

Account from Stan Etherington to AirmenDK from his sons David and John, October 2024.

THE ATTACK ON THE GESTAPO AT AARHUS, DENMARK ON 31ST OCTOBER 1944.

Towards the end of October, I was strolling around Dispersal (which is where the aircraft were parked) when I was taken to one side by my flight commander, F/I Patterson, who in a confidential manner, said "Not a word to anyone but there's a big show coming up soon and I've got you on the battle order". He wouldn't say any more so I was left speculating on what the show might be. I discussed it with Colin and we thought back to the daring exploits of 140 Wing with precision attacks on German HQ, barracks, VI sites and of course the famous attack on the prison at Amiens to release French resistance members who were being held pending execution. We had to assume that it was an operation of this type where surprise and pin-point accuracy are required. It was not long before we were to know what the "show" was to be, because we were called to a briefing at which a large number of crews were present and on the table was a detailed model of the target area on which we were now to be briefed by our Station CO, Group Captain Wykeham-Barnes. The target was two college buildings of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, which housed the Gestapo and their records of members of the Danish Resistance Movement. We didn't know at the time that the Resistance leaders had made the request that the buildings be destroyed. The CO identified on the model the buildings which were to be bombed and specified the line of attack. It was important that this line was maintained and that we were to ensure that bombs did not overshoot as a hospital lay beyond the targets. The bombs which each aircraft would carry would be 2 x 500 lb with 11 second delay fuses. Twenty four aircraft would take part flying in boxes of six plus a film unit Mosquito. We were to be escorted by a Polish squadron flying Mustangs. The entire operation was to be flown at zero feet and most of the journey would be over the sea. I didn't know at that time that there had been an exchange of signals between the Danish resistance organiser and the Air Ministry, when the Danes had said that the Gestapo had arrested a lot of their members and it was imperative that the Gestapo records were destroyed. Neither did I know that present at the briefing was Capt. Tillich, a Danish Resistance chief, nor that Air Commodore Basil Embrey was there. He was chief of two groups and would later interview me for a commission. He was there because he was flying with us, which was highly dangerous for him from another aspect. He had been shot down and had evaded capture in a manner that displeased the Germans, who had put a price on his head. So if he was to be shot down again and captured, he would be executed. Towards the end of the briefing, we were told that anyone unlucky enough to find trouble and unable to return safely home should make for Sweden, which was about 75 miles across the Kattegat from northern Denmark. We were allocated to our aircraft, I got my favourite 'F' for Freddie, and then all crews proceeded to carry out an NFT (Night Flying Test). Take off in the morning was scheduled for 07.00 hrs. and it was to be a formation take off and flight to Swanton Morley in Norfolk, where we would top up tanks. Colin and I completed our NFT and retired to the mess. Colin produced his maps and we had a brief chat about the operation. It was early to bed and early to rise on 31 October 1944. At around 07.00 hrs. we were leaving Thorney Island, taking off in formation and forming up to fly in formation to Swanton. However, low cloud precluded this and we made our way individually. 2 Having topped up tanks at Swanton Morley, we were again at 9.30 forming up in four sections of six aircraft led by W/C Reynolds with Squadron Leader Sismore as his navigator. We were immediately down to sea level and would now have to stay low for the 350 miles approximately across the North Sea. Maintaining low level over the sea is more difficult than overland and requires more

concentration. There is also the problem of sea spray on the canopy thrown up by the preceding aircraft. We carried two 50 gallon drop tanks on pods under the wings. The fuel management required flying for a period on outer wing tanks until 50 gallons approx. had been used, which the contents of the drop tanks could then be transferred to the outer wing tanks. It was the pilot's choice as to whether he then got rid of the drop tanks. Performance was not a factor, but most pilots did let the tanks go. It was at this point, somewhere in the middle of the North Sea that Colin and I came extremely close to disaster. One of the aircraft in the section ahead released a tank which struck the sea at about 300 mph. then shot up into the air and passed over our starboard wing, narrowly missing the propeller. But we were soon making landfall at the coast of Jutland. I understand that we were exactly on track thanks to the accurate navigation by Sismore. We flew inland for a distance until we reached a point where a dodgy manoeuvre had to be carried out in order to separate the four sections. This was necessary in order to allow a time interval between the sections and avoid any bomb exploding when aircraft were over the target. To achieve this, the first section of 6 carried straight on to the target. Meanwhile, the remainder started to orbit. The second section did one orbit then flew on, the third section two orbits and the fourth section three orbits. Sounds complicated, but it was the only way to achieve reasonable separation. When I think back now, there at a point somewhere in the middle of Jutland, 18 Mosquitos were flying in a circle at nought feet and about 250 mph,; 36 Merlin 25's roaring away. The locals must have wondered what it was all about. I did see one Danish man stood in the middle of a field and waving madly. At least I assume he was waving to us. Being the fourth section we had to complete three orbits before carrying on to Aarhus. If this little performance in low level formation flying hadn't alerted the Germans, what else was needed? So on we flew. It was a full October day, but as we approached I could see smoke ahead where the boys up front had done their stuff. Getting close I opened the bomb doors we were flying echelon starboard and I was formatting on the aircraft 'K', flown by W/C Thomas with F/Lt. Humphrey Baker. Now just short of the buildings I saw the bombs leave aircraft 'K' as I also had pressed the bomb release. Already the two college buildings were severely damaged. When we were directly over the buildings, there was a terrific explosion from below. It was a rogue bomb and gave us a very scary experience. At the same time flak was coming at us from the right, but streaming over the top. All this happened in a split second and I saw that 'K' was turning away and then I lost sight of him. I turned on a course for home that Colin gave me and put on a little power to get clear of Denmark quickly. I anticipated that the Germans had had time to scramble fighters and things could soon get hectic. 3 It transpired that the blast below us had knocked out one of Thomas's engines and he had immediately set a course for Sweden on one engine. We stayed at very low level and sped back across Jutland for home. We had a Polish squadron of Mustangs as escort, but I didn't see them at any stage of the operation. I think they must have gone ahead and suppressed the German fighter activity. It seemed quite a short time before we were crossing Jutland's West Coast and we were over the sea with a 350 mile flight to the Norfolk coast ahead of us. But we could relax a little now. Every minute took us 5 miles further away from potential danger and it was no longer necessary to maintain formation, so we proceeded with a series of gaggles. At last we were back at Swanton Morley and glad to be there. My fuel was very low and I would not have had sufficient to get us back to base. Aircraft were arriving, refuelling and departing for Thorney Island. Whilst I was re-fuelling, I was asked to take a passenger back to base. It was F/O Coe, the navigator of S/L Denton. Their aircraft was damaged and unserviceable. They had flown so low that their tail had hit the roof of the building and that had left their tail wheel back in a street in Aarhus. We

landed back at Thorney Island at 15.50 hrs to learn that a signal had been received from the Air Ministry and a message from the Danish patriots: "Gestapo Headquarters completely destroyed. Congratulations to all concerned". The operation had been a highly professional and successful one. The objective had been achieved. There were no aircrew losses. Thomas and Humphrey-Baker landed safely in Sweden and were returned to the Squadron shortly afterwards. There was slight damage to two aircraft as a result of bird strikes. 'F' Freddie had behaved perfectly. The operation had taken us personally over 8 hours, including our time in Swanton. We had flown over 1200 miles, 700 of them over the sea and nearly all at low level. A further interesting statistic is that, of the 16 aircrew taking part from 487 Squadron, Colin and I were the only NCO's. In May 1945 all crews received a letter from the Danish Resistance Movement which is attached. This was accompanied by a pair of silver cuff links embossed with the Danish Royal Crest. Also attached are copies of the signals exchanged between the Resistance leaders and RAF HQ