

FRANKFURT – BY NIGHT AND BY DAY

TWO ACCOUNTS OF LONG DISTANCE BOMBING

By Peter Chapman

From late October 1917 until the Armistice in November 1918, the RFC, RNAS and RAF attempted to wage a strategic bombing campaign against German cities and industries from bases in the vicinity of Nancy, France. This was first under the direction of 41st Wing RFC, containing one day and two night bombing squadrons of the RFC and RNAS, and later by the Independent Force, under the command of Major General Hugh Trenchard, comprising four day and five night bombing squadrons, as well as one fighter squadron.

When compared to the massive bombing campaigns witnessed in the Second World War, the operations carried out by the British during this period were sporadic and miniscule in scale. They nonetheless proved to be a nuisance to the Germans, who had to retain personnel and equipment on home defence when both were badly needed elsewhere. Also, the bombing of civilians, although unintentional on both sides, was a relatively new phenomenon and frequently caused a panic out of all proportion to the actual damage done and casualties caused.

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects concerning these bombing raids is of the risks involved and benefits gained by the bombers operating in formations during daylight, or singly at night. There are arguments to be made in favour of both tactics.

If a squadron operated in formation during daylight, they could reasonably be expected to navigate to and from their targets with more accuracy than could be achieved at night, and once there, could bomb the target with a greater accuracy than could be achieved by night.

However, their chief concern would be the greater ability of the German defences to retaliate, both through fighter aircraft interception and greater accuracy of their anti-aircraft ground defences, who could readily see the approaching bombers. This meant that the bombers had to be relatively fast, retain their formation at all costs and operate at a height which, while it made interception more difficult for the enemy fighters, also made bombing accuracy that much harder to achieve.

By contrast, their night bombing counterparts could not operate in formation for fear of collision with other nearby aircraft in the dark, and so had to operate singly. This placed a greater onus on the navigator to steer an accurate course to and from the target in the dark, always difficult to achieve over a long distance. Once there, it was also more difficult to pick out a specific group of buildings in a blacked out city on which to drop their bombs.

However, there were a number of advantages in night bombing. A single aircraft operating at night could be larger and carry a greater weight of bombs and operate at a lower altitude because of the reduced efficiency of the defences. There was no radar or radio assistance, and any night fighters had to hope for an interception based on pure good fortune. Also, anti-aircraft fire from the ground was less accurate, as the attacking aircraft, unless illuminated with searchlights by chance, were not visible. Once a target had been reached, the bomber could then circle the target and obtain bearings before making an attack, a luxury no day bomber could afford when better defences were operating.

I intend to illustrate these differences in the following account of two air raids carried out on the German city of Frankfurt in 1918, one by night and the other by day. The reader can then see for themselves the contrasting dangers endured by the men who flew in these pioneering raids. The raids in question were carried out on the night of 24 August by a single Handley Page 0/100 aircraft of 216 Squadron, and a month later, on the morning of 25 September, by 13 Airco DH9a aircraft of 110 Squadron.

By Night

In late August 1918, 216 Squadron were based at Autreville, France and were equipped with Handley Page 0/100 and Handley Page 0/400 twin-engined heavy bombers. These aircraft normally carried a crew of three – pilot, observer/navigator and gunner - and with a bomb load of up to 1650 lbs were able to reach targets as far afield as Cologne, Stuttgart or Frankfurt.

The weather outlook on 24 August 1918 was not good, with a strong south-east wind blowing across much of eastern France and a weather forecast of severe thunder storms approaching later that evening. Despite this, orders were received at the squadron to mount a maximum effort that night, the main target being the railway station and sidings at Frankfurt am Main, with the Burbach works at Saarbrücken as an alternative target, should a raid on Frankfurt not be possible.

Shortly after dusk the squadron's six serviceable aircraft took off individually, with a time lapse of a few minutes separating each take off, each aircraft being given the go ahead by the aerodrome officer via signal lamp. Soon after they had all departed, however, it became apparent to many crews that they would be faced with an almost impossible task to reach Frankfurt in the prevailing weather, and gradually all but two aircraft returned to their aerodrome with their bombs. One of the remaining two chose to bomb Boulay aerodrome, an alternate target, before also returning to Autreville.

The sixth aircraft that night was Handley Page 0/100 No. 3138, crewed by Capt Robert Halley DFC (pilot), Lt Robert H. Reece DFC (observer/navigator) and 2Lt C.W. Treleaven, a relatively new pilot in the squadron, who went along as their gunner. An experienced pairing, Halley and Reece had already undertaken a number of long distance bombing sorties to targets such as Mannheim and Stuttgart, and both had been decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross for their exploits. After taking off and gaining height over their aerodrome, they steered a course to D lighthouse, one of a number of automated signaling lights on the Allied side of the lines which continually flashed a predetermined Morse Code letter as a guide to the night bombers. By figuring their ground speed and drift en route, the two men calculated that they could reach Frankfurt and return safely, despite the wind, if they steered a direct course there and back. Even then, their margin for error was almost nil, as they calculated they would have no more than five minutes over Frankfurt itself if they were to regain their own lines safely afterwards, and then with only 10 minutes of fuel to spare.

Steering a 39 degree course from D lighthouse, at an average altitude of 6000 feet, they encountered no more than sporadic flak from each town as they flew north of Saarburg, Bitsche and Pirmasens, then south of Kaiserslautern before crossing the Vosges mountains. They then crossed the Rhine River valley north of Oppenheim and flew on to Mainz. Here they followed the Main River to Frankfurt, arriving at their target at midnight. They were greeted by a heavy anti-aircraft barrage and numerous searchlights, but switching off his engines briefly, Halley quickly glided their aircraft down and Reece dropped their bomb load, comprised of a single 550 lb and four 112 lb bombs, as close as possible to the *Hauptbahnhof*, or main railway station.

All of their bombs missed the intended target, falling in a ragged line across the properties alongside the river front, near the Westhafen. One bomb that landed on the Westhafen itself caused considerable damage to material stored there. This was possibly the 550 lb bomb. The rest of the bombs damaged private property. Overall damage was considerable, however, amounting to 100,000 marks.

Having dropped their bombs, Halley and Reece hastily steered the most direct course for their own lines, over 100 miles away against a strengthening headwind. To add to their problems, they were approaching a storm ahead, which they dared not climb above as they did not have the fuel to spare. They elected instead to fly right underneath it, and found themselves being tossed about by fierce winds while being illuminated by lightning flashes and soaked by driving rain for hours. They were also being caught periodically in searchlights and their aircraft received numerous shrapnel hits from the accurate anti-aircraft fire, although none of these were serious enough to bring them down.

They finally cleared the first storm as they passed over Kaiserslautern, only to fly straight into another storm on the other side of the town. This storm too was cleared briefly, sufficient for them

to again check their course and make a course correction, before they flew into a third and even more violent storm than those before. Fortunately, this storm was over quicker than its two predecessors, as Halley was unable to do more than keep the aircraft flying while it lasted, with no chance to follow a compass course. They arrived south of the Marne-Rhine canal as dawn was breaking, and steered for the nearest aerodrome, but shortly after crossing into friendly territory their engines stopped through lack of fuel, and the exhausted crew were forced to make a safe landing in a field near Luneville, eight and a half hours after they had set out.



Handley Page O/100 No.3138 in the field at Luneville, after its return from the epic flight to Frankfurt on the night of 24/25 August 1918. The crew can be seen sitting in the foreground, in front of the admiring spectators. R.H. Reece

Having striven against almost impossible weather, this brave crew had succeeded in reaching Frankfurt and dropping their bombs there, causing some considerable damage, albeit in the wrong place. They had then returned to a safe landing on their own side of the lines.

Their chief enemy this night was not the Germans however, but the weather, which may well have caused a less experienced crew to fail in their mission. They did not encounter any German fighters during the entire flight, but had been subjected to accurate anti-aircraft fire from various towns en route, as they were forced to fly low in a storm, and were being illuminated by lightning flashes as well as searchlights from the ground.

By Day

Exactly one month later, Frankfurt was to receive a daytime visit from a new squadron of the Independent Force. 110 Squadron had joined the Independent Force in France at the beginning of September, and were equipped with the new Airco DH9a single-engined day bomber. This aircraft carried a crew of two – pilot and gunner - and was capable of carrying a bomb load of 230 lbs to distant targets like Cologne, Stuttgart or Frankfurt. The squadron had already undertaken one long distance raid to Mannheim on 16 September, when crew inexperience had cost them two aircraft over the target.

The weather dawned fine on the morning of 25 September, and thirteen available crews from 'B' and 'C' Flights were called to undertake a previously ordered raid on Frankfurt. After standing around for some time while their aircraft were warmed up and bombs were loaded, the crews clambered in, started their engines and adjusted their oxygen masks. The latter would be required later, because of the great altitude that the bomber formation flew at.

Taxying out to the take off point, most of the heavily laden bombers, full of fuel and loaded with bombs, bogged down in the soft ground and had to be manhandled into position by judicious use of their engines and much hard work on the part of the ground crew.

Taking off individually between 0955 and 1005, each aircraft began circling the aerodrome and manoeuvring into their Flight formation. The first formation of seven aircraft was led by Capt A. Lindley and the second, comprising six aircraft, by Capt A.C.H. Groom. Once the two Flights had formed up, they circled the aerodrome, gaining height. At 12000 feet each pilot turned on his engine compensator to reduce fuel consumption and increase their range, and at 15000 feet the two Flights took up station with each other, and headed north for the lines, still gaining altitude.



DH9a F1000 'Hydrabad No.7', flown by Lt H.J. Cockman, was so badly shot about on 25 September that it had to be sent to 3 ASD for repair. L.A. Rogers

At 16000 feet the pilots turned on their aircraft's oxygen supply, and shortly afterwards the formation were met by an accurate anti-aircraft barrage as they crossed into German territory just west of Blâmont. A period of nervous excitement passed without any of the DH9a's being badly hit or forced out of the formation, and the anti-aircraft fire stopped as the aircraft drew out of range, still heading north in the brilliantly blue sky, with the sun at their backs and a strong wind blowing them towards their target.

Shortly after 1115 the formation was surprised by a group of German scouts near Saverne, which came diving out of the sun onto the tail of the formation, firing as they came. Before any of the surprised gunners could react, one DH9a in 'C' Flight, mortally hit, dived over the vertical towards the ground, being pounced on immediately by a number of the Germans.¹ Other aircraft in both Flights were damaged, but their Flight formations held and their gunners began to retaliate. Sgt T.W. Harman in F980 fired two bursts at a Pfalz scout which spun down, seemingly out of control, and 2Lt W.G.L. Bodley in F1010 claimed a black and white Fokker D.VII as out of control in the same exchange. The Germans, now wary of the massed guns being wielded by the DH9a gunners, dropped back to a safe distance and followed, contenting themselves with firing at long range or making sporadic raids on the formation of bombers. One of these attacks was successful, as a second aircraft was lost soon afterwards.² The surviving bombers continued on towards Frankfurt with an increasing number of Germans in pursuit, as elements of Kest 1b and Kest 9 joined the fray. One 'C' Flight pilot, Lt W.A. Armstrong, looked back and counted 50 enemy aircraft following the DH9a's at one point.

The first indication of the target was a black cloud in the distance, over Frankfurt. As the DH9a crews drew nearer to the town, they realized that this was an intense anti-aircraft box barrage, which was fortunately directed 1000 feet too low this day, and did not trouble them overly much. As the bombers moved into the attack, the German scouts drew off and waited outside the barrage for the bombers to turn for home again.

To retain the protection of the formation, the normal practice in day bombing squadrons was for all aircraft in a formation to drop their bombs in unison, on receiving a signal from the formation

leader. Their target was the main railway station, or *Hauptbahnhof*, and on the signal of the front formation leader, Capt A. Lindley, the surviving DH9a's released seventeen 230 and 112 lb bombs on Frankfurt at 1240, a total of one and a half tons.

Most bombs missed the station by at least half a mile, scattering in a ragged line from the main thoroughfare of *Kaiserstrasse* to the Wilhelms bridge. One bomb on the former caused considerable damage while others damaged and destroyed property in a line up to the bridge. A single bomb struck the northern end of the Wilhelms bridge but only damaged a house there. The rest of the bombs fell on the south side of the river in mostly open country, causing only slight damage to the lock gates, while three were seen to fall in the River Main. One person was killed and a further seven injured by the falling bombs, and total damage amounted to 146,000 marks.

Turning away from Frankfurt, 'B' and 'C' Flights became separated, although each retained their individual formations. Once clear of Frankfurt the German scouts moved in once more, but in 'C' Flight's case they did not press their attack but contented themselves with following the formation of DH9a's at a safe distance.

Having reached Frankfurt in 50 minutes with a strong tail wind, the DH9a crews now found themselves having to battle into the wind once they turned south, and this made the flight back to the lines a long and dangerous one. At one point the two Flights, intent on making their way home, almost collided as each was intent on watching the German scouts and maintaining formation. Eventually the two Flights lost sight of each other entirely, with all but one of the surviving aircraft of 'C' Flight crossing the lines safely, and four of these, all damaged, reaching their aerodrome that same afternoon, five hours and forty minutes after setting out. The exception was E9660, piloted by Lt C.B.E. Lloyd. After his engine began to misfire and he lost the remainder of his formation, he was attacked by five enemy aircraft. His gunner, 2Lt H.C.J. Elwig, claimed one of these in a running fight, after which the remaining four enemy aircraft withdrew. Lloyd and Elwig were not to reach safety however, as they ran out of fuel while still on the enemy side and crashed in the Vosges mountains while attempting to land their badly damaged aircraft. Both men, bruised and shaken, set fire to their aircraft and managed to evade capture until two days later, when they surrendered to a passing German patrol.

The survivors in 'B' Flight were unfortunate in again being singled out by the Germans, who attacked them relentlessly all the way back to the lines, a fight that saw the bombers lose two further aircraft, as well as crewmen aboard some aircraft that did return safely.³ Of these, E8420 was badly shot up by Germans scouts and the gunner, Sgt W.H. Neighbour, killed. Another gunner, Lt R.F. Casey in F993, who had earlier claimed two enemy aircraft out of control, was badly wounded in the thigh and fainted. His aircraft then being closely engaged by four enemy aircraft, Casey was roused by his pilot, Lt R.P. Braili, and despite his wound he opened fire on these aircraft, one of which spun down, apparently out of control and the rest retired to a safe distance. For his actions on this raid, Casey was subsequently awarded the DFC, one of three such awards to 110 Squadron on this raid.

Another of the DFC recipients was Lt H.J. Cockman, the pilot of F1000. He was severely wounded during the return flight, being hit in the right leg and having his left arm shattered by machine gun fire. Although bleeding badly and unable to fly the aircraft himself, he remained calm and managed to get his gunner to fly the aircraft under his instruction, keeping them in the protection of their formation. On reaching his own side, Cockman landed their damaged aircraft himself despite his grave wounds. Of the 13 aircraft that set out on the morning of 25 September for Frankfurt, four failed to return. A number of the other DH9a aircraft required extensive repairs after their return.

In the four aircraft that failed to return, two aircraft and four of the men were forced down in Germany and made prisoner while Sgts H.W. Tozer and W. Platt in E8422, and Lt L.S. Brooke and 2Lt A.V. Provan in F992 were all shot down and killed.⁴

Twelve aircraft and 24 men of 110 Squadron had done their best to carry out their assigned mission, and had suffered severely doing so. In perfect daytime conditions, they had been ruthlessly exposed once well into Germany, losing four aircraft to the German scouts and having all the others damaged to one degree or another. In return, they had bombed their target, causing some damage and casualties, and had claimed to have shot a number of German aircraft down out of control, a fairly meagre return for a great deal of effort on the part of the crews.

Postscript

Throughout 1918, the day and night bomber squadrons of the RAF raided Frankfurt on six separate occasions.

Of this total, the night bomber units undertook three raids and lost only two aircraft to the defences, although it must be said that far fewer aircraft were involved in these night raids than were in the day raids. The first of these night losses was on the night of 21/22 August, when another 216 Squadron Handley Page 0/100, No.1466, received flak damage to a fuel tank over Frankfurt, unbeknown to the crew. This caused them to run out of fuel shortly after crossing their own lines, and they crashed in a wood, the fuel soaked aircraft catching fire and being totally destroyed. All three crewmen were unharmed however. The second night bomber to be lost to the Frankfurt defences was Handley Page 0/400 D8302 of 100 Squadron, on the night of 16/17 September. This aircraft lost an engine to the anti-aircraft gunfire over Frankfurt, and was forced down at Darmstadt. The crew was captured a few days later after trying to make the Swiss border on foot.

In contrast the day bombers, who also made three raids on Frankfurt, suffered severe casualties at the hands of the German scouts and anti-aircraft artillery. The bulk of these casualties were to 110 Squadron, who lost another seven aircraft out of a formation of 13 on 21 October, when German scouts managed to break up their neat and self-protecting formations, picking off individual aircraft with relative impunity. On this occasion, none of the 13 bombers reached Frankfurt. In all, some eleven day bombers were lost on the German side during the three daylight raids on Frankfurt by the RAF in 1918, and many others returned in a damaged condition and with dead or wounded crew on board.

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NOTES

1. This was probably E8422 crewed by Sgts H.W. Tozer (pilot) and W. Platt (gunner), which crashed near Saaralbe. Both men were killed.
 2. Elements of Jastas 3 and 15 were almost certainly involved, as Gefreiter Meyer of *Jasta* 3 claimed a DH9 south-east of Saaralbe at 1115, and Lt Georg Handelsmann of *Jasta* 15 claimed another five minutes later, south of Metz. It seems fairly certain that Meyer's victims were Tozer and Platt.
 3. The aircraft lost by 110 Squadron during the return flight from Frankfurt were probably victims of Vfw Gott of *Kest* 9, who claimed a DH4 at Darmstadt, just south of Frankfurt, Lt Keisze of *Kest* 1b, who claimed a DH4 at Mannheim at 1430, or an unknown pilot of *Kest* 3 who claimed a DH4 at Zabern at 1430. Other possible claimants were *Jasta* 78b. Lt Richard Schmidt and OfStv E. Prime of this unit each claimed a DH9 and a DH4 respectively at Zabern and Bühl aerodrome during a running fight after 1430.
 4. The 110 Squadron crews taken prisoner were Lt C.B.E. Lloyd and 2Lt H.J.C. Elwig in E9660 and Capt A. Lindley and Lt C.R. Gross in F1030.
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