then turn for a long south-easterly leg heading for the Big City, Berlin, which was cloaked that night in thin clouds. Danish villagers' memories of the explosions over their homes would pass down through generations.

In the unpressurised aircraft, temperatures were as low as minus-40 degrees. Navigators at least had the luxury of being able to plug into the electrics of the aircraft; they sometimes had wires in their uniform working like an electric blanket. The noise in the four-engine Lancaster bomber was "ear-splittingly loud", says Dr Lachlan Grant, a senior historian at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. As planes neared the German border, flares, flak and searchlights made the sky suddenly bright as anti-aircraft guns sent up bullets from the ground and night fighters patrolled the skies.

One German plane, a Junkers Ju 88, had a highly-skilled pilot at its controls – 23-year-old Gerhard Raht. When war broke out, Raht had ignored his parents' pleas to join their family's furniture-making business, and had instead joined the Luftwaffe straight from school. Raht was already a veteran of numerous air battles when he took off from his position that January night at Lütjenhorn, 20km south of the planned Allied route.
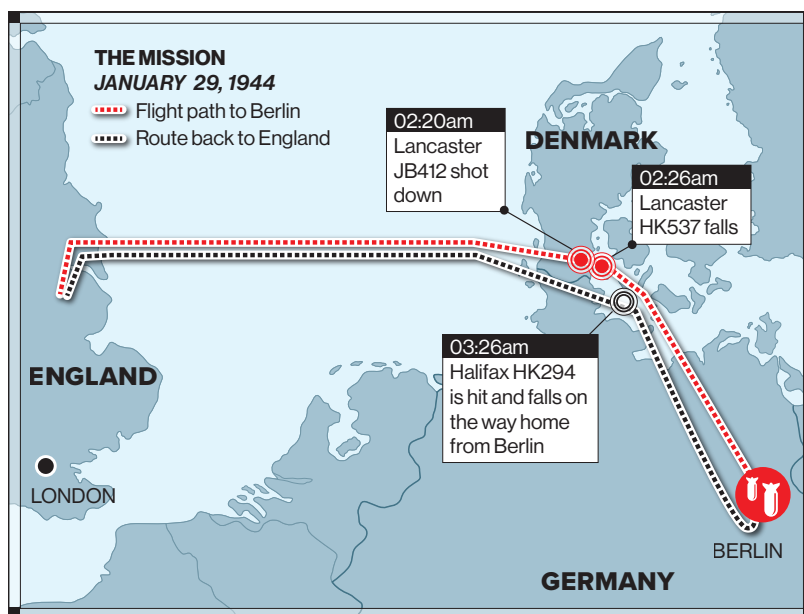
Raht would go on to claim 58 Allied aircraft, and be awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves – one of Nazi Germany's highest military honours. Right now, the first wave of the Allied formation was in his deadly sights. Raht brought down an RAF Halifax bomber, then turned his Junkers towards the Lancaster with Australian John Tree aboard, coming from below and behind, aiming his weapons at the fuel lines. The Lancaster's pilot, Willy Simpson, tried to corkscrew away, but at 2.20am Raht hit the plane and set it alight. The Allied crew prepared to jump for their lives. In his position as mid upper gunner, Tree was wedged into an exposed space in the top of the fuselage – but he managed to climb down from his position and prepared to exit the burning plane.

Around them, planes were exploding and falling from the sky. Over the next hour – 66 minutes of hell to be exact – another two planes carrying young Australian airmen would go down. Some survived and were taken to Prisoner of War camps. Most did not. The survival rate for a Bomber Command airman was devastating. That night alone, 49 planes were lost.

The plane was hit and set alight. The crew prepared to jump for their lives

Enemy ace:
German pilot Gerhard Raht. Top, from left, John Tree; Norman Cooper; George Jeffreys Kerr; Lewis Havelock Christmass

THE MISSION
JANUARY 29, 1944
▪▪▪▪ Flight path to Berlin
▪▪▪▪ Route back to England

02:20am
Lancaster JB412 shot down

DENMARK

02:26am
Lancaster HK537 falls

03:26am
Halifax HK294 is hit and falls on the way home from Berlin

ENGLAND

LONDON

BERLIN

GERMANY

Tree was wearing his parachute the last time the plane's wireless operator Bill Livesey saw him, holding the ripcord as he prepared to leap from the door near the tail. "He turned round and looked at me but never said anything, as we were in a bit of a hurry," Livesey would later write, with classic understatement. "But he did not look in panic at all."

Livesey and rear gunner John Fell followed Tree out of the plane, and they lost sight of each other as they tumbled into the darkness.

Hans Brandt, aged 11, looked skywards from his home in the village of Skovbøl, in Nazi-occupied Denmark, and saw the searchlights from Flensburg seeking out the Allied bombers.

As the noise from the planes came closer, sirens sounded and villagers ran for a cellar that had been reinforced with iron beams (months earlier, an Allied plane under attack had released bombs that killed several cows in the nearby paddock). Years later, Hans recounted to a history website how other villagers "came into the cellar saying they had seen a burning bomber to the south east of the village, flying at a very low height".

When daylight came, Hans, his two brothers and a school friend ventured out and found the wreckage of the Lancaster bomber, scattered over a wide area in the fields close to the village of Varnæs. The engines had fallen off one by one and were lying in a pool of oil, each