



Command Backbone

A Wellington Ic of 214 Squadron clawing its way out of Stradishall in 1941. A PRICE

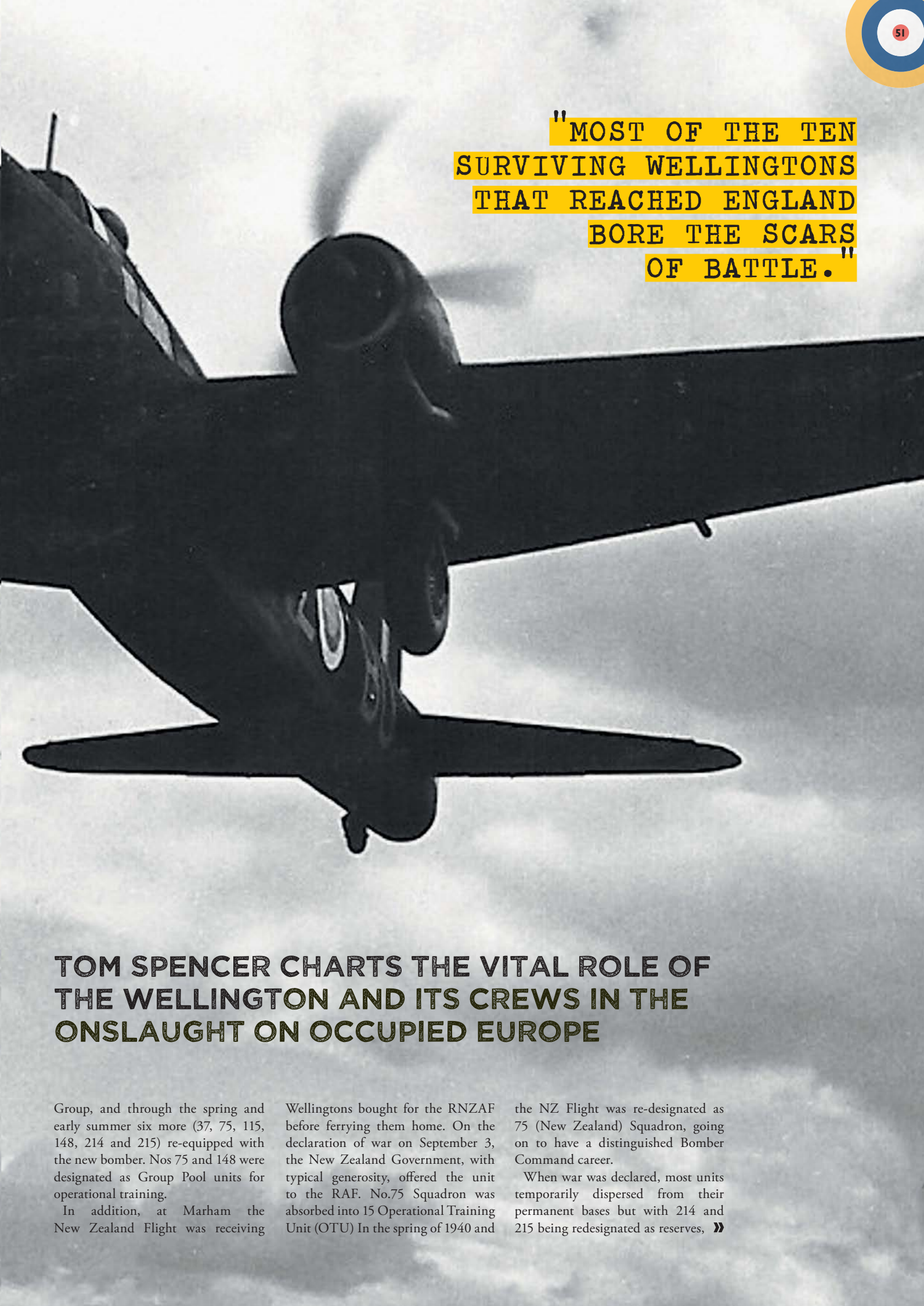
“Without the Wellington during the first three years Bomber Command would have been totally ineffective, and could never have maintained its constant assault on Germany.” That is how the

Air Officer Commanding of 3 Group from 1939 to 1942, Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin, summed up the importance of the ‘Wimpey’.

On the evening of October 10, 1938, the first Wellington I was delivered to 99 Squadron at Mildenhall, replacing obsolescent Handley Page (HP)

Heyford biplanes. The following month, 38 Squadron at Marham followed suit and both units were fully equipped by January 1939. By then 149, also at Mildenhall, had begun receiving them with 9 Squadron at Honington taking delivery in February.

The squadrons were all part of 3



**"MOST OF THE TEN
SURVIVING WELLINGTONS
THAT REACHED ENGLAND
BORE THE SCARS
OF BATTLE."**

TOM SPENCER CHARTS THE VITAL ROLE OF THE WELLINGTON AND ITS CREWS IN THE ONSLAUGHT ON OCCUPIED EUROPE

Group, and through the spring and early summer six more (37, 75, 115, 148, 214 and 215) re-equipped with the new bomber. Nos 75 and 148 were designated as Group Pool units for operational training.

In addition, at Marham the New Zealand Flight was receiving

Wellingtons bought for the RNZAF before ferrying them home. On the declaration of war on September 3, the New Zealand Government, with typical generosity, offered the unit to the RAF. No.75 Squadron was absorbed into 15 Operational Training Unit (OTU) In the spring of 1940 and

the NZ Flight was re-designated as 75 (New Zealand) Squadron, going on to have a distinguished Bomber Command career.

When war was declared, most units temporarily dispersed from their permanent bases but with 214 and 215 being redesignated as reserves, »



Czech 311 Squadron was the first Wellington unit manned by exiled Europeans. Mk.Ic R1410 flew 13 'ops' with 311.

ZDENEK HURT

3 Group began the war with just six operational units. All flew Mk.Is with manual nose and tail turrets, but deliveries of the Mk.Ia, equipped with power-operated nose, tail and turrets, had begun.

REPULSED BY DAY

Operations began immediately on the evening of September 3 when nine Wellingtons of 37 and 149 Squadrons

joined HP Hampdens on an armed reconnaissance off Wilhelmshaven. The 'rules of engagement' only allowed the bombing of vessels on the high seas, but the following afternoon 14 aircraft from 9 and 149 found the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* off Brunsbüttel and attacked in the face of a barrage of flak. As they left the target area the bombers were targeted by waiting

Messerschmitt Bf 109Ds of I/JG 77, and the Wellingtons of Flt Sgts Borley and Turner of 9 Squadron were shot down by Fws Alfred Held and Hans Troitsch. No.9 began training on the Mk.Ia the next day.

Armed recess over the North Sea continued but on the night of September 8 three aircraft of 99 became the first Wellingtons to penetrate into Germany, dropping nothing more deadly than leaflets, on Hanover.

It was still believed that tight formations of bombers could successfully fight off a sustained onslaught by fighters in daylight. On the morning of December 3 a force of 24 Mk.Ias from 38, 115 and 149 hit shipping at Heligoland from 10,000ft (3,048m), claiming hits on a cruiser, though in reality they sank a trawler.

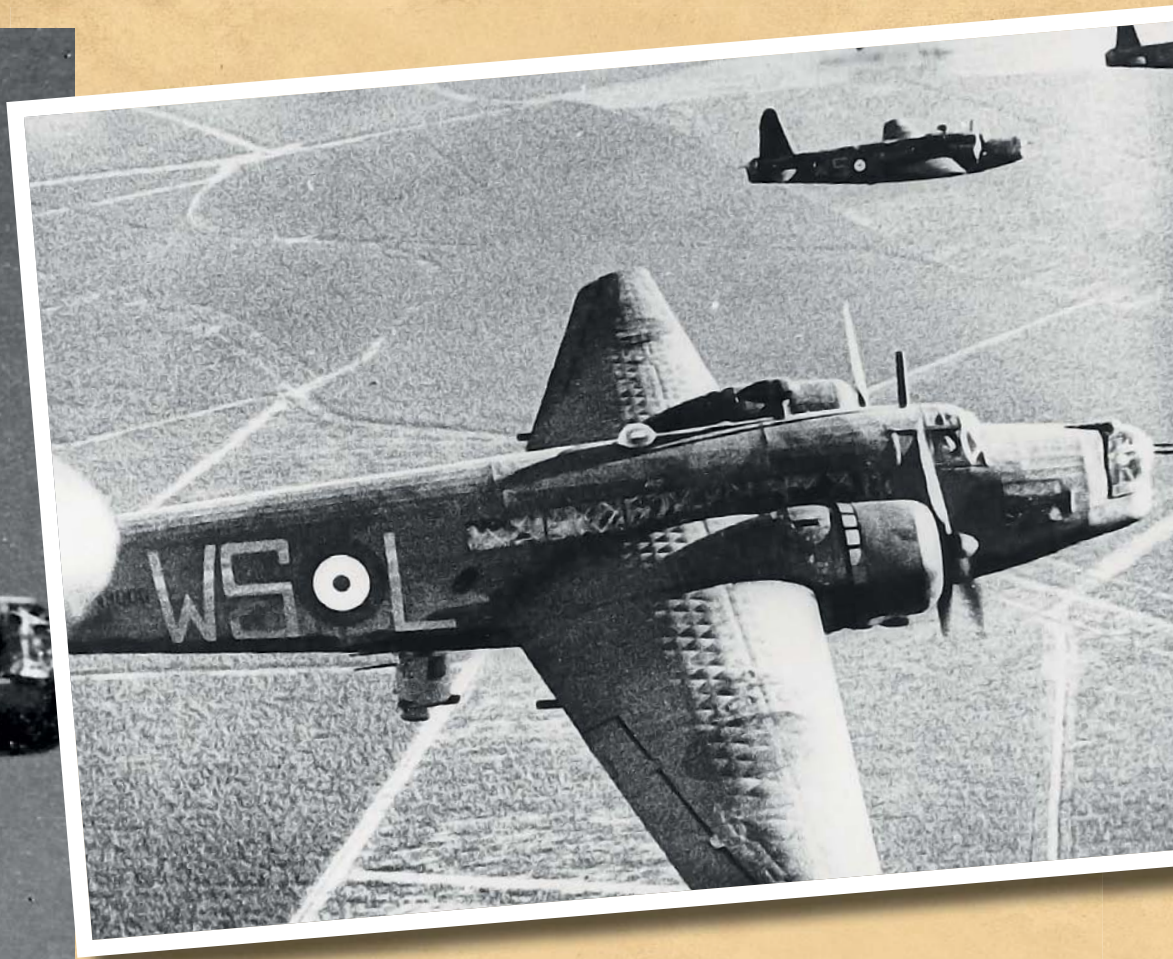
As they withdrew, Bf 109Ds from I/ZG 26 pounced but were fought off. N2879 of 38, flown by Plt Off Odoire, was attacked by Oblt Gunther Sprecht who, despite damaging the bomber, was then shot down by two bursts from LAC John Copley in the rear turret. Copley received a DFM for his efforts.

BATTLE OF THE HELIGOLAND BIGHT

A dozen Wellingtons from 99 set out



Two aircraft of 75 (NZ) Squadron in 1940. RNZAF



in poor weather for the Heligoland Bight at low level on December 14. Off Wangerooze they were intercepted by Bf 109Es of II/JG 77 and Bf 110Cs of 1/ZG 26 which, between them, brought down half the force – just one Bf 110 being claimed by Cpl Alex Bickerstaff, rear gunner in Sqd Ldr 'Square' McKee's N2958. The survivors returned, all damaged, with their bomb loads intact.

Undeterred, a further raid was ordered for the morning of the 18th when Wg Cdr Kellett led 24 aircraft from 149, 9 and 37 Squadrons in boxes of six to attack shipping in fine, clear weather. Two returned early but the remainder were detected by German radar as they approached the coast: what developed became known as the 'Battle of the Heligoland Bight'.

As they headed for home the

formation was intercepted by waiting fighters – ten were shot down and two more ditched. Most of the ten surviving Wellingtons that reached England bore the scars of battle. It was the end of bombing the Reich in daylight in strength.

INTO THE NIGHT

Leaflet sorties, given the codename NICKELLING, continued into 1940 as the Mk.Ic began to be delivered. The next major action for Wellingtons came during the invasion of Norway which opened on April 9. Two days later an attack was made against Luftwaffe aircraft at Stavanger by 15 machines from 9 and 115, crews from the latter bombing from 1,000ft.

F/Sgt Powell's aircraft suffered three direct flak hits. Despite his wounds he brought it home and earned his unit's

first gallantry award of the conflict. By the time 115 was re-equipped with Avro Lancasters in early 1943 it had lost 98 Wellingtons – more than any other unit in Bomber Command.

The following day the RAF despatched its largest force of the war to date when 83 aircraft, including 36 Wellingtons, staged a daylight raid on shipping in a vain attempt to blunt the German assault. Attacks against Norwegian airfields continued until the invasion of France and the Low Countries on May 10 changed priorities dramatically.

Initially only targets west of the Rhine could be hit but this restriction was lifted on the 15th. That night 99 bombers, including 39 Wellingtons, attacked targets in the Ruhr industrial area, so beginning the strategic offensive against Germany. The »

Wellington Ia N3000 of 9 Squadron with its seldom-used ventral turret extended.

T MASON

"FOR THE FIRST TIME, BRITISH BOMBERS CAME DIRECTLY OVER BERLIN, AND THEY DROPPED BOMBS. BERLINERS ARE STUNNED. WHEN THIS WAR BEGAN, GÖRING ASSURED THEM IT COULDN'T HAPPEN."

parlous ground situation demanded more tactically relevant objectives and so rail and road communications were hit, but to little avail; by the end of May British and French forces were being evacuated from Dunkirk.

A new front opened soon after when Italy declared war on June 10. That night eight Wellingtons participated in the first strike on Italy and the next night 22 raided Genoa and Milan. German targets predominated through the summer but, owing to problems with weather and navigation, results were often poor.

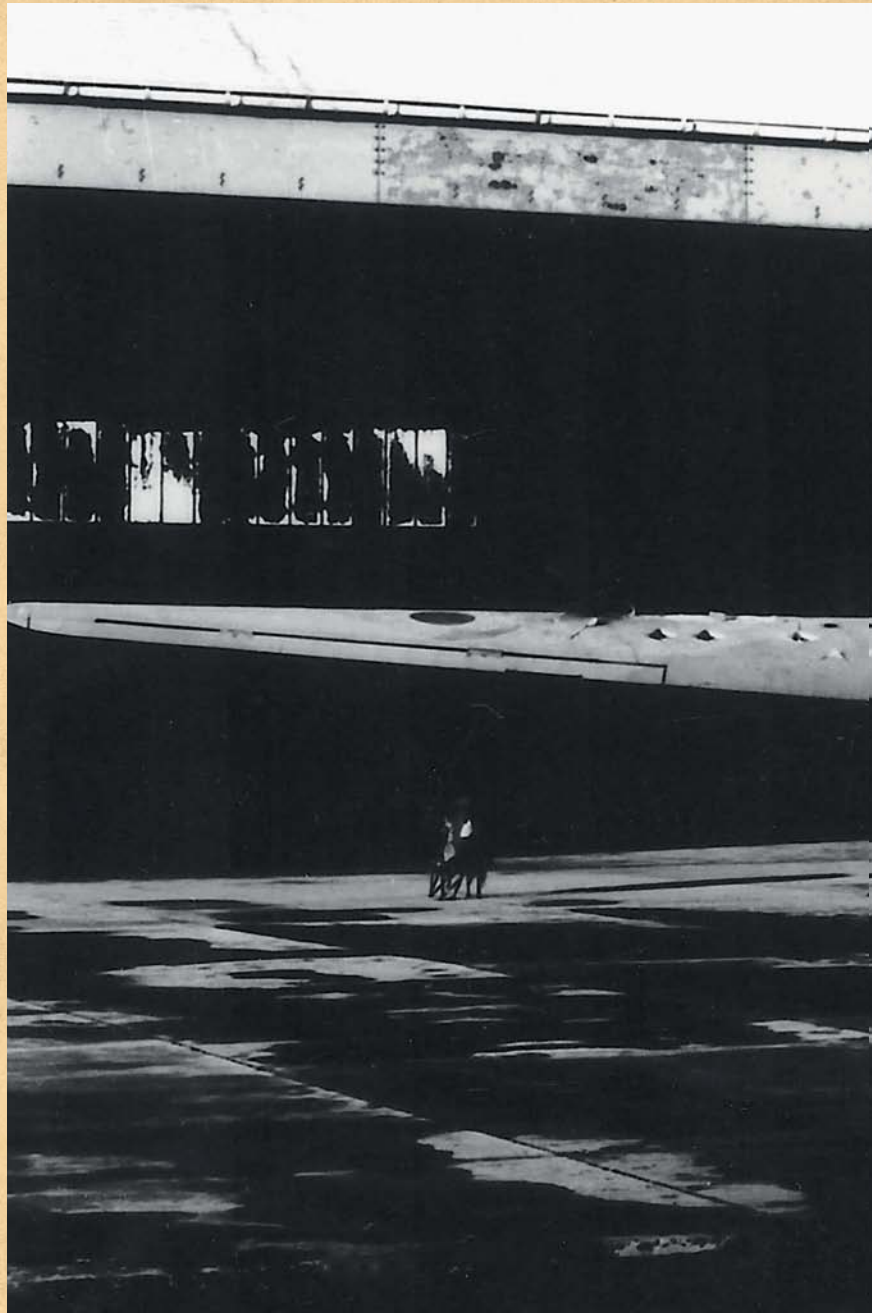
MORE UNITS, MORE LOSSES

Responding to the increasing attacks, the Luftwaffe established a dedicated night-fighter arm – the Nachtjagd. Eighteen Wellingtons were part of a force that struck industrial targets in north-west Germany on July 19 but at 02:00 hours while en route to Wismar, L7795 of 9 Squadron, flown by Sqn Ldr J B S Monypenny, was shot down. The next night two Wellingtons were intercepted and brought down by Bf 110Cs of I/NJG 1. These first officially confirmed Wellington victories for the recently created Nachtjagd were an ominous portent.

At that time 311 Squadron, manned by Czech personnel, was forming at Honington – the first new ‘Wimpey’ unit since 1939. A dozen more had followed by the end of the year – including the Polish-manned 300, 301, 304 and 305 Squadrons – although 37 and 38 were sent to the Mediterranean.

On August 25 Berlin was attacked for the first time by a force including 21 Wellingtons. Although damage

During the ‘Thousand Bomber’ raids in mid-1942 aircraft from OTUs were drafted in to reach that magical figure, among them this Wellesbourne Mountford-based 22 OTU crew. VIA R C B ASHWORTH



was slight, the effect was huge, a US press correspondent writing: “For the first time British bombers came directly over the city, and they dropped bombs. Berliners are stunned. When this war began, Göring assured them it couldn’t happen.”

The capital was attacked again on the next few nights, much to the irritation of the Nazi hierarchy. Shortly before midnight on the 30th, Oblt Werner Streib shot down Fg Off Craigie-Halkett’s crew from 214 Squadron in the first interception directed by Würzburg ground radars

With air battles raging over southern England, there was the imminent threat of invasion so the French Channel ports became the priority in what became known as the ‘Battle of the Barges’. A force of 30 Wellingtons hit shipping in



"...THEY WERE INTERCEPTED BY BF 109Es AND BF 110Cs THAT, BETWEEN THEM, BROUGHT DOWN HALF THE FORCE."

Emden and Boulogne on September 8 at the cost of two of 149's aircraft with just a single survivor.

By November the pace slackened, not least because of deteriorating weather. The 'bombing directive' started to specify oil targets as the highest priority, though other objectives, such as Berlin, continued to feature.

Most raids included acts of gallantry, such as during a Berlin run in mid-November. Having bombed the main railway station, 115's W2509, flown by Sgt Morson, was badly hit and an engine set on fire. With the flames extinguished, Morson headed across the inhospitable North Sea as Sgt Cleverley, the wireless operator, sent a stream of messages. Eventually they were forced to ditch but most of the crew was saved; both Morson and

Cleverley received the DFM.

'Area bombing' was ordered for the first time, against Mannheim, on December 16. Carried out mainly by 3 Group's Wellingtons, eight carried incendiaries to act as markers. 'Ops' continued through Christmas with the last of the 133 Wellingtons lost in 1940 – 27 of them from 99 Squadron – going down on a raid against Hamm early on the 30th. It had been a long year, but worse was to follow.

FIRST OF THE CANUCKS

As dusk fell on a bitterly cold January 1, 1941, more than 100 bombers, including many Wellingtons, headed for Bremen. The clear visibility helped the crews inflict significant damage to industrial and residential areas, albeit at the cost of two machines from

301. The port was hit again on the succeeding two nights as the bomber force increased its assault, with units suffering steady losses.

In the early hours of January 30 as Sgt Humphrey Smiles DFM of 214 Squadron eased his Wellington off from Stradishall, the port engine failed and the bomber hit the runway and burst into flames. One of the first on the scene was Padre Harrison who, despite the risk of explosion, helped evacuate the shocked crew – he was decorated with the George Medal.

Attacks continued through the spring in the face of increasingly effective defences; two raids on Hanover and Bremen in early February costing a dozen Wellingtons – four of them from 115. The period also saw 40 and 148 move to the Middle East, their »

Heavily-damaged Mk.Ia N2871 of 9 Squadron was brought into North Coates after the Wilhelmshaven raid, December 18, 1939.

M J F BOWYER



Wellington III Z1572 was a determined survivor having served with 115 and 75 (NZ) Squadrons before joining Canadian 419 (illustrated) which in turn passed it on to 427. It ended its days in April 1945 with 16 OTU.

CANADIAN FORCES

loss being offset by the re-forming of 104 Squadron and the re-equipping of 101 with Wellingtons.

More significant was the formation at Driffeld of 405 Squadron – the first of 11 Canadian Wellington units to form over the next 18 months. The unit took on Merlin-engined Mk.IIs which, eventually flown by eight squadrons, were capable of carrying the latest weapon, the 4,000lb (1,814kg) blast bomb nicknamed the ‘Cookie’.

Wyton-based 15 Squadron flew its last Wellington ‘op’ on May 8 and became the first to change to ‘heavies’ when its Stirlings arrived. That night Bomber Command dispatched a record of 364 aircraft; seven Wellingtons were lost.

EXTRAORDINARY VALOUR

Flying against Hamburg on May 10, a 115 Squadron aircraft skippered by Sgt Anderson was attacked and hit by a Bf 110 flown by Lt n Eckart-Wilhelm von Bronin of 6/NJG 1. His barrage knocked out the navigator, Sgt Legg, who, when he came round, found the rest of his crew had baled out. His

own parachute had fallen through the escape hatch but, undaunted, he disengaged the autopilot and managed to crash-land the blazing bomber to survive as a prisoner of war.

An even more remarkable incident occurred during an attack on Münster on July 7 when the engine of a 75 Squadron Wellington was set on fire. The co-pilot, 22-year-old Sgt Jimmy Ward, climbed out onto the wing and managed to extinguish the blaze before retracing his hazardous path back inside. The ‘Wimpey’ returned safely. For his action Ward was awarded the Victoria Cross.

When it was announced, he was summonsed to meet Winston Churchill. On seeing the shy young hero the great man said: “You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence.” In reply Ward could only croak, “yes, sir.” With evident compassion and admiration, Churchill replied: “Then you can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours.” Ward’s was but a brief glory, for he was lost over Hamburg on September 15.

RELENTLESS GRIND

At this time a new bombing directive was issued requiring concentration on German transport systems, with the Ruhr predominating. Strikes on the northern ports continued, as did those on Berlin.

The old adversaries of capital ships were also targeted as several had arrived at Brest following Atlantic forays and saw a brief return to daylight sorties. A hundred bombers, including 79 Wellingtons, attacked the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* in Brest on July 24 but in the

face of flak and stiff fighter opposition the raid proved costly: of the dozen machines lost, ten were Wellingtons.

Three of those that failed to return were from 405 Squadron. Sgt Ken Craig’s crew in W5881 had a torrid time with four separate attacks from Bf 109s, two of which were shot down by his gunners, Sgts Hughes and Higgins. The latter was wounded and the stricken aircraft limped home to ditch just 300 yards from the Devon coast; all the crew survived. Plt Off Trueman’s crew disappeared without trace while the CO, Wg Cdr Gilchrist, also went down, but he and most of his crew evaded capture.

It was not only in frontline units that the Wellington served within Bomber Command. There was a huge training organisation and the Wellington was the backbone for a number of operational training units. Trainee OTU crews were often tasked with a few less risky ‘ops’, such as a leaflet drop over France, before graduating to the front line.

During August the first Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) unit began forming at Holme-on-Spalding Moor. Under Wg Cdr N G Mullholland DFC, 458 Squadron began operations on October 20 when ten Wellingtons bombed Rotterdam and Antwerp. Z1218, flown by Sgt Hamilton, was lost with only one survivor.

Two nights later, Le Havre was hit and by the month’s end Cherbourg, Brest and Dunkirk were hit. The rest of 1941 was marked by poor weather and only two raids were made in November. On the 24th many of 458’s trained personnel left to form the nucleus of another RAAF squadron, 460, at Brighton. Like most other 1 Group Wellington units, both flew the Twin Wasp-engined Mk.IV, deliveries of which began to the Polish 300, 301 and 305 Squadrons during August.

The grind of operations continued into another winter and, despite

With an impressive bomb log marking it as a veteran, Wellington Ic R1781 served with 101 Sqn at Bourn in early 1942. V REDFERN





The Mk.X was the most produced of the Wellington variants - Hawarden-built LP700 before being issued to service.

increasing deliveries of more modern 'heavies', Wellingtons remained the Command's backbone. In one of its last raids before transfer to Egypt, 458 sent three aircraft to hit Boulogne and seven to the rail yards at Düsseldorf.

After bombing, one of the latter, skippered by Flt Lt Saville, flew over a lit-up airfield on which a Heinkel He 111 was taking off. The irrepressible Australian dived to enable his gunners to strafe the aircraft and it veered off the runway. It had been a hard year, fought against an increasingly effective defence system that had seen night-fighter claims alone jump tenfold to 421. A total of 466 Wellingtons had been lost on operations.

THOUSAND PLAN

As 1942 began Bomber Command continued to expand and no fewer than 15 Wellington squadrons formed during the year. These balanced out those that re-equipped with Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters. First to form was the Royal Canadian Air Force's (RCAF) 419 at Mildenhall, which began 'ops' on January 11 when two aircraft bombed the battlecruisers in Brest. No.419 was the first of ten Canadian Wellington units to form in 1942. The following month it began re-equipping with Hercules-engined Mk IIIs, the variant becoming the mainstay until the greater availability of 'heavies' in 1943.

The pace of the Command's transformation increased with the arrival in February of its new C in C, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris. This

coincided with a new directive specifying the 'area bombing' policy. There was also a change in tactics with a concentration on a single target each night, increased use of incendiaries and the introduction of the 'bomber stream'. Of Harris's 469 frontline bomber force, 221 were Wellingtons.

A major success for Harris was the raid on Lübeck on March 28 when 146 Wellingtons were among the 234 bombers that destroyed the centre of the old Baltic port. This was followed by a series of four attacks on Rostock in late April, again causing significant damage.

Harris wanted a larger demonstration – to unleash a thousand bombers on a single target. With an operational strength of little more than 400, »



One of 166 Squadron's Wellingtons with nose artwork at Kirmington in 1943. N ELLIS



Wellington II W5461 of 104 Squadron went down against Berlin on August 12, 1941; Sqn Ldr Budden and his crew became PoWs. R THIRSK



The first RCAF Wellington unit was 405: Mk.II W5537 at Driffield in July 1941.
CANADIAN FORCES

mostly Wellingtons, he had to resort to aircraft from the OTUs as well as others from Coastal and Army Co-operation Commands. In this first use of the 'bomber stream' the aerial armada – more than 600 of which were Wellingtons, half from OTUs and flown by instructors – raided Cologne on May 30.

Despite the ad hoc nature of this force the defences were swamped and considerable damage was done at the cost of 41 aircraft, 29 of them Wellingtons. A dozen of these were from OTUs, with Wellesbourne Mountford-based 22 OTU and 26 OTU from Wing losing four each.

To underline the success the force was unleashed on Essen two nights later, but haze and low cloud resulted in scattered bombing. Nonetheless, the validity of the new tactics was established and, following smaller-scale raids, the 'Thousand Force' was reassembled to strike at Bremen on June 25 – Wellingtons making up almost half the procession that flew across the target in little more than an hour. Once again cloud cover affected the result, but the new policy was vindicated.

Throughout the rest of the year Bomber Command grew markedly, with much of the muscle coming from

newly-formed Wellington units, most with Mk.III's. On the horizon was the ultimate bomber version, the Hercules VI-engined Mk.X, the first of which entered service with 466 Squadron RAAF at Leconfield in November – followed there by 196 and 431 Squadron RCAF at Burn. No.199 at Blyton began 'ops' when five of its Wellingtons took part in a raid on Mannheim. It was the last to become operational in 1942.

CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY


As 1943 dawned the long-awaited sustained assault began in earnest. Despite greater use of four-engined 'heavies' there were still 19 Wellington units in the order of battle, though most would be re-equipped during the summer and by the end of the year just one squadron remained.

The last Wellington squadron in Bomber Command was 166, which assembled at Kirmington on January 27 from elements of 142 and 150. It was immediately operational and on the 29th sent a dozen aircraft to Lorient. Several crews experienced severe icing and had to return early and three more aborted for other reasons. W/O Gray and his crew in BK115 were shot down near the target and all perished.

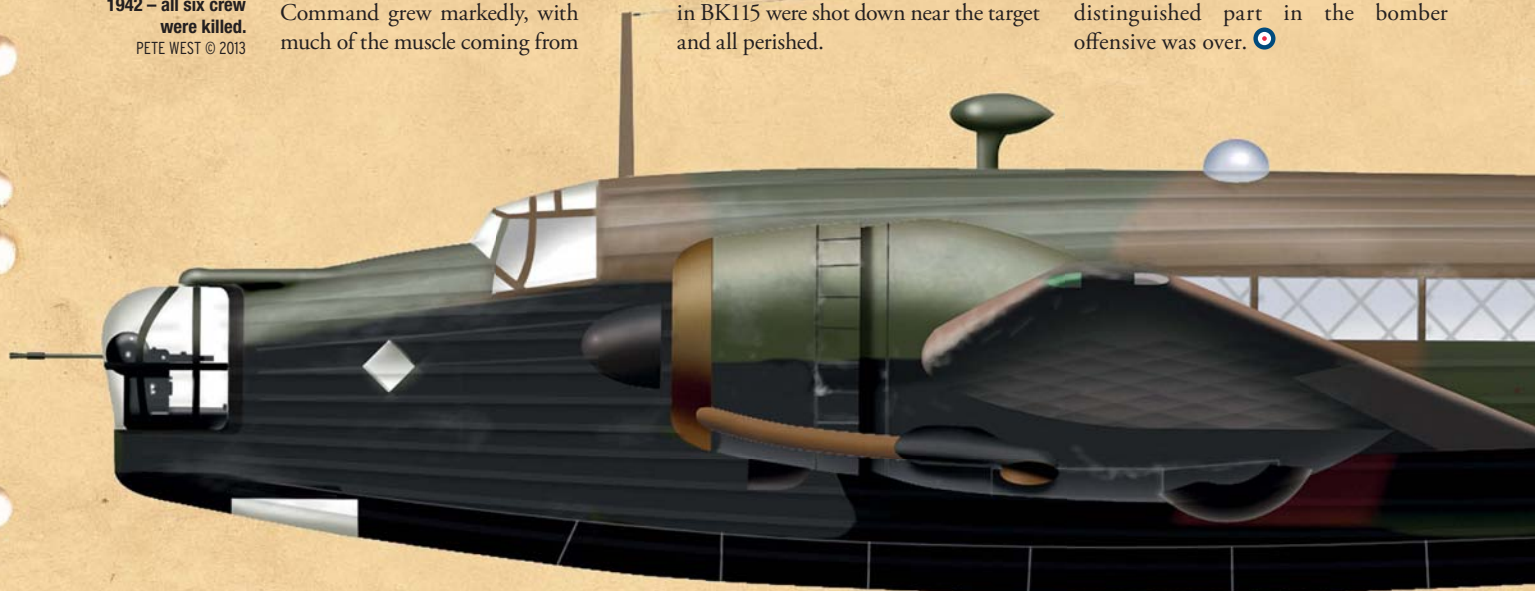
It was against the same target on February 13 that 166 launched 14 aircraft as part of a 377-strong force which included 99 Wellingtons. All of 166's aircraft successfully bombed and headed home. Having safely crossed the English coast at 8,000ft at about 10pm, BK460 flown by F/Sgt George Ashplant was struck from beneath by a Halifax of 158 Squadron. The impact killed one of the crew, tore off the underside of the Wellington's nose and the engines from their mountings.

Ashplant ordered his crew to bale out. Then it was discovered as the bomb aimer's parachute had fallen out Ashplant gave him his. Through skilful flying he managed to make a crash landing. For his unselfish courage Ashplant was recognised by the first award of a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal to Wellington aircrew. The CGM had been instituted earlier in the year for NCOs and ranked second only to the VC. Sadly this brave man died when his was one of two 'Wimpeys' lost in the first of the great firestorm raids on Hamburg, on July 24.

By the time the last three RCAF Wellington units in 6 Group re-equipped with Halifaxes during October, just the Poles in 300 Squadron at Ingham were left with them. The unit was restricted to peripheral targets and mining into 1944, during which losses were mercifully light. The final Wellington loss on 'ops' was on February 20 when F/Sgt Kabacinski's crew in Mk.X JA117 failed to return after laying mines off St Nazaire.

Although the type continued to be used at OTUs for training, including some leaflet dropping operations, and on intelligence gathering duties with 192 Squadron, the Wellington's distinguished part in the bomber offensive was over. 

Chester-built Mk.Ic R3149 of 301 Squadron. It went on to serve with 12 OTU and went missing on a raid to Bremen on June 26, 1942 – all six crew were killed.
PETE WEST © 2013



ONE CREW'S TOUR

In May 1941 Plt Off John Gee joined 99 Squadron at Waterbeach, straight from training, and flew his first operation against Cologne on the 17th. As was usual, he flew as second pilot with an experienced crew before taking over a crew of his own, flying his first trip as captain to Rotterdam on July 5. Further trips followed, all in the Pegasus-engined Wellington Ic.

No.99 had recently received two Merlin-engined Mk.IIs, capable of carrying the 4,000lb 'Cookie' bomb. In late July Mk.II W5458 was allocated to John and his crew, much to their delight, as he recalled: "I was fortunate to be given *Z-for-Zola* as my aeroplane. It was a lovely machine to fly. The extra power from the Merlins made it faster and it was more manoeuvrable than the Mk.Ic, but it was a bit of a handful on take-off. To counter this, the pilot had to lead with the port throttle so that he could then control the swing until there was airflow over the rudder to give directional control.

"I loved the Mk.II and W5458 *Zola* became my favourite. I did my first operation in *Zola* to Kiel on July 24. We had a good trip and it was great to feel the extra power and response; it almost felt like a fighter by comparison. Visibility over Kiel was good and we dropped the 'Cookie' accurately. There were many

searchlights and the flak defences were moderate."

They landed safely after a 7 hour, 15 minute sortie and next flew *Zola* in a raid on Cologne on July 30, encountering severe storms and accurate flak before bombing. After leave, Gee's crew next flew 'their' Mk.II on August 22 against Mannheim: "Visibility was good and we were able to locate the target accurately. On the bombing run we experienced very concentrated heavy flak. The gunners seemed to have got our height and direction spot-on and they fairly plastered us. We were hit in the tailplane but fortunately the damage was not serious..."

"As we were leaving the target area we were attacked by a night-fighter. That was the first time this had happened to us. I put the Wellington into a corkscrew by starting a diving turn to port and then came up into a climbing turn to starboard. The fighter opened fire on us and I could see tracer passing our starboard side. Tom Gittins opened up in return from his rear turret and the fighter veered away. We did not see any more of him and so set course for home."

The crew 'visited' Karlsruhe and Cologne in *Zola* and also attacked the German battlecruisers in Brest in clear weather in early September. On the 7th they set out on their first 'op' against



Berlin – again in *Zola*. "Approaching Berlin we found that visibility was unusually clear and we were able to locate the city and we dropped our 4,000lb bomb near the aiming point. There were a number of searchlights but the heavy flak did not seem as concentrated as the Ruhr."

In December John and his crew completed their tour and he became an instructor. *Zola* later moved to 12 Squadron and was lost in a raid on Mannheim on May 20, 1942.

A 305 Squadron crew use a 4,000lb 'Cookie' blast bomb for a team photo before delivering it to a German city in 1943.
MIKE INGHAM



Opposite:
Sqn Ldr John Gee's favourite mount, Wellington II W5458 'Z-for-Zola'.
J W GEE

