from 218 Squadron. BF565 and BK688 both fell victim to nightfighters over Belgium, and neither produced a survivor from among the crews of P/O Allan and F/S Davis respectively. It had already been a very expensive month for the squadron by the time P/O Rich took EF365 for an air-test on the 31st, and the flight ended with a crash-landing in Norfolk after engine failure, although without injury to the occupants. This brought the month's tally to ten aircraft and eight crews lost from 113 sorties.

The first ten nights of June were devoted to minor operations, before almost eight hundred aircraft took off to attempt to rectify the recent failure at Düsseldorf. Despite an errant Oboe marker luring away some bomb loads to fall into open country, the main weight of the attack hit the city centre, where forty square kilometres became engulfed in flames. Almost nine thousand separate fires were started, forty two war industry factories suffered a complete stoppage in production for varying periods, and thirteen hundred people lost their

lives. The defenders fought back valiantly to claim thirty eight aircraft, equaling the highest loss to date of the campaign, but only two Stirlings were among them, and 218 Squadron operated without loss. Bochum wilted under a concentrated assault in the absence of Stirlings on the 12/13th, and an all-Lancaster heavy force pounded Oberhausen two nights later. As part of the continuing quest to find the optimum marking method, Cologne was marked by H2s on the 16/17th, for a force of Lancasters to follow up with moderate success. The Stirling squadrons returned to action on the 19/20th, when they joined Halifaxes in a raid on the Schneider armaments works at Le Creusot, the objective for a major daylight effort by 5 Group in the previous October. The Pathfinders provided only illumination, so that the main force crews could identify and bomb their specific buildings individually from low to medium level over two runs. This required a little more precision than the crews were accustomed to, and only about 20% of the bombs fell within the

A hectic round of the space of five Krefeld on the force of seven included 117 contributed to a and a half thousand destroyed, and the city centre by fire. It was not a one-sided contest, however, 72,000 homeless would have been news, that forty not be returning were from BK712, which was nightfighter over survivors from the P/O Shillinglaw, and flak over Holland. alongside his bomb- the gunners, while were taken into following night, aircraft attacked destroyed more



Pilot Officer "Doc" Rich RAAF

hundred houses there and in neighbouring Oberhausen, while causing serious damage to the towns' public buildings and industry. It was another night of heavy losses, amounting to thirty five aircraft, and 218 Squadron was represented by BF572, which crashed into the North Sea, taking with it F/S Smith and five of his crew. The sole survivor was one of the gunners, who presumably baled out while the stricken aircraft was still over land, and he became a PoW.

to, and only about fell within the

four operations in nights began at 21/22nd, when a hundred aircraft Stirlings. These record haul of five houses being destruction of the was not a one-sided and some of the residents of the city cheered by the four bombers would home. Two of these Downham Market, shot down by a Belgium with no eight man crew of BK722, a victim of P/O Rich died aimer and one of the four survivors captivity. On the over five hundred Mülheim, and than eleven

After a night's rest, 630 aircraft set out for Elberfeld, whose twin Barmen had been decimated at the end of May. This was another copybook example of the destructiveness of Bomber Command when all facets of a plan came together in perfect harmony, and 171 industrial premises and three thousand houses were reduced to rubble. This represented over 90% of the town's built-up area, and eighteen hundred people lost their lives under the bombs and flames. There were two more empty dispersals at Downham Market after this operation, those which should have been occupied by BF501 and EH892. The former was accounted for by a nightfighter over Belgium, and it took the eight man crew of Sgt Hoey to their deaths. The latter contained the crew of flight commander S/L Beck, who was one of four men killed when it became a victim of flak over Germany, while the three survivors joined the growing roll-call of 218 Squadron airmen in PoW camps. Despite the losses, it was a highly effective series of operations, which was halted at the notoriously elusive oil town of Gelsenkirchen on the 25/26th. Complete cloud cover and the failure of equipment afflicting a number of the Oboe Mosquitos led to a disappointing raid, and in an echo of the past, bombs were sprayed over a wide area of the Ruhr, and the target escaped lightly. Not so the bomber force, which lost a further thirty aircraft, and for the third time in four operations, 218 Squadron had to post missing two crews. Nightfighters over Holland were responsible for the demise of both EF430 and EH898, the former containing the crew of flight commander S/L Maw, who all baled out into the arms of their captors. The latter was the chariot of Sgt Hughes and his crew, and was shot down from 13,000 feet while outbound, with only the navigator escaping by parachute to become a PoW.

A series of three operations against Cologne spanning the turn of the month began on the night of the 28/29th, and involved six hundred aircraft, including seventy five Stirlings. Those crews reaching the target were greeted by complete cloud cover, and only six of the Oboe Mosquitos were able to mark as planned. Despite this, the much bombed city suffered the most horrendous assault of the war thus far, with a level of devastation quite unprecedented at a German urban target. 6,400 buildings were reduced to rubble, and forty three of them were of an industrial nature. A total of fifteen thousand buildings were damaged to some extent, 4,377 people lost their lives, while a further 230,000 were rendered homeless at least for a period. There were no 218 Squadron aircraft among the twenty five missing, and the squadron again operated without loss at the same target on the 3/4th of July, when a further 2,200 houses and twenty industrial premises were destroyed. The series was concluded by an all Lancaster heavy force on the 8/9th, after which, the city authorities were able to assess that eleven thousand building had been destroyed over the three raids, five and a half thousand people had been killed, and 350,000 others had lost their homes. 110 sorties during the month made June marginally the least active for 218 Squadron since January, and it had cost seven aircraft and crews.

Stirlings were excluded from another disappointing failure at Gelsenkirchen on the 9/10th of July, and although two further operations to the region would be mounted at the end of the month, the Ruhr offensive had now effectively run its course. Harris could look back over the past five months with a genuine sense of achievement at the performance of his squadrons, and derive particular satisfaction from the part played by Oboe in the devastation of Germany's industrial heartland. Losses had been grievous, and "Happy Valley's" reputation well earned, but the factories had more than kept pace with the rate of attrition, and new crews continued to flood in to fill the gaps. With confidence high in the

ability of the Command to deliver a knockout blow at almost any target, Harris sought an opportunity to send shock waves through the Reich by destroying one of its major cities in a short, sharp series of raids until the job was done. Having been spared by the weather from hosting the first one thousand bomber raid in May 1942, Hamburg was the ideal choice to host Operation Gomorrah. As Germany's Second City, Hamburg's political status was undeniable, as was its position of prominence as a centre of industry, particularly with regard to U-Boat construction. There were other considerations of an operational nature, however, which also made this Hanseatic city an attractive proposition. Its location near a coastline was an obvious aid to navigation, and it could be approached from the sea, without the need to traverse large tracts of hostile territory. It was also close enough to the bomber stations to allow a force to approach and withdraw during the few hours of total darkness afforded by mid summer. Finally, beyond the range of Oboe, which had proved so crucial at the Ruhr, it boasted the wide River Elbe to provide a strong H2s signature for the navigators high above. In each year of the war to date, Bomber Command had visited Hamburg during the last week of July, and so it would be in this year. In the meantime, Lancasters were sent to Turin on the 12/13th, while a mixed force including over fifty Stirlings raided Aachen on the following night. The latter was an outstanding success, which left almost three thousand buildings in ruins, and many large industrial premises and public buildings sustained heavy damage.

Operation Gomorrah began on the night of the 24/25th, and was attended by the first operational use of Window, the tinfoil-backed strips of paper, which, when released into the air stream, descended slowly in great clouds, swamping the enemy's nightfighter control, searchlight and gun-laying radar with false returns. The device had actually been available for a year, but its employment had been vetoed, lest the enemy copy it. The enemy had, in fact, already developed its own version code-named Düppel, which had also been withheld for the same reason. A force of 791 aircraft stood ready for take-off in the late evening of the 24th, twenty of them Stirlings from 218 Squadron, led by W/C Saville on his ninth operation since taking command. EF352 returned early with a u/s intercom, but the remainder pressed on, encountering little contact with enemy nightfighters during the outward flight. A number of aircraft were shot down during this stage of the operation, but each was off course, and outside of the protection of the bomber stream. The efficacy of Window was immediately apparent to the crews on their arrival in the Hamburg defence zone, where the usually efficient co-ordination between the searchlights and flak batteries was absent. The defence was accordingly random and sporadic, thus giving the Pathfinder crews a rare almost unhindered run at the aiming point. The markers were a little scattered, but most fell close enough to the city centre to provide a strong reference point for the main force crews, and over the next fifty minutes, almost 2,300 tons of bombs were delivered. The bombing began near the aiming point, but a pronounced creep-back developed, which cut a swathe of destruction from the city centre along the line of approach, across the north-western districts, and out into open country, where a proportion was wasted. Never-the-less, it was a highly destructive attack for the loss of a very modest twelve aircraft, for which much of the credit belonged to Window. At a stroke, the device had rendered the entire enemy defensive system impotent, but an advantage was rarely held for long before a counter-measure was found, and this would eventually see the balance swing back in Germany's favour. It was a sad night for 218 Squadron, whose crews awaited in vain the return of their commanding officer. BF567 was shot down by a

nightfighter over Germany, and the bomb-aimer alone of the eight men on board escaped with his life to spend the rest of the war in a prison camp. Shortly before his death, W/C Saville was awarded the DSO, the citation for which is quoted from A.M.B.10952, dated July 1943. "This officer has completed a large number of sorties, and has displayed outstanding determination to achieve success. He is a fearless commander, who invariably chooses to participate in the more difficult sorties which have to be undertaken. Whatever the opposition, W/C Saville endeavours to press home his attacks with accuracy and resolution. By his personal example and high qualities of leadership, this officer has contributed materially to the operational efficiency of the squadron". The new commanding officer was W/C Oldbury, who arrived from the recently formed 620 Squadron. His role there is not known, but his promotion to Wing Commander was dated the 1st of July 1943, and he was possibly a flight commander, or was gaining operational experience.

On the night after Hamburg, Harris switched his force to Essen, to take advantage of the body blow dealt to the enemy's defences by Window. It was another massively concentrated assault on this city, and the Krupp complex sustained its heaviest damage of the war, while over 2,800 houses and apartment blocks were destroyed. It was on this night, that the Mk I Stirling operated with 218 Squadron for the final time. After a night's rest, 787 aircraft took off to return to Hamburg for round two of Operation Gomorrah. What followed their arrival over the city was both unprecedented and unforeseeable, and was the result of a lethal combination of circumstances. A period of unusually hot and dry weather had left tinderbox conditions in parts of the city, and the initial spark to ignite the situation came with the Pathfinder markers. These fell two miles to the east of the planned city centre aiming point, but with unaccustomed concentration into the densely populated working class residential districts of Hamm, Hammerbrook and Borgfeld. The main force crews followed up with uncharacteristic accuracy and scarcely any creep-back, and delivered most of their 2,300 tons of bombs into this relatively compact area. The individual fires joined together to form one giant conflagration, which sucked in oxygen from surrounding areas at hurricane velocity to feed its voracious appetite. Such was the ferocity of this meteorological phenomenon, that trees were uprooted and flung bodily into the flames, along with debris and people, and the temperatures at its seat exceeded one thousand degrees Celcius. The inferno only began to subside once all the combustible material had been consumed, and by this time, there was no one left within the firestorm area to rescue. It would actually be weeks before many of the burned-out buildings had cooled sufficiently to allow access to basements, where some of the more gruesome finds would be made, and an accurate assessment of casualties could begin. At least forty thousand people died on this one night alone, on top of the fifteen hundred killed three nights earlier, and on the following morning, the first of an eventual 1.2 million inhabitants began to file out of the tortured city. Seventeen aircraft failed to return, but 218 Squadron welcomed all eighteen of its crews home, seventeen of them having bombed as briefed.

Another night's rest preceded the third Hamburg raid, for which eighteen Stirlings from Downham Market made up a force of 777 aircraft. EF449 returned early with intercom problems, but 707 aircraft arrived over the city approaching from the north to deliver 2,300 tons of bombs. The Pathfinders were again two miles east of the aiming point with their markers, which fell a little to the south of the firestorm area. A creep-back developed across the devastation of two nights earlier, before falling onto other residential districts beyond,

where a new area of fire was created, although of lesser proportions. The city's fire service was already exhausted, while access to the freshly afflicted districts was denied by rubble strewn and cratered streets, and there was little to be done, other than to allow the fires to burn themselves out. The defences were beginning to recover from the shock of Window, and as they did so, the bomber losses began to rise. Twenty eight aircraft failed to return on this night, two of them, BF578 and EE895, belonging to 218 Squadron. The former's demise came at the hands of a combination of flak and a nightfighter, which brought the Stirling down over Germany, killing the pilot, Sgt Pickard, and one of his gunners, and delivering the remainder of the crew into captivity. The latter was a victim of flak in the target area, and there were no survivors from the crew of Sgt Clark. Both crews were just emerging from their freshman status, and were on their third and fifth operations respectively.]

Publicate

NARRATIVE REPORT OF COMBAT OF STIRLING 1 A/C 'Q' (BF 352) 218 Squadron.

Night 11/12th June 1943. Target - Disseldorf.

Comdn. Sgt Aaron.	M/U Gnr. Sgt Richmond.
Navigator. Sgt Brennan.	R/Gnr. Sgt Mc Cabe.
W/Op. Sgt Gray.	F/Eng. Sgt Hitchcock.
F/Eng. Gnr. F/S Larden	

Stirling 'Q' *M.E. 109*

On the night of 11/6/43 whilst flying to Disseldorf Stirling 1 A/C (BF 352) of 218 Squadron was attacked at 0110 hours by an ME 109, 25 miles North of Antwerp. Our aircraft was flying at 13,000 feet on a course of 112 deg T. and an I.A.S. of 160 mph. Bombs had not been dropped. The visibility was very good, there being a full moon on the starboard quarter and no cloud. The enemy aircraft was first seen by the Rear Gunner (Sgt McCabe) 1200 yds away on the port quarter and slightly below, it closed in to about 700 yds. and our rear gunner opened fire with two bursts. The enemy aircraft immediately broke away to starboard and was not seen again. At no time did the enemy aircraft open fire.

<u>NAME OF O.T.U. AND A.G.S. AT WHICH GUNNERS WERE TRAINED.</u>	<u>Rear Gunner.</u> Sgt Mc Cabe. No 7 A.G.S. Stormy Down. No 26 O.T.U. Wing.
	<u>Mid-Upper Gunner.</u> Sgt Richmond. No 2 A.G.S. Dalross. 1483 Flight Marham.

..Sgt. Aaron.. Sgt.
Captain of 'Q' No 218 Squadron.

J.L. R. ... F/Lt.
.....
Squadron Gunnery Leader.

13.

Combat Report submitted by Flight Sergeant Arthur Aaron and crew.

July ended with a devastating attack on Remscheid by roughly equal numbers of Halifaxes, Lancasters and Stirlings on the 30/31st, and this brought down the final curtain on the Ruhr offensive. A fairly modest force of around 250 aircraft destroyed over 80% of the town's built-up area, including most of its industry and 3,100 houses, and eleven hundred people lost their lives. The Stirling brigade sustained the highest numerical and percentage losses, and one of the eight missing examples of the type was from Downham Market, where BF440 crash-landed on return. Sgt Knight and his crew were unhurt, but their colleagues in BF519 were less fortunate, and all died on Dutch soil after an encounter with a nightfighter. The squadron launched a new record of 130 sorties during the month, losing five aircraft and four crews, including that of the commanding officer. Operation Gomorrah was concluded somewhat inauspiciously on the 2/3rd of August, when violent electrical storms and icing conditions persuaded many crews to abandon their sorties and turn for home. Some bombed alternative targets, while others jettisoned their bombs over the sea, and little fresh damage was inflicted on Hamburg. 218 Squadron despatched fifteen crews, of which, one returned soon after take-off, nine jettisoned their loads, two brought their bombs home, and just three attacked the target as briefed. This undoubtedly saved lives in Hamburg, but the damage had already been done. 218 Squadron's contribution to the campaign was seventy one sorties, fifty seven of which bombed as briefed, and three aircraft failed to return.

Italy was by now teetering on the brink of capitulation, and Bomber Command was invited to help nudge it over the edge with a series of raids on its major cities during the second week of August. 1, 5 and 8 Groups began the assault, with all-Lancaster attacks on Genoa, Milan and Turin on the 7/8th. Before the Alps were crossed again, Mannheim suffered the destruction of thirteen hundred buildings on the 9/10th in the absence of a Stirling contingent, and Nuremberg hosted a moderately successful raid on the following night, in which over a hundred of the type participated. Three of them failed to return home, among them EE885, which crashed in southern Germany after being hit by incendiaries over the target. Seven of the crew abandoned the stricken aircraft safely and fell into enemy hands, but the pilot, F/L Fillmore, was killed, possibly through sacrificing his chance of survival to save his crew. Earlier on the 10th, the squadron donated one of its flights to form the nucleus of a new unit, 623 Squadron, with which it would share Downham Market, until the latter was disbanded in December.



No.623 Squadron, RAF Downham Market

Lancasters and Halifaxes returned to Milan on the 12/13th, while 112 Stirlings set out for Turin, with forty Pathfinder Halifaxes and Lancasters for company. On approaching the target, 218 Squadron's EF452 was hit by fire from another bomber, killing the navigator instantly, and wounding other members of the crew, including the pilot, F/S Aaron. He was hit in the face and chest, and was unable to use his right arm. The flight engineer and bomb-aimer took control of the Stirling, which now had only three good engines, and pointed its nose towards North Africa, while the pilot was given morphine and made as comfortable as possible. As the North African coast was reached, Aaron, whose jaw was shattered, and who consequently was unable to speak, insisted on trying to take control. It proved impossible for him to do so, but he remained conscious, and wrote instructions with his left hand to help his colleagues with the landing. Finally, at the fifth attempt, the Stirling was successfully belly-landed at Bone airfield in Algeria, where F/S Aaron succumbed nine hours later to his injuries. Had he rested quietly during the flight from Turin, the likelihood is that he could have survived, but instead, he became the second and last Stirling crewman to be awarded the Victoria Cross. Remarkably, the only other one was also awarded posthumously, to F/S Middleton of 149 Squadron, following a raid on the same target of Turin in November 1942. Lancasters continued the assault on Milan on the 14/15th and 15/16th, and it was left to 3 Group and a Pathfinder element to conclude the campaign against Italy at Turin on the 16/17th. On return to their stations, many crews were diverted because of poor visibility, and some of them only arrived back home late on the 17th, preventing them from being made ready in time for an operation that night of the utmost importance. One 218 Squadron Stirling, EH884, did not return at all, having been shot down by a nightfighter over France while outbound, killing W/O Chudzick and four of his crew. Two men did survive, a gunner, who fell into enemy hands, and the navigator, who didn't, and managed to retain his freedom.

Since the start of hostilities, intelligence had been filtering through concerning German research into rocket weapons. Through the interception and decoding of signals traffic, the centre for such activity was found to be at Peenemünde, an isolated location on the island of Usedom on the Baltic coast. Regular reconnaissance flights helped to build up a picture of the activity there, and through listening in on signals, the brilliant scientist, Dr R V Jones, was able to monitor the V-1 trials being conducted over the Baltic, and gather much useful information on the weapon's range and accuracy. Churchill's chief scientific adviser, Professor Lindemann, or Lord Cherwell as he became, steadfastly refused to give credence to rockets as weapons, and even when confronted by a photograph of a V-2 on a trailer at Peenemünde, taken by a PRU Mosquito as recently as June, he stubbornly remained unmoved. It required the urgings of Dr Jones and Duncan Sandys to persuade Churchill of the need to act, and it was finally agreed that an operation should be mounted at the first available opportunity. This arose on the night of the 17/18th of August, for which a detailed plan was meticulously prepared. The Peenemünde research and development establishment consisted of three main areas, the housing complex where the scientists and workers lived, the assembly buildings, and the experimental site. The operation was, therefore, to take place in three waves, each wave assigned to a specific aiming point, beginning with the housing estate, and the Pathfinders were charged with the responsibility of shifting the point of aim accordingly. 3 and 4 Groups were to go in first, to be followed by the 1 Group attack on the assembly sheds, while 5 and 6 Groups brought up the rear at the

experimental site. The entire operation would be controlled by VHF by a Master of Ceremonies, or Master Bomber, in the manner pioneered by Gibson at the Dams, and the officer selected was G/C Searby of 83 Squadron, who had been Gibson's successor as commanding officer at 106 Squadron. He would be required to remain in the target area throughout the raid, within range of the defences, directing the marking and bombing, and exhorting the crews to press home their attacks. A spoof raid on Berlin by eight Mosquitos of 139 Squadron was intended to draw off the enemy nightfighters, and provide the crews with a clear run at the target, where the bombing would be conducted from medium to low level.

597 aircraft answered the call for a maximum effort, the numbers somewhat depleted by the unavailability, as already mentioned, of a proportion of the Stirling brigade. Most aircraft got away between 21.00 and 22.00 hours, and set course in clear conditions for southern Denmark. 218 Squadron managed only five aircraft, led by W/C Oldbury in BF522, but he was forced to return early with a faulty intercom. This left S/L Ryall in EE888, F/L Kingsbury in EH923, W/O Grant in BK700 and F/S Adams in BK650, all of whom reached the target area without incident. The initial marking of the housing estate went awry, and the first markers fell onto the forced workers camp at Trassenheide, more than a mile beyond the planned aiming point. This inevitably attracted a proportion of the 3 and 4 Group bombs, and heavy casualties were inflicted upon the friendly foreign nationals trapped inside their wooden barracks. Once rectified, this phase of the operation proceeded according to plan, and a number of important members of the establishment's technical staff were killed. The 1 Group attack on the assembly sheds was hampered by a strong crosswind, but this area too sustained severe damage, leaving just the experimental site for 5 and 6 Groups. It was at this point, that the nightfighters arrived belatedly from Berlin, and proceeded to take a heavy toll of aircraft, both in the skies over Peenemünde, and on the route home towards Denmark. The 5 Group crews were authorized to adopt their "time and distance" method of bombing if the target were obscured by smoke, and some did so, although this was perhaps the least effective part of the operation. Forty aircraft failed to return home, and twenty nine of these were 5 and 6 Group aircraft from the final wave. The operation was sufficiently successful to set back the development programme of the V-2 by a number of weeks, and the production of secret weapons was moved underground immediately afterwards.

Harris had long believed, that Berlin, as the seat and symbol of Nazi power, held the ultimate key to victory. He maintained the belief, that bombing alone could win the war, and if this could be achieved, it would remove the need for the kind of protracted and bloody land campaigns, which he had personally witnessed during the Great War. At the time, it was a perfectly reasonable theory, which Harris was the first in a position to put to the test. It is only in the light of recent conflicts, that we know with absolute certainty of the necessity to physically occupy the enemy's territory, in order to gain complete submission. On the night of the 23/24th, Harris embarked on the first stages of what would be the longest and most bitterly fought campaign of the war. Nothing before or after came closer to breaking the Command, and it would prove to be the one which brought down the final curtain on the Stirling's career as a front line bomber. 727 aircraft took off for the Capital, 124 of them Stirlings, and the Pathfinders were confronted by the usual difficulties of trying to identify the city centre from the jumble of images on their H2s screens. In the event, they

marked the southern outskirts of the city, and some of the main force crews approached from the south-west instead of a more southerly direction, depositing many bomb loads onto outlying communities and open country. This would be a feature of the entire campaign, but at least, on this night, considerable damage was inflicted on the southern districts, where 2,600 buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged, and this represented the best result yet at the "Big City". On the debit side, the loss of fifty six aircraft was a new record, and sixteen of them were Stirlings, 12.9% of those despatched. Three Downham Market dispersals lay empty next morning, two belonging to 218 Squadron, those normally occupied by BF522 and EH986, and one from 623 Squadron. The 218 Squadron aircraft contained the crews of F/S Martin and F/S Williams respectively, the former crashing into the sea off Denmark killing all on board. The latter went down in the target area, and only the flight engineer and bomb-aimer escaped with their lives to become PoWs. The 623 Squadron loss was the unit's first, and was keenly felt across the tarmac at 218 Squadron. S/L Hiles DSO, DFC had completed two tours with the squadron, before being posted as a staff officer to 3 Group HQ. It was something of a scratch crew setting out in EH925, mostly made up of 218 Squadron airmen, and all were killed, when it was shot down by a nightfighter a little south of Berlin.

104 Stirlings joined 570 other aircraft for a raid on Nuremberg on the 27/28th, when most of the bombing again fell beyond the city limits, while the remainder was scattered across its south-eastern districts. The disappointment was compounded by the loss of thirty three aircraft, eleven of each type, and this represented a 10.5% loss rate for the Stirlings. 218 Squadron's EF448 crashed in Germany, killing F/S Davis and four of his crew, while the two survivors joined their recently captured colleagues. The Command was due another success, and this came on the 30/31st, with a two-phase attack on the twin towns of Mönchengladbach and Rheydt. Unlike the two-phase operations of 1944/45, which allowed a two or three hour gap between waves, this was a two minute pause, while the Pathfinders transferred the marking from the former to the latter. The main force crews exploited accurate marking, to destroy over 2,300 buildings in the two locations, but another twenty five aircraft failed to return home. 218 Squadron posted missing two crews, those of F/S Clague in BK650, and Sgt Bennett in EF903. The former was shot down by a nightfighter over Holland on the way home, and it was later learned that the pilot and three others had been killed, while the navigator and a gunner were in enemy hands, and the bomb-aimer was on the run, ultimately to evade capture. There was no good news concerning the latter, however, which crashed in the target area with total loss of life. The month was brought to a close on the night of the 31st, with the second of the current series against Berlin. This was a dismal failure, caused largely by further problems with H2s, which led to the markers again falling well to the south of the city centre. Bombs fell up to thirty miles back along the line of approach, and forty seven aircraft were lost, seventeen of them Stirlings, a massive 16%. Remarkably, 218 Squadron came through unscathed to post a monthly tally of 107 sorties for the loss of eight aircraft and seven complete crews.

The current phase of the Berlin offensive was concluded by an all Lancaster force on the 3/4th of September, in an attack which again largely undershot the target. However, some of the bombing hit the Siemensstadt district, where a number of important war industry factories suffered a serious loss of production. The creep-back was incorporated into the plan of attack at Mannheim and Ludwigshafen on the 5/6th, when the aiming point was in

the eastern half of Mannheim, with an approach from the west. As expected, the bombing spread back over the western half of Mannheim, before spilling across the Rhine into Ludwigshafen, and thousands of buildings were either destroyed or seriously damaged. The Stirling losses were 7%, and the alarm bells continued to ring at Bomber Command HQ. 218 Squadron was not afflicted, but its time would come during the final week of the month. Four hundred Lancasters and Halifaxes raided Munich on the 6/7th, before some of the Stirling brigade took part in what became a controversial operation on the 8/9th. Operation Starkey had been devised to mislead the enemy into believing that an invasion was imminent, and it involved all of the services, including the RAF. Harris was not amused at being ordered to participate in what he described as play-acting, and when the time came, he gave it less than his full commitment. Starkey began in mid August with highly visible troop movements, and the assembly of glider fleets and landing craft, which any self-respecting enemy reconnaissance crew could not fail to notice. Attacks on heavy gun emplacements on the French coast were to have begun in the final week of August, but poor weather conditions continued into September, and it was not until the night of the 8/9th, that operations could take place. By this time, the Air Ministry had revised its demands on Harris, and in the interests of keeping civilian casualties at an acceptable level, reduced the commitment of heavy bombers. The targets for this night were two batteries, code-named Religion and Andante, situated respectively north and south of the small resort town of Le Portel near Boulogne. Phase I, against the northern site, involved Oboe Mosquitos and Pathfinder Halifaxes marking for fifty seven Stirlings and sixty one Wellingtons from 91 and 93 Training Groups. 218 Squadron contributed seven aircraft, all of which carried out their assigned tasks and returned safely. The Phase II force was of similar size and make-up, except for a number of 6 Group Wellingtons, and 92 Group representing the Training Groups. Four 218 Squadron Stirlings took part in the attack on the Andante site, and all returned without mishap. Sadly, the operation was a failure, and neither battery was damaged, while Le Portel suffered grievously, and around five hundred of its inhabitants lost their lives.

There were no further operations for the main force crews until the night of the 15/16th, when 369 crews drawn from 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups were briefed for an attack on the Dunlop Rubber factory at Montlucon in central France. P/O Adams took EF425 for an air-test in preparation for the operation, but it crashed on take-off, and was written off, although without injury to the crew. The operation was controlled by W/C "Dixie" Dean of 35 Squadron as Master Bomber, and he presided over an accurate attack, which left every building in the factory complex damaged, and all fourteen 218 Squadron crews returned safely having carried out their assigned tasks. On the following night, a similar force tried to repeat the success at the important railway yards at Modane, on the main route into Italy. The location of the target in a steep valley thwarted the crews' best endeavours, however, and the operation failed. 218 Squadron dispatched fifteen crews, and for the second night running, there were no early returns, and all got back safely after delivering 54,480lbs of bombs.

A series of four major operations against Hanover over a four week period began on the 22/23rd, at the hands of over seven hundred aircraft. It would prove to be a difficult city to hit, and stronger than forecast winds in the target area pushed the marking and bombing onto the south-eastern outskirts, where little damage was inflicted. Two 218 Squadron

Stirlings were among the twenty six missing aircraft, and a third crashed in England after struggling home with severe flak damage. The flight engineer and both gunners had abandoned EJ105 over Germany, but one of the gunners failed to survive the descent, while his colleagues were taken prisoner. F/S Duffy managed to regain the Suffolk coast despite an engine fire, but the Stirling crashed soon afterwards, killing those left on board. EF139 was hit by bombs from above, an ever-present risk for the lower flying Stirlings, and crashed in the target area, killing Sgt Spencer and four of his crew. Finally, BK700 also crashed in Germany, and there were no survivors from the crew of P/O Colquhoun. Mannheim hosted its second raid of the month on the 23/24th, when over nine hundred houses and twenty industrial premises were destroyed, and an important I G Farben chemicals factory in the northern part of Ludwigshafen was seriously damaged. The squadron's EJ104 was brought down over Germany, and only the wireless operator from the crew of F/O Brace was able to save himself. 678 aircraft departed their stations to return to Hanover on the 27/28th, and most of them wasted their bombs on open country north of the city, after wrongly forecast winds misled the Pathfinders. 9% of the 111 Stirlings failed to return, and 218 Squadron registered the loss of two more. Both BF472 and EE937 crashed in Germany, the former in the target area, and neither produced a survivor from among the crews of F/L Balding and P/O Knight respectively. Another testing month for the Stirling brigade saw 218 Squadron launch ninety four sorties, for the loss of seven aircraft and six crews.

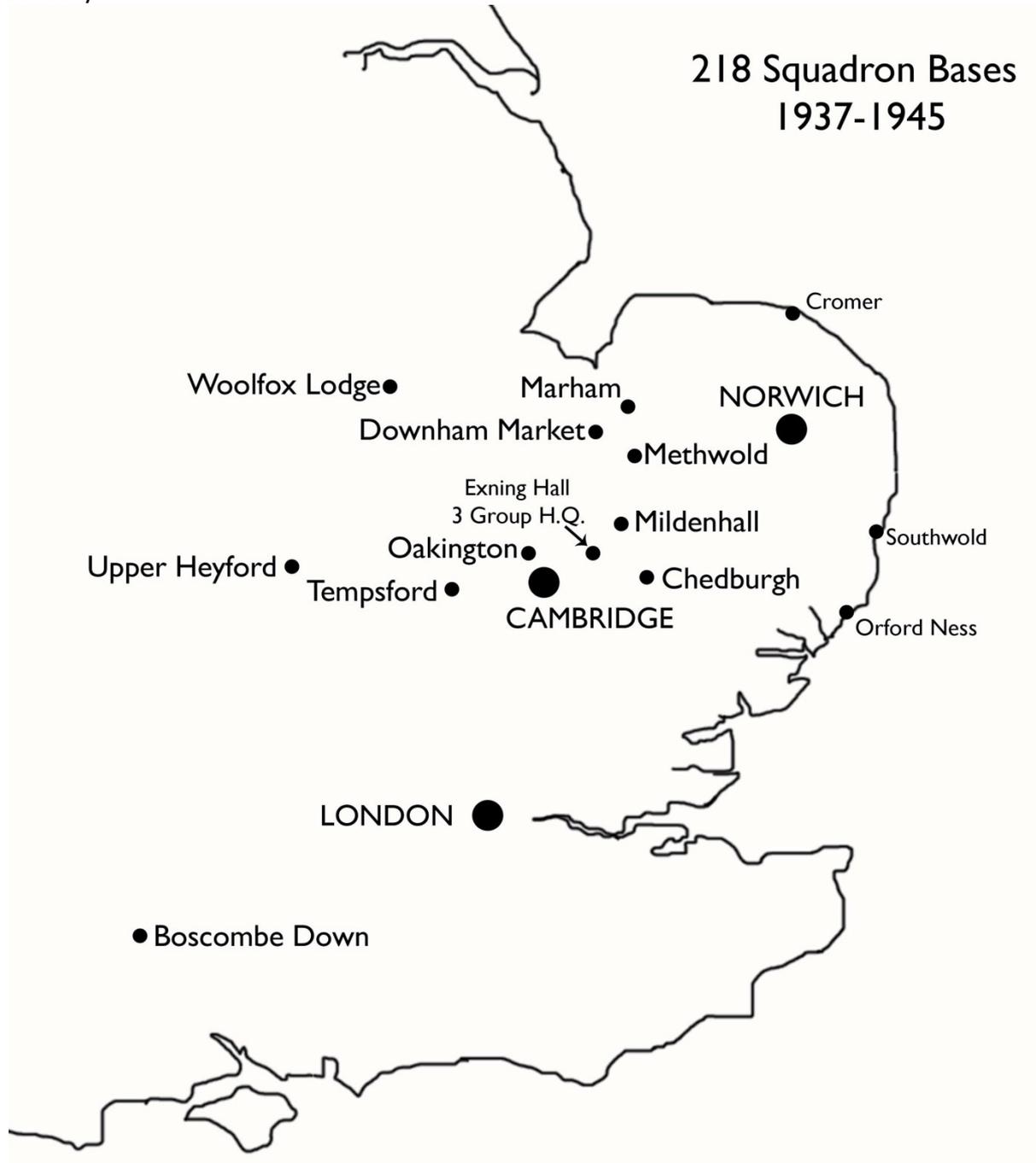
October began in hectic fashion for the Lancaster squadrons, which were called on to provide crews for six operations in the first eight nights. Hagen and Munich opened the month's account, before the Halifaxes and Stirlings were called into action at Kassel on the 3/4th. This was the first truly major assault on the city, and was only partially successful after the H2s markers overshot the aiming point, and the visual marker crews were hampered by haze. Most of the attack fell onto the western outskirts and outlying communities, although one eastern suburb was devastated. The squadron's EH984 was hit by flak over Germany, but the entire crew of F/S Riley managed to take to their parachutes before the crash, and all were taken into captivity. After escaping the worst ravages of a Bomber Command attack thus far, Frankfurt wilted under a heavy assault on the following night, during which, the main weight of bombs fell into the eastern districts and inland docks area. Both were engulfed in flames, and many administrative and public buildings were also hit in the city centre. An all Lancaster raid on Stuttgart on the 7/8th brought the first employment in numbers of 101 Squadron's nightfighter communications-jamming ABC-equipped examples of the type, and the loss of just four aircraft suggested a successful debut. The third Hanover raid took place on the 8/9th, without a contribution from Stirlings, and it was an outstanding success, which destroyed almost four thousand buildings, and damaged to some extent thirty thousand others. The Stirlings, meanwhile, were conducting a diversionary operation against Bremen, and although it was a scattered attack, the accuracy of the bombing was of secondary importance. It cost the squadron a crew, however, that of F/S Rogers, who all died when BK687 crashed in Germany. The final Hanover raid was mounted by an all Lancaster force on the 18/19th, and was a disappointing affair, which fell mainly into open country. There were no further major operations for the Stirling squadrons during the month, as they sat out an all-Lancaster raid on Leipzig on the 20/21st, and an attack on Kassel on the 22/23rd. The latter resulted in a firestorm, the destruction of over 4,300 apartment blocks, and the death of at least six thousand people, but forty three bombers failed to return, and one wonders how a Stirling contingent might have fared. Only forty

nine sorties were flown during the month, and these had cost the squadron two aircraft and crews.

November began as October had ended, with the Stirling squadrons sitting out the few bombing operations mounted. It was the Lancasters and Halifaxes which carried out a destructive raid on Düsseldorf on the 3/4th, while two dozen Stirlings mined the sea lanes around the Frisians. Lancasters alone rectified the September failure at the Modane railway yards in southern France on the 10/11th, but a Halifax main force failed in an attempt to bomb a similar target at nearby Cannes on the following night, and hit the town instead. This was the last major activity, as Harris cleared the decks for the resumption of the Berlin offensive. In a minute to Churchill on the 3rd, he had stated, that he could “wreck Berlin from end to end”, if the Americans were to join in, and that it would cost between them four to five hundred aircraft, while costing Germany the war. The Americans, however, were committed to a land invasion, and there was not the slightest chance of enlisting their support, so undaunted as always, Harris would go to the Capital alone. It was an all-Lancaster force, which rejoined the long and rocky road to Berlin on the 18/19th, while the Halifaxes and Stirlings provided the main force for a raid on the Command’s favourite diversionary target of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen. Both locations were concealed beneath cloud, and each attack was scattered, but the diversionary force produced by far the better results in terms of damage to industry and housing, and seemed to be effective in helping to restrict losses from the Berlin force to nine aircraft. In contrast, twenty three aircraft failed to return from southern Germany, and among them was the squadron’s EE884, which crashed in Germany, killing P/O Hine and all but one of his crew. It was the turn of the Lancaster crews to sit out a raid on the 19/20th, while Halifaxes and Stirlings tried in vain to hit Leverkusen. The operation was a complete failure, which landed only one high explosive bomb on the intended target, but afflicted twenty seven other towns in the southern half of the Ruhr.

A maximum effort was called for on the 22/23rd, for the next raid on Berlin. 764 aircraft took off, including fifty Stirlings, and the crews again encountered complete cloud cover, which prevented any immediate assessment of the results of their efforts. In fact, this was the most devastating assault of the war on the Capital, destroying at least three thousand houses and apartment blocks, along with twenty three industrial premises, while two thousand people lost their lives, and a further 175,000 were rendered homeless. Five Stirlings were among the twenty six missing aircraft, and this represented a 10% loss rate for the type. 218 Squadron lost one of its flight commanders, S/L Prior, who died with his crew, when EF180 crashed in the target area. The losses among the Stirlings proved to be the final straw for Harris, who, from this point, removed them from future operations over Germany, effectively relegating them to useful other, if secondary duties. This must have been something of a blow to 3 Group, which, from the very start of hostilities, had been at the forefront of the Command’s campaigns. Only 115 Squadron and the newly formed 514 Squadron, both equipped with Hercules powered Mk II Lancasters, would represent the Group in the main offensive for the time being. During the final days of the year, XV Squadron would begin the process of converting to Mk I/III Lancasters, and would be operational in January, while the rest of the Group followed suit gradually over the first nine months of 1944. From now on, Stirlings were to play an even greater role in mining operations, and, in fact, had already been responsible for around 50% of such sorties during

1943. A new role also beckoned at this time, as support increased for the resistance organisations in the occupied countries. This was already a 3 Group preserve in the hands of 138 and 161 Squadrons, the so-called "Moon" squadrons, operating out of their secret station at Tempsford in Bedfordshire. The restrictions placed on Stirling operations applied only to Germany, and this left the way clear for bombing operations over France, where a new menace was being prepared for use against Britain. V-1 launching sites were being set up, and these would become targets for 3 Group's Stirling contingent during December and January.



The main offensive continued for the rest of the Command, and twenty four hours after the highly productive raid on Berlin, an all-Lancaster main force followed up with proportionate success, destroying another two thousand houses, and killing around fifteen hundred

people. They returned on the 26/27th, and despite misplaced markers, managed to destroy thirty eight war industry factories, and damage many more. 218 Squadron flew a modest forty four sorties during the month for the loss of two aircraft and crews, and December would make even fewer demands. The main force went to Berlin on the 2/3rd, and received a bloody nose at the hands of the defences, and then inflicted a heavy blow on Leipzig on the following night. Some Stirlings mined in northern waters on the 1/2nd, and around the Frisians on the 4/5th, before a period of inactivity took the Command through to mid month. On the night of the 16/17th, Lancasters raided Berlin, while twenty six Stirlings, including four from 218 Squadron, joined in the first of a series of attacks on flying bomb sites, this one at Tilley-le-Haut near Abbeville. Other Stirlings carried out mining sorties around the Frisians and in French coastal waters, the squadron's EE888 failing to return from the latter, and was lost without trace somewhere in the Bay of Biscay with the crew of F/S Williams. MZ263 arrived back over Cornwall short of fuel, in the kind of bad weather conditions, which were to blight the night's efforts for the whole Command, and it was crash-landed at St Eval by F/O Locke and his crew, who all sustained injuries. The 1, 6 and 8 Group stations were particularly effected by thick fog, and twenty nine Lancasters either crashed or were abandoned by their tired crews as they sought for somewhere to land on return from the Capital, and around 150 members of air crew lost their lives. The raid on the flying bomb site failed, despite being marked by Oboe Mosquitos, and this highlighted the limitations of Oboe as an aid to precision bombing. Although ideal for urban areas, where a margin of error of a few hundred yards was immaterial, a small target required pin point accuracy. A simultaneous attack on a site at Flixecourt by 617 Squadron under W/C Cheshire had also failed for the same reason, but the difference here, was that 617 Squadron and Cheshire had the influence to do something about it. The frustrations born out of this and a later failure would lead to 617 Squadron developing its own low level visual marking technique using Mosquitos, and this would ultimately result in 5 Group becoming an independent force from April 1944. The Stirlings and 617 Squadron returned to the flying bomb sites on the 22/23rd, 218 Squadron providing one aircraft for the Abbeville site and six for one in the Cherbourg area. An all-Lancaster main force went to Berlin on the 23/24th, and on Christmas Eve, another attack was planned on a flying bomb site, but was subsequently cancelled. The fifth wartime Christmas came and went in relative peace, before a maximum effort raid on Berlin took place on the 29/30th with only moderate success. This would prove to be the first of three trips to the Capital in an unprecedented five nights spanning the turn of the year, a burden which was to fall principally on the Lancaster squadrons. 218 was the least employed of the Stirling units during the month, and despatched only twenty five sorties for the loss of two aircraft and one crew. It had been a year of steady and persistent losses for 218 Squadron, with a few bad nights, but unlike many other units, there had been no catastrophes, and the coming year would bring a drastic reduction in missing aircraft and crews.

1944

The year began with all-Lancaster main forces raiding Berlin on the nights of the 1/2nd and 2/3rd, each time ineffectively for a combined loss of fifty five aircraft. They gained some compensation at Stettin on the 5/6th, when twenty industrial buildings and over eleven hundred houses were destroyed, and eight ships were sunk in the harbour. On the 14/15th, almost five hundred Lancasters attacked Brunswick for the first time in numbers, and failed

to inflict more than light damage, on what would prove to be an elusive target until the autumn. It was an expensive night, costing thirty eight aircraft, and a further thirty five were missing from the next raid on Berlin on the 20/21st. On the following night, Halifaxes joined in to send a force of over six hundred aircraft to Magdeburg, when, in return for an inconclusive raid and almost certainly little damage, a new record loss of fifty seven aircraft was incurred. There was to be no respite for the hard-pressed main force and Pathfinder crews, however, and on the 27/28th, they embarked on the first of three trips to Berlin in just four nights. This was an unprecedented concentration of long range operations, and one which tested the resolve of the crews to the absolute limit. Each of the raids achieved a reasonable degree of success, and the Capital suffered heavy damage, but nowhere were their signs of collapse, and the city continued to function as the seat of government.

The Stirling squadrons meantime, had been spending the month on mining operations, and prosecuting the on-going campaign against flying bomb sites. The latter involved fifty seven Stirlings on the 4/5th, including twelve from 218 Squadron, whose target was at Hazebrouck, while 617 Squadron dealt with a second site, and both targets were plastered without loss. It was also on this night, that Bomber Command made mention for the first time of flights on behalf of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The delivery and collection of agents from French fields, and the dropping of arms and supplies to resistance organisations had, as previously mentioned, been in progress for two years under a cloak of secrecy. The secrecy would remain in place, but such was the demand for these flights, that 3 Group detached elements of its Stirling squadrons to Tempsford on a rota basis. 218 Squadron would not become involved until February, but continued to contribute to the attacks on flying bomb sites. The next of these took place on the 10/11th, when the squadron put up eight aircraft for a target in the Pas-de-Calais, and this was followed on the 14/15th, the night of the Brunswick failure, when fifty nine Stirlings and thirteen Halifaxes bombed three sites without loss. 218 Squadron sent nine crews to a site at Cherbourg on this night, and a further ten to the same area on the 20/21st. While the Command was receiving its bloody nose at Magdeburg, eighty nine Stirlings were involved in attacks on five sites, 218 Squadron despatching ten to Hazebrouck and two to Cherbourg, while 617 Squadron attended to a sixth, and again there were no losses. The final raids of this type during the month took in a number of sites on the 25/26th, for which 218 Squadron put up seven aircraft for Cherbourg, and then Stirlings featured prominently in the extensive diversionary measures laid on in support of the Berlin operations. On the 27/28th they laid mines off the Dutch coast, and on the 28/29th they carried out their "gardening" activities in Kiel Bay, but on the latter occasion particularly, the German nightfighter controller was not misled, and forty six Lancasters and Halifaxes failed to return. 218 Squadron flew five mining and forty one bombing sorties during the month, and operated without loss.

The weather at the start of February hampered main force operations, and prevented Harris from mounting another assault on Berlin early on, to follow on the heels of the late January trio of raids. It was not until the night of the 15/16th that the operation took place, and it was a record-breaking night in a number of ways. The 891 aircraft taking off represented the largest non-1,000 force to date, and it was the first time that five hundred Lancasters and three hundred Halifaxes had operated together. Those reaching the target delivered a record 2,600 tons of bombs, much of it to good effect within the city, although many bomb loads again fell onto outlying communities. It was a good night for the defenders, however,

who hacked down forty three bombers. On the 19/20th, over eight hundred aircraft set out for Leipzig, and headed towards the greatest disaster to afflict the Command thus far in the war. Nightfighters intercepted the bomber stream as it crossed the Dutch coast, and remained with it all the way to the target, where some crews arrived ahead of the Pathfinders through wrongly forecast winds. As they orbited in the target area waiting for the markers to go down, around twenty of them were shot down by the local flak, and collisions accounted for the loss of at least four other aircraft. The raid itself was inconclusive, but the casualty figures were not, and when all of those returning home had done so, there was an unbelievable shortfall of seventy eight, a new record loss by a clear twenty one aircraft. In contrast, only nine aircraft failed to return from a useful raid on Stuttgart on the following night, before a new tactic was introduced for the next two raids, against Schweinfurt and Augsburg on the 24/25th and 25/26th respectively. The forces were split into two waves, separated by two hours, with the intention of catching the nightfighters on the ground refueling and re-arming. Over seven hundred aircraft took part at the former, and while the operation was dogged by undershooting and was a failure, the second phase force lost 50% fewer aircraft than the first, in an overall casualty figure of thirty three. The Augsburg operation was a copy book example of the Command at its most awesome, when all facets of a plan came together in perfect harmony. The beautiful and historic old city was devastated by fire, and centuries of its cultural heritage were lost forever. Apart from 149 Squadron's detachment at Tempsford, the Stirling squadrons' efforts during the month were devoted entirely to mining. On each of the nights when main force operations were laid on, the Stirlings were out in numbers to provide a diversion. When Berlin was attacked, and on the night of the Leipzig debacle they were mining in Kiel Bay, for Stuttgart they operated in French coastal waters, and then it was back to Kiel Bay and the Kattegat during the Schweinfurt and Augsburg raids. Mining also took place on nights when the main force stayed at home, and the squadron registered its first loss of the year during one of these, EJ125 crashing into the sea while sowing its vegetables near Borkum, and F/L Wiseman and his crew lost their lives. The squadron despatched a total of fifty nine mining sorties during the month, and on the 28th, detached twelve aircraft to Tempsford under the A Flight commander, S/L Overton, to begin its stint on behalf of SOE.

The main force went back to Stuttgart on the 1/2nd of March, and lost only four out of 557 aircraft, in return for a highly destructive attack. Thereafter, the participating squadrons stayed at home until mid month, and it was during this interlude that 218 Squadron began its SOE flights over France, and the first salvos were fired in the pre-invasion campaign as part of the Transportation Plan. SOE sorties were particularly arduous, and often required crews to fly low, sometimes in difficult visibility, to pinpoint the drop zone, making them easy targets for light flak. Seventy six aircraft were involved in SOE sorties on the 4/5th, on return from which, 218 Squadron's EE944 lost its port outer engine during final approach to Tempsford. The pilot tried to overshoot, but was unable to prevent the port wing from dropping, and the Stirling side-slipped into the ground. P/O Edwards and four of his crew died in the wreckage, while the two gunners sustained injuries. On the night of the 6/7th, Halifaxes of 4 and 6 Groups carried out the first of the interdiction raids in preparation for the forthcoming invasion. The systematic dismantling by bombing of the French and Belgian railway networks would occupy much of the Command's attention from now until the end of the summer, but with the Lancasters still fully engaged in the winter campaign, it was left to the Halifaxes to open proceedings on this night. The target was the railway yards at

Trappes, where heavy damage was inflicted on installations, track and rolling stock. Later on the 7th, 218 Squadron completed its departure from Downham Market, and took up residence at Woolfox Lodge. That night, a predominately Halifax force, with some 3 and 6 Group Lancasters for company, carried out a similar assault on the railway yards at Le Mans, and also achieved considerable success. On the 9th, W/C Oldbury concluded his tour as commanding officer, and was posted to Bomber Command HQ. He was replaced by the experienced W/C Fenwick-Wilson, who had previously commanded 405 Squadron RCAF between August 1941 and February 1942. Le Mans was effectively hit again on the 13/14th by an all Halifax heavy contingent, before the main force returned to work for the first time in two weeks, for the third raid on Stuttgart in a little over three weeks. Unlike the first two, this was not a success, and thirty seven aircraft were lost, most of them to nightfighters. Also on this night, Stirlings became involved for the first time in the Transportation Plan, when joining Halifaxes in a raid on the railway yards at Amiens. On the 16th, the 218 Squadron detachment concluded its period of duty at Tempsford, having flown forty four sorties, and that night, Stirlings and Halifaxes returned to Amiens for what became another successful tilt at the railway yards.

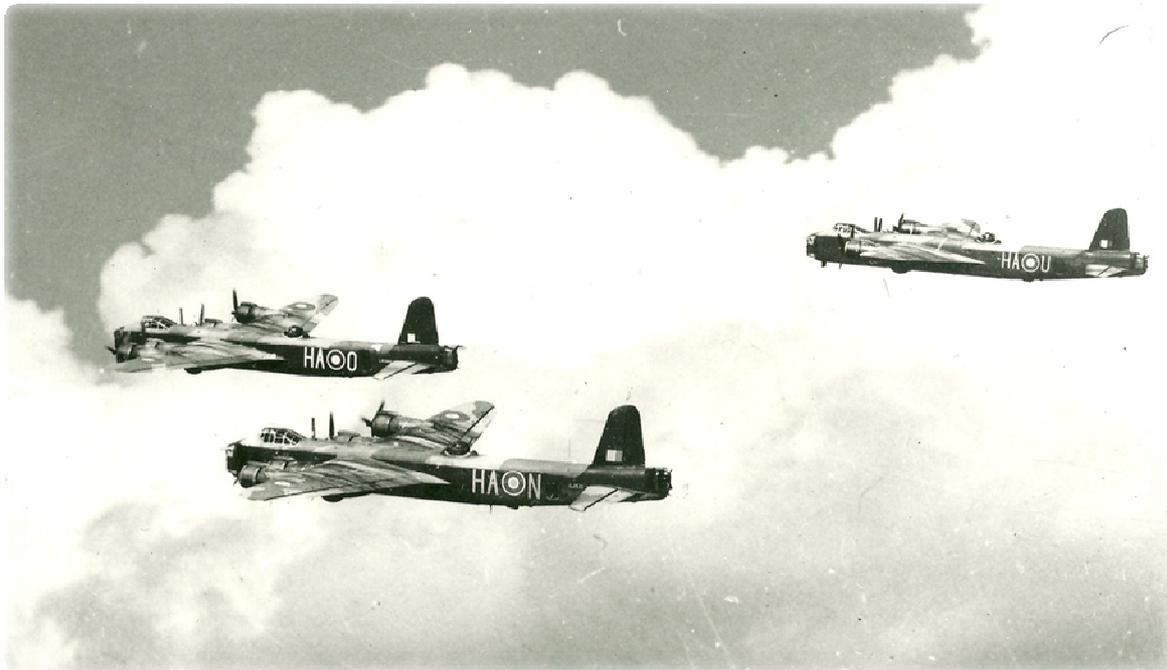
Two massively destructive attacks, each employing over eight hundred aircraft, were delivered on Frankfurt on the 18/19th and 22/23rd. The first alone resulted in the destruction of or serious damage to over six thousand buildings, and after the second one, half of the city was left without electricity, gas and water for an extended period. On the 23/24th, Halifaxes and Stirlings attacked the railway yards at Laon, but the Master Bomber called a halt half-way through. Twenty four hours later, Harris sent a force of heavy bombers to Berlin for the final time during the war. Over eight hundred aircraft were involved, and the crews encountered unusually strong winds from the north, which broke the cohesion of the bomber stream, and led to scattered bombing. More than a hundred outlying communities were afflicted by stray bomb loads, while a moderate amount of damage was created in the city's south-western districts. The jetstream winds blew many returning aircraft over heavily defended areas of Germany, and two thirds of the seventy two shot-down bombers were claimed by the flak batteries. On the 25/26th, a mixed force of all three types failed in an attempt to bomb the railway yards at Aulnoye. Although the Berlin offensive was now over, the winter campaign still had a week to run, and two more major operations for the crews to negotiate. The first of these fell on Essen on the 26/27th, when over seventeen hundred houses and apartment blocks were destroyed, and many war industry factories sustained heavy damage. Thus was continued the remarkable run of successes at this target, since the introduction of Oboe to main force operations a year earlier. On the same night, Halifaxes and Stirlings damaged the railway yards at Courtrai, but also hit the town, causing many civilian casualties. The winter campaign came to an end on the night of the 30/31st, with a standard maximum effort raid on Nuremberg. The operation went ahead despite grave doubts about the forecast cloud, and in the face of a hotly disputed 5 Group-inspired straight in route. The meteorological conditions were almost freakish, with unusually bright moonlight and crystal clear visibility, and the forecast cloud at cruising altitude failed to materialize, but formed instead as a back cloth below, to silhouette the bombers like flies on a table cloth. Condensation trails formed to further advertise to the enemy the presence of hostile aircraft over their homeland, and jetstream winds from the south added insult to injury. The operation became the greatest disaster to afflict the Command during the entire war, with the loss of ninety five aircraft, most of them falling to nightfighters before the

target was even reached. Over a hundred crews bombed Schweinfurt in error, and Nuremberg escaped with only insignificant damage.

That which now faced the main force crews was in marked contrast to what had been endured over the long winter months. The Transportation Plan was now the priority for the whole Command, and the long slog to Germany on dark, often dirty nights, was to be replaced by largely shorter range hops to France and Belgium in improving weather conditions. These operations would prove to be equally demanding in their way, however, and would require of the crews a greater commitment to accuracy, to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. The main fly in the ointment was a dictate from on high, which decreed that most such operations were worthy of counting as just one third of a sortie towards the completion of a tour, and until this flawed policy was rescinded, mutterings of discontent pervaded the bomber stations. Despite the prohibitive losses over the winter, the Command was in remarkably fine fettle to face its new challenge, and Harris was in the enviable position of being able to achieve that, which had eluded his predecessor. This was, to attack multiple targets simultaneously, with forces large enough to make an impact. Such was the number of aircraft and crews available to him, that he could now assign targets to individual Groups, to Groups in tandem or to the Command as a whole, as dictated by operational requirements. Although invasion considerations were the priority, Harris still favoured city-busting as the key to victory, and while he remained at the helm, he would pursue this line of attack whenever an opportunity arose.

The new campaign got into full swing on the night of the 9/10th, when Halifaxes, Lancasters and Stirlings of 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups attacked the Lille-Delivrance goods station, while elements from all the Groups went for the railway yards at Villeneuve-St-Georges on the outskirts of Paris. The former in particular was highly successful, and destroyed over two thousand items of rolling stock, along with buildings and installations. Sadly, the satisfaction was marred by very heavy casualties among French civilians in adjacent residential districts, and this was a problem which would never satisfactorily be addressed. Five similar targets were attacked on the following night, before an area raid on Aachen devastated the town on the 11/12th, and killed over fifteen hundred people. There would be few opportunities for Stirlings to carry bombs from now on, and the number of squadrons operating the type under Bomber Command was dwindling. From the 14th, the Command became officially subject to the dictates of SHAEF, and would remain thus shackled until the Allied armies were sweeping towards the German frontier at the end of the summer. While 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups were inflicting heavy punishment on Cologne on the 20/21st, and 5 Group was carrying out its first fully fledged independent operation with its own marker force at La Chapelle, 218 Squadron sent fourteen Stirlings to conduct a G-H raid on the railway depot at Chambly. G-H would become a 3 Group preserve from the autumn, and in its hands, it would prove to be a highly effective blind bombing device. The system was based on a G-H equipped lead aircraft releasing its bombs as a signal to the following gaggle to do likewise, and it would be developed by the Group into a fine art, with a particular application against oil and railway targets. On this night, only four aircraft bombed, and LJ448 crashed in France, killing F/L Doolan and one of his crew, while one man was taken prisoner, and four others ultimately evaded capture. Two nights later, Düsseldorf was pounded by well over five hundred aircraft, and two thousand houses were destroyed or seriously damaged, along with dozens of industrial premises. Also on this night, forty eight Stirlings, including fourteen

from 218 Squadron, joined the other types for a raid on the railway yards at Laon. Not only was the Master Bomber's Lancaster shot down, but 218 Squadron's EH942 was despatched by a nightfighter, and crashed in France killing S/L Poulter and one of his gunners. This was the pilot's first operation for three years, but happily, the other five members of the crew escaped by parachute, and evaded the enemy's attempts to capture them. The squadron was involved at Chambly twice more, on the 24/25th and 26/27th with four and ten aircraft respectively, and together with mining operations, this brought the month's tally to 113 sorties for the loss of two aircraft.



"B" Flight above the clouds May 1944

Having closed 218 Squadron's April bombing account, it fell to Chambly to open that of May. Mounted on the night of the 1/2nd, it was a 3 Group operation, predominately with Lancasters, while 218 Squadron provided all sixteen Stirlings. The raid was outstandingly accurate, but cost the squadron three aircraft, one of which crashed in England. EF184 was caught by a nightfighter on the way home, and was crash-landed at the emergency strip at Woodbridge by P/O Scammell. The flight engineer was killed, but whether this was during the engagement or the landing is uncertain. The two missing Stirlings, EF259 and EF504 both crashed in France, three of the former's crew losing their lives, while F/O Eliot and three others evaded capture. Two also retained their freedom from the latter, but F/O Jones and the remaining four were killed. This proved to be the last bombing operation to be carried out by the squadron during the month, and the only other Stirling units now still operating in 3 Group, 90 and 149 Squadrons, devoted their energies during May entirely to mining and SOE operations. The main force, in its constituent parts, began to concentrate in greater detail on pre-invasion targets, thus coastal batteries, airfields, ammunition dumps and military camps and depots all competed with railways for the bombers' attention. The coastal batteries were generally in the Pas-de-Calais, and well away from the planned invasion beaches, in order to maintain the deception. Deception was to play a major part in the actual landings, and 218 Squadron was one of a number of units to be selected for an important and special role. For the remainder of the month, the selected crews spent their

time in preparing for the big day, the training flights being recorded in their log books as "special local flying" or something similar. While this was in progress, the squadron maintained its commitment to mining, an activity, which cost it another aircraft on the 9th, although fortunately, without crew casualties. Returning in the early hours from the Gironde coastal region of France, EF249 lost its port inner engine while approaching base, and the pilot, F/S Samuels, was unable to select full flap. On touch-down, the Stirling swung off the runway losing its undercarriage, and was declared a write-off. There was little time for Harris to indulge in city-busting, but opportunities arose during the final third of the month, and he raided Duisburg and Dortmund for the first time in a year on the 21/22nd and 22/23rd respectively, each to good effect.

The weather at the start of June was less hospitable than had been hoped for, and delayed the launching of the invasion. Training for 218 Squadron's part in Overlord continued with practice flights on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th, during which, twenty eight sorties were flown by the eight selected crews. Their role was one of supreme importance, which would have a direct bearing on the enemy's response to the approaching invasion fleet. If Operations Glimmer and Taxable were successful, the latter a similar operation by 617 Squadron, it meant that the armada of Allied ships would probably reach its position off the Normandy beaches unopposed, and be able to disembark the invasion forces in relative peace. The plan was for six 218 Squadron aircraft in two lines of three abreast, to fly a meticulously accurate succession of overlapping elongated orbits for up to 2¾ hours, each one advancing gradually towards the coastal area between Boulogne and Le Havre, north of the genuine landing grounds. At precise intervals, Window would be dispensed into the slipstream at a rate of a bundle every twelve minutes, and to the enemy radar, this would appear as a large convoy of ships heading across the Channel at a speed of 7 knots. These six aircraft plus two reserves would represent only a tiny fraction of the Command's contribution to the invasion, and in all, a record 1,211 sorties would be flown against coastal batteries, and in diversionary or other support operations. It was 23.39 hours when LJ522 took off from Woolfox Lodge in the hands of F/L Chaplin and F/L Webster, to launch Operation Glimmer. Each aircraft carried a crew of thirteen men, comprised of two pilots, three navigators, one wireless operator, one flight engineer, two gunners, two Windowers and two spare bods. Two minutes later, S/L Brentnall and P/O Ecclestone departed in LJ472, to be followed at 23.44 by S/L Overton and F/L Funnell in EF133. The reserve aircraft were next away at 23.50, F/Ls Locke and Coram in LJ449, and F/L Knapman with the appropriately named F/L Stirling in LJ517, both of these pilot combinations RNZAF/RAAF. An hour after the departure of the first aircraft, F/Ls McAllister and Young initiated the second wave in LK401, to be followed three minutes later by F/Ls Seller and Scammell in LJ632, and F/Ls King and Gillies in EF207 at 00.43. By the time the second wave reached its beat, the first wave had completed eight of its eventual twenty three orbits, and the final fifteen would be conducted in tandem. If a single crew faltered in its course or the timing of turns and Windowing, the enemy would see the operation as a spoof, and be alerted to a landing elsewhere. In the event, the crews of both 218 and 617 Squadrons performed to the high standards expected and demanded of them, and the operations were a complete success.

A thousand aircraft were aloft on D-Day Night to attack communications targets in and around the towns leading to the beachhead. It was similar fare on the next two nights, as 218 Squadron returned to the business of mining, a role to which it would devote itself

exclusively for the remainder of the month. The campaign against railways would continue, but would run alongside two new offensives, one of which was to make particular demands on the Command's resources over the summer. This was the renewed campaign against flying bomb launching and storage sites, which would begin on the 16/17th, but first, 1, 3 and 8 Groups opened a new oil campaign with stunning success at Gelsenkirchen on the 12/13th. All production of vital aviation fuel at the Nordstern plant was halted for several weeks, at a cost to the German war effort of a thousand tons per day. The first daylight operations since the departure of 2 Group a year earlier, were mounted against E-Boats and other fast light craft at Le Havre on the evening of the 14th. It was a predominately 1 and 3 Group show, the former attacking first, with 3 Group following up at dusk, both under the umbrella of a Spitfire escort. The operation, and a similar one against Boulogne on the evening of the 15th, were entirely successful, and few craft remained sufficiently intact to pose a threat to Allied shipping supplying the beachhead. For the remainder of the month, the Command was active by day and night against railways, oil refineries, V-Weapon sites and fuel and ammunition dumps, each raid accompanied by Pathfinder Mosquitos and or Lancasters to carry out the marking. Apart from its eight sorties on behalf of Operation Glimmer, 218 Squadron flew forty nine mining sorties, which resulted in two Stirlings being written off at home on the night of the 12/13th. EF181 crashed when a tyre burst during take-off for French coastal waters, but F/L young and his crew walked away, while EF299 came to grief when attempting to overshoot on return, and F/L Funnell and his crew also emerged unscathed. As events were to prove, these were the final Stirling casualties to be suffered by the squadron as its two and a half year association with the type neared its end. On the 17th, 90 Squadron conducted its final Stirling sorties, leaving only 218 and 149 Squadrons, to carry the banner in 3 Group as bomber units.

Flying bomb sites and railway targets kept the rest of the Command busy during the first two and a half weeks of July, although the first tactical operations in support of the ground forces took place on the evening of the 7th. On the 17th, twenty eight Stirlings had a rare opportunity to carry bombs when attacking flying bomb sites, and a further twenty four participated in a 3 and 8 Group attack on five sites on the 27th. Twenty Stirlings joined a predominately Halifax force in a number of raids on flying bomb launching and storage sites in the Pas-de-Calais on the 28th, including one in the Foret de Nieppe, and this was attacked again on the following day with sixteen Stirlings in attendance. Earlier in the month, almost a thousand aircraft were involved in support for the British Second Army's Operation Goodwood by daylight on the 18th, before 1, 6 and 8 Groups returned to the oil offensive at Wesseling and Scholven-Buer that night. The first raid for two months on a German urban target was mounted against Kiel on the 23/24th, when six hundred aircraft appeared suddenly and with complete surprise from behind an elaborate 100 Group RCM screen, and inflicted massive damage on the town. Three raids in five nights on Stuttgart from the 24/25th left its central districts in ruins, and the month ended with further support for the ground forces on the 30th, and attacks on railway and V-Weapon targets on the 31st. 218 Squadron despatched over seventy mining and bombing sorties during the month, and sustained no casualties. Lancasters began to arrive at Woolfox Lodge during the second half of the month, making the squadron the forty fifth to equip with the type, and the business of converting the squadron's crews began in earnest.

V-Weapon related targets dominated proceedings at the start of August, and on the 2nd, twenty Stirlings joined 370 other aircraft in attacks on one launching and three supply sites. These were the last Stirling sorties by 218 Squadron, and two days later, a move was completed to Methwold, from where the Squadron's Lancaster operations would begin. Only 149 Squadron now retained Stirlings as a bomber unit in 3 Group, and its conversion would begin this month. Since the start of the year, 3 Group had been gradually emerging from its "winter of discontent", as one by one, its squadrons took on Lancasters, and soon it would regain its rightful place at the forefront of operations. After its short period of screening, 218 Squadron returned to the fray as a fully-fledged Lancaster unit on the night of the 9/10th, when seven aircraft took off to attack a flying bomb storage site at Fort d'Englos. One Lancaster returned early, but the remainder carried out their assigned tasks before coming safely back home. The successful crews and aircraft were those of S/L Brentnall in PB291, F/L Funnell in ME842, F/L Arbury in PD223, F/L Webster in NN704, F/L Sheldon in LM281 and F/L Knapman in JB475. 1, 3, 4 and 8 Groups were out in strength in daylight on the 11th to bomb railway yards and a bridge at four different locations. The 218 Squadron element of six was assigned to the marshalling yards at Lens, and all returned safely. The inevitable first loss of a 218 Squadron Lancaster came on a busy night of operations on the 12/13th. One of the two major raids was of an experimental nature on Brunswick, and was conducted without a Pathfinder presence, to ascertain the ability of main force crews to locate and hit a target on the strength of their own H2s returns. Meanwhile, 297 Lancasters and Halifaxes were sent to Rüsselsheim to attack the Opel motor works, but failed to cause more than minor damage, after most of the bombs found open country. Twenty aircraft failed to return, including PD252, one of six 218 Squadron participants, and this crashed in France, killing P/O Humphrey and two of his crew. Four others survived to be taken into captivity, but one of the gunners was critically injured, and lost his fight for life within hours. It was the pilot's seventh operation, but his first in a Lancaster.

Over eight hundred aircraft were involved in support of Canadian ground forces on the afternoon of the 14th, as they advanced on German positions around Falaise. It was on this occasion, that some stray bombs fell among Canadian troops, killing thirteen of them, while over fifty others were wounded. In preparation for his new night offensive against Germany, Harris launched a thousand aircraft by daylight on the 15th, to attack nine nightfighter airfields in Holland and Belgium. On the night of the 16/17th, over four hundred aircraft destroyed fifteen hundred houses and many industrial buildings at Stettin, and sank five ships in the harbour. A simultaneous attack on Kiel by three hundred aircraft was partially successful, many of the bombs falling within the docks area and ship building yards. Bremen was left devastated by an assault on the 18/19th, which left more than 8,600 houses and apartment blocks gutted by fire, and well in excess of a thousand people killed. The campaign against flying bomb sites would be concluded by the end of the month, as the Pas-de-Calais returned to Allied hands, but there was still time for it to claim another 218 Squadron crew. Seven of them were on the way home from a site at Vincly on the evening of the 25th, when, it seems, LM258 was hit by flak shortly before crossing the French coast. The Lancaster remained airborne and struggled on until just four hundred yards short of the Suffolk coast near Felixstowe. Here, at 21.15, it crashed into the sea, witnesses stating that the undercarriage was lowered, and both port engines were feathered. Whether by design or accident, the pilot turned into the dead engines, causing the Lancaster to side-slip into

the water. Sadly, there were no survivors from among the crew of F/L Haggis, who was on his eleventh operation, but all of the bodies were recovered for burial. That night, four hundred aircraft from 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups returned to Rüsselsheim, and put part of the Opel factory out of action, but there was no effect on lorry production. 1, 3 and 8 Groups delivered a destructive attack on Kiel on the 26/27th, and the final acts of the flying bomb campaign were played out at twelve sites on the 28th. Stettin received its second visit of the month on the 29/30th at the hands of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups, and August was brought to a close with daylight attacks by almost six hundred aircraft on nine V-2 stores on the 31st.

September would be devoted largely to returning to Allied control the three French Channel ports still occupied by the enemy. 1 and 3 Groups opened the campaign against enemy positions around Le Havre on the 5th, and further operations took place on the 6th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th, and a few hours after the last mentioned, the German garrison surrendered to British forces. Also that day, synthetic oil refineries were attacked at Castrop-Rauxel, Kamen and Gelsenkirchen under a heavy fighter escort. 5 Group inflicted a firestorm on Darmstadt later that night, in which over twelve thousand people lost their lives, and on the following night, 3 Group participated in the final heavy raid of the war on nearby Frankfurt. The western districts suffered severe damage, but seventeen Lancasters were lost, and it turned into the heaviest night of casualties for 218 Squadron during its career with the type.



Le Havre Docks

NF906, NF911 and PD262 all crashed on German soil, and there was not a single survivor from the crews of F/O Corlis, F/O Smith and F/L Seller respectively, the last mentioned consisting of eight men. One day's bombing on the 17th, during which three thousand tons were delivered on their positions, was sufficient to demonstrate to the occupiers of Boulogne that their situation was untenable, and they surrendered a little over a week later. This left only Calais to be liberated, and moves to bring this about began on the 20th. Over six hundred aircraft took part, and an accurate and concentrated attack took place. 1, 3 and 4 Groups provided the main force for a heavy raid on Neuss on the 23/24th, and later that day, the second raid was mounted against enemy positions around Calais. Attacks on the

port were conducted daily from then until the 28th, and Canadian ground forces took control shortly afterwards.



October would see the start of a new Ruhr offensive, and the heaviest ever attacks of the war. First, however, most of 1 and 3 Groups were called into action at Saarbrücken on the 5/6th, in response to a request from American ground forces to cut enemy communications through the town. This was achieved, along with the destruction of almost six thousand houses, although fortunately, many of the inhabitants had fled the town, which was now standing on the front line. The second Ruhr campaign was opened by 3, 6 and 8 Groups at Dortmund on the night of the 6/7th, and the usual extensive catalogue of damage resulted. The frontier towns of Cleves and Emmerich were mercilessly bombed by elements of 3 and 4, and 1 and 3 Groups respectively on the 7th, to protect the exposed Allied right flank following the failure of Operation Market Garden. There was little further activity for 3 Group until mid month, when Operation Hurricane was launched as a demonstration to the enemy of the overwhelming superiority of the Allied air forces ranged against it. At first light on the 14th, over a thousand aircraft took off for Duisburg, arriving overhead shortly after breakfast time to deliver almost four and a half thousand tons of bombs. That night, the force returned in similar numbers to emphasize the point about superiority, and this massive effort, of despatching 2,018 sorties in less than twenty four hours, was achieved without any contribution from 5 Group.

A new role was beckoning for 3 Group as a partially independent entity using the G-H device. In order to gauge its effectiveness in the hands of a largish force, the virtually virgin target of Bonn was selected to host a raid on the 18th, so that there would be no previous damage to cloud the issue. Around a third of the Group's Lancasters were equipped with G-H to act as gaggle leaders, and their fins were painted with prominent markings. The system had been in use for some time, but not by large forces, and it was to be employed by day and night, when the target was cloud covered, and the cloud did not extend beyond 18,000 feet. 128 aircraft took off, and the operation was an outstanding success, which destroyed seven hundred buildings, mostly in the historic city's central districts. The Group would still operate in tandem with others as required, and on the 19/20th, it joined 1 and 6 groups in a two-phase assault on Stuttgart. This was the last operation by 218 Squadron to be presided over by W/C Fenwick-Wilson, who was posted to 31 Base on the 21st. W/C Smith arrived from 115 Squadron, where he had presumably been a flight commander in the rank of Squadron Leader. A G-H raid took place on Neuss on the 22nd, but this was not as successful as that on Bonn, and less than a hundred buildings were classed as destroyed. The Hurricane force moved on to Essen on the 23/24th and again on the 25th, by which time, the city had lost its former status as a major centre for war production. Leverkusen was subjected to a

G-H raid on the 26th, but cloud prevented any immediate assessment of the results. Cologne's turn at the hands of the Hurricane force came on the 28th, and again on the evenings of the 30th and 31st, and massive damage was inflicted. Throughout the month, operations had been conducted against heavy gun emplacements and the sea walls on the island of Walcheren in the Scheldt Estuary, and 3 Group was involved in a number of these. It also conducted G-H attacks on oil refineries at Wesseling and Bottrop on the 30th and 31st respectively, and both were believed to be accurate. It had been a good month for 218 Squadron, in which no aircraft or crews were lost.

The Group opened its November account with a G-H raid on an oil plant at Homberg on the 2nd, before joining the Hurricane force to pound Düsseldorf on the 2/3rd. An attempt by the Group to hit the town of Solingen failed on the 4th, but it was rescheduled for a G-H attack on the following day, and this time, thirteen hundred houses were among the buildings destroyed. Over seven hundred aircraft were involved at Gelsenkirchen on the 6th, where the Nordstern synthetic oil refinery and the town itself provided the aiming points. That night, the Group carried out a G-H raid with stunning success on Coblenz, where over 50% of the built-up area was reduced to rubble. On the 8th, a 3 Group raid on the Meerbeck oil plant at Homberg seemed to go well for the loss of just one Lancaster, and this was the first to go missing from 218 Squadron since that bad night at Frankfurt in September. PD374 was one of fifteen aircraft despatched by the squadron, and contained the crew of F/O Hough. It was shot down over Germany on the way home, killing the pilot and two others, and one of the survivors, it is believed the flight engineer, P/O Tales, was subsequently murdered by members of the SS. This ill-treatment of captured airmen would escalate as Germany's position declined, and it was a very bad time for crews to find themselves in enemy hands. In most such cases, and certainly in this one, the perpetrators underwent trial after the war, and were hanged.

On the 11th, 3 Group sent over a hundred Lancasters to Castrop-Rauxel for a G-H attack on the oil refinery, and went for a similar target at Dortmund on the 15th. In both cases, the raids were believed to be accurate, but complete cloud cover prevented any assessment by the crews. Before pushing through the enemy lines between Aachen and the Rhine, American ground forces requested that the three small towns of Düren, Jülich and Heinsberg be bombed to disrupt communications. Over eleven hundred aircraft took part in the operations on the afternoon of the 16th, when Heinsberg was assigned exclusively to 3 Group. It was something of a sledgehammer to crack a nut situation, and in a town containing only a little over a hundred civilians and a handful of enemy soldiers, half of the former lost their lives. Stormy weather over Homberg prevented crews from maintaining formation on the 20th, and it is likely that the oil plant escaped damage on this occasion. Its reprieve was short-lived, however, and came to an end on the following day, during its fifth attack of the month, the last four delivered by 3 Group. A sheet of yellow flame and a rising pall of thick black smoke was evidence enough of the accuracy of the bombing. The Group's burgeoning expertise at hitting oil related targets was providing competition for 5 Group, whose own low level visual marking system by Mosquito had proved to be highly successful. The two Groups between them, using entirely different methods, would specialize in oil and railway targets for the remainder of the war. The Nordstern plant at Gelsenkirchen provided the objective for the Group on the 23rd, before an experimental raid to ascertain the effective range of G-H. The railway yards at Fulda, a town in central Germany, south of

Kassel, were 160 miles from the frontier, and were selected as the target for a force of seventy five 3 Group Lancasters. In the event, the signal was not quite strong enough, and the bombing was widely scattered. It was a different story at Cologne on the 27th, when the Kalk Nord yards were bombed to good effect by G-H, and this was followed by a modestly effective raid on Neuss on the 28/29th. The Group's final act of the month was to send sixty Lancasters each to Bottrop and Osterfeld on the 30th, to attack a coking plant and a benzol plant.

December was to follow a similar pattern, and began for 3 Group with a G-H raid on the Hansa benzol plant at Dortmund on the 3rd. On the following day, Oberhausen suffered the destruction of almost five hundred houses in its central districts at the hands of the Group, which went to the important railway centre of Hamm on the 5th, and laid waste to 39% of the town's built-up area. This was on the day on which the squadron changed address for the final time during the war, and took up residence at Chedburgh. On the 6/7th, the Group joined forces with 1 Group to provide the main force for the first heavy attack on one of Germany's eastern oil refineries. The target was at Leuna, west of Leipzig, and photographic reconnaissance revealed extensive damage to the plant. On the 8th it was railway yards at Duisburg, and on the 11th, a similar target at Osterfeld, before a G-H raid on the Ruhrstahl steelworks at Witten, south-west of Dortmund. The steelworks was not hit, but the town suffered considerable damage, and over three hundred people lost their lives. Two of the eight missing Lancasters were from among the twelve contributed by 218 Squadron, but there was at least a happy ending for one of the crews. A flak-damaged PB766 had to be ditched fifty miles out from the Suffolk coast, after escaping fuel robbed it of three engines, but F/L Warwick and his crew were spotted by a Walrus of 277 Squadron, and rescued unhurt by a Royal Navy launch. Less fortunate were their colleagues, F/S Roberts and crew in PB674, which crashed in Germany with no survivors.



Encounter over Witten, December 12th 1944. No.218 (Gold Coast) Squadron lead No.31 Base.

An attempt by the Group to hit the railway yards at Siegen on the 16th resulted in heavy damage and casualties in the town instead, and it was a similar story at Trier, which was attacked three times by the Group in five days. Mounted on the 19th, 21st and 23rd, the severity of the damage and casualties within the town became progressively greater, and it was not possible to assess whether or not the railway yards were hit. On Christmas Eve afternoon, a hundred aircraft from the Group bombed Hangelar airfield at Bonn, and then the entire Command had a day off to celebrate the final wartime Christmas. Elements from each of the Groups were in action again on Boxing Day, however, to carry out attacks on enemy positions in the St Vith area, following the German break-out in the Ardennes on the 16th. Elements of 1, 3, 5 and 8 Groups bombed the railway yards at Rheydt on the frontier on the 27th, before 3 Group went alone to accurately attack the Gremberg yards at Cologne on the 28th, and the Lützel yards at Coblenz on the 29th. The Group operated for the final time during the year on the 31st, in an attack on the railway yards at Vohwinkel near Solingen in the Ruhr region. 218 Squadron put up seventeen Lancasters, two of which collided over the target, before crashing in or near Solingen. There were no survivors from the crew of F/O Kench in NG330, but it seems that two of the eight men on board NF926 survived what must have been a controlled crash-landing, while another parachuted to safety and was taken prisoner. He, one of the gunners, was fortunate indeed, because F/O Woodrow and Sgt Watson, the pilot and navigator respectively, were shot by a local policeman while trapped inside the aircraft. The perpetrator, Herr Schulze, was tried and hanged in 1947. It was a sad way for the year to end, particularly with the scent of victory wafting over from the Continent. The end was not yet, however, and much remained to be done before the proud and tenacious enemy finally laid down his arms.



“A” Flights Amourers RAF Chedburgh 1944. Over worked like all ground crew these men and the WAAFs were the back-bone of every squadron.

1945

The New Year began for 3 Group as the old one had ended, with a raid on the railway yards at Vohwinkel in the early evening of the 1st of January. 218 Squadron despatched seventeen aircraft, one of which, PB768, was hit by flak over the target, damaging fuel lines to the port inner engine, which was feathered. On the way home over Namur in Belgium, the Lancaster was hit twice more by American flak, causing the entire port side to catch fire. The aircraft immediately span out of control, crashing, before all but the bomb-aimer were able to comply with the bale-out order, and F/O Grivell and the other five occupants were killed. F/O Ingram sustained shrapnel wounds, but was eventually returned to station sick quarters at Chedburgh. A number of Bomber Command aircraft were afflicted by American flak on this day, the gunners developing itchy fingers following the Luftwaffe's ill-conceived and ultimately ill-fated Operation Bodenplatte, which had been launched at first light against the liberated airfields in France, Holland and Belgium. The aim to destroy elements of the Allied air forces on the ground had been only modestly realized, while around 250 front-line day fighters had been lost, and many of the pilots were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. This was a setback from which the Luftwaffe's day fighter force would never fully recover.

1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups joined forces to deliver the most telling blow of the war on Nuremberg on the 2/3rd, when over 4,600 houses and apartment blocks were destroyed, along with two thousand medieval houses and hundreds of industrial buildings. The Group sent small forces to attack benzol plants at Dortmund and Castrop-Rauxel on the 3rd, and then switched to railway yards at Ludwigshafen on the 5th, and Neuss on the 6/7th. The bombing at the latter was scattered, and although some hit the railway yards, most fell into the town, where over seventeen hundred buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged. The operation cost only one Lancaster, LM187, which became violently uncontrollable over the target, forcing the pilot to jettison the bomb load and shut down the port outer engine, which ultimately caught fire. The fire could only be extinguished through cutting off the fuel feed to both port engines, and this accomplished, the Lancaster began to lose height, while remaining difficult to control. At 4,000 feet over Belgium, F/O Banton accepted the futility of the struggle, and ordered his crew to bale out. The flight engineer, Sgt Simms, accidentally deployed his parachute inside the aircraft, and was unwilling to risk using it. He asked the wireless operator, Sgt Longley, to allow him to cling to his back in a joint descent, and realising the extent of his colleague's predicament, Sgt Longley readily agreed, despite the risk to himself. Sadly, as the parachute jerked open, Sgt Simms became dislodged, and fell to his death. Sgt Longley fell into trees and was badly injured, but survived the experience, and was awarded the coveted CGM for his selfless act.

The last major raid of the war on Munich was delivered by 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8 Groups on the 7/8th, and was deemed to be successful. It preceded a G-H attack on the Uerdingen railway yards at Krefeld on the 11th, which caused heavy damage in the town's eastern districts, and this was followed by a similar target at Saarbrücken on the 13th and 14th. Benzol plants at Recklinghausen and Bochum occupied smallish 3 Group forces on the 15th, and another one at Wanne-Eickel was the target on the 16/17th. Almost three hundred aircraft from 1 and 3 Groups were involved in a raid on a benzol plant at Duisburg on the 22/23rd, but the nearby Thyssen steelworks was also hit, and suffered severe damage. After a few days break from operations, the Group sent 150 Lancasters back to the Gremberg railway yards at Cologne

on the 28th, and two of the 218 Squadron contingent of twenty failed to return. The operation was led by the squadron's W/O Evers on his twenty ninth sortie, flying in PD296. It was hit by flak over the target, and was seen to crash beyond, after only the flight engineer of the eight occupants had escaped by parachute, albeit in an injured state. F/L Hodnett and his crew in LM281 were more fortunate in having some time to determine their fate. They were also hit by flak over the target, losing both port engines, and the Lancaster was observed by other crews to be losing height. All seven men successfully abandoned the aircraft to its fate, to spend the rest of the war as POWs. January closed for the Group with a return to the railway yards at Krefeld on the 29th.

February began in similar vein, with a G-H attack on Mönchengladbach on the 1st. 1, 3 and 6 Groups joined forces to provide the muscle for a raid on Wiesbaden on the 2/3rd, which was conducted through complete cloud cover. Despite this, 550 buildings were destroyed, most of them houses and apartment blocks, and around a thousand people were killed. Over the succeeding week, the Group went alone to Dortmund on the 3/4th, to attack the Hansa benzol plant, bombed an oil refinery at Wanne-Eickel on the 7th, and tried in vain to hit



Krefeld's Hohenbudberg railway yards on the 8/9th. The Churchill inspired series of major raids on Germany's eastern cities under Operation Thunderclap began at Dresden on the night of the 13/14th, and will forever be the most controversial Bomber Command raid of the war. The two-phase operation was opened by 5 Group, employing its low level visual marking technique, although, in the face of a band of cloud, this part of the operation was only moderately successful. 244 Lancasters delivered over eight hundred tons of bombs, which started fires, and by the time that the second phase force approached the target three hours later, the fires had taken hold to act as a beacon. The skies were now also clear, allowing standard Pathfinder marking to precede the dropping of a further eighteen hundred tons of bombs by the 529 Lancasters of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups. 218 Squadron contributed twenty aircraft, but had four of them return early. The attack set off the same horrific chain of events witnessed at Hamburg eighteen months earlier. A firestorm erupted, tearing the heart out of the beautiful and historic city, and an estimated fifty thousand people lost their lives, although some believe a truer figure to be substantially higher. Thunderclap moved to Chemnitz on the following night, for an operation run on

similar lines, although 4 Group substituted for 5 Group. The city was covered by cloud, and the less reliable use of skymarking led to a scattered and indecisive attack. 218 Squadron sent seventeen aircraft on this occasion, and two of these also returned early.

Over the next five weeks, the small town of Wesel on the Rhine was to suffer the most appalling bombardment, largely because of the presence of its railway yards, and because of its close proximity to the Allied advance. 3 Group began the assault on the 16th, before the population had been evacuated, and heavy casualties were inflicted. 4 and 6 Groups went in on the following day, before 3 Group returned on the 18th to deliver a G-H attack through

cloud, and again on the 19th, when the railway yards were in the centre of the bombing pattern. The southern half of Dortmund was pounded by 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups on the 20/21st, and on the 22nd, 3 Group raided oil refineries at Gelsenkirchen and Osterfeld. The Squadron's NG450 was shot down by flak over the former, the single loss from the day's operations, and F/O Muschamp was killed with both gunners. The four survivors were beaten by members of the Gestapo, before being sent to PoW camps. 3 Group devoted the remainder of the month to Germany's oil industry, with operations against the Alma Pluto refinery at Gelsenkirchen on the 23rd and 27th, another at Bergkamen on the 25th, the Hoesch benzol plant at Dortmund on the 26th, and the Nordstern refinery at Gelsenkirchen on the 28th, all of which were negotiated by the squadron without loss.

March brought the final operations of the war against a number of cities, which had always featured prominently on the Command's target list. Mannheim was raided for the last time on the 1st, while 3 Group returned to the oil plant at Bergkamen. Cologne hosted its final raid on the morning of the 2nd, an operation planned as a two-phase affair involving 155 Lancasters from 3 Group, to follow up an initial assault by seven hundred aircraft. The first part proceeded according to plan, but the failure of a G-H station in England prevented all but fifteen of the 3 Group aircraft from bombing. It mattered little to the once proud and magnificent city of Cologne, which fell to American forces four days later. 3 Group maintained the pressure on the enemy's oil industry with a return to Wanne-Eickel on the night of the 4/5th and Gelsenkirchen during the afternoon of the 5th. That night, the Thunderclap force returned to Chemnitz, and left central and southern districts engulfed in flames. On the 6th, 3 Group carried out a G-H attack on the Wintershall refinery at Salzbergen, and continued the assault on Wesel that night. Over five hundred aircraft of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups plastered the virgin eastern town of Dessau on the 7/8th, during which, 218 Squadron posted missing its first crew of the month. PD278 was shot down by a nightfighter over Germany, and there were no survivors from the crew of F/L MacKenzie. A new oil target for the Group was the Emscher Lippe benzol plant at Datteln on the northern edge of the Ruhr. Both the north and south plants were bombed through cloud by G-H on the 9th, but it was not possible to make an assessment of the results. This was followed by a G-H attack on the Scholven-Buer refinery on the 10th, and photographic reconnaissance revealed extensive damage.

The final raid of the war on Essen set an all-time record, when 1,079 aircraft took off in the late morning of the 11th, fourteen of them from 218 Squadron, although one returned early. The city was left in a state of paralysis, and was taken by American forces later in the month. The record was surpassed a little over twenty four hours later, when 1,108 aircraft departed their stations in the early afternoon of the 12th, to deliver the final attack of the war on Dortmund. A new benchmark of 4,851 tons of bombs was dropped onto the already shattered city, and all war production was effectively brought to an end. 3 Group was not overly active for the remainder of the month, but would continue its work against oil and railway targets, at which it had proved itself so effective since October. Benzol plants at Datteln and Hattingen were the objectives on the 14th, at Dortmund and Hüls on the 17th and Hattingen and Langendreer on the 18th.



Bombing Photo taken by Flight Lieutenant Les Harlow DFC and crew, Regensburg April 20th 1945.

On the 19th, seventy nine of the Group's Lancasters were sent back to Gelsenkirchen to bomb the Consolidation benzol plant. The squadron's RA532 lost two engines to flak, but remained airborne long enough for F/O Johnson to carry out an emergency landing at Brussels-Evere airfield, where the Lancaster was declared to be beyond economical repair. The Group switched to railway yards at Hamm and Münster on the 20th and 21st respectively, and bombed Bocholt by G-H on the 22nd, presumably again to cut communications. The penultimate raid on the unfortunate town of Wesel was conducted by 3 Group on the 23rd, and by the time that 5 and 8 Groups had completed the job that night, 97% of the built-up area had been reduced to rubble. Benzol plants at Hamm and Salzgitter near Brunswick on the 27th and 29th completed the group's operations for the month.

The bombing war for the heavy brigade would end in April, and the month was attended by a sense of winding down. 3 Group opened its account at Leuna on the 4/5th, when a scattered attack in the company of 6 and 8 Groups left only minor fresh damage at the refinery. 1, 3 and 8 Groups produced an effective attack on Kiel on the 9/10th, which left severe damage in one of the U-Boat yards, and capsized the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer, while seriously damaging the Admiral Hipper and the Emden. A return to the port by 3, 6 and 8 Groups on the 13/14th brought less satisfactory results, and this was followed by

the final area attack of the war on an urban target. Five hundred Lancasters drawn from 1, 3 and 8 Groups set out for Potsdam on the evening of the 14th, to operate in the Berlin defence zone for the first time since the 1943/44 winter offensive. The operation proceeded more or less according to plan, causing much damage, while around five thousand people lost their lives, and some of the bombing spilled over into the Capital. 218 Squadron put up a creditable twenty four aircraft for this operation, one of which returned early. On the 18th, over nine hundred aircraft pounded the island of Heligoland, which contained a naval base, an airfield and a small town. As the bombers retreated, they left behind them a cratered moonscape, and a rising mushroom cloud of smoke and dust. 218 Squadron despatched a magnificent twenty seven Lancasters, all of which reached and bombed the target, before returning safely.

A modest forty nine 3 Group Lancasters were sent to bomb the Pasing railway yards at Munich on the 19th, and on the following day, a hundred set out on the long trip to Regensburg, deep in southern Germany, to target a fuel storage depot. With British ground forces about to advance into Bremen, over seven hundred crews of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups were briefed on the 22nd to bomb the city's south-eastern suburbs in the early evening. 3 Group opened the attack, creating so much smoke and dust, that the Master Bomber called a halt, and sent the remainder of the force home with their bombs. Shortly before the 218 Squadron crews returned to Chedburgh, an accident occurred, which cost the lives of some of their colleagues. NF994 developed engine trouble during the outward flight, and when almost in sight of the target, turned back towards home. Shortly after 20.30 hours, the Lancaster crashed one mile south-west of the airfield, killing F/L Spiers and four of his crew, while one of the gunners succumbed to his injuries on the following day. Even more tragic was the loss of NF955 and its crew during take-off for the squadron's, and indeed, the Group's final operation of the war on the 24th. The Lancaster suffered starboard engine failure as it became airborne, and went into the ground still within the airfield boundary with a full bomb load. During the next thirty minutes, the Lancaster was torn apart by detonations, and nothing could be done for F/L Jenyns and his crew. The operation against railway yards at Bad Oldesloe in northern Germany was something of a surprise to the inhabitants, and in the absence of adequate civil defence arrangements, around seven hundred people lost their lives. Twenty two Lancasters had departed Chedburgh for this momentous occasion, and in addition to the tragedy mentioned above, four crews returned early. The remaining seventeen carried out their assigned tasks before returning safely home to complete 218 Squadron's offensive operational career.

The final operations by heavy bombers took place on the 25th, when the SS barracks at Hitler's eaglesnest retreat at Berchtesgaden were bombed by 1, 5 and 8 Groups in the morning. Later in the day, 4, 6 and 8 Groups attacked heavy gun emplacements on the island of Wangerooge, while that night, 5 Group operated against an oil refinery at Tonsberg in Norway. On the 29th, 218 Squadron participated in the first food-dropping sorties to Holland under Operation Manna, sending ten aircraft to Rotterdam, and these humanitarian flights continued until the end of Hostilities on the 8th of May. 218 Squadron acquitted itself magnificently during its long and varied wartime career, and was part of the backbone of 3 Group from the moment it joined towards the end of 1940. Its duty done, it was disbanded at Chedburgh on the 10th of August 1945.



I am indebted to my good friend and aviation author and historian Chris Ward for allowing me to use the above details from his 218 Squadron profile. All photos and maps copyright No.218 Squadron Association ©