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“Happy Valley” The Ruhr Valley as experienced by Bomber Command aircrews in World War II

Flying Officer Ross Pearson, OAM, RAAF (Retd)

An inaugural Bomber Command Commemoration Day¹ will be held at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, on 1 June 2008. The ceremony will honour Australians who served with the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command during World War II. Here, one of their number, Ross Pearson, provides an insight into what bomber aircrews experienced when attacking targets in Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr Valley.

There was flak, flak, bags of bloody flak
In the Ruhr, in the Ruhr,
There was flak, flak, nothing else but flak
In the valley of the Ruhr.
My eyes are dim, I cannot see
The searchlights they are blinding me
The searchlights they are blinding me.

During World War II, this song was sung to the tune of *The Quartermaster's Store* in many an officers' or sergeants' mess in the squadrons of Bomber Command. Two episodes illustrate why this was a popular way of letting off steam. Flying Officer Keith Campbell, No. 466 Squadron, RAAF, Drifffield, Yorkshire, had this comment to make on a trip to “Happy Valley”, as the Ruhr was called by the bomber aircrews:

“During a tour of operations, it is certain a crew will have ‘visited’ somewhere in Happy Valley – as the Ruhr was called – and flown past, or sometimes, unintentionally, over it, on the way to or returning from a target in Germany. It was the industrial heart of Germany, containing the names of cities and towns all too familiar to Bomber Command aircrews. The area was reputed to have hundreds of flak guns for its defence, as well as squadrons of Luftwaffe fighters.

Everyone flying to a target in the Ruhr was absolutely sure each gun was pointed at him personally. The amount of shrapnel falling from these 88mm shells must have constituted a danger to the local population who may not have been in a bomb shelter and, if collected, would have fed the furnaces at Krupps works for a week.

On one of my ‘trips’ to Duisburg, we lost an engine on our Halifax just after crossing the enemy coast. Although we were losing height, there was 7/10 cloud, so we figured that if we were attacked, we could disappear in a friendly cloud.

On reaching the target we were at 14,000 feet, well below the rest of the bomber stream. The flak over the target was not directed at a particular aircraft but formed a concentrated area, from 18,000 to 20,000

feet, the height at which the bomber stream flew and through which they had to fly to bomb the target. As we were 6000 feet below, we avoided the bursting flak but were in danger of being hit by bombs from the bombers above.

After bombing and turning for home, a night fighter started his attack on us. Fortunately our gunners saw him coming and we dived into the cloud and lost him. With no more incidents we arrived safely home.

As well as the ‘ack/ack’ guns, there were also hundreds of searchlights, lighting up the sky, searching for a bomber. Should a bomber be unlucky and be caught in a searchlight beam, within seconds another dozen searchlights would form a ‘cone’ and the unfortunate aircraft would be lit up like a Christmas tree. Should a master beam – a blue light – join in, it would mean the flak would be radar predicted on that particular aircraft and it was a fortunate crew who managed to escape from such a concentration of 88 mm shells. Unhappily, many aircraft and crews were lost after being ‘coned’.”

Another Australian pilot, Jack Thomas, who served in No. 102 Squadron, RAF, Pocklington, Yorkshire, as a member of the RAAF, relates this experience of the Ruhr:

“The outward trip to Gelsenkirchen was a breeze, but suddenly everything changed. The bomb aimer and I sighted the flak. It was unbelievable. The sky was a close pattern of black patches. The white-faced bomb aimer went down into the nose to his bombsight. I looked at the flak pattern ahead and thought, ‘This is it. We die here. Nobody could possibly survive this barrage!’ Reluctantly, we flew into this maelstrom expecting the worst. Amazingly, we were not hit and gradually I realized we had a chance – it was a box barrage, not predictor flak. It looked worse than it actually was. Perhaps the first wave suffered more than us. We were on our bombing run, bombs away, bomb doors closed, photo flash taken; and then we were turning away from the target – alive!”

On a lighter note, as Thomas’ wireless operator, I commented on the above approach to the navigator – on how clear the sky was – no flak ahead. With a grin he said: “Yes, but we are now going to dog-leg into Gelsenkirchen”. Then, to my dismay, I saw what Jack Thomas had already perceived.

¹Details are available from Keith Campbell – telephone: (02) 9489 3250.