X
The RAF Attack on Berlin and Peenemünde.
My first victory. 18 August 1943

Then we sat in the semi-darkness of the readiness rooms, talked about recent operations, played chess or listened to music with our eyes closed. A few of the keener types were chewing carrots; the Medical Officer had told us that they contained Vitamin A, which was good for the eyes. Whoever saw his opponent first at night was the first to open fire, and it was he who survived. We had never had our night vision tested. That came in towards the end of the war, and the eye specialists discovered that those night fighter pilots with the best night vision and the fastest adaptation also had the highest tally of victories. It was little wonder that some crews did not survive their first operational flight: the enemy pilot had better night vision and saw them first.

At about ten o'clock we were ordered to cockpit readiness. Enemy radar transmissions were being reported over the North Sea. No one knew, of course, which town they were aiming for. We hurried to our aircraft, now wearing flying overalls, fur boots, intercom headset and oxygen mask, and together with our wireless operator and rear gunner we waited for the order to take off. I don't know how many hours and days in every sort of weather we must have sat in our aircraft and waited, often until the first light of dawn. Just a few weeks ago the experienced crews would have taken off for the night-fighter areas to intercept the leading bombers. But since the disaster of Hamburg and the jamming of German radars by means of aluminium strips that was now a thing of the past. Now freelancing was the order of the day; now most of us, new crews as well, took off in our turn and positioned ourselves at a radio beacon. From there we would be directed by a central control station into the bomber stream. This system was called 'Tame Boar', as opposed to 'Wild Boar'.

A highly experienced officer and excellent bomber pilot, Hajo *Herr*mann, the sort of old campaigner that wars have produced since the dawn of time, had advised Göring and the senior echelons of the *Luftwaffe* that in addition to the twin-engined night fighters singled-engined Me 109s and Fw 190s should go into action above the burning targets. This, then, was 'Wild Boar', which often enough but the fear of death into us twin-engine men by their pilots' wild manoeuvring. Both systems would cause the RAF great trouble during the next months. It was, after Hamburg, a reply to Harris for his reckless bombing of our towns and by the end of the war it had cost the RAF 55,000 young fliers from all parts of the Commonwealth.

In the post-Hamburg months the RAF no longer came separately but in tight bomber streams of 400 to 800 four-engined machines which, in order to deceive the German defences, sometimes split into smaller streams and attacked separate targets. At first these streams were escorted by up to 30, later by as many as 100, twin-engined fighters, the fast Mosquitos. It was now becoming apparent that modern wars would be decided by the massive injection of material, weapons and munitions, and not by bravery on the part of individual men. After the Ruhr Area, after Cologne, Hanover and Nuremberg, it was now Berlin's turn.

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On 17 August 1943 the day dawned. About an hour before midnight we at Parchim got the order to scramble and make for radio beacon 'Berta' to the west of Berlin. 'Stand by, stand by, attack on Berlin!' came the instruction from the ground station. I was flying above the city at an altitude of six thousand meters, but I could not make out any specific activity in the cold, clear night apart from hundreds of searchlights, nervous anti-aircraft fire, bright flares in the air, but no fires on the ground. And the controller on the ground repeating again and again, 'Stand by over Berta. Stand by.'

As I later read after the war in a book by the British historian Middlebrook, 'The Peenemünde Raid', 213 night-fighter aircraft were waiting above Berlin at that time, kept there by eight Mosquitos that were dropping all sorts of different flares and thousands of aluminium strips in order to simulate a bomber attack.

Then to the north, in the direction of Stettin, about 200 kilometres distant, I saw cascades of flares and the well-known 'Christmas trees' of the British Pathfinders, and also the first fires burning on the ground. Immediately I decided that I would go where the action was. I wasn't going to have a repeat of what had happened to me at Hamburg, when they told me to stay where I was. I opened my throttles to full power and flew towards the smoke-clouds and the fires at more than 500 kilometres an hour.

Once again the British had deceived the entire German air defence system. While the eight Mosquitos were putting on a large firework display over Berlin, 560 four-engined bombers were flying over Denmark to a small place called Peenemünde where, unknown to us all, there was a research station and production centre under Wernher von Braun for V1 and V2 rockets. It took me a bare thirty minutes to arrive there in conditions of perfect visibility above a moonlit bank of cloud. At once I saw a four-engined aircraft. I went straight into an attack from astern and above and fired between the two engines on the port side, where the fuel tanks were. The wing burst into flame at once, and there was no defensive fire from the bomber.
I moved to starboard into the darkness and waited to see if the fire went out. The Lancaster continued to burn and went into a shallow dive. I followed it down, and just managed to pull up above the burning bomber when it crashed into woodland. The whole thing had taken a scant two minutes.

The height from which the enemy attacked Peenemünde was much lower than usual. All at once I experienced a feeling of relaxation, as if all the tension that I had been prey to for months had vanished. Not for a single moment did I give any thought to the men inside the Lancaster. My *Funker*, *Unteroffizier* Kiel, gave our position: we were near to Hanshagen, only a short distance from Greifswald, where our 9th *Staffel* was based. As I was running short of fuel, we landed there. My old friend *Leutnant* (Engineer) Rudi Thun, who later received a doctorate and became a highly respected physicist with Raytheon in the USA, provided me with a 750 cc. BMW motorcycle with sidecar from the airfield at Greifswald, and I drove with my *Funker* to the place where my victim had crashed, a distance of about 15 kilometres.

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We could see the smoke rising from the wreckage when we were still a long distance away. Then I stood by the bomber, feeling as I imagine Richthofen did in the First World War. The charred corpse of the captain was hanging in the pilot's seat of the still-smoking Lancaster. The other bodies, scarcely recognisable, lay scattered in the remains of the aircraft's fuselage. The stink was terrible. At that time the full extent of what had happened did not occur to me. I felt like a victor and the avenger of my people. A signals officer told me that there was one survivor. I wanted to see him.

The young man in a white pullover, about my age, tall and erect, with an open face, was standing in front of the local fire station guarded by a soldier. I went up to him and spoke to him politely in my schoolboy English. He gave me his name, Sergeant William Sparkes from Portsmouth, and his service number. Presumably he thought I was an interrogating officer. He provided his details in accordance with the requirements of the Geneva Convention. Only when I told him that I was a night-fighter pilot did he become more communicative, and I found out that he had been the rear gunner and that he had not seen me. Today I regret that I was not more friendly towards him.

Twenty years after the war the British historian Middlebrook, whom I have already mentioned, carried out in-depth investigations into this raid on the rocket station at Peenemünde, and he interviewed me at my home, and I remembered the name of Sparkes and that he came from Portsmouth. By means of a newspaper appeal Middlebrook located Sparkes, whom he quotes as follows in his book:

'We kept on going down and, at that time, I thought we were still trying to evade by a straightforward dive but we continued on – down, down, down. It was then that we got instructions to prepare to abandon the aircraft. My job was to get the front hatch open and, to do this, I had to get the bundles of Window[1] off the hatch. It didn't take me long, not the way I moved; I tossed it all forward on to the bomb sight. I opened the hatch and, almost immediately, heard the command to abandon the aircraft.

Because I had been so busy, I had stopped taking note of the altitude of the aircraft and what the rest of the crew were doing. I just didn't know what the damage had been or whether any of the others had been hit. I do know that there was no doubt in my mind about getting out – there was no hesitation – so I suppose that I must have known the situation was rather dire. Normally, in training, the crew was always lined up behind me, waiting to get out, and it has always puzzled me why there was no one there. When the prisoners of war were collected at Greifswald, I kept trying to find more of my crew and, when none of them turned up, I began to wonder whether they had got away after all and returned to England. It never occurred to me that they were all dead.

[1] 'Window' – the aluminium-coated paper strips dropped by the RAF bombers to jam the enemy radars. The Germans called it '*Düppel*'.

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Today I can well imagine the sergeant's feelings. It was exactly the same with us: the crew and our comrades in the squadron were like a secret society, and we stuck together through thick and thin. Flying for hours through the darkness, the ever-present fear of sudden attacks out of the blackness of the night, the searchlights groping for us fliers like the fingers of a corpse, the turbulence, the weather with its icing and its thunderstorms, injured or wounded comrades in the aircraft – all this welded us together. And then, suddenly, they were no longer there, they would never return. Missing, nowhere to be found, mutilated, burnt to death. What monsters we human beings are!

Normally RAF crews did not fly more than thirty missions to Germany, Italy or France. The mental and physical burdens experienced on a long-range flight of eight hours or more are unimaginable. The British crewmen often saw comrades flying nearby go down in flames. The fighters were faster and more manoeuvrable. The German two-centimetre cannon shells were more lethal than the machine-gun bullets of the RAF. On rare occasions when our cannon jammed a single two-centimetre shell in a fuel tank was enough to shoot the bomber down. The British navigators, flight engineers and air gunners had to move around in very restricted space in their heavy flying suits, in aircraft without pressurised cabins and without heating. Unlike our practice, their parachute was not worn all the time but had to be clipped on when an emergency occurred.

Just like us, they also had their idealism, and they had volunteered for the RAF out of the spirit of adventure and the love of flying. Only comparatively few RAF aircrew reached the their statutory thirty missions. Bomber losses often amounted to five percent per operation, which statistic implies that to survive more than twenty sorties was a matter of chance. For us German aircrew there was no limit set to the number of night-time operations. A hundred or two hundred operations against the enemy, repeated wounds, four or more descents by parachute, were not a rarity in the German night-fighter force. Peter Hinchliffe, the author of 'The Other Battle' mentioned earlier, wrote:

For a *Luftwaffe* crewman there was no set number of operations after which he was rested, as there was for his opposite number in the RAF. He flew until he either died, was wounded, was badly injured in a crash-landing or, very rarely, was posted to less hazardous duties.

In the year 1978, thirty-five years after Peenemünde, I received out of the blue a letter giving details of the Lancaster that I had shot down near Peenemünde. A German historian gave me this information:

Lancaster JA 879 of 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron, based at Dunholme Lodge, near Lincoln.

Pilot, Sgt. W. J. Drew, age unknown.

Sgt. J. D. M. Reid, aged 19, from Scotland.

Sgt. S. I. Rudkin, aged 21, from Leicester.

Sgt. J. T. Jopling, aged 23, from London.

Sgt C. E. James, age unknown.

Sgt. J. H. Bassett, age 20, from London .

One survivor, Sgt. Bill Sparkes, aged 22, from Portsmouth.

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I looked long at this list, thinking, and I have to admit that tears came to my eyes and that I was inwardly deeply moved. My God, what had I done? By now I was the father of four healthy young men of the same age-group of whom I was very proud, all of whom were students in Frankfurt, the youngest at Grammar School in Königstein. I tried to imagine how my wife and I would take it if we were to lose one of these boys in a war. How must the parents in Scotland, England or Rhodesia have felt when they were told that their sons were missing over Germany. When there is a war, who gives any thought at all to parents and mothers who have placed all their love and hopes in the lives of their children?

For me with Peenemünde the war was far from over. It would still last almost two years more.

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