

About the Shell House Attack

By Anders Straarup

– translated from [the article in Danish](#).

Now it is 75 years since the [Shell House](#) in Copenhagen was bombed, quite exactly on 21 March 1945. It was the Gestapo HQ in Copenhagen where a number of members of the resistance movement were interrogated, often under torture. This article attaches special importance to the Allied airmen. In www.airmen.dk/sh1.htm there are details.

The HQ of the German secret police at the University of Aarhus was [attacked](#) by the RAF on 31 October 1944, so in Copenhagen 26 members of the resistance movement were placed on the top floor of the Shell House as living bomb shields.

Numerous arrests together with wire-tapping of telephone conversations between high ranking Germans made the resistance movement implore the RAF to bomb the Shell House. Ole Lippmann confirmed one



The Shell House ruin seen from Kampmannsgade, from SHELLHUSET 21.-3.-1945.

additional time that it was necessary in the light of a planned German operation that might crush the resistance movement in Copenhagen. Some of his friends on the top floor would be killed, but on the other hand they might be taken to Ryvangen to be executed.

The Royal Air Force agreed to carry out the bombing even if it might cost the lives of hundreds of civilians and maybe a third of the attacking force.

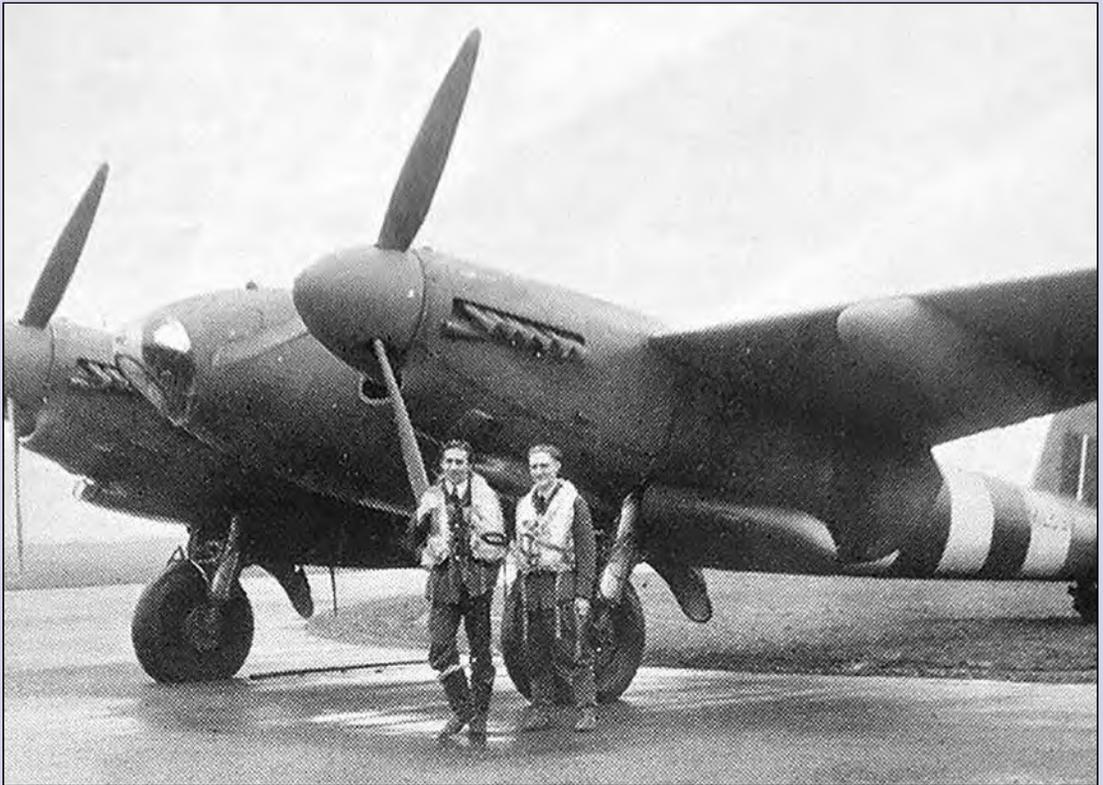
On 21 March 1945 at 08.15 hrs 20 [Mosquito](#) bombers escorted by 28 [Mustang](#) fighters took off targeting Denmark. They made landfall at [Nr. Lyngvig light house](#) near Hvide Sande and went on to Tissø near Kalundborg. Their height was not more than 15 metres above sea level and not more than 100 metres over land (preferably tree top height) to avoid being caught on radar screens. From Tissø wave I continued towards Copenhagen, while wave II circled Tissø once, and wave III circled twice to create a distance between the three waves of attack, so they would arrive at staggered intervals at the Shell House just before the lunch break, while the Germans very likely were working with open safes, so that documents would be set ablaze. Impossible to predict that a number of leading members of the Gestapo were attending a funeral just that day. As planned wave I flew to the coast north of Køge and north east towards the target. The 7 planes reached the marshalling yard that you still pass between Copenhagen Central Station and Kastrup with the airport. The 4 chimneys of the [Ørstedsværket](#) were easy to see. The flight path was a direct line over the dome of the theatre Det nye Teater and the south west corner of the lake Sankt Jørgens Sø. Then the Shell House would be right ahead as shown on the map. For peculiar reasons the Germans had carefully seen to it that the Shell House was the only building in the area with camouflage paint!

Each of the 18 [Mosquito FB VI](#)'s carried 2 bombs, each 500 lb. Some of the planes of wave I and wave III also carried incendiary bombs. The 2 [Mosquito B IV photo planes](#) each carried 4 bombs of other types. 6 planes of wave I dropped their bombs, and most of them hit the lower storeys of the Shell House that caught fire. Miraculously 18 of the 26 prisoners of the attic floor survived because the energetic prisoner C. Lyst Hansen made a stunned German guard hand over a bundle of keys. 8 prisoners perished and their names are seen on a memorial plaque on the Shell House, which was rebuilt in 1950-51.

From wave II and wave III only a few bombs were dropped against the Shell House which was hit by 8 high-explosive bombs altogether. However, if all of the attack had been carried out as planned, the Shell House would most likely have been totally destroyed without any possibility of survival for the prisoners. As it was about 75 members of the Gestapo perished and as intended the violent fire destroyed big parts of German archives, so the Gestapo was severely weakened.

In wave I the leading 3 Mosquitoes heading for the Shell House flew about 4 metres higher than the following 4, the first of which was flown by Wing Commander [Kleboe](#).

Unfortunately he accidentally hit [a light tower](#) 35 metres tall near the corner Enghavevej/Ingerslevsgade. During the flight at low height across the North Sea a layer of white salt was left on the panels of the cockpit. It could be removed, but only as long as you had windshield wash. Furthermore the Pilot and Navigator had to keep an eye on the map and on landmarks. Maybe Kleboe at the last moment saw the tower 2125 metres from the Shell House and tried an evasive action. It was about 15 seconds from the target, so the planes had opened their bomb bay doors. Other light towers in the area are seen on [Google Map Shell House](#).



A Mosquito with its crew of two airmen, from SHELLHUSET 21.-3.-1945.

[Kleboe's plane](#) hit the light tower with its tail section, so he lost control and the plane took a totally wrong course. [An eye witness](#) near the far end of the red houses of Ingerslevsgade, that you see from the train north of the many tracks, saw that a part of the tail section fell off and that two bombs were released. They flew right over the house, while the plane grazed the roof of the house with its left wing. Fortunately one bomb did not explode, but the other one killed 11 people in 106 Sønder Boulevard. You very rarely hear anything about them. However, there is a memorial [plaque on the rebuilt house](#).

His plane flew on while Kleboe tried to regain control. Kleboe and Hall perished when they [crashed into some garages](#) about 100 metres from the French School, and a big fire erupted.

Wave II was attracted by the smoke. The idea was to look for a large building, fire and smoke. At the last moment the leader and no. 2 abstained from bombing as the navigator in each of the planes became aware that a number of landmarks that had to be there were missing.

Unfortunately one pilot in wave II did not catch that the target was wrong, so he hit the French School with 2 high-explosive bombs – and 5 planes of wave III also understood the burning school as the target. However, a map from the Civil Air Defense shows that only 2 powerful high-explosive bombs hit the school, while 13 other bombs hit the area nearby. Other sources have slightly different numbers.



Part of Google Map Shell House with straight line to the Shell House. More on AirmenDK.



[A propeller blade and a memorial plaque](#) on the Shell House, photo Anders Straarup.

The disaster at Frederiksberg cost the lives of 124 Danes, 87 of them pupils of the French School. Furthermore 156 people were injured including many children. The salvage work has been described in detail, and the heartrending accounts from surviving children clearly show that traumas do not disappear just because you refrain from talking about unpleasant experiences.

Pilot Drew of a Mustang was hit by flak and crashed into the Fælledparken near what is now the western corner of our national football stadium Parken. He managed to say a little to a Danish fireman before he died. [Drew](#), [Kleboe](#), and [Hall](#) are buried at [Bispebjerg Cemetery](#). In Kleboe's native town [the story of his war effort](#) is told in great detail.

Over the harbour of Copenhagen MOS [NT123](#) was hit in one engine by flak. The pilot announced over the radio that he would try to reach Swedish area. The plane passed the Swedish island of [Hven](#) in the middle of the Sound at low height and with severe smoke from its left wing. Maybe the pilot considered it a Danish area, just as others without closer studies of maps have considered Bornholm a Swedish island. He flew over the island without landing and crashed into the Sound. The two airmen climbed up on a wing, but severe winds made it impossible for people of the island to get to their assistance. The plane sank shortly after. The two airmen disappeared and have never been found.

On the return flight to England [MOS SZ999](#) and [MOS RS609](#) were hit by flak from German positions near Hundested and crashed into the sea east of Samsø. The 4 airmen were reported Missing in Action – but 55 years later Colonel [Helge W. Gram](#), assisted by Derek Carter and Peter Lake, managed to prove that a man who was washed up on the uninhabited island of Vejrø on 25 March 1945, was undoubtedly [Herman Hirsch Becker](#). In the first place he was buried as unknown in [Tranebjerg](#) on Samsø wearing his dark blue uniform of the Royal Norwegian Navy with a kangaroo badge from the Australian Squadron he served in. His body also had two rare ribbons that matched the ribbons of medals awarded to Becker in January 1945. He knew that his family in Stavanger had been taken to German concentration camps, so he flew on till he was shot down on his mission no. 47! In the year 2000 he got a gravestone, paid for by the state of Norway. [AirmenDK](#) has much about him.

Pilot [Hamilton](#) of a [Mustang](#) had to make a forced landing near the Ringkøbing Fjord on his return flight due to damage from flak, so he became a Prisoner of War. The rest of the planes managed to get back to England, as planned by Chief Navigator [Sismore](#). He stated to the excellent film “The Shell House Attack” from 2013 that he could not tell if the attack was a success, because how do you weigh the lives of children to the result of the accurate bombing of the Shell House. He and other airmen were very much affected by the erroneous bombing and the many civilian casualties.

Sources: Have a look at the Danish version. Thanks to Derek Carter for comments! My work has gone on since August 2007, and it is much appreciated, as seen on [About AirmenDK](#) with links from there..



The memorial plaque unveiled on 21 March 1995 by Ole Lippmann and Ted Sismore after a speech by Derek Carter, photo Anders Straarup.

This was just about a few of the 463 Allied planes with 3,088 airmen – nearly all of them shot down over Denmark or Danish waters 1939-45, see [AirmenDK www.airmen.dk](#) with both details and overview, photos of gravestones and monuments to airmen and links to where they are.

Members of The [Danish Arms & Armour Society](#) are scattered all over our country, so you will be able to find information about planes and airmen shot down in your area from [Planes – clickable map](#) and the similar option [Cemeteries](#) with 1,030 airmen buried in Denmark and the [Search form](#) for the database.