



BOMBER CO

FIRST VICTORIA CROSS

AIR CDRE **GRAHAM PITCHFORK** PROFILES 49 SQUADRON'S RODERICK LEAROYD, A PILOT WHO SURVIVED A DEVASTATING ATTACK MISSION, AND WAS AWARDED A VC FOR HIS ACTIONS.

ARTWORK EA-M's hazardous low-level attack. (BY ANASTASIOS POLYCHRONIS)



On the night of 12/13 August 1940, 11 Hampdens – six from 49 Squadron and five from 83 Squadron – were tasked with attacking the aqueduct that carried the Dortmund-Ems canal over the River Ems north of Münster. Against fierce opposition, two bombers were shot down while others were severely damaged but managed to return to base. Among those that suffered the greatest battle damage was the one

flown by Flt Lt Roderick Learoyd of 49 Squadron. For his gallant actions that night he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the first of 19 given to men of Bomber Command and one of only 32 bestowed on airmen during the Second World War.

Roderick Alastair Brook Learoyd was born in Folkestone, Kent, in February 1913 and he was educated at Wellington College, Berkshire. He went on to study aeronautical and

COMMAND'S



automobile engineering at Chelsea College in London.

By 1936 he had decided to join the Royal Air Force to be a pilot and he was awarded a short service commission. After completing his training, he received his flying badge in December 1936.

He was posted to RAF Worthy Down near Winchester, Hampshire, where he joined ▶



LEFT
A sea mine ready for loading in a Hampden.
(KEY COLLECTION)

OPPOSITE
Roderick Alastair Brook Learoyd.
(VIA AUTHOR)



RIGHT Hampden P4403/EA-M, the aircraft in which Learoyd earned his Victoria Cross. (VIA ANDREW THOMAS)

49 Squadron, which was equipped with the Hawker Hind bomber. This elegant biplane had grave limitations as a bomber and was in urgent need of replacement. The unit moved to the bigger airfield at Scampton, Lincolnshire, where, in March 1938, it was the first outfit to re-equip with the twin-engine Handley Page Hampden. Shortly afterwards, 83 Squadron also moved to Scampton to exchange its Hinds for the Hampden.

The new aircraft, a monoplane, offered a major advance on the Hind with its twin engines, all-metal construction and four-man crew. Conversion to the bomber occupied much of the next 12 months but this included very little night flying.



HANDLEY PAGE HAMPDEN I

Construction: Built by Handley Page at Cricklewood, London, English Electric in Lancashire, and the CAC consortium in Canada. There were 1,432 constructed including prototypes, plus around 20 conversions from the similar HP Hereford.

First Flight: 21 June 1936 by prototype K4240 from Radlett, Hertfordshire, with Major James Cordes in the pilot's seat.

Powerplants: Two 1,000hp (746kW) Bristol Pegasus XVIIIs.

Dimension: Span 69ft 2in (21.1m). Length 53ft 7in. Height 14ft 11in. Wing area 668sq ft (62.1m²).

Weight: Empty 11,780lb (5,343kg). Loaded 18,756lb.

Performance: Max speed 254mph (408km/h). Service ceiling 19,000ft (5,791m). Initial rate of climb 980ft/min. Range 1,885 miles with 2,000lb of weapons, or 1,200 miles with 4,000lb load.

Armament: One fixed and one Browning gun forward, and twin Brownings in the rear ventral and dorsal stations. Up to 4,000lbs of bombs.

Crew: Four.

Note: performance and weights varied according to role and configuration.

It had been envisaged that only the AW Whitley force would fly during the hours of darkness and the other bomber units would operate in daylight in tight, self-defending formations.

READY FOR WAR

By late August 1939 war with Germany seemed inevitable and the two Scampton-based squadrons were placed on readiness. Following the invasion of Poland on 1 September each unit was ordered to bomb up some of its aircraft. When war was declared two days later a force of Hampdens was ready to begin operations.

Bomber Command had received orders that no targets could be attacked on German soil. It could strike naval vessels at sea and it could overfly Germany, but only to drop propaganda leaflets.

On the morning that war was declared, nine Hampdens were at readiness including three from 49 Squadron.

BELOW A 49 Squadron Hampden being prepared for another mission c. 1940. (VIA AUTHOR)





LEFT
Hampden aircrew
leaving their aircraft
after a sortie off the
Norwegian coast
in April 1940.
(KEY COLLECTION)

on the 25th he flew his first gardening (mining) operation when he sowed his vegetables (code for mines) off Pellworm Island on the west coast of Schleswig-Holstein. A few nights later he carried out a second gardening sortie, this time to the east coast of Denmark, a mission of more than seven hours. April 1940 saw the commencement of a long campaign of mine-laying operations, which the Hampden with its large bomb bay was particularly suited to.

STOPPING THE NAZI WAR MACHINE

After the German invasion of the Low Countries and France on 10 May, Bomber Command was authorised to hit targets in Germany and its occupied territories. Learoyd attacked the marshalling yards at Liège, Belgium, with 250lb and 500lb bombs and incendiaries. Operations intensified in June with particular attention paid to railway systems, aerodromes and possible invasion embarkation ports.

On 28 June, Learoyd attacked the lock gates on the Dortmund-Ems canal, a vital waterway that carried essential raw materials to the great industrial Ruhr. He dropped his bombs but was unable to see the results.

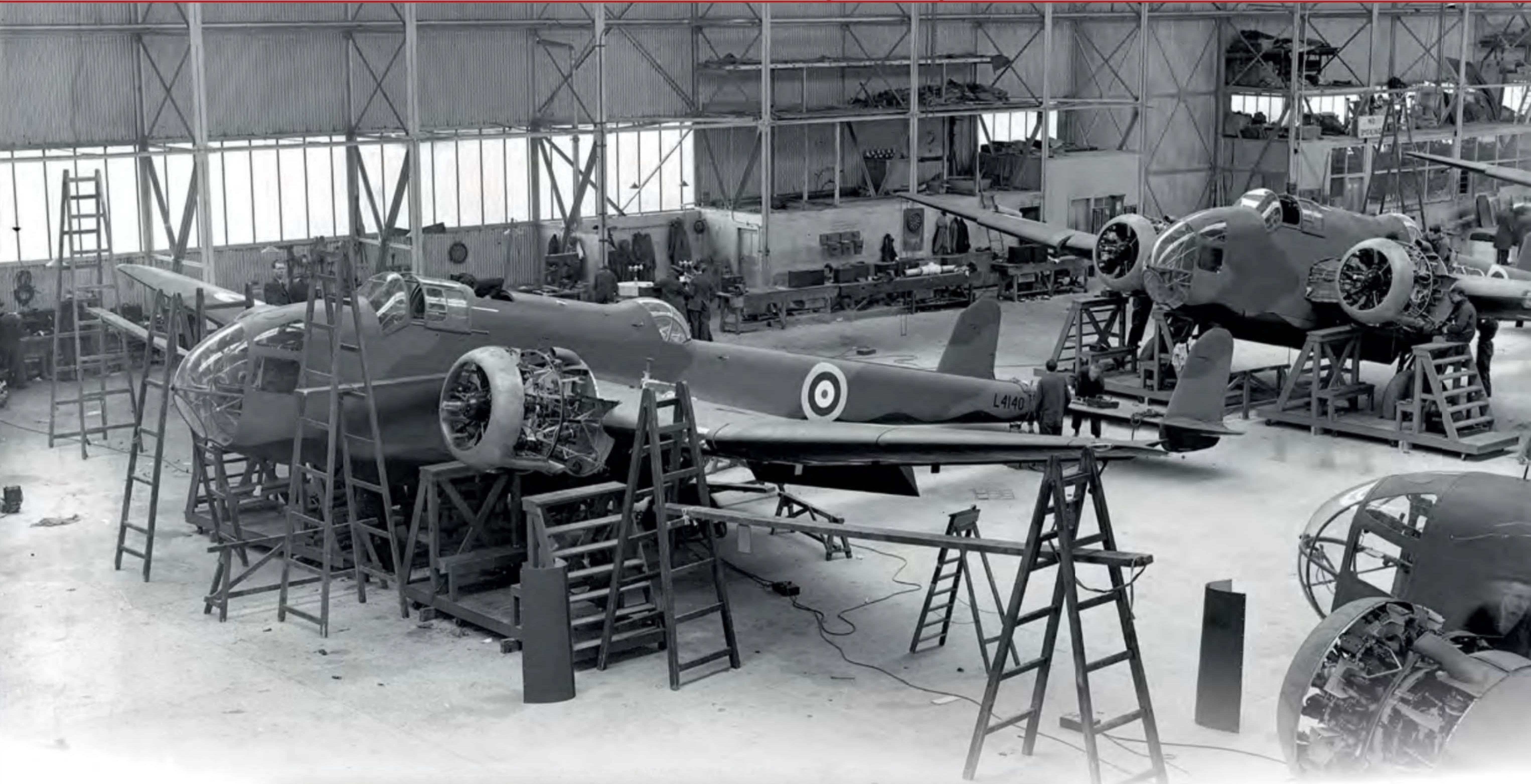
Six weeks later, on the night of 11/12 August, Learoyd (now an acting flight lieutenant) returned to the canal flying Hampden P4403/EA-M. At this stage of the war it was a target of special importance because of the build-up of shipping and barges planned for movement to the English Channel ports for the eventual invasion of Britain. As a result, the Germans had established a formidable ►

BELOW
A crew practising
their escape drill
in case of an
emergency landing
on water.
(KEY COLLECTION)

Learoyd, known throughout his time in the RAF as 'Babe' because of his well-built size, was assigned to Hampden I L4040. The force took off from Scampton just after 0600hrs to carry out a low-level armed reconnaissance and to bomb any German warships sighted. They were tasked to head for the Horns Reef lightship a few miles west of the Danish port of Esbjerg but poor weather in the area prevented any sighting and the force returned to base disappointed at having seen no targets.

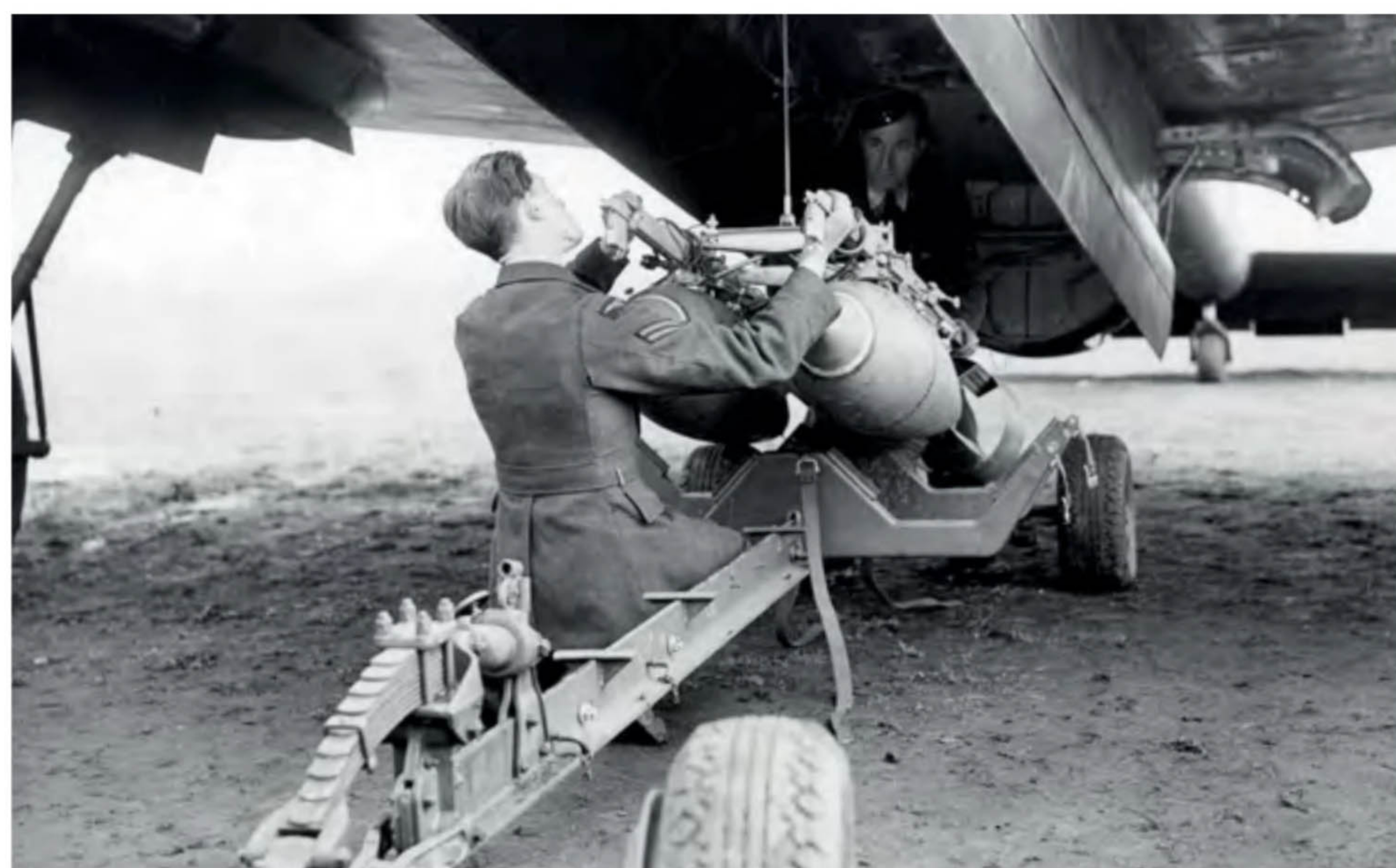
Throughout the rest of 1939 the Hampdens of 49 Squadron carried out an occasional sweep, but it was not until the following April that operations intensified. During the month Learoyd undertook sorties off Denmark and North Germany and





ABOVE
Hampden L4140 on
the production line.
(KEY COLLECTION)

RIGHT
Bombs are loaded
aboard a Hampden
in May 1940.
(KEY COLLECTION)



Learoyd, who was circling nearby, had seen these attacks go in and watched as the fourth aircraft ran the gauntlet of the intense anti-aircraft fire. Plt Off Hugh V Matthews' aircraft was repeatedly hit but he managed to drop his bombs accurately before pulling away to face the daunting task of returning to Scampton on one engine, which he managed successfully.

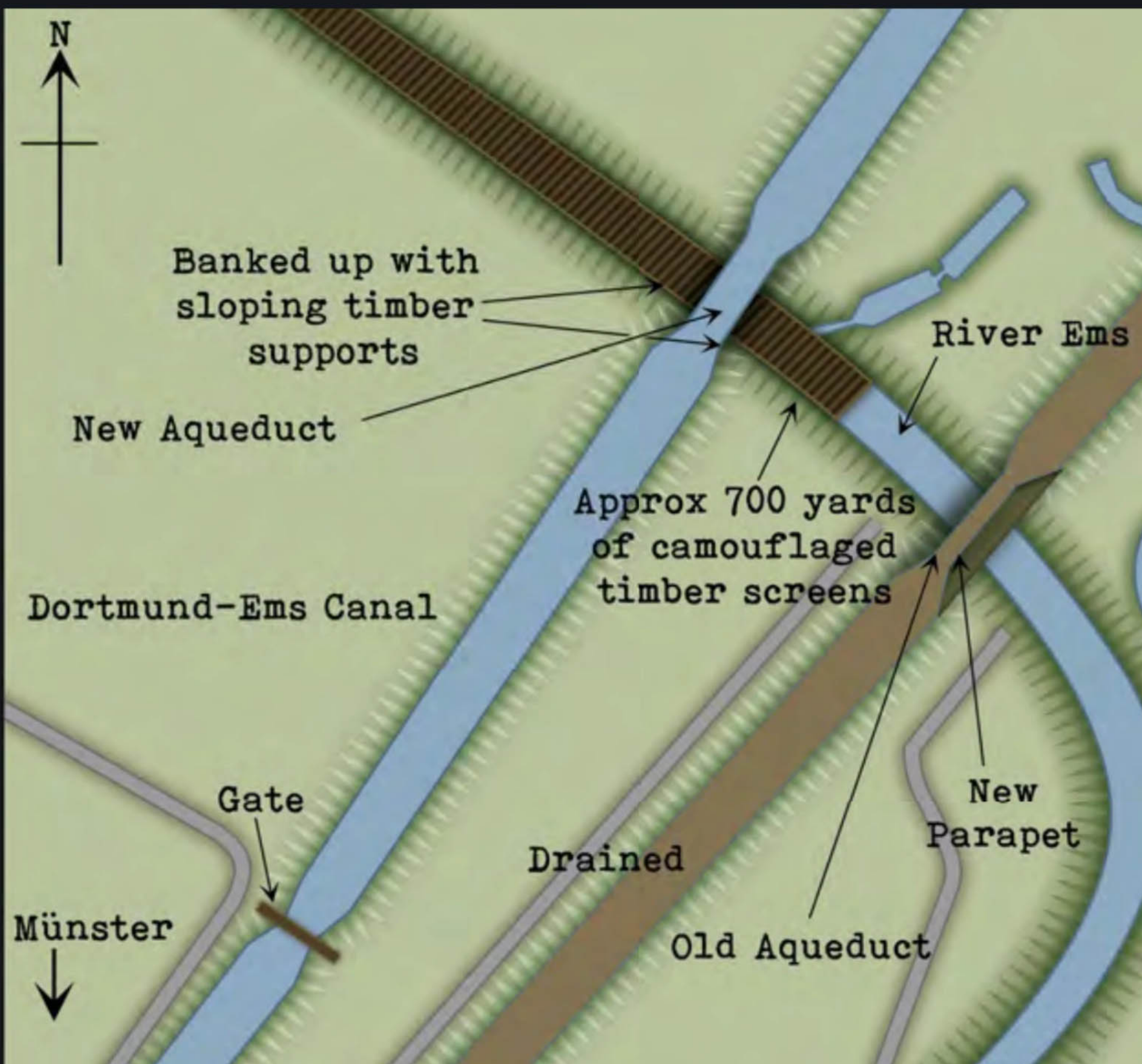
ENTERING THE MAELSTROM

Learoyd was the fifth to attack. He had seen the devastating effect of the anti-aircraft fire on his colleagues yet he was determined to carry out his mission. By this time the fire coming

RIGHT
Ground crew
preparing to load
a mine into a
HP Hampden.
(VIA AUTHOR)

array of anti-aircraft guns and searchlights designed to blind the RAF crews. Of the 11 Hampdens tasked with the operation, two failed to find the target and four carried out diversionary attacks, leaving five to hit the canal aqueduct above the River Ems. Learoyd took off from Scampton at 20:00hrs and arrived over the canal on time in half moonlight, which reflected off the water. He stood off as Sqn Ldr 'Jamie' Pitcairn-Hill of 83 Squadron made his attack at 100ft, approaching through an intense barrage of light flak. Although badly damaged, Pitcairn-Hill managed to drop his bombs in the right place. The second aircraft to attack was shot down and the third was so badly hit the crew baled out and were captured.





was still dark. Unsure of the aircraft's undercarriage and flaps, and not wishing to further endanger his crew, he elected to wait until dawn before attempting to land. In a great feat of airmanship, he got the bomber down safely. Learoyd and his crew had been airborne for almost nine hours.

The attack turned out to be successful, causing damage that was so serious it blocked the canal and no barges could pass through for ten days. This was one of the first times during the war that a specific and precise target had been attacked by specially trained crews. It was not the last time that such a high-profile operation would be flown from Scampton – the Dambusters would fly from there in 1943.

DUE RECOGNITION

A number of awards resulted from this valiant attack including a DSO for Pitcairn-Hill and a DFC for Matthews. A week after the operation, on 20 August, it was announced that Learoyd, the last to make his run into the target when the defences were at their most dangerous, had been awarded the Victoria Cross for, 'high courage, skill and determination...and an example which is unsurpassed'. One of his

LEFT
The Dortmund-Ems canal and the River Ems, north of Münster, Germany.
(ANDY HAY)

BELOW
The Hampden's relatively small cockpit.
(KEY COLLECTION)

BELOW LEFT
A crew shortly after returning from a night mission.
(KEY COLLECTION)

“LEAROYD WAS THE FIFTH TO ATTACK. HE HAD SEEN THE DEVASTATING EFFECT OF THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE ON HIS COLLEAGUES YET HE WAS DETERMINED TO CARRY OUT HIS MISSION”

up from the ground was at its fiercest and the gunners and searchlight operators were fully aware of the line of approach of the bombers.

Roderick let down to 150ft and, just short of the release point, he was blinded by searchlights and the aircraft was hit by two shells that tore through the starboard wing. Despite the intense flak, he held the badly damaged bomber steady allowing the bomb aimer to release the munitions

while his two gunners engaged the searchlights and gun batteries.

After clearing the target, he and his crew assessed the extent of the damage to their aircraft, which was severe. In addition to the smashed wing, the main problem facing Learoyd was damage to the hydraulic system, which had allowed the flaps to droop and increase drag. He managed to coax the Hampden across the North Sea and he arrived over Scampton while it





ABOVE
A Hampden navigator/bomb aimer in his 'office'.
(KEY COLLECTION)

gunners, Leading Aircraftman William Rich, received the DFM. Recognised for his modesty and his cool and unflappable nature, 'Babe' Learoyd's honour was popular on the squadron. On 9 September he attended an investiture when he received his supreme award from His Majesty the King.

For a few months, Learoyd was the personal assistant to Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham. He had a brief period in command of 83 Squadron before becoming the Wing Commander Flying at 14 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at RAF Cottesmore in Rutland, where Hampden crews were taught.

In December 1941 he took command of 44 Squadron following the loss of its commanding officer on operations. The unit still had Hampdens but in December the Avro Lancaster arrived to re-equip the squadron, the first to receive the RAF's most famous wartime bomber.

ANOTHER VC ON THE UNIT

During his period in command of No.44, one of his flight commanders, the South African Sqn Ldr John Nettleton, led a combined force in a daylight attack against the MAN

BELOW
An early Hampden bomber in flight.
(KEY COLLECTION)

SGT JOHN HANNAH VC

Roderick Learoyd wasn't the only Scampton-based Hampden airman to be awarded the Victoria Cross. On 15 September 1940 wireless operator Sgt John Hannah of 83 Squadron took off in Hampden I P1355/OL-W to attack German invasion barges assembling near Antwerp, Belgium. His aircraft was badly damaged by flak during the strike, the fuel tanks were hit and a fire broke out in the bomb bay. Hannah, who was just 18 at the time, made his way to the rear of the aircraft to find that the gunner had already baled out. The young Scotsman tackled the blaze, firstly with extinguishers, and then – even as the floor of the cabin started to melt – by beating at the flames with his logbook. Though badly burned, he succeeded in his efforts, enabling the pilot to bring the crippled aircraft home.

For his bravery, he was awarded the VC, becoming its youngest ever recipient for aerial operations. John was so weakened by his injuries that he was discharged from the RAF, with full disability pension, in December 1942. Sadly, his health did not improve significantly and he died in Leicestershire on 7 June 1947. His VC is on display at the RAF Museum Hendon. (INFORMATION COURTESY OF STEVE BEEBEE)



Artwork of Sgt John Hannah's 83 Squadron Hampden I P1355/OL-W. (Key/Pete West)

Diesel factory at Augsburg in Bavaria. For his outstanding gallantry and leadership Nettleton was awarded the Victoria Cross. For a brief period, the squadron enjoyed the unique distinction of having on its strength two holders of the supreme award for valour. A month later, Learoyd left the unit to take command of 25 OTU at Finningley, South Yorkshire.

This appointment signalled the end of his operational career. After serving in the Public Relations Branch he began training in the air transport role flying Douglas Dakotas. For a year he served with 1314 Flight at Accra in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) flying routes throughout West Africa. He

was demobilised in October 1946 as a wing commander, then for three years he flew as a VIP pilot in Malaya before beginning a long career in the motor industry including as export sales manager for the Austin Motor Company.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris wrote of him: "He was a quiet and reserved man but also a friendly and comradely one. A good man at a party, he never allowed his social life to interrupt his flying career. Even after the award of the VC he gave no hint of conceit or self-importance."

Wing Commander Roderick 'Babe' Learoyd VC died on 24 January 1996, aged 80. Ⓞ

