

Kenneth Jones' Account of P4344's Last Flight

Hampden P4344 was becoming a veteran by 20th July 1940. Her crew consisting of the undersigned as pilot, Sgt George (Wilbur) Wright – navigator, Sgt David Cain – rear gunner and Sgt Jack Lawrence – signaller, were due for a rest after the next operation. That is if one considers converting to Manchesters a rest!

For the final operation Jack Lawrence had to be replaced by Sgt Bonson. Jack had received burns on a previous operation when he was reeling in the trailing aerial in a thunderstorm! This was virtually the first change of crew since the outbreak of war, ten and a half months earlier, but Jack came to see us off and promised to wait up for our return in the early hours of 21st July.

The briefing for this operation was very thorough and explicit. The targets were the battleship 'Tirpitz' and the pocket-battleship 'Von Sheer', both berthed in the Wilhelmshaven docks. They were to be attacked with mines activated by delayed action soluble fuses. Six aircraft of 61 Sqn. were to attack the Tirpitz in the inner harbour and three aircraft of 144 Sqn., the Von Sheer in the outer harbour. The mines were to be dropped from 50ft. The interesting part of the briefing was the reason for this rather dicey operation.

After the fall of France the balance of capital ships could be upset in favour of the Germans. The French capital ships, Dunkerque, Strasbourg and Richelieu may have been added to the Tirpitz, Scharnhorst, Gneisnau etc. to form a formidable battle fleet. Every effort was to be made to prevent this happening and in consequence 61 Sqn. was detailed to do their bit by low level attacks on the Tirpitz and Von Sheer lying so snug in Wilhelmshaven.

A diversion was arranged whereby Hampdens from Scampton were to bomb from 8 or 10 000ft on the other side of the estuary. This was intended to draw off the A.A. fire from the low-level attack. In fact the Scampton aircraft were virtually unmolested; the Hemswell aircraft were not so lucky!

Our aircraft was one of the six attacking the Tirpitz. As night was falling we took off on a fine moonlit night and set off for Wilhelmshaven. Crossing the coast at low-level the final run was made from the North.

By the time we approached the target the flak was flying in all directions and the searchlights were sweeping across the whole of the final run in. They soon picked us up with blazing intensity. Wilbur Wright at the bombsight calmly passed his instructions until a staccato "Look out to starboard". It was a well-timed warning. We missed a tall chimney by a whisker. We could feel, hear and smell the flak hitting us repeatedly; the lights were dazzling and then to my intense relief Wilbur shouted "Bombs gone. Look out for the ship. Pull up for God's sake." We pulled up over the masts and superstructure.

Now for home! But that wasn't so easy. The intercom was dead. And the damage received in that mad rush to, and over, the target had proved too much for poor old P4344. We struggled up to 300ft and set course for home, or at least in a westerly direction, but control and power were steadily fading and, being shot at again by the defences of Jever airfield, we came to earth with both engines on fire.

How we came to earth is a matter of debate. As the pilot, I maintained I had landed. My crew, who was badly bumped, said I crashed. In calm debate, at a much later time, we compromised and called it crash-landing! An interesting sequel to the trip was that Wilbur Wright and David Cain, both badly wounded with flak, were taken to Wilhelmshaven hospital. They were able to see over the docks and two sights were of particular interest. Firstly, Wilbur saw the tall chimney outside the hospital, the one we so nearly hit on our run in. Secondly, they could see the Tirpitz somewhat askew and sitting on the bottom of the dock. It was a long time – 18 months I have been told – before she was in service again.

Kenneth Jones.

The Hampden Operation on the Dortmund-Ems Canal

The first attack on the Dortmund-Ems canal was carried out by the two Hemswell squadrons of Hampdens, 61 and 144 Squadrons. This was on 19th June 1940. Both squadrons had put in some concentrated training in low-level flying at night along the Lincolnshire canals aiming at a 50ft accuracy for dropping. This was probably the precursor for the more sophisticated training developed for the Dam Busters? The operation involved twelve aircraft from each squadron attacking the two aqueducts – the old and the new – that carried the canal across the river Ems. The briefing was, as usual, thorough and detailed and I remember it well.

The Dortmund-Ems canal was the main link between the industrial Rhineland and Northwest and Central Germany. Disruption of the canal traffic would impose a real burden on the railways that were already overloaded and partially damaged. The barge traffic was the equivalent of hundreds of trainloads daily. The Dortmund-Ems canal was a major target and the aqueducts were its weakest link.

The attack was to be made with mines activated by soluble fuses that had very recently been developed by the Royal Navy. The mines were to be dropped at the mid point of the aqueduct because an arrestor device would prevent them travelling after hitting the water. We took off at staggered intervals on a clear night with a bright moon and crossed the Dutch coast at a comfortable height, descending to low level at Gelsenkirchen. The trip to the aqueducts was an idyllic moonlight flight, at nought feet, just following the canal. The aqueducts appeared on schedule and the mines dropped as briefed with no real effort or trouble and so back home to de-briefing and bacon and eggs. Not a peashooter had been fired at us and the whole trip had taken only five hours.

Following the de-briefing it transpired that all but two of the twenty-four aircraft had found the targets and had dropped as briefed. No wonder. One couldn't miss! Oh! What a lovely war!

The disappointment came when the Photo Recce reports arrived and the aqueducts were still there. Cracks were in evidence at the far end of the aqueducts and the water had drained out of the canal but the aqueducts, which we had expected to be lying shattered a hundred feet below in the Ems valley, were still in position.

The reason for the failure to shatter the aqueducts was later discovered. The mines had not been fully developed because of shortage of time. Further tests showed that after hitting the water the arrestor gear did not pull the mine up abruptly. They had apparently travelled to the far end of the aqueducts. Had we known, we could have dropped at the near end so they would travel to the middle. It would have been just as easy and the repeated attacks that were made later would not have been necessary. Needless to say none of the subsequent attacks on the Dortmund-Ems canal was the joy ride that we had on the 19th June and 'Babe' Learoyd would have had to have found another way of winning his VC.

Kenneth Jones.

Translation of Article in Wilhelmshavener Zeitung by Neil Prendergrast

Wilhelmshavener Zeitung

Wilhelmshaven (3)

Seite 5

Sonnabend, den 31. Dezember 1983

Saturday 31 December 1983

“On the Trail of a friendship between opponents”

British Author Seeks Witnesses.

By Hans Fr. Daniel

Addressed to the Wilhelmshavener Zeitung, Harry Moyle writes in German from Great Britain.

“Somewhere about midnight on 20/21 July 1940 15 Hampdens carried out a low level attack against the battleship Tirpitz. The attack was unsuccessful because three of the Hampdens were shot down in flames by intensive fire. One aircraft crashed in the vicinity of Wilhelmshaven and one of the wounded airmen was Sgt.(Sergeant) Neil Prendergrast.

He acted as interpreter, was well treated, and spoke of the friendship which existed at the time between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe.

It was customary for a Luftwaffe Officer to drive 17 kilometres from his aerodrome to bring cigarettes and sweets to the RAF personnel in the hospital. The gifts were bought with money that had been collected at the Luftwaffe station.

There was also a volunteer woman worker, the wife of a local police officer who looked after their wants (needs) and brought them books etc. One of the German sick orderlies showed Neil an article in the Wilhelmshavener Zeitung which described the attack, with photographs of the burnt-out Hampdens.

Harry R. Moyle himself recalls an attack that actually took place at this specific time. On the 20 July, a Saturday, at 23.05 hours, an air raid into the German defence zone round Wilhelmshaven was reported estimated as 14 aircraft. The navy gunners put up a barrage. Many British bombers were trying to attack at low level the dock gates and wharfs. The Tirpitz was lying there still being built.

Friedrich A. Greve, a Wilhelmshavener who has busied himself for many years with the history of the homeland air defences around Wilhelmshaven and has recently completed a book on this theme, has uncovered this statement from researches into the town's archives. *Near to the Tirpitz a special bomb was found which was equipped with a time fuse, although no damage was done to the ship at the time. Further bombs hit the quartermaster's office, the docks, fell near to the passenger liner St. Louis in U-boat, near the lightship Z, between the docks and Jachmann Street, and on the harbour installations and buildings.* It was not confirmed according to Greve whether two houses in Banter Way were also hit. A few nights earlier the Crematorium had been destroyed by an H.E. bomb.

“Funf britische Bomber sturzten ab”
Five British bombers crash.

According to the German sources five British Handley Page Type bombers have crashed. The shooting down is attributed to the Navy – Flak – Artillery Section No. 282 stationed at Hooksiel with batteries (emplacements) in Horumersiel. These machines were presumed to have crashed near Schillig. Between 01.02 and 01.45 hours two other machines in low level flight were caught in the artillery anti-aircraft defence fire from the airfield at Upjever.

Evidently one of these machines was able to crash land on the dummy airfield at Irmenhof a few kilometres further on, south west of Reepsholt. It was identified as a Handley Page with the identification symbol P4344 of 61 Squadron of the RAF from Hamswett (Hemswell) Linsolnstone (Lincolnshire). The crew consisted of George Anthony Wright (Pilot Officer), Richard Bonson (Sergeant), David Coin (Cain) (Sergeant), and Kenneth Jones (Sergeant). They set fire to their machine and were taken prisoner.

Thus (on this account) Sergeant Neil Prendergrast can really only have been flying in that Hampden which received a direct hit over the harbour area and according to contemporary accounts in the week after the air attack had crash landed about the same time on the Rustersieler mud flats in flames.

It was reported in the papers at the time that besides the fuselage of the machine, a man had also fallen into the water (sea). Then the other three had climbed out of their canopies, hurried away from their burning aircraft, and were caught with their boots stuck in the mud and with their last remaining strength struggled on to dry land.

In the newspaper reports of that week the defence activity of the anti-aircraft guns only was mentioned. It seems that fighter airplanes were being used entirely in air raid operations against England at the time.

Greve explains these details of the undoubtedly strained relationship between the Naval Anti-Aircraft Stations and the (Luftwaffe) German Air Force in the North Sea Coastal Areas, which were the cause of continual dispute. By reference to other historical sources it is however always reported that ‘Fighters’ had also been involved in air-fights with British bombers. They flew from the airfield at Upjever where a squadron of JG 1 (Junkers Mark 1 ?) under the command of Wing Commander Schumacher was stationed, also out from Wittmundhafen and from Stendal, during the period evidently when the Heinkel Type HE 111 bombers were stationed at Marx.

Thus doubtless the station from which the Officer who visited Neil Prendergrast can only really be the site at Jever. If one goes from there to where the British prisoners lay in the Marine-lazarett (seamans hospital) the distance of 17 kilometres agrees with that suggested.

The author of the letter, Harry Moyle is interested in witnesses who can remember the Attack described and above all have any recollection of the friendships between those who were on opposite sides at the time. Moyle is putting the history of the bombers “Handley Page Hampden” together.

Readers who would like to contribute any information of these events should contact the local editor of the Wilhelmshavener Zeitung. The contacts will then be passed on to Harry Moyle.

60 YEARS ON

Translation of letter from Freidrich Greve

Dear Mr Wright,

I was able to obtain your address from the "Wilhelmshavener Zeitung" and was informed of the contents of your letter. It is interesting to read how you fared during your imprisonment.

I have over the years studied the history of my home town Wilhelmshaven and the 'airbattle' taking place in this part of the country. I have built up an extensive archive on this subject. Throughout the war I was studying/observing Wilhelmshaven with the aid of photography and I still document Wilhelmshaven's presence and development today. I was able to help Harry Moyle with photographs and information of the attack on the 20/21 July 1940 which he incorporated into his book 'The Hampden File'. As a memorial I would like to present you with my book which also includes details of your emergency landing in your Hampden P4344.

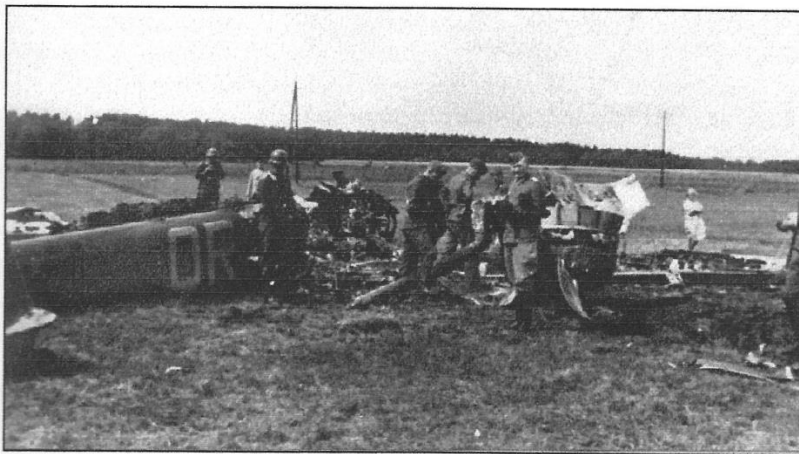
I include 2 photographs which show your destroyed Hampden and a copy from the war log of the German navy base North Sea, about the attack on the 20/21 July 1940 as well as a copy of a map showing the crash site and the airfield Irmenhof. In the first photo the lieutenant and the soldiers to his left belong to the second 'Marine-flakbrigade'. The soldiers with the steel helmets belong to the airforce in Jever.

At the end of my letter I have one request. Would it be possible for you to send me a photograph of yourself in your RAF uniform, maybe with the crew in front of the Hampden P4344.

I wish you all the best.

Yours sincerely

Freidrich



Translation of newspaper article sent by F. Greve

A surprising letter was received by the editors of the newspaper just before the end of the year, (Dec. 2000). George Anthony Wright, a former member of the RAF thanked us for the help and hospitality which was offered to him as a prisoner of the German airforce during World War II.

The 83 year old was part of the attack force trying to destroy the "Scheer" and "Tirpitz" on the 20/21 July 1940. Approximately 15 low flying aircraft tried to reach the naval airbase in the "Jade".

"I was a navigator in a Hampden aircraft. It was our mission to destroy the "Tirpitz" with a seamine,"

tells George Wright. During the flight over Wilhelmshaven his aircraft was badly damaged and turned westward. Flakbases in "Schortens" and "Jever" fired again at the Hampden. According to Wright the plane caught fire and the pilot was forced to land on the small airfield at "Irmenhof" to the southwest of "Jever". All four members of the crew survived the impact. George Wright and his colleague David Caine however were injured.

"Some of the locals came to the crash site with drinking water in a bucket," remembers Wright.

The two officers were initially cared for in the airforce base "Upjever". They were then moved to the navy hospital in Wilhelmshaven.

"There we were under the care of a most delightful nurse whose surname, I think, was Hoffmann and her son served in the marines".

Wright describes how she used to wake them everyday by simply pulling away their bedclothes.

"She took very good care of us."

She used to pinch apples from the kitchen for Caine who was suffering from blood poisoning.

"These extra vitamins did him the world of good".

There was also a young physiotherapist.

"She had gold teeth which perfectly matched her brown tan".

George Wright had to stay in hospital for a total of twelve weeks. Once he was fully recovered he was taken to the prisoner of war camp for English aircraft personnel in Frankfurt. Two German officers came to pick him up in Wilhelmshaven.

"And to say goodbye Mrs Hoffmann gave me a glass of gin and said, 'I hope all goes well with you George'".

It wasn't until 5 years later, after spending time as a prisoner in Konigsberg and Berlin that George Wright returned to England. He moved to a little town called Wooler in the north of England, left the RAF, became a primary teacher and the father of 5 daughters.

Wright meets every year with former colleagues and talks about their experiences during the war. One of his friends who was also in the navy hospital in Wilhelmshaven in 1940 died recently.

"This stirred the memories and I wrote this letter to thank everybody who helped us during that time".

Copy from the "War Log"

20.7.1940

Since 20.05pm penetration of the airspace by approximately 14 planes;

Firing;

Several planes diving trying to take out the sluices and docks; 5 of those caught fire and crashed. One in "Rustersiel" 3 prisoners taken; one near the "KW" Bridge one prisoner ("Kaiser Wilhelm" Bridge Hampden P4343 pilot Dudley Davis); one near "Jever" (Hampden P4344 emergency landing on the airfield "Irmenhof" to the southwest of "Jever" near the village "Rispel"); one plane shot down by the warship Arkona between "Schellig" and "Wargerooge" crashing into the "Jade".

Bombings;

One bomb dropped on the supply station – some fire damage; one into the docks; one into the port near "Tirpitz" – no damage; one bomb at the submarine base near the living quarters on the ship St. Louis – no damage; one went into the water near the lightboat "Z"; 5 bombs between the navy docks and "Jachmannstrasse" – slight damage; 3 bombs into the new docks – no damage. Further bombs into a garden in "Neuengroden" –slight damage.

Message from town command – 70 metres in front of first exit probably two magnetic mines are immediately sealed off. 2 more in the docks near "Tirpitz" which were detonated and one near the swing bridge (possibly "Kaiser Wilhelm" bridge).

Translation from 'Die Luftverteidigung im Abschnitt Wilhelmshaven 1939-1945'

By

Friedrich August Greve

The RAF attack plan was for 6 aircraft to fly at 4000 metres dropping scatter bombs and pretending to attack the port while five other planes attacked the Tirpitz and the Scheer in low flying action. For the low flying attack seamines weighing 680kg were used. The mines were filled with 340kg of TNT and their detonators were activated through contact with salt water. The time limit before detonation was 40 minutes. The plan was to drop them near the boats for them to sink to the bottom and then detonating, ripping open the bottoms of the boats.

During the flight towards the German airspace one Hampden belonging to the 6 'distraction' aircraft got lost over North Holland and turned back to its base. Another could not find Wilhelmshaven and dropped its bombs into the mouth of the river Ijssel in the north of the Netherlands. The very precise time planning for the attack could not, for some reason, be adhered to. As the first low flying aircraft (17 metres above ground level) approached the town the 'pretend' attack was already over. A concentrated defence firing from the light weapons flak greeted the low flying aircraft which were approaching at 8 minute intervals from a northerly direction. One aircraft was damaged during the flight towards Wilhelmshaven, turned and dropped its deadly cargo near Schillig on the Dutch coast.

During the following low flying attack, bombs were dropped by three Hampden aircraft – one into the docks near the Tirpitz and two further ones aimlessly into the Hipperhafen and near the first exit. Two more planes were so badly damaged over the town that one crashed along the shore near Rustersiel. The second aircraft turned westward. Under fire from the flak point Schortens and the airforce base in Jever it was forced to land at the airfield Irmenhof to the south west of Jever near the village Rispel. Before the arrival of the soldiers from Jever the crew had set fire to the plane.

The last attacking Hampden was already on fire during its flight towards the town. Despite this the pilot Dudley Davis managed to aim his bomb at the Tirpitz in the port. Even though he was constantly in the firing line and his aircraft almost unflyable, he managed to pull it up and eastward narrowly missing the roof tops of the dock buildings and the housing estate behind.

Affected by the heat in his cockpit, Davis managed to exit his aircraft. Crouching on the right wing, one hand on the cockpit, he pulled his parachute ripcord. His parachute inflated in seconds pulling the pilot off the wing and in a pendling motion from a height of approx. 15 metres, 140 metres away from the KW-Bridge to a safe landing on the Gazelle Bridge. This was never before done in the history of flying. Just as he described in his book 'Into the Silk' he managed to escape with a few cuts and minor burns to his face which claimed his lovely moustache, before he was taken prisoner.

His aircraft bounced off the water approx. 20 metres away from the shore to the west of the KW-Bridge. The other three members of the crew could not escape and did not survive the crash.

The mines exploded after the aforementioned time limit without damaging the Tirpitz. Near the Scheer no bombs were dropped. Through the bombing slight damage was caused between the marine base and the Jachmannstrasse and in Neuengroden and the supply base suffered some minor fire damage. A fourth plane was shot down by the heavy artillery on the Arkona. The concentrated use of the light artillery and the fact that the attackers time plan was lost prevented further severe damage. The loss of the 2 boats would have been a great triumph for the RAF whose attack was launched with quite some courage.

