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BOMBER OFFENSIVE

An article by
Air Commodore L. MacLean

★ ★ ★

Smooth the descent and easy is the way :
The gates of hell stand open night and day
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labour lies.

★ ★ ★

—*Dryden*

“You can stand in any one of a thousand places in the larger cities of Germany and as far as the eye can see there is nothing but ruin. Many of those areas will not be rebuilt for generations—if they are rebuilt at all.” Those are the opening words of an article entitled “Thoughts on the Devastation of the German Cities,” by Leo A. Codd, Editor of the American magazine *Ordnance*. He continues: “Words and photographs are inadequate to describe the degree of damage that has been done to European culture in all the countries where total war from the air was waged.”

From the spiritual he descends to the material and quotes statistics: “To appraise the cost to ourselves in material and in effort ponder these figures: there were more than 1,440,000 bomber sorties and 2,680,000 fighter sorties flown against the enemy. The cost in dollars to the United States for its part in the Air War in Europe was more than \$43,000,000,000.” His figures are taken from the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and are therefore authoritative.

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The cost of the British share, extending as it did over a much longer period, cannot have been less. We thus reach a combined total, expressed in sterling, for the whole air war in Europe, of the order of 21,000,000,000 pounds, a figure at which comprehension boggles. It would be well indeed to ponder on the return for this prodigious outlay since the success or failure of a war, like any other form of the business of life, can only be judged on the basis of results accruing in relation to energy expended. Materially this country is now bankrupt. Spiritually—"What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

War is essentially an affair of ethics as well as economics and, though the economical aspect presses heavily on the people of the world today, the ethical aspect has continuously occupied the thoughts of mankind in an unceasing endeavour to diminish war's inevitable horrors, and to limit and localize its effects. The advocates of "air power", in urging their claim for precedence, took a firm stand, with a foot planted squarely on each of these bases. In comparison with war waged by military or sea power, air warfare, they maintained, would prove not only more humane but incomparably cheaper. Humane, they argued, because aerial bombardment would not be directed towards the wholesale destruction of humanity, but focussed on those few centres vital to national life, would, through a dislocation of governmental control and the routine of living, undermine public morale, destroy the will to fight and cause a collapse at the centre regardless of the outcome of naval or military action. Cheaper—because cheapness is, of course, inherent in a short war waged by a small air force whose attacks would be so precisely focussed.

Such was the Air Staff's gospel of war, propagated assiduously throughout some twenty years from 1919 onwards; and the people of this country began the war deluded into the belief that it was well founded and practicable. About this let there be no

mistake or evasive thinking. The simple summary above is the essence and substance of what was fed to the public and is essentially and substantially what the man in the street believes today. The protagonists of this gospel were acclaimed, not because of their powers of logical deduction from past events but because, presumably by divine inspiration, they could, despite the lessons from those events, prophesy a new era.

By 1925 the separatist Air Staff doctrine, purely conjectural, had been crystallized and was officially enunciated by the Commandant of the R. A. F. Staff College as follows:

“If the Government had decided that the main effort towards winning the war was to be made by its air power, the object of the Air Force will be to dislocate the national life of the enemy people: and the vital centres would then be—the seat of government, transport and communication systems and the water, light and food supply.”

That the Government did decide, at an early date in hostilities, that the main effort towards winning the war was to be made by air power, is easily ascertained by reference to the utterances of such public authorities as Mr. Churchill and Sir Arthur Harris. Sir Arthur Harris—a Marshall of the Royal Air Force—in his book “Bomber Offensive” writes on page 53:

“It is worth while remarking that no other country in the world had at that time* conceived the possibility of using an air force in this way to fight a war by itself and, within certain limits, win a war outright.”

On page 54:

“Winning a war by bombing as at that time** we were proposing to do.”

* 1940

** 1941

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And, finally on page 76 :

The general idea at this time*** on what civil servants always call a high level, was that the main and almost the only purpose of bombing was to attack the morale of the industrial workers.”

Similarly, Mr. Churchill, in a number of speeches, left little doubt on the point, but in particular, in an address to Congress in Washington on 19th May, 1943, he said :

“Opinion, Mr. President, is divided as to whether the use of air power by itself will bring about a collapse of Germany or Italy. The experiment is well worth trying.”

It is unnecessary further to labour the point. We have from these two supreme authorities that it was the policy of the Government, accepted by the Air Staff, that the Air Force should attempt the task of fighting and winning a war by an unprecedented process employing an entirely new technique—the process of striking direct at the vital centres in the enemy’s economy, using a technique of selective obliteration by means of bombs from the air, to bring about a collapse of public morale and the surrender of the enemy government through popular pressure.

Since the collapse of neither Italy nor Germany did occur until, in the first case American and British armies had overrun the country, and in the second American, British and Russian armies had, foot by foot, fought their way to a convergence from all sides on to Germany’s capital with her armies hemmed in and immovable, it is unnecessary to labour the failure of this air-power experiment—the most costly in history.

*** 1942

Despite this failure, the old soothsayers—unabashed, unashamed and active—are still making the same prophecies and the bomber doctrine is still booming. It is therefore more than ever necessary to extricate from the morass of propaganda the few pieces of substance and truth.

In previous articles I have indicated the oblique consequences, on naval and military operations, of the separatist doctrine. In this article I intend to trace the course of the central bomber offensive, not with a view to emphasizing its self-evident failure but in order to reach some estimate of how much or how little it contributed towards, or even retarded, victory.

The indispensable foundation, to bring the experiment even into the realms of feasibility, is the ability on the part of the bombing force to hit a preselected target of known importance in the enemy's economic system. The questions demanding an answer are: Did the bomber force in fact possess the required skill? If not, to what extent was this skill lacking and were the Air Staff aware of its absence before war began?

The first lesson, learned at a desperate price, was that daylight bombing was out of the question. Both Lord Tedder and Sir Arthur Harris leave little doubt about that. Tedder, in the course of a lecture at Cambridge on 18th February, 1947, stated:

“Our operations against the German fleet showed up one respect in which we had been wrong. It had been thought that, though the bomber could not by its very nature be as fast as the fighter, yet it could cope with the fighter provided it had sufficient speed and effective defensive armament. The heavy casualties suffered by the raids off Kiel and Wilhelmshaven showed that this was not the case and from that time on till late in the war the great bulk of our bomber operations over Germany were at night.”

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Harris, less circumlocutory, on page 73 of "Bomber Offensive," states.

"The German defenses were so strong that it was impossible to operate regularly or with any sizeable force by day, so that all our main operations were confined to the hours of darkness."

On page 80:

"Our attacks on the German naval units during the phoney war had shown that we could not operate by day over Germany without completely prohibitive casualties for day fighters and we at once began to prepare and train for bombing at night."

Moreover, on page 39 he demolishes the implication by Tedder that reasonable care had been devoted to ensuring that our bombers were adequately fast and armed. He states:

"The Hampden was cold meat for any determined fighter in daylight as I knew it would be and we got one or two pretty serious knocks. The Hampden was then a most feebly armed aircraft with a single gun on top and a single one underneath manned by a gunner in a hopelessly cramped position, together with a gun firing forward which, as it was fixed, was of no value at all."

Wing Commander Guy Gibson, V. C., describes, in "Enemy Coast Ahead," one of the serious knocks which Harris mentions. He writes, on page 67:

"When, however, these Hampden squadrons were given their chance and did get to Norway in daylight it was pretty fierce slaughter. Their orders were to fly in a very tight box so as to bring as much defensive armament as possible to bear on oncoming fighters, but the Germans were no fools; they had found a weak spot in the Hampdens, for at that time there was a blind area on

either side and the Huns made the best of their knowledge..... Their mode of attack was to fly in formation with the Hampdens perhaps fifty yards out and slightly to the front, and pick off the outside men with their one gun aiming with a no-deflection shot at the pilot. The bomber boys could do nothing about it; they just had to sit there and wait to be shot down. If they broke away they were immediately pounced on by three Messerschmitt 109's waiting in the background. If they stayed the pilot received a machine-gun serenade in his face. One by one they were hacked down from the wing man inwards. Watts said it was a terrible sight to see them burst into flames at about twenty feet, then cartwheel one wing into the cold sea. First B Beer went; that was poor old Peter. Who was next? There was H Harry on the outside. The German gunner carefully took aim, then a few minutes later H Harry disappeared beneath the flaming waves. That was poor old Charles. One pilot made the hopeless gesture of pulling back his hood and firing his revolver at the enemy gunner, but it was no good and his brave act was the last thing he did on this earth. At last low cloud was reached and four out of the twelve managed to scrape home."

This kind of slaughter was not peculiar to the Hampdens. Wing Commander Asher Lee, in his book "The German Air Force," describes the fate of the Battle and Blenheim squadrons in 1940. He writes on page 55:

"The same relative impotence characterized the daylight attacks by British Blenheims and Battles on German troops and communications in the battle area. Flying mostly without escort and in small numbers, they were engaged in operations which were at best hazardous and in the main suicidal."

By the time that it had been decided to resort to night bombing as the panacea against slaughter, the bomber force had