

NIGHT OF THE INTRUDERS UNTERNEHMEN GISELA



In early March 1945, the German Luftwaffe, in an isolated display of resistance, developed a tactic which, had it been deployed earlier, could have neutralised the WWII operations of Royal Air Force Bomber Command. In the early hours of 4th March 1945, in Unternehmen (Operation) Gisela, some 200 Junkers JU88 nightfighters of the Luftwaffe Nachtjagdeschwader Gruppen (Night Fighter destroyer Group) had been deployed to intercept the allied bombers returning to base at their most vulnerable point, just before landing. The marauding aircraft crossed the North Sea at points stretching between the Thames Estuary and up the east coast to the North Yorkshire moors. The fact that these intruders were able to cross the North Sea coast without being picked up by English radar operators would seem to have been a result of a degree of complacency that had set in amongst Bomber Command, as the Luftwaffe appeared to be subdued.

F/Lt 'Uncle Will' Hay, piloted PB504, one of 12 Lancasters dispatched by 49 Squadron to attack the Dortmund-Ems Canal; during the return leg he noted something rather unusual:

"Coming back from the Dortmund-Ems, I saw beacons on the Dutch coast, the type which the night fighters orbit before being vectored onto the stream. The beacons were usually single, but this was a double one and to me meant only one thing - the fighters were waiting to move in. I dropped to sea level (ignoring the bomb aimer's complaints about the sudden rush of pressure on his ears) and we came back just over the tops of the waves."

'Uncle Will's' instincts were correct; for crossing the North Sea with the returning bombers of 4 and 5 Groups, were Ju88Gs of the German Luftwaffe - but here 'Uncle' (whose crew was one operation shy of their tour) luck must have been strong, for the enemy was also flying to England at wave top level. In the very early hours of Sunday 4 March, large scale German intruder operations were carried out over eastern England.

Halifax squadrons returning to Yorkshire from operations against the Kamen Oil refinery, Special Duty squadrons landing in Norfolk and Lancasters returning to Lincolnshire from Ladbergan - all became the prey of prowling Luftwaffe night fighters in the moonlit eastern counties.

49 Squadron started letting down at Fulbeck just after midnight.

F/O Les Hammond RAAF (SW265) and crew were on their final approach; navigator Norman Smith recalls what happened next:

"On return our R/T set was u/s and we could not receive messages from the control tower; so as we approached we fired a red Very light and came straight in to land. As we touched down, all the airfield lights were suddenly all switched off. Without R/T we didn't hear the 'Bograt' instructions - this was the codeword given to inform aircraft that intruders were around and that they should scramble and await further orders.

The skipper turned the aircraft off the runway and just as we were getting out, an intruder 'shot up' the runway. We all dived on the deck and tried to make ourselves as small as possible... I looked up just as the intruder, a Ju88 passed overhead. Whilst all this was happening and with cannon shells ripping into the runway all around, the skipper 'walked' over to our Lancaster and switched off the navigation lights; we had left them on to warn other aircraft that may have landed behind us. A little later we saw a flash in the distance, and thought it may have been our intruder being shot down!"

Pilot, F/O Les Hammond RAAF adds the following to his navigator's account:

"We fired a red final warning on entering the funnels, and received no red from the control van. We used the entire runway as the brakes were u/s and eventually turned off onto the grass at a safe distance from the runway.

The crew wearily climbed out leaving the 'old girl' standing there lit up like a Christmas tree... engine noises then sounded overhead and the next thing we saw was a Ju88 on a steep turn right at us. My first thought was the illuminated target we had given him... his aircraft was outlined by a string of horizontal muzzle flashes and we will never know where his bullets landed... there wasn't a single hole in the old kite!

This is where Smithy and I differ in our accounts; he said I walked across to our aircraft and switched the master switch off... if there had been anyone there to time me, I will wager a sizeable bet that I broke every Olympic record ever set! I don't remember how I got up through the door as the ladder had been tossed inside... I think I just flew!"

Unfortunately, the crashing aircraft that night in the fields of Lincolnshire and neighbouring counties, were nearly all RAF bombers. F/Lt Jack Winter (PB484) and crew were the final aircraft to land at Fulbeck touching down in T-Tommy at 00.27hrs... just two minutes later the carnage began: 00.29hrs. In the direction of the coast, a Lancaster of 12 Sqn. Wickenby dived headlong into the ground at Ulceby Cross near Alford. The aircraft's engines buried themselves 10 feet into the ground; there were no survivors.

00.40hrs. A Halifax of 466 RAAF Sqn was attacked and the crew baled out over Waddington just south of Lincoln. The crewless aircraft then flew on towards the coast but tragically crashed at Friskney near Skegness demolishing a cottage and killing three people.

00.57hrs. A Lancaster of 1654 HCU Wigsley crashed at Church Warsop near Mansfield after being shot down. The crew managed to bale out but sadly the mid-upper gunner was killed.

01.00hrs. The pilot of a 460 RAAF Sqn Lancaster had received the 'Bograt' call from his Binbrook base. Moments later they were 'Pounced' by a Ju88. F/O Warren miraculously crash landed his burning aircraft on farmland at Barfield House, Langworth, not far from the railway crossing. The crew, who were struggling to free the injured mid-upper gunner, were the subject of the night fighter's attention still further... as they tried to make good their escape, the Nazi pilot repeatedly strafed the helpless airmen assisted by the light from the burning bomber. Fortunately the Lancaster crew survived... but for the Luftwaffe crew, who made off over Scothern heading towards Scampton, their time would soon be up for they had only a matter of few more minutes to live!... as we shall see.

01.02hrs. Another 1654 HCU Lancaster crew was attacked over their home airfield of Wigsley; the rear gunner baled out, but the pilot managed to land the aircraft at High Ercall.

01.05hrs. To the east of Fulbeck, in the direction of Cranwell, a valiant French pilot, Captain Lacou and his flight engineer, F/Sgt Le Masson, held their burning Halifax aloft whilst the rest of the crew escaped by parachute. The aircraft finally plunged to the ground near Anwick Grange, its fuel tanks erupting killing both brave airmen. At the same time, yet another Lancaster from 1654 HCU Wigsley was shot down, and dived into the ground at Stapleford Wood between Fulbeck and Newark; all the crew were killed (one of these two crashes may have been the flash that the Hammond crew witnessed).

01.05hrs. A Lancaster from 1662 HCU at Blyton near Gainsborough was attacked in the Doncaster area, but the pilot managed to land safely.

01.10hrs. Another Lancaster of 12 Sqn. Wickenby, was shot down and fell at East Stockwith near Blyton; all the crew were killed.

01.15hrs. A Lancaster crew of 44 Sqn Spilsby, received the 'Bograt' call and headed north away from their base... they hadn't travelled far before the intruder struck. The wreckage fell in flames into Brocklesby Park near Brigg. Sadly, none of the crew survived. A memorial plaque dedicated to this crew has been placed on a tree near where they perished.

01.18hrs. Over Norfolk, F/O Reid and crew of 189 Squadron were heading back to Fulbeck from the Ladbergen trip, when a night fighter shot them down; there were no survivors as the Lancaster dived into the nearby East Rudham Railway Station.

01.36hrs. A 76 Sqn. Halifax crew were trying to make their Yorkshire base when a fighter caught them over Lincolnshire; the crew all managed to parachute to safety before the Halifax crashed at Cadney near Brigg.

Observer J.P. Kelway, was a member of L.1 Post, No 11 Group, ROC, Lincoln. Not following his usual custom of sleeping at his post prior to duty, the early morning of 4th March, saw him motoring to duty along the Welton to Hackthorn road, some 2 miles east of Scampton airfield.

Feldwebel Heirich Conze and crew (who had minutes earlier downed and strafed the Lancaster crew at Langworth) were looking for ground targets to attack. Although Observer Kelway's car lights were hooded according to regulations, there must have been just enough light to be seen by Conze. The Ju88 came streaking in at ground level aiming straight at Kelway's car when it struck telegraph wires and then the ground before hitting the car and flinging it across two fields. Kelway was instantly killed, as were the 4 man crew in the Ju88.

Observer Kelway was buried in Newport Cemetery, Lincoln, on 7 March; a large number of his fellow observers attending. He was the only member of the ROC to be killed on duty.

The German crew are buried in Scampton Churchyard.



Whilst such hostilities were being enacted over Lincolnshire, many similar combats were happening over Yorkshire and East Anglia. The British defences had been taken totally by surprise; of the 5 German fighters destroyed in England, at least 3 were due to their own low level flying. Back at the German bases, 8 crews were missing, 3 more crashed, 6 crews baled out near their home airfields due to fuel shortage, and 11 aircraft crashed or were damaged when landing.

The attack had lasted just two-and-a-half hours, and during that time 13 Halifaxes, 9 Lancasters, one Fortress and a Mosquito had been shot down. Whilst over England, the Germans had strafed anything that moved on the ground; as a result 17 civilians had been killed and 12 seriously wounded. The night had served as a timely reminder that the enemy was still a capable and deadly opponent.

