

CAUGHT

When RAF Intelligence Officers discovered that German bombers were using radio-navigation beacons in France to find their way to targets in Britain, the race was on to set up beacons in Britain that mimicked those in France. The signals confused and confounded Luftwaffe crews, and on at least one occasion resulted in unexpected consequences as **Andy Saunders** relates.

MEACON

ABOVE: The Dornier 217 came to grief alongside a waterway called Jury's Gap on the Kent/Sussex border, near Camber.

AS WITH any new type operated by the Luftwaffe there was always eagerness on the part of British intelligence to secure an example of the aircraft for evaluation. If one might be procured in good enough condition to be returned to flight then all well and good, but very often the prizes collected after such aircraft arrived in the British Isles were either quite beaten up or else reduced to mangled wreckage. Of course, and whatever the state or condition of the German aircraft involved, the remnants (however meagre) might yet reveal significant snippets of information

for the investigators of the RAF's A.I.2(g) technical intelligence department. Sometimes, objects or equipment might be forwarded to the Royal Aircraft Establishment for further investigation or analysis but, of course, it was always the intact or relatively undamaged examples that were of the most value. Sometimes they fell into RAF hands unexpectedly, and through unusual circumstances.

WATCHING AND WAITING
The successes achieved by the Dornier 17 in both its Z and P variants during the campaigns against Poland, the

West and over Britain between 1939 and early 1941 had shown the design to be a reliable workhorse and an effective weapons delivery asset. That said, it had already been recognised in 1937 that there was a need to upgrade the existing design and to this end the Dornier Flugzeug company submitted a proposal to the technical branch of the RLM (Reichsluftfahrtministerium, or Air Ministry) for what was a scaled-up development of the basic Dornier 17 design. This was to meet the Luftwaffe's requirements for longer ranging, heavier and more versatile warplanes that needed to be capable

IN THE

N'S TRAP

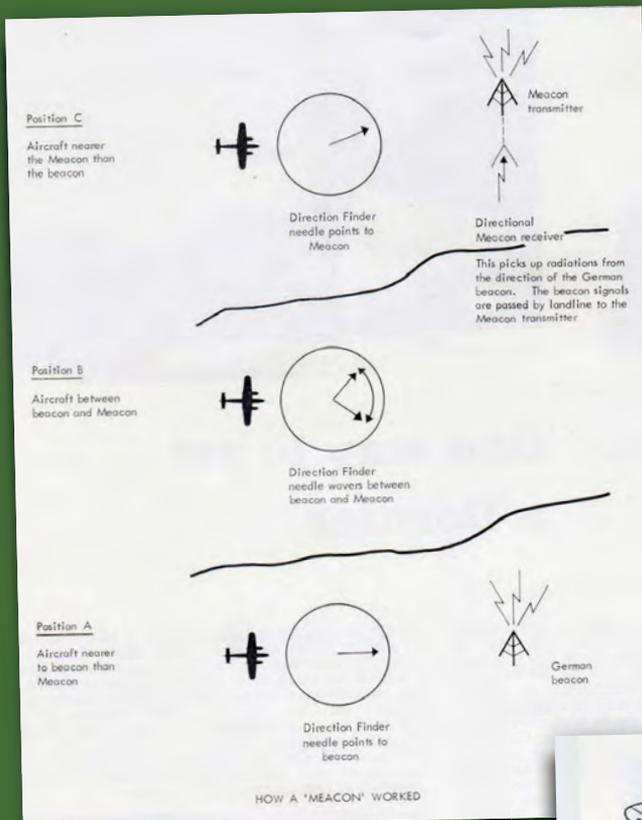
of lifting substantially heavier offensive loads and delivering them in either level or diving flight, albeit that the requirement for a dive-bombing capability with the aircraft was later abandoned. Classified as a heavy bomber, the project received the designation Dornier 217 and by the end of 1938 the first prototypes had been constructed. By 1940 flight testing and development was well advanced with early production models being delivered in late 1940 and operational with 2.(F)/11 in Romania by January 1941 where they were employed on clandestine photographic reconnaissance over

the Soviet Union in preparation for Operation Barbarossa. By mid-1941 the BMW 801 engine-equipped Dornier 217 E-1 was finally being issued to two frontline units operating against mainland Britain and its surrounding coastal waters, KG2 and KG40. Although Dornier 217s had already been engaged and shot down by British defences from the summer of that year onwards, all of them had thus far fallen into the sea. The RAF had still to examine one up-close, and although it was only a matter of time before one fell over land there was a high probability that such a victim, when it arrived, would most

likely be largely smashed up. For now, A.I.2(g) watched, waited and hoped for a Dornier 217. Also watching and waiting, but not specifically for the Dornier 217, was the RAF's No 80 (Signals) Wing who, appropriately, carried the motto: 'Confusion To Our Enemies'. As one Luftwaffe pilot later observed of his Meacon misadventure on a night in October 1941 when writing to the author in 1975, 80 Group had certainly lived up to its motto: 'I hadn't exactly been caught in the trap' he observed 'I was already in it as soon as I neared Britain.' That flier was Oblt Gunther Dolenga, a pilot flying with 5./KG2. >>

CAUGHT IN THE MEACON'S TRAP

RAF Electronic Warfare: 1941



made a day-flight into the Atlantic looking for an aircraft and carrying four x 500 kg bombs but nothing could be seen in the mist and the bombs were jettisoned in the sea.

On 18 August, U5 + DN had reverted to a land target and took another four x 500 kg bombs to Birmingham but, unable to find the target in 10/10 cloud, dropped the bombs randomly. Again, on 1 September, another four 500 kg bombs were jettisoned during an intended attack on Newcastle when heavy AA fire and night fighter action caused the mission to be aborted. Again, on 16 September, another sortie had to be abandoned due to British night-fighter attacks during a dusk shipping reconnaissance off the east coast. Altogether, UG + DN and her crew had been having a run of bad luck. Maybe, they thought, the 50th war flight would see better fortunes?

hanging in the cockpit, a good luck charm from his ground crew. As things would turn out, the celebratory sparkling wine would go undrunk and the lucky horseshoe clearly needed a little more magical power to overcome the RAF's electronic counter-measures.

Dolenga's Dornier 217 was an E-1 variant and one of the tranche of the first one hundred production models delivered to the Luftwaffe. Indeed, its Werke Nummer (0069), confirmed that it was the sixty-ninth off the production line. Already, though, the type was being superseded by the E-2 version although these were only coming into service to replace E-1s when they became lost or damaged beyond repair. Given his status as Staffelkapitan-in-waiting, Dolenga could doubtless have demanded that he be allocated an E-2, but as

TOP LEFT: Diagrammatic representation of how the RAF 'Meacon' worked.

RIGHT: A detailed cut-away drawing was made for 'Aeroplane' magazine from the example which Hptm Dolenga delivered to the RAF.

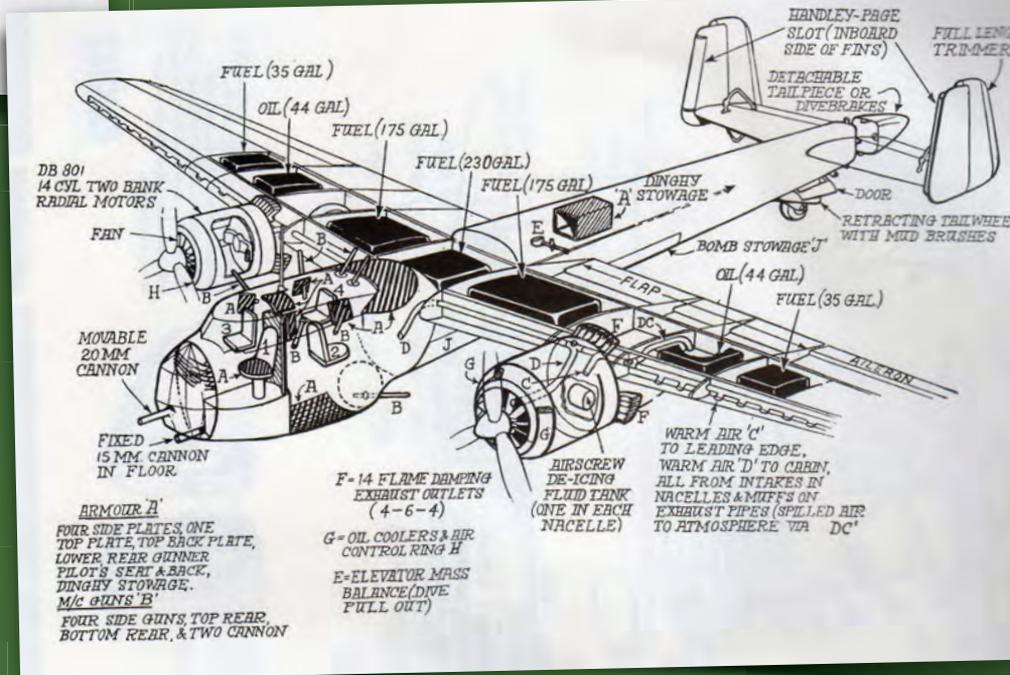
BELOW: Gp Capt E B Addison, the Commander of 80 Wing, RAF.

A RUN OF BAD LUCK

It was at around midnight on 11 October 1941 that Oblt Dolenga and his three crew members (Uffz Walter Trompeter [observer], Uffz Willi Sprink [wireless operator] and Uff Konrad Friederich [flight engineer]) took off from their base at Evreux and headed out westwards towards the Scilly Isles for an armed shipping reconnaissance in their Dornier 217. This was familiar hunting territory for Dolenga and

his crew and already emblazoned on the fin of the Dornier 217 was the white outline of a British 20,000 ton ship, claimed as damaged during July. Given luck, Dolenga reckoned that this war flight, his 50th, would see a British ship sunk. As it happened, though, many of Dolenga's recent war flights had hardly

been crowning successes. For instance, on 10 August 1941, U5 + DN had

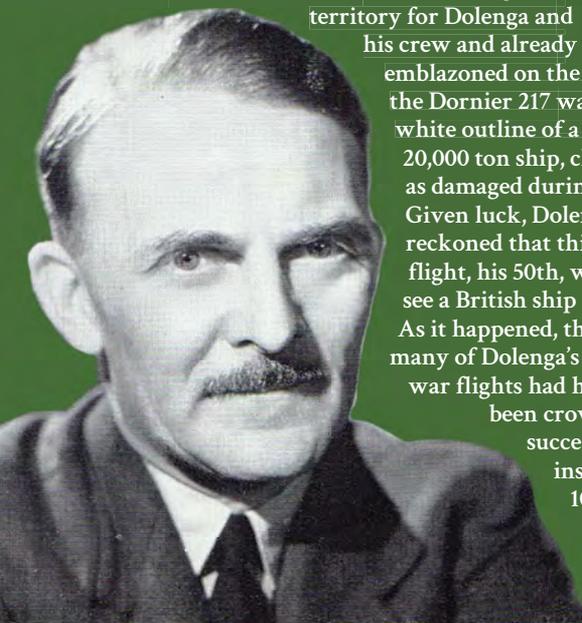


BOX OF ELECTRONIC TRICKS

To celebrate the 50th war flight a bottle of sparkling French wine was on board to be drunk on return to Evreux. Hopefully, after a run of misfortune, it would be a case of this time having something to actually celebrate, although quite apart from toasting his half-century of operational flights there was added cause to celebrate; next week, on the 17th, it would be his twenty sixth birthday. Additionally, he had also been promoted to Staffelkapitan to replace Hptm Lienemann who had recently suffered a broken leg. So, there would surely be plenty to celebrate. A horseshoe was also

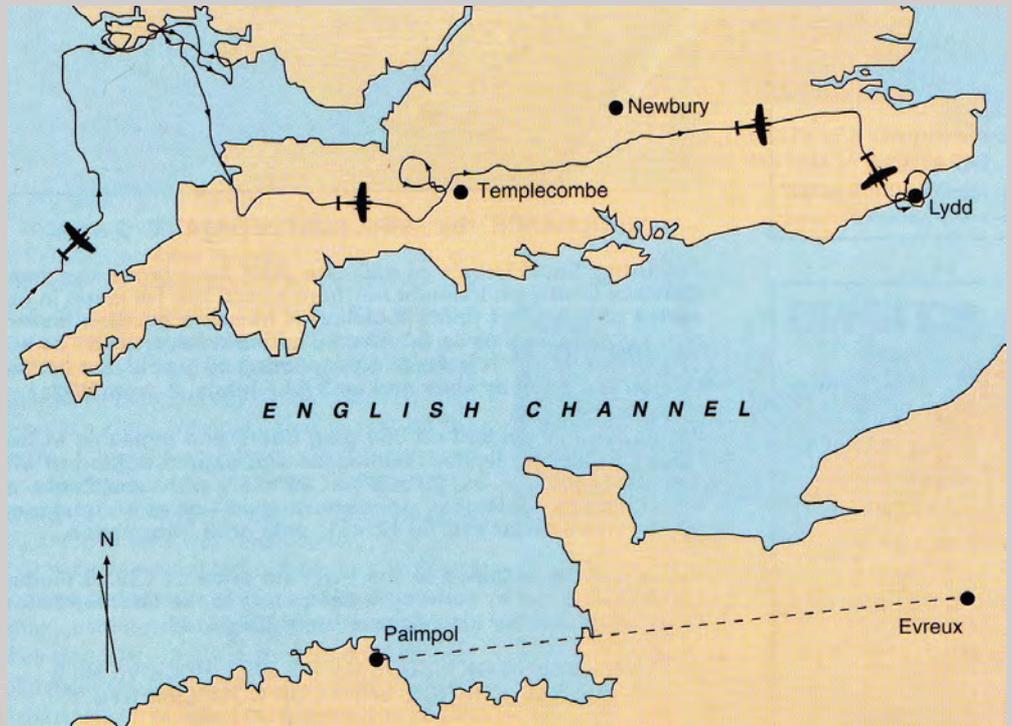
it was he preferred his faithful Do 217 E-1, U5 + DN. For one thing, the E-1 was marginally faster than the E-2 version due to the fact that it had no gun turret behind the cockpit and was therefore somewhat better streamlined. Additionally, the lack of turret on the E-1 made for rather more spacious cockpit accommodation and Dolenga felt altogether more comfortable in 'D' for Dora.

As he set course toward the western approaches of the English Channel, and despite the clear danger of any operational sortie, Dolenga still had good cause to feel confident and quietly satisfied with his war thus far. Equally confident



and satisfied was Gp Capt Addison with his box of electronic tricks at 80 (Signals) Group.

Dolenga's shipping reconnaissance west of the Scilly Isles was completed without incident or the hoped-for contact with British shipping and soon after 02.00 hrs on the morning of 12 October the Dornier 217 was headed eastwards back towards its base. However, and unknown to Dolenga, the winds encountered over the Atlantic had not been as forecast and, as a consequence, the Dornier was already somewhat off-track for its return to Evreux. Not only that but the north coast of France hadn't appeared in front of the aircraft as expected. Scanning the gloom, the crew could make out only the white crested waves in the sea below and far ahead. Dolenga, somewhat confused, nevertheless assumed that he was somewhere over the western



ABOVE: The meandering route of Hptm Dolenga's Dornier 217 on 11/12 October 1941 across southern England as the crew became increasingly confused by the false signals from the 'Meacon'.

reaches of the English Channel and duly turned northwards in the hope that his navigator could get a fix on the south coast of Cornwall which was expected to shortly appear. About half-an-hour later, and when a line of breakers obligingly appeared along a coastline, the Dornier flew up and down the shore for some while as the frustrated crew tried to match the coast to their flying maps. Giving up in the darkness, and with partial cloud cover further impairing the quest, Dolenga decided to head southwards towards the French coast. Unfortunately, what he had assumed to be the south coast of Cornwall had, in fact, been the south coast of Wales and what he now assumed to be the English Channel

was, in fact, the Bristol Channel. He would neither be the first nor would he be the last German aviator to fall into that geographical trap. Of course, it wasn't the only trap that Dolenga was going to fall into on that sortie.

THE TRAP HAD BEEN SPRUNG

Thus far, Dolenga and his crew had been the victims of wind speeds and directions that had not been predicted and had then made a simple navigational error by placing the south coast of Wales as the south-Cornish coastline. >>

LEFT: Hptm Gunther Dolenga, pilot of the first Dornier 217 to fall into British hands.

BELOW: Brand new Dornier 217s lined up ready for delivery at the factory, early 1941.



CAUGHT IN THE MEACON'S TRAP

RAF Electronic Warfare: 1941

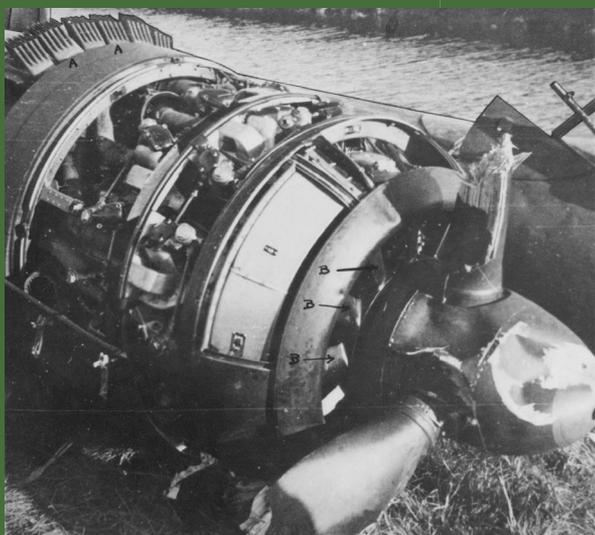


TOP LEFT: RAF crews prepare to salvage the cockpit section of the crashed Dornier.



TOP RIGHT: Using a Coles Crane, a RAF salvage party set to work hauling the bomber out of the river.

BELOW: A view of one of the Dornier's engines with annotations by RAF intelligence.



However, such glitches were not going to mislead them for long, they confidently believed. Now, as they flew across what they assumed to be northern France and Brittany, the navigator tuned in his radio direction finder to the beacons at Paimpol and Tocqueville and was comforted to receive strong and clear signals. Under normal circumstances the considerable difference between the expected and the actual bearings would have immediately been apparent. But these were not normal circumstances.

The crew had now been unsure of their position for some considerable time and were quite content to grasp without question the apparent

lifeline that the beacon signal was throwing them. For now, at least! However, the signals in which they trusted didn't come from the Paimpol beacon at all but, instead, the 80 Wing Meacon at Templecombe near Yeovil, Somerset.

Unaware that the trap had been sprung, Dolenga continued in blissful ignorance until he reached the location of what he thought to be either the Paimpol or Tocqueville beacon at around 04.00 hrs. The problem was that Paimpol was positioned on the French coast, and below was nothing but land. And if it were Tocqueville then he ought to be able to see the Channel Islands. For a while, the Dornier circled waveringly to the west of the Meacon, but there was no sign of a coastline anywhere nearby and the collective consternation on board was becoming considerably heightened by the minute. However, as Dolenga headed from the Meacon on a course of zero-eight-zero, which should have taken him directly to Evreux from Paimpol, there was cause for the anxiety to be yet further heightened; now, they should be picking up the Evreux beacon. Instead, they were getting signals from the Newbury Meacon and their direction finder needle began to waver hopelessly as the Dornier passed to the south of it. Nevertheless, Dolenga continued steadfastly

along his established course believing that it must surely bring them, eventually, to Evreux. Instead, they were on a heading for Rochester and as they neared the north Kent coast the Thames Estuary and Isle of Sheppey loomed in the early morning light at around 04.45 hrs. Plausibly, this could be the north coast of France and so Dolenga turned southwards on a track that he yet hoped would take him to Evreux, although the crew now realised that they were certainly very thoroughly lost. But at least there was the comfort of knowing they were over German held territory. Or so they thought. Imagine, then, the confusion on board the Dornier 217 when yet another coastline loomed up ahead. Where on earth were they?

COCKPIT WRENCHED SIDEWAYS

Puzzled by this further navigational headache and geographical mystery, Dolenga concluded that, after all, they must have wandered down across north-western France and ended up either somewhere on the Biscay coast or near Granville on the Normandy coast. None of it made much sense, though, but the only



logical explanation was that they were somewhere over those parts of France and since fuel was getting low there was little choice but to make a wheels-up forced landing in the first available field. Firing a number of red Verey cartridges to announce his emergency arrival, Dolenga lined the Dornier 217 up for its enforced landing and as it slid across the grass the bomber finally came to rest half-in and half-out of a small waterway. Its back was broken, propellers splintered and the cockpit wrenched sideways. As it had come in for its landing, a number of anti-glider-landing poles had been swept aside, but the crew were still certain they were in France. Dolenga himself had been slightly injured in the crash but sent two of his crew off to reconnoitre and get assistance. It was only when they saw the outline of a British soldier with his distinctive tin hat that the truth dawned on them and the pair hastened back to the aircraft. Here, the crew tried

RAF's A.I.1(k) intelligence report noted: 'Dolenga was an experienced pilot, who had been a blind flying instructor for seven months in 1940, and it is therefore surprising that he should have become lost in this way.' In its commentary, here, the report rather suggests that A.I.1(k) did not have any inkling, at this stage, of the part played by 80 (Signals) Wing in the demise of U5 + DN. However, the secrets of the Dornier 217 were now about to be laid bare as the wreck was dismantled into manageable sections on-site and transported to the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough for detailed technical evaluation. Here, and although the Dornier 217 was far too badly damaged to repair for flight evaluation, a comprehensive report was assembled on the BMW 801 A/1 engines, airframe and equipment.



ABOVE:
A view looking back down the fuselage of Dornier 217, U5 + DN.



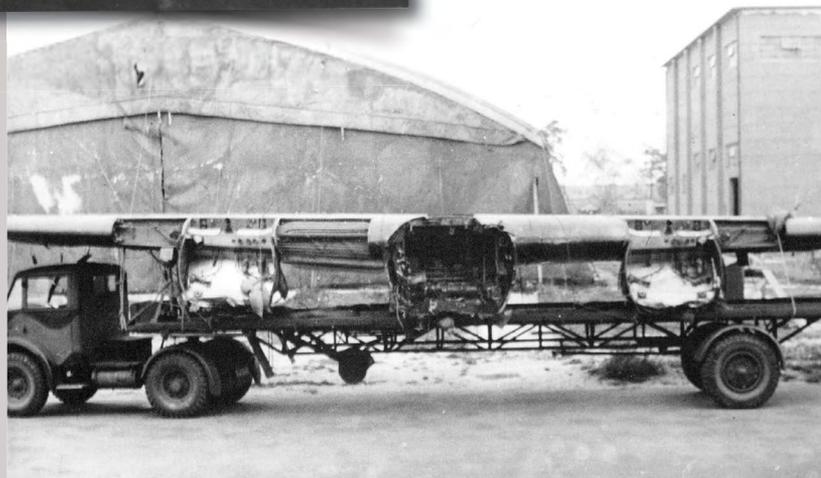
LEFT:
A series of photographs taken by RAF Air Intelligence shows the bomber from different angles and is annotated with technical details of interest. The rudder was marked with the outline of two ships claimed as attacked, a 5,000 ton vessel sunk off Great Yarmouth on 5 August 1941 and 2,000 ton vessel damaged off the Scillies during July.

THE MEACON'S SIREN LURE

As for the Meacon system, the apparatus continued to claim successes. Some of them may have been 'unknown' successes in that victims might well have crashed in the seas around Britain or failed to return home due to navigational confusion caused by the Meacons, with the reason for such losses remaining unknown to either friend or foe. However, a little over a month after Dolenga's downfall, and on 26 November 1941, a Junkers 88 A-5 of 1./Kustenfliiegergruppe 106 became disorientated during an armed shipping reconnaissance of the Irish Sea between Bardney Island and Wicklow. >>

unsuccessfully to set off demolition charges and to remove wireless equipment but were prevented from doing so by the timely arrival of locally stationed troops. It didn't get any worse than this. Clearly, Dolenga's run of bad luck remained unbroken. Unbroken, too, was the celebratory bottle of sparkling wine that RAF investigators found in the cockpit.

The Dornier 217 had in fact come down on the bank of Jury's Gap Sewer, a drainage ditch that runs across Broomhill Level at Camber, East Sussex, and very close to the county border with Kent. Surprisingly, the



LEFT:
The Dornier 217 arrives by road at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough.

CAUGHT IN THE MEACON'S TRAP



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

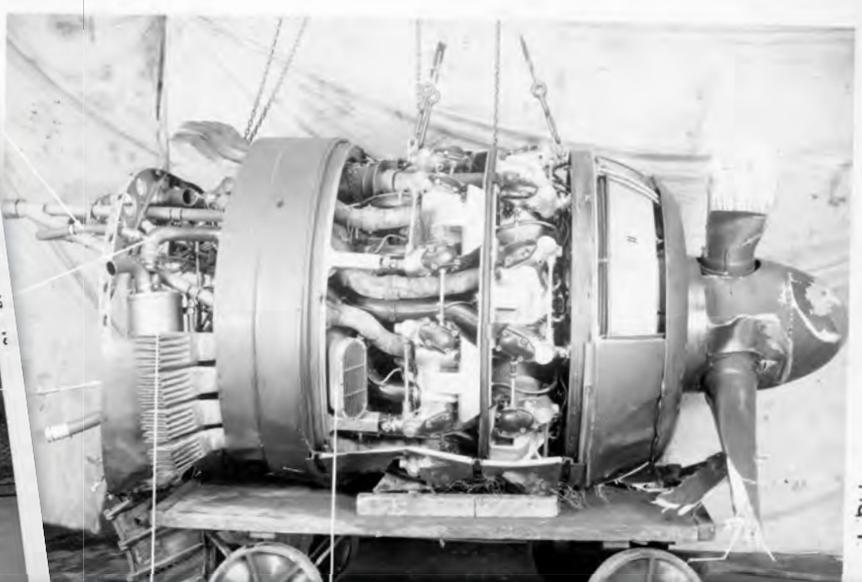


FIG 1



ABOVE: Of particular interest to RAF investigators were the BMW 801 engines and the cockpit section with its instrumentation and controls.

Turning for home at the end of the sortie, the crew then thought they had been subject to a miscalculation of wind strengths but had, in fact, been 'Meaconed'. Finding themselves over Cardigan, the navigator mistook that town for Plymouth and headed south. As they crossed North Devon, and eventually *did* find themselves over Plymouth, the crew reasoned that they had crossed the English Channel, flown across part of Brittany and were now over the Bay of Biscay and that Plymouth, below them, was an unidentified French coastal port.

These were states of confusion that were something of a pattern amongst Luftwaffe crews who were either caught in the Meacon trap over the west of England, or who simply made basic navigational errors arising out of the assumption that the Bristol Channel was the English Channel.

Turning back inland, the Junkers 88 crew then found themselves over RAF Chivenor, North Devon,

where they fired a red and white flare and landed, wheels down, at 21.15 hrs. The startled aerodrome defence company were concerned that the Junkers 88 might be about to take-off again and fired a 'precautionary' burst of automatic fire into the cockpit. The gunfire slightly wounded the observer, Ogefr Erich Kurz, although the others, Uffz Erwin Herms (the pilot), Gefr Heinrich Klein and Ogefr Friedrich Krautler were unharmed. Herms immediately shut down his engines and the startled crew were taken POW by an equally startled RAF ground party. Again, the Meacon had chalked up a success although this time the aircraft was in pristine and airworthy condition and was subsequently operated by the RAF wearing British marking and the serial number HM509. During its time in RAF service it ended up having a part in the wartime film *'In Which We Serve'* when the aircraft was temporarily returned to the livery of its former owners.

The same night that Uffz Erwin Herms' crew had been 'Meaconed', and again most likely due to the influence of the same electronic countermeasures system, another Junkers 88, this time an A-4 of 2./Kustenfliegergruppe 106, was lost in the sea off Land's End with all four crew in what remain unexplained circumstances. However much German aircrews might have become aware of the Meacon's confusing influence on accurate navigation and geographical positioning, they would still continue to fall victim to its siren lure or simply become lost when signals were either confused or jammed.

Meanwhile, Gunter Dolenga's bottle of wine hadn't gone to waste. Instead of being quaffed to celebrate a successful German sortie it was auctioned to raise funds for the RAF Benevolent Fund, and drunk instead to toast the successful capture of the Luftwaffe's latest bomber. Such were the fortunes and misfortunes of war. ©