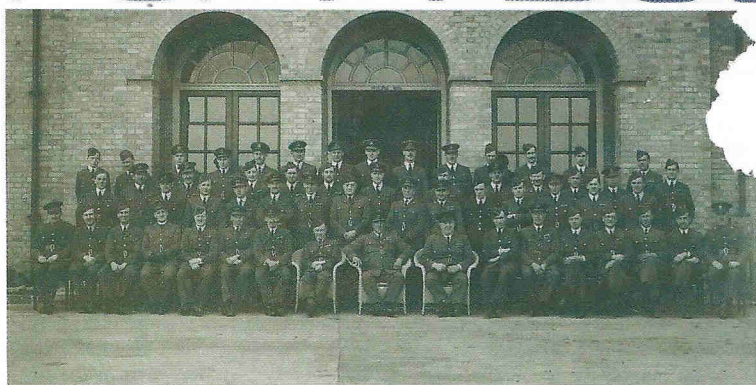


Entitled 'We're Off On A Raid', this painting by Trevor Lay depicts 83 Squadron aircrew, including Fg Off Guy Gibson, gathered at RAF Scampton's 'A' Flight Dispersal on September 4, 1939, when Squadron Commander Wg Cdr Leonard Snaith appeared and said "We're off on a raid." It has been produced as a limited edition print by Lowood Arts and Media and is signed by Sqn Ldr P Ward-Hunt of 49 Squadron and Sqn Ldr A K Cook of 83 Squadron. For full details see the advertisement on page 24.



Cold Meat For A Determined Fighter



That was how 'Bomber' Harris described the Handley Page Hampden. Vulnerable or not, Sqn Ldr Gerry Pye describes how they fared in the early stages of the war

DURING MY TOUR of duty at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, I was particularly honoured to serve in a part-time capacity as the station historian. I became fairly accustomed to receiving requests for information at my small archive, but one particular supplication towards the end of 1999 puzzled me for a few weeks and has fascinated me ever since.

I was presented with a black and white photograph of RAF officers dressed in their 'best blue' formed up in front of the standard arches of an officers' mess. One of the corners of the photograph had seemingly been

purloined to serve as bedding material for a small rodent but other than that there was very little to distinguish this photograph from the hundreds of others like it that punctuate the magnolia painted walls of most RAF officers' messes.

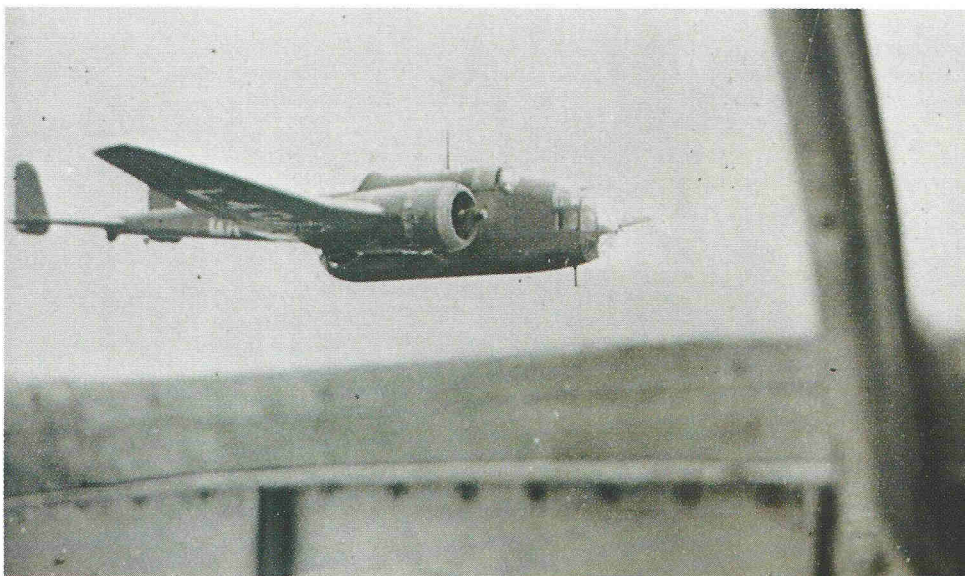
I learned early in my job as the station historian that the RAF did not readily reveal its past to my amateur inspection, and as I studied the moon-faced men and boys gazing patiently at the camera lens, I was not confident of being able to enlighten the photograph's most recent owner as to the identity of the squadrons pictured,

The original photograph (complete with a corner eaten away by a small rodent) of 49 and 83 Squadrons gathered outside the Officers' Mess at RAF Scampton on April 2, 1940.

VIA J LEE

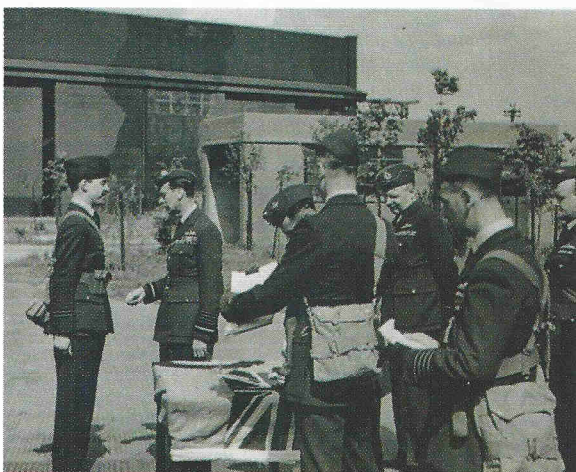
let alone where and when the photograph was taken. However, when the array of neatly-penned autographs on the back was pointed out I was instantly taken by how familiar these signatures appeared to me.

Shortly before he was killed in action, Wg Cdr Guy Gibson, famous for commanding 617 Squadron during the Dambuster Raid, compiled his memoirs in a book entitled *Enemy Coast Ahead*. He dedicated this work to the officers and men that he had served with who had already met their deaths and he listed their names as part of his introduction.

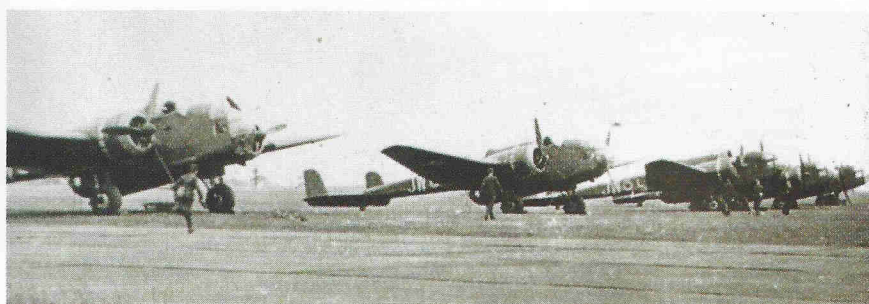


great difficulty intercepting bombers. It was also widely believed that owing to the bombers' armaments, a fighter would struggle to destroy them even if the formation was to be successfully intercepted.

It became pivotal to the 'knock-out' blow theory that bombers could attack the enemy in broad daylight with relative impunity, and the appearance of high-performance monoplane fighters during the later half of the 1930s did little to alter this doctrine. Consequently, few resources were expended to develop navigation aids, and blind-flying instruments were not generally seen in cockpits until 1937. So by 1939, Bomber Command was geared up to attack the enemy only in daylight and it was in broad daylight that the first Hampden raid of World War Two was launched.



"MOST OF THE airmen had never even taken off in a fully bombed-up Hampden."



Many of the names on the back of the photograph appeared in this list and others were mentioned within the body of the book, which indicated that the picture was undoubtedly 49 and 83 Squadrons during their domicile at RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire. Moreover, I was also able to ascertain with some degree of certainty that the picture was taken during April 1940.

There was no disguising how pleased I was with myself when I reported all this to my enquirer. However, my elation was tinged with sadness when I considered how many of these men had been killed early in the war.

Furthermore, it occurred to me that since Gibson served on 83 Squadron from September 1937 to September 1940, he too should have appeared in the photograph; but despite hours of magnifying glass enhanced scrutiny, neither Gibson's face nor his signature could be found. Where was he, and why would he be allowed to miss such an important gathering?

Shortly after the photograph was taken, one of the officers pictured won the Victoria Cross; others distinguished themselves sufficiently to meet the King, and many of these men were among the first to take part in raids on Berlin. To the undiscerning eye, there is nothing remarkable about the photograph; however, from the comfort

TOP: A rare photo taken by a wireless operator from his rear-upper turret. It is believed to have been taken by a 50 Squadron crew during a practice sortie to Evanton on the Cromarty Firth, North Scotland, circa 1939.

ABOVE: His Majesty King George VI presenting the DFC to Flt Lt Timmerman at RAF Scampton on May 27, 1940. The officer third from right is the AOC 5 Group, none other than 'Bomber' Harris himself. P WARD-HUNT

ABOVE RIGHT: Pre-war (July 1939) line-up of 44 Squadron Hampdens at Waddington.

ALL RAF WADDINGTON HERITAGE CENTRE UNLESS NOTED

of my humble archive I soon learned that the depicted gathering marked the end of the so-called 'Phoney War', the period between September 1939 and April 1940. The men of 49 and 83 Squadrons, flying in their woefully-outmoded Handley Page Hampdens, were soon to become part of the last vestige of military power capable of hitting back at the Wehrmacht during the darkest days of World War Two when Britain fought alone.

One of the most prized documents in the Waddington archive was a logbook that once belonged to W/O R C Browne. W/O Browne was a general duties clerk by trade, but between 1929 and 1931 he flew a total of 162 hours in a Handley Page Hinaidi – one of the biplane bombers that preceded the Hampden. Many of his logbook entries describe dummy raids on London, which were flown all the way from Lincolnshire without being intercepted by fighters – even though the fighters knew the Hinaidis were coming.

Browne reports that he often saw the fighters searching in vain for his formation. In *Enemy Coast Ahead* Gibson boasts about 'attacking' London in his Hampden as late as 1939 without being intercepted.

It is easy to appreciate, therefore, why the planners at the Air Ministry were convinced that fighters would have

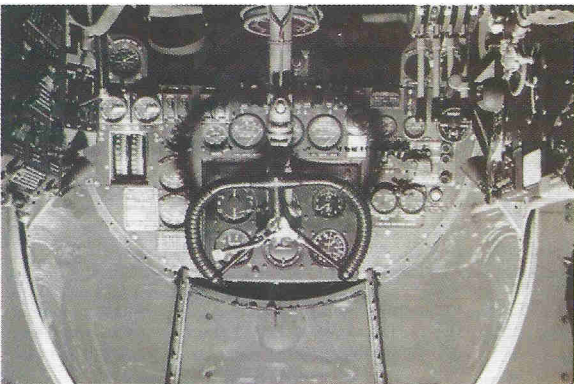
WE'RE OFF ON A RAID

On September 4, 1939, Wg Cdr 'Willie' Snaith (pictured to the left of the Station Commander), the Officer Commanding 83 Squadron, reappeared at the 'A' Flight Dispersal shortly after morning prayers and said dolefully to his men: "We're off on a raid".

The target was the German pocket-battleships lying at anchor at the entrance to the Kiel Canal, and Snaith informed his pilots – amongst them Fg Off Guy Gibson – that owing to bad weather, the squadron would have to attack from low altitude. A tirade of questions followed because most of the airmen had never even taken off in a fully bombed-up Hampden. With only a few hours remaining before take-off, the airmen were busy consulting publications about how to attack a ship and at what height to fly to avoid flak.

The Station Armament Officer did his best to allay fears about the bombs bouncing off the armoured decks and stressed the importance of trying to lodge the bombs in the superstructure for maximum effect. In his book, Gibson confides how absurdly unprepared the squadron was and how he was shaking with nerves as the take-off time kept being postponed in the hope of better weather.

When he did finally climb into his cockpit, the groundcrew did not know

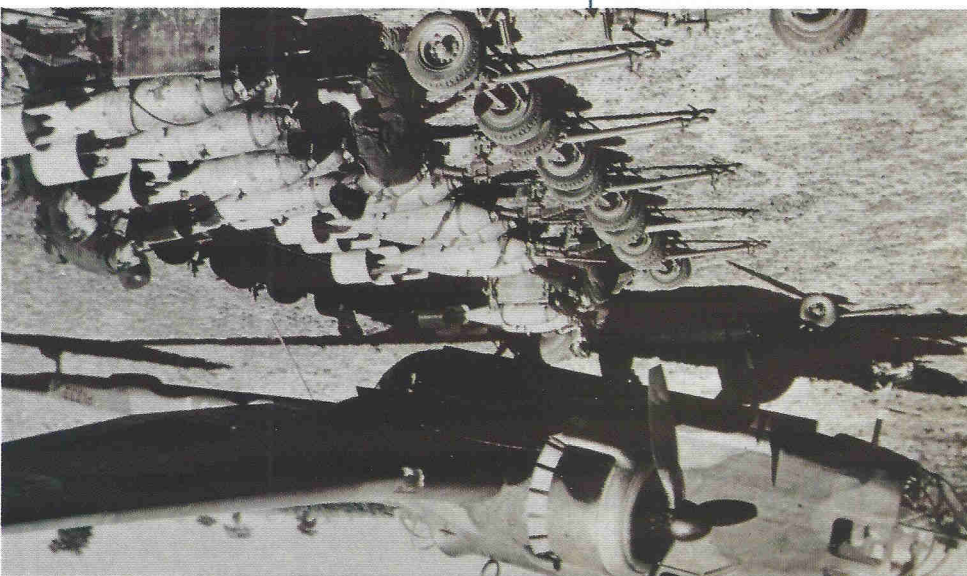


Squadrons return to Scampton, but by January 1940 saw 49 and 83 in the sea.

several Hampdens were forced to ditch fuel trying to find a telltale landmark. navigation aids because the formations invariably became lost and ran low on sorties reinforced the need for better enemy was rarely engaged, these despatched to investigate. Although the coast and the squadrons would be now and again German destroyers would be reported off the North-east nightlie began to wear thin, but every and the novelty of the Manchester

In November the fog turned to rain atbome. fog wanted sufficiently to get flying training whenever the October unfortunately for them, by night the social nightlie punctuated, where the men set about enjoying found itself in the Manchester area, operations. The Scampton Wing dispersal of aircraft not needed for Bomber Command ordered the the ground, and as a precaution proportion of the Polish aircraft on had destroyed a significant campaign revealed that the Germans 'Phoney War' began in earnest. For 49 and 83 Squadrons, the would not be used for operations again until December 21, 1939.

REAL 'PHONEY WAR'



ABOVE: No.49 Squadron

Hampden P1333 being bombed-up with 250lb General Purpose bombs.

BELOW: Hampdens of 50 Squadron, RAF Waddington, at their dispersals alongside the A15 on September 3, 1939.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A close-up of Sgt Ldr Ward-Hunt's Hampden cockpit. Note the fledgling instrument landing system fitted bottom right and the compass binnacle immediately forward of the control column.

P WARD-HUNT

All of the aircraft in Cunningham's section were shot down and only four out of the 20 airmen survived. This raid served to highlight the inadequacy of the Hampden as a fighting machine. The lack of armour plating, particularly around the pilot, meant that the crew could be killed long before the aircraft was incapable of flying. The arcs of fire of the rear Vickers guns were woefully narrow, leaving significant blind spots; and the fuel tanks did not seal themselves if holed. Though quickly identified, improvements were slow to be



of them had landed a Hampden in the dark! This was an exceedingly poor showing that was to be repeated throughout September 1939 – every time the knock-out blow aspirations were thwarted by appalling weather. However, the poor meteorological conditions not only protected the German ships from the Hampdens, but equally shielded the Hampdens from the German fighters. On September 28, the weather improved and shortly after daybreak, 12 Hampdens of 144 Squadron took off

Scampton – it was the first time any turned north to join the circuit at then followed into Lincoln and highlighted the canal, which they hours before the moon rose and around Lincolnshire for nearly two lost. The aircraft had to 'stoooge' but Snath's navigator was hopelessly crossed the English coast at Boston, instantly apparent. The formation the RAF's navigating skills became As darkness fell, the inadequacy of North Sea.

having ditched the bombs in the dutifully and headed back to Lincoln back. The formation followed miles off course, decided to turn and Snath, convinced that he was cloud base was as low as 100ft (30m) 10 miles (16km) from the target, the in and so too did the formation. At Wilhelmshaven, the weather closed About 40 miles (64km) from eastward and headed for Germany, whereupon the formation turned Snath over Lincoln Cathedral, had become. He caught up with and was instantly aware of how sluggish his fully-laden Hampden dust. Gibson took off shortly after Gibson's view behind a pall of brown to take-off and he disappeared from

Snath was the first of 83 Squadron rose into the air. to the right was when the Hampden noted, keenly, how severe the swing along Scampton's grass runway and Hampdens ahead of him bounce Gibson watched each of the Group to launch for Germany. about being the first squadron in 5 off, which earned it the right to boast No.49 Squadron was first to take Pegasus engines roared into life. apprehension waned as soon as the anyone off to fight before. Gibson's what to say because nobody had sent



A 50 Squadron Hampden and two crews immediately prior to a daylight raid, circa 1940.

L4098 of 44 Squadron seen at Waddington on May 2, 1940, after attempting to land with the undercarriage not fully locked.

now the rain had turned to snow in one of the most severe winters experienced for a long while and life for the Hampden crews was distinctly miserable. The days were filled with lectures on navigation, armament and meteorology and the more despondent amongst the men likened their daily routine to that of an operational training unit.

As the snow thawed towards the end of January the Scampton wing was on the move again. The U-boat scourge was beginning to bite, so 49 and 83 Squadrons were posted to Lossiemouth in Scotland to attempt to intercept the submarines as they sailed through the Faeroes-Shetland gap en route to the Atlantic. For 83 Squadron in particular, it was not an auspicious time owing to its mistakenly attacking a British submarine which, thankfully, did not

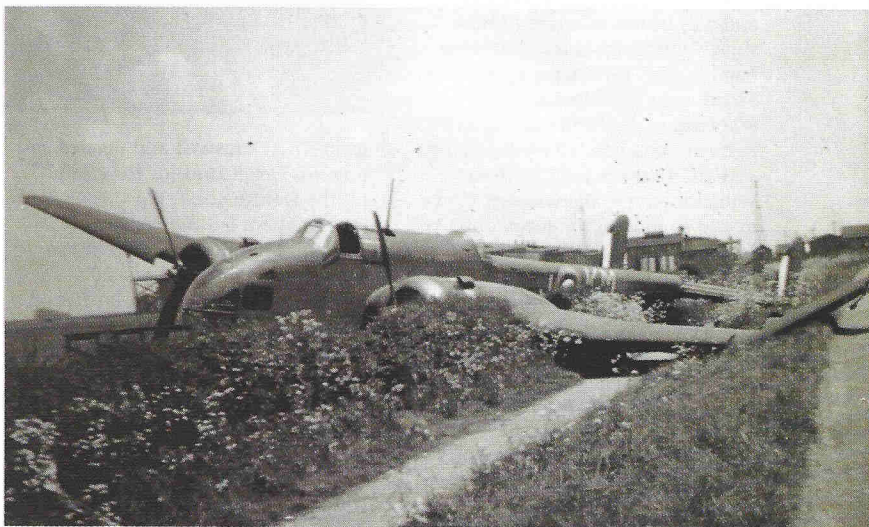
result in the deaths of British sailors but did raise further questions about bombing accuracy.

On March 19, 1940, the Wing returned to Scampton amid confusion about the appearance of mines in the English estuaries. With the Royal Navy on guard in these estuaries the laying of these mines was attributed to German seaplanes operating from bases between Sylt and Borkum on the north-west coast of Germany. The Scampton Wing was ordered to patrol the area and bomb flare paths in the sea to prevent the seaplanes taking off and landing.

The other task that befell the Scampton Wing was that of leaflet

home near Bedford to show me another copy of the photograph, which had not been damaged by rodents, and on the bottom was neatly penned 'April 1940'. I congratulated myself on my fledgling researching prowess, but the issue of Gibson's absence was still proving elusive.

Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt could not remember the exact day in April when the photograph was taken, which was perfectly understandable; after all, how many of us can look at our school photograph and remember the day it was taken? He recalled that the Station Commander had hurriedly instigated



"We're Off On A Raid"

By Trevor Lay

September 4, 1939. Flying Officer Guy Gibson was amongst the airmen from No. 83 Squadron gathered at the A Flight Dispersal, Royal Air Force Scampton, when the Squadron Commander, Wing Commander Leonard Snaith, appeared and said, dolefully: "We're off on a Raid".

A Limited Edition of 200 Prints signed by Squadron Leader P. Ward-Hunt, of No. 49 Squadron and Squadron Leader A. K. Cook of No. 83 Squadron, No. 5 Group Bomber Command 1940. Biographical information and Certificates of Authenticity included.

The original painting is also available for sale, price on application.
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dropping over Germany. Although unpopular, these raids provided invaluable experience of navigating around the skies of the Third Reich. At the end of March 1940, Gibson confides that the respite since September 3, 1939, had served the Scampton Wing well; it could now navigate and bomb accurately, and was proficient in night flying and radio-assisted landings.

By sifting through the 49 and 83 Squadron operational records, held by the Public Record Office at Kew, and looking for the names that matched the signatures, I confirmed my first thoughts that the photograph had to have been taken sometime in April 1940. I naively thought that the Operational Records would include an entry '2 April 40 - Squadrons Assembled for Photograph'; but alas when the record entries were made, the respective adjutants had not made provision for my enquiries some 60 years later.

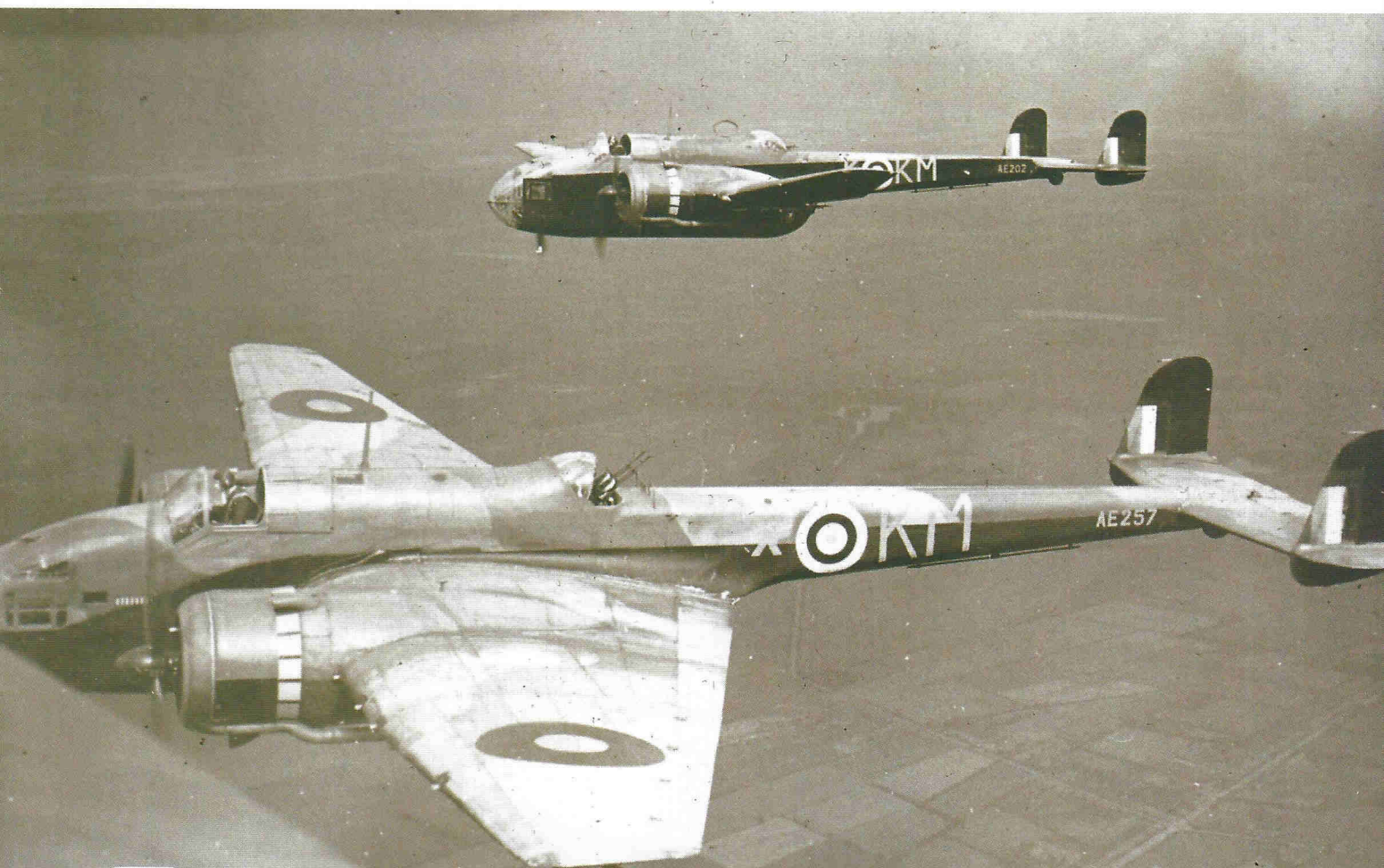
With the help of both Squadron Associations, I was able to trace Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt - one of only two men in the photograph known to be around today - and he kindly invited me to his

the gathering on the premise that things were 'hotting-up' and there might not be another suitable opportunity.

Gibson was not the only absentee; some officers were flying at the time and some were stranded at other airfields, having been diverted owing to poor weather. The poor weather features in the Operational Records for April and both squadrons were stood down between April 2 and 4, and between April 7 and 9, 1940. In *Enemy Coast Ahead*, Gibson records his waking up at Scampton on the morning of April 9, so it was more than likely that the photograph was taken on April 2 - but I could not be certain.

Having stretched my amateur research skills to the absolute limit, I decided to turn to the Air Historical Branch (AHB) for assistance and I was very pleased to receive a letter from Mr Clive Richards stating that a check of Gibson's service record had revealed his attending a course at the Blind Approach Training and Development Unit, RAF Boscombe Down, between March 27 and April 5, 1940. So he rejoined his squadron too late to be in the photograph, but just in time for the Wehrmacht's invasion of Norway on April 9, 1940, and the end of the 'Phoney War'. The pace - and the risks - was to increase dramatically.

Concludes in the December issue as the Hampden force is thrown into battle... in broad daylight! On sale November 1.



Cold Meat For A Determined Fighter

Sqn Ldr Gerry Pye concludes his account of early Hampden operations

FLYING HAMPDENS into battle during the day had been found wanting on three occasions prior to April 12, 1940; but the knock-out blow theory, shaped throughout the 1930s, was not to be cast aside lightly. Hindering the German Scandinavian campaign meant attacking ships, but Bomber Command was still unable to do so effectively under the cover of darkness. No.5 Group therefore launched a combined force of 12 Hampdens of 44 and 50 Squadrons from RAF Waddington on April 12, 1940... *in broad daylight!*

Not surprisingly, the force was badly mauled; six of the Hampdens were shot down over the target and two were severely damaged. This had a profound impact on the Commander of 5 Group, Air Vice Marshal Harris (later to become 'Bomber' Harris) who stated that the Hampden was "cold meat for a determined fighter" and more

modifications were recommended.

To defend against beam attacks, rectangular apertures 12in (0.3m) high by 10in (0.25m) were cut in each side of the fuselage just aft of the wing spar and in the Perspex side panels of the navigator's position. The navigator would operate his 'K' gun from one of these positions if a beam attack occurred. Furthermore, 38 Hampdens were fitted with a modified mounting for the rear upper guns to allow a wider traverse; but the penalty was an increase in basic weight, which rendered the take-off performance almost borderline.

On April 6, 1940, 83 Squadron suffered its first loss in action when L4054 ran out of fuel over Whitley Bay after nine hours of flying. The pilot, navigator and rear gunner were found drowned the next day, but the wireless operator was missing. The next few weeks comprised propaganda leaflet, or 'Nickel',

A formation of 44 Squadron Hampdens. Note the bomb markings just aft of the navigator's window on AE257 in the foreground.

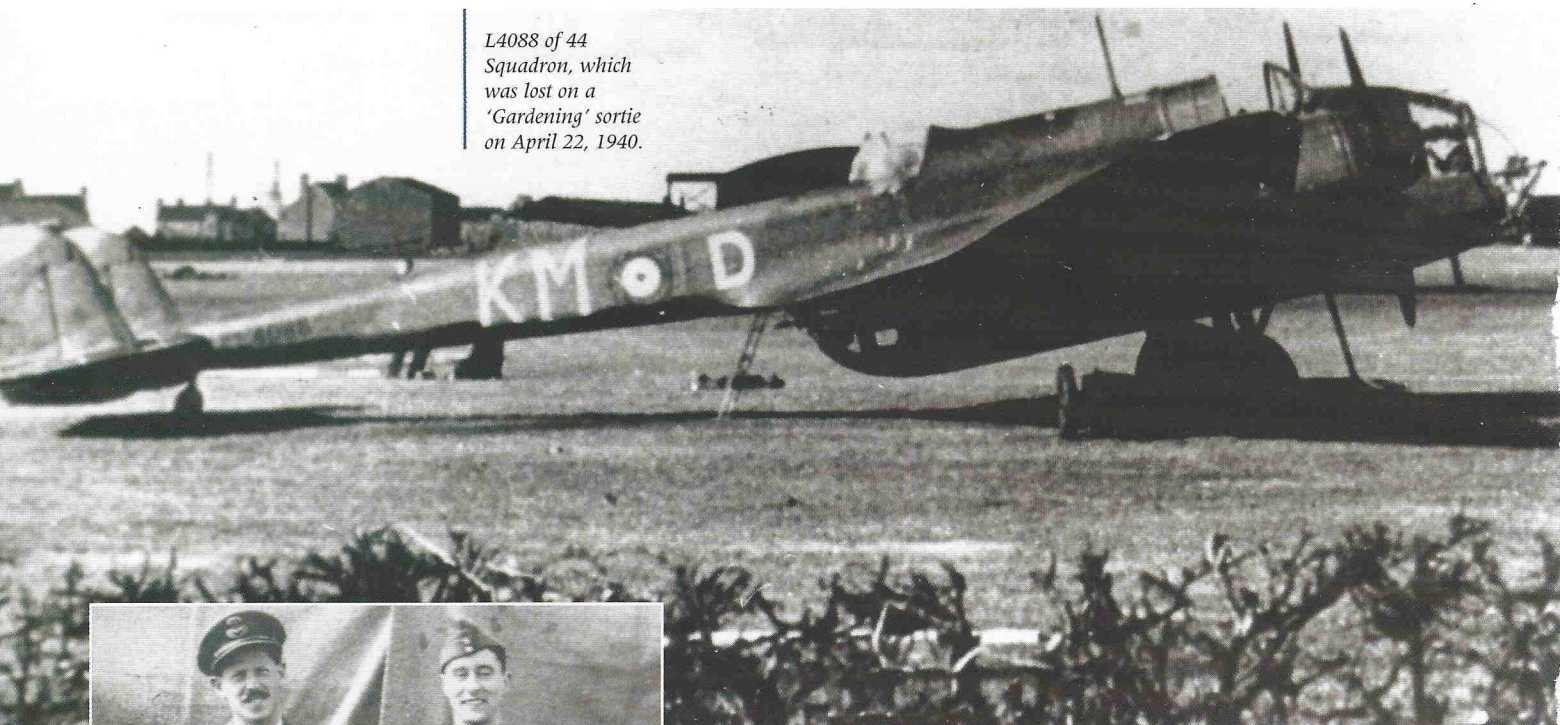
ALL RAF WADDINGTON
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dropping at night and looking for German ships during the day. Luckily for the Scampton Wing, the weather invariably thwarted attempts to locate the warships. I say 'luckily' because there is nothing to suggest that 49 and 83 Squadron would have fared any better against the Luftwaffe than 44 and 50 Squadrons did.

Towards the end of April there was a significant shift of emphasis to mine laying or, in contemporary parlance, 'Gardening'. This term was used because the mines themselves were codenamed 'Vegetables' and the areas where the mines were 'planted' were identified by the names of vegetables or flowers. For example, 'Yams' was North Heligoland (or Helgoland), 'Daffodils' was the Baltic Sound, 'Quince' was Kiel Bay and 'Eglantine' was the Elbe Estuary.

The Hampden's relatively huge bomb bay was an unforeseen

L4088 of 44 Squadron, which was lost on a 'Gardening' sortie on April 22, 1940.

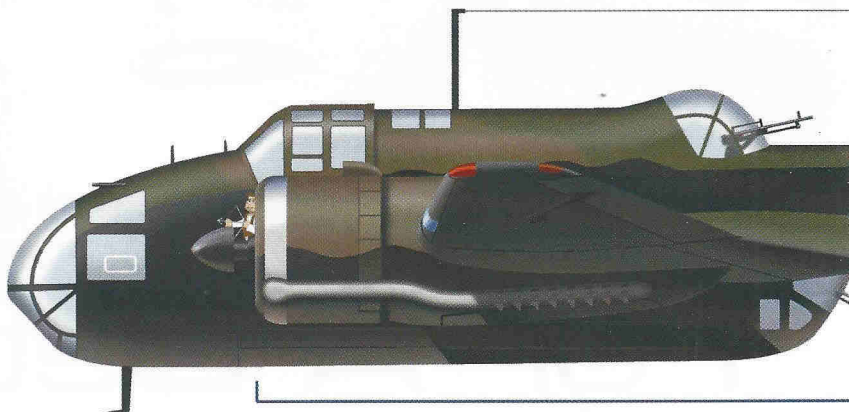


advantage and it was the only aircraft capable of carrying the 1,500lb (680kg) mine when the mine-laying campaign began. The mines had to be dropped from a height of between 400 and 1,000ft (122 to 305m) with a ground-speed not exceeding 200mph (322km/h) or else the parachute, designed to stop the mine disintegrating on contact with the sea, would tear away.

It had to be dropped into a depth of between 5 and 12 fathoms (10-24m) and would then lie on the seabed until fired by any major change in the surrounding magnetic field, eg a passing ship. Interestingly, during April, most of the write-ups for the 49 and 83 Squadron Operations Record are three-pages long.

The pilots on Waddington's first mine-laying sortie. Back row (left-right): Fg Off Cove, 50 Sqn, Sgt Smyth, 44 Sqn. Front row (left-right): Flt Lt Dutton, 44 Sqn, Sqn Ldr Weir, 44 Sqn, and Flt Lt Bennett, 50 Sqn.

Wg Cdr 'Babe' Learoyd vc, who won his Victoria Cross for an attack on the Dortmund-Ems Canal when a Flight Lieutenant on 49 Squadron.



FIVE HOURS TO THE RUHR

In May 1940, bombing effort shifted towards German industrial targets in the Ruhr Valley but, again, Bomber Command was found wanting. It could take a Hampden five hours to reach the Ruhr, during which time a heading

error of only a few degrees could easily place the aircraft 20 miles (32km) away from the target – at one time more bombs were being ditched in the sea than fell in the target area.

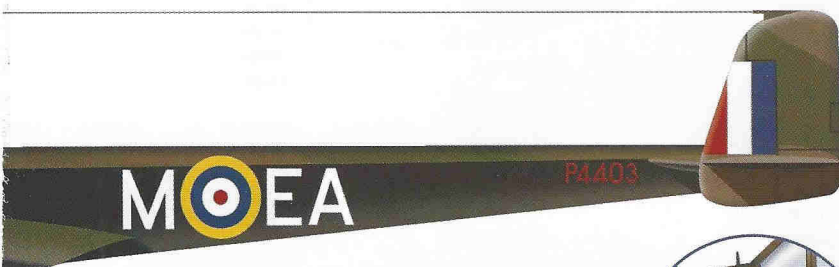
Not having found the target and being unable to fix a position to begin the homeward leg, there was an increased likelihood of not making UK landfall in the designated corridor and being fired upon by 'friendly' coastal defences or, worse still, of flying into barrage balloons. Moreover, the merest hint of enemy intruders in the area would mean that all the flare paths would be extinguished and radio-landing aids turned off, and many Hampdens were lost trying to locate darkened airfields.

Not surprisingly, the industrial damage inflicted on Germany was negligible and not a single German fighter or anti-aircraft gun was withdrawn from the Western Front to protect the Reich. The assault on the Ruhr, a pivotal tenet of the knock-out blow theory, was conducted with utterly inadequate means and was a complete failure.

Regrettably, men from 49 and 83 Squadron were being killed in the process; though they were also winning medals. On May 27, 1940, His Majesty King George VI honoured the station with a visit and was pleased to present Flt Lt Timmerman of 49 Squadron with the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Into June and the Scampton Wing was doing what it could to stop the Wehrmacht's rapid advance across northern Europe by bombing railway junctions, troop concentrations and road traffic. But it could not stop movement on the ground – the best it could hope to do was slow the movement down.

With the knock-out blow theory consigned to oblivion, Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding famously wrote to the Air Ministry prophesying the "complete and irremediable defeat of this country" if the Home Defences were not organised to resist a knock-out blow from the Luftwaffe. By the end of June, the 49 and 83 Squadron sortie rate was such that the write-ups



No.49 Squadron Hampden I P4403 'EA-M' as flown by Flt Lt Learoyd when he won his Victoria Cross during the attack on the Dortmund-Ems Canal on August 12/13 1940. Inset shows its Pinnocchio nose-art. PETE WEST © KEY 2002



"...AT ONE TIME more bombs were being ditched in the sea than fell in the target area."



for the Operations Record had reduced to a single paragraph.

After the fall of France, Britain stood alone and there were two distinct possibilities to face; the invasion and occupation of the UK mainland, or a gradual attrition caused by enemy attacks on the shipping that carried food and materials across the Atlantic. Either way the German Navy would figure strongly and Bomber Command aircraft were despatched to attack German dockyards, naval bases and warships at anchor such as the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*. But Hitler's territories now extended from the Arctic north of Norway to the coast of Spain, and there were insufficient resources to hem in the German Navy.

Mining the estuaries became

increasingly vital and the Hampden spearheaded a successful 'Gardening' campaign. Owing to the difficulties in recording enemy losses due to mines, this whole effort has largely gone unsung in the annals of RAF history.

With the Battle of Britain raging in the skies over England, there was also a pressing need to hinder the German concentration of invasion material at the ports and one of the most targeted inland waterways was the Dortmund-Ems Canal, linking the Ruhr to the Ems River. On August 12, 1940, five Hampdens took off from Scampton in a combined 49 and 83 Squadron operation to block the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal by dropping specially-modified mines against the lock gates.

To launch the mine with any hope of success it was necessary to approach from a direction well defended by enemy gun emplacements, and the first two Hampdens to try were both hit and lost. Nobody would have criticised Flt Lt Learoyd for being chary as a result, but he kept his composure and began his run in at 150ft (45m).

His aircraft was repeatedly hit and large pieces of the mainplane were torn away, but he planted his mine on target before limping back to Scampton only to find upon arrival that the flaps were inoperative and the undercarriage indicators were out of action. Not wishing to risk landing his battered Hampden in the dark, he stooged around Lincolnshire waiting for dawn and landed safely without causing injury to the crew or further damage to the aircraft. Learoyd's citation for the Victoria Cross – only the third to be awarded so far in the war – was gazetted on August 20, 1940. Although unusually descriptive, it does not mention that the mine had a salt-water activated fuse, which failed to operate in the brackish water of the canal.

AD983 of 44 Squadron crashed into the Girl's High School, Lincoln, returning from a 'Gardening' mission on July 22/23, 1941. The four crew and a woman from the school were killed.

LEFT: Cecil Mannix (a Rhodesian) sitting on the nose of 44 Squadron's 'D-Dopey' at Waddington, circa 1941. Note the square aperture in the navigator's window to provide access for a Vickers 'K' machine-gun in the event of a beam attack.

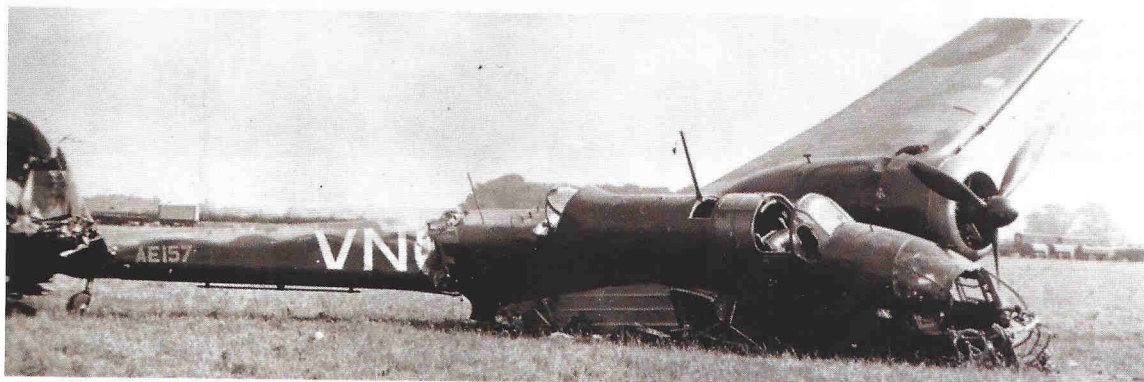


blow to the Luftwaffe that would eventually force Hitler to reconsider invading Britain.

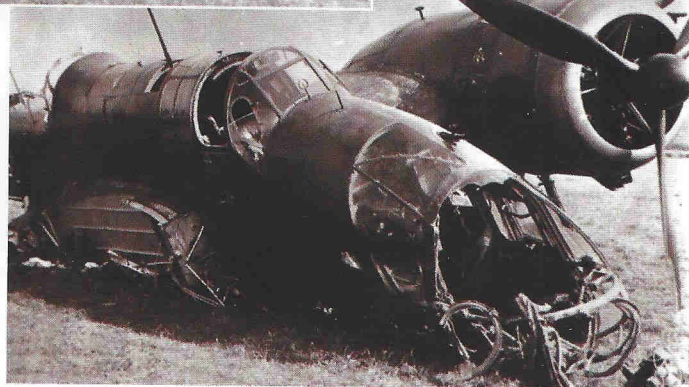
But throughout September the Germans stepped up their invasion plans and on September 15, 1940, 83 Squadron sent 15 aircraft to bomb barges sheltering in the Belgian port of Antwerp. The flak over the target was fierce and it was difficult to carry out the bombing run without being hit.

Guy Gibson piloted one of the few Hampdens to escape unscathed, but as he headed home he saw an 83 Squadron aircraft that had not been so lucky and was on fire. Upon his return, Gibson discovered that the aircraft had been that of Plt Off O'Connor, a Canadian. His navigator and rear-gunner had baled out but the wireless operator, 18-year-old Sgt John Hannah,

Crews from 50 Squadron pose in front of a Hampden at RAF Waddington circa 1940. Note the absence of the aperture in the navigator's side panel.



LEFT AND BELOW: AE157 of 50 Squadron was written off after colliding with another Hampden on the ground at Waddington on August 31, 1941.



AVENGING LONDON

At the same time as Learoyd appeared in the *London Gazette*, a German bomber dropped its bombs on London – allegedly in error – and Winston Churchill ordered Hampdens, Wellingtons and Whitleys to bomb Berlin as a reprisal. On August 25, 12 Hampdens took off from Scampton and headed to Berlin for the first time in the war. This and subsequent raids on Berlin stretched the Hampdens to the limit because sortie lengths were in the region of nine hours and there was little margin for miscalculation. Unexpected headwinds, enemy action and icing would reduce fuel reserves to the minimum, forcing crews to land wherever they could.

In the early hours of August 26, two

Hampdens from 83 Squadron ditched off the Norfolk coast, consigning otherwise wholly serviceable and increasingly precious airframes to the bottom of the North Sea. Another 83 Squadron Hampden crash-landed near Durham and a Hampden from 49 Squadron disappeared without trace. Ditching in the sea was a likely outcome of attacking Berlin in a Hampden and some unfortunate crews would find themselves dinghy bound twice in one week.

These attacks on the German capital appear not to have caused significant damage; however, they infuriated Hitler to such a degree that he ordered the Luftwaffe to exact revenge by bombing London. This gave Fighter Command breathing space to regroup and deal a

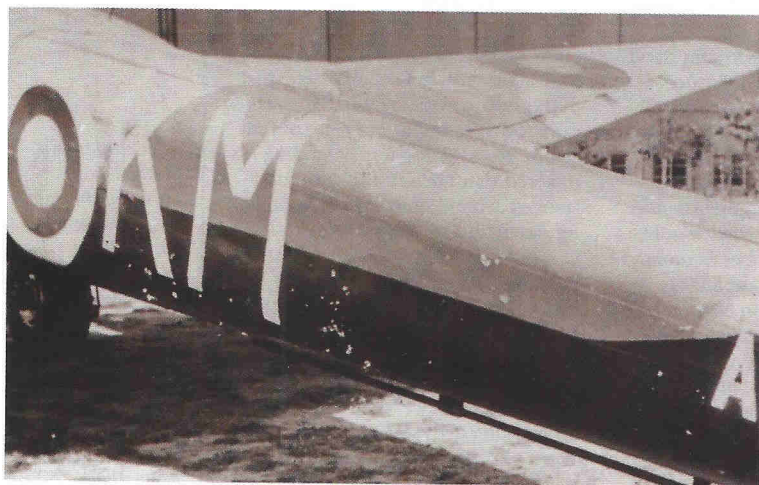
had remained in the aircraft and had put out the fire with his bare hands. This allowed O'Connor to fly the aircraft to the UK, and for his magnificent act of bravery, Hannah became the youngest airman ever to have been awarded the Victoria Cross – the second for the Scampton Wing.

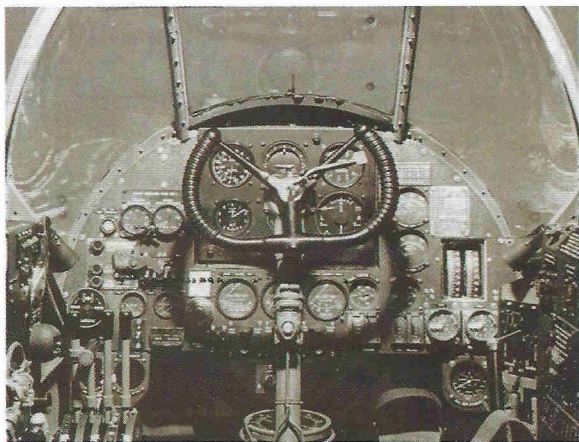
By the end of September, the Operations Record write-ups had reduced to single line entries; but the threat of invasion was waning and by October the squadron returned to the, by now, more routine business of mine laying. It had been an extremely costly summer for the Scampton Wing in terms of aircrews and airframes.

Gibson is outwardly upbeat about this in *Enemy Coast Ahead*, but he was known to be in a very depressed state of mind at the end of September. Most of the men he had been with in April, only five months before, had now gone. Men he had been team mates with on the rugby and cricket pitches;

LEFT: During a raid on Berlin on September 2/3, 1941, 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron lost four Hampdens. AD982 limped home after sustaining damage over the target. The wireless op and rear gunner were wounded, but the pilot and navigator were unhurt.

RIGHT: The signatures on the reverse of the 49 and 83 Squadron photo taken at Scampton on April 2, 1940. (And with the rodent nibbles apparent! VIA J LEE





FLYING THE HAMPDEN

In February 2000, the 49 Squadron Association put me in touch with Squadron Ldr Ward-Hunt, pictured in the Scampton photograph third from the right, second row, and I asked him what flying the Hampden was like. He remembered that the crew members were more or less isolated from each other and relied heavily on the intercom. The pilot sat in a cramped cockpit above the wing, which gave him a good view forward and around. Immediately behind the pilot's folding seat was an opening roughly 4ft (1.2m) deep, just wide enough for a man in full flying kit and parachute to squeeze through, which continued in a sloping tunnel under the pilot's seat leading to the front cockpit. In the centre section there was a metal door, which completely isolated the wireless operator as he sat at his radio panel. Above the wireless operator's position were two Vickers 'K' machine-guns pointing aft in a turret, complete with sliding dome, which the wireless operator was expected to operate during combat.

Further aft, the rear gunner was permanently ensconced in his turret. His head was level with the wireless operator's feet and his legs stretched along the padded fuselage floor. The rear gunner would often complain bitterly of cramp on long flights.

In *Enemy Coast Ahead*, Gibson states that it was not possible for the pilot to leave his seat once he was airborne. Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt recalls that early Hampden crews comprised two pilots in lieu of a pilot and navigator, and they had to practise the changeover drill.

Essentially, the first pilot would trim the aircraft into neutral as best he could before engaging the autopilot. He would then unbuckle his harness and fold the seat down before squeezing himself hard up against the door that led to the wireless operator's position; whereupon, the second pilot would emerge from the hole behind the seat and clamber into the cockpit. The fuselage was only 3ft (0.9m) wide and it was impossible to squeeze into the cockpit without snagging the switches and dials.

Once the first pilot was safely positioned in the front cockpit, the final part of the drill would be to run through the cockpit checks to make sure that nothing had been inadvertently switched off. By the start of the war, however, the second pilot had been replaced by a navigator and the captain was indeed confined to his cockpit for the duration of the trip.

In terms of handling, Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt remembers that the Hampden was a delight to fly, but it was not without its vices; the most troublesome of which was the side-slipping effect caused by the tiny fin areas. The aeroplane was inclined to yaw during a flat turn and if this was allowed to happen at low altitude, the consequences could be fatal.

Furthermore, the single-engine performance was marginal at best and a safe single-engine landing demanded exemplary airmanship, skill and training. Many accidents occurred as a direct result of engine failure. Interestingly, the early Hampdens had slots in the leading edge of the wing, which would have markedly improved the low-speed performance; however, this feature had disappeared by mid-1940 in favour of balloon-cable cutters.

The Hampden afforded its crew very little by way of creature comforts. Cpl W Cook, a 44 Squadron wireless operator/air gunner, recalled that during night sorties he had to use the palm of his hand to operate his Morse key because his fingers were always stiff with cold and when he blinked, his eyes would frequently freeze in the shut position. It was not so bad flying during the day, but, alas, the RAF had to learn the hard way that in war the daytime sky was no place for a Hampden.

men who had been his drinking companions and his closest friends. Gibson's list of missing comrades in the front of his book for 83 Squadron alone numbers 20 men killed and six taken as prisoners of war.

He left 83 Squadron at the end of September 1940 to become a night-fighter pilot with 29 Squadron, but the Hampden would carry on for a few more years yet. It was not properly phased out until October 1943 having served a swansong tour with several meteorological units.

Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt completed 30 missions in Hampdens before converting to the Avro Manchester and, like many other pilots that had done so, he soon had good cause to wish for the Hampdens' return. With the Manchester came another debacle and, again, its shortcomings were not fully exposed until many of our most experienced crews had been killed flying it into battle – so much for lessons learned.

But to stay with the Hampden, 'Bomber' Harris summed up its contribution to the war effort by saying: "The crews made the best of it and, being a strong and reliable aircraft, it did a sterling job."

In my view, it did that job only because of the exceptional calibre of the men that flew it. Men who learned to fight the hard way in cramped and cold cockpits, flying in the dead of night with nothing to guide them and with no means to properly defend themselves against enemy attack.

The statistics speak for themselves. Of the 1,433 Hampdens delivered almost half, 714, were lost on operations, which is quite a disturbing figure until you consider the number of aircraft Bomber Command lost as a whole. In 2,000 days of European fighting, the RAF lost 8,697 bombers alone – Bomber Command's losses of airmen were greater than those of all the British armies on the continent from D-Day to VE-Day.

From the comfort of my armchair, safely ensconced in my small archive, I have to wonder whether the cost in

lives would have been as great if Bomber Command had been better prepared at the start of the war and if the RAF in general had been quicker to eschew the fallacious doctrine of the knock-out blow?

The effectiveness of any fighting force relies on a synergy between personnel and equipment. It is no use having courageous and highly-skilled aircrew going to war in poorly-appointed aeroplanes. Similarly, there is no point calling upon poorly-trained crews to operate state-of-the-art-fighting machines.

The story surrounding the photograph of 49 and 83 Squadrons, taken as they stood on the precipice of near disaster, serves as a useful reminder to all of us still serving in the RAF that in times of peace we must prepare for war.

Maximising effectiveness means that we must identify the shortcomings of our equipment – or indeed of our training – before we go to war, so that we know how our aircraft handle fully bombed up and do not have to read up on 'how to attack a ship' immediately before take-off. But the lessons of the Scampton Wing go much further. As any veteran would confide, it is impossible to truly emulate the machinations of war during training and when the 'balloon goes up' things are bound to go wrong.

Mistakes may be inevitable, but the important thing is to recognise these mistakes early and to get it right quickly to avoid any needless sacrifice – a lesson that 44 and 50 Squadrons had to learn the hard way on April 12, 1940.

Whether the RAF is called upon to defend the nation, to uphold the will of the International Community in the world's hot spots or simply to deliver humanitarian aid to stricken communities, we must never again allow ourselves to become 'cold meat for a determined fighter'.

The author is very grateful to Sqn Ldr Ward-Hunt, Mr Bert Dowty, Mr Ron Ellis and the Canadian Museum of Flight for their invaluable assistance with this article.

