Collecting 'Firebomb Fritz'

Austin J Ruddy looks at the range of German incendiary bombs that were aimed at Britain, many of which are now highly prized collectors' items.

At just 13in (33cm) long and weighing only 2.2lb (1kg), to the uninitiated the standard incendiary bomb (IB) must have seemed the feeblest missile in the Luftwaffe's armoury, but when the weapon was unleashed on Britain it caused fearsome fires which soon came to epitomise the Blitz. The ordnance even attained a nickname – Firebomb Fritz. Some 80 years on, these former weapons are now hotly collected by enthusiasts.

A good proportion of IBs failed to ignite due to their rudimentary impact pin fuse. Sometimes, the canister in which they were dropped also failed to open mid-air and just spilt their unfired IB loads on landing and were simply collected the morning after the raid by the ARP – or souvenir-hungry schoolboys! In many cases these IBs have remained in sheds, attics and cellars for the last 80 years and now find their way on to the collecting market.

It goes without saying that all potential purchasers must confirm with vendors that their example for sale is inert and free from explosives. Essentially, purchase from reputable militaria dealers is the safest way.

GERMAN FIREBOMBING CAMPAIGN

Initially, the British government was slow to recognise the potency of the Luftwaffe's firebombs. The main pre-war concerns centred on poison gas, meaning there was less focus on attack by incendiary bombs; indeed, the Auxiliary Fire Service was only formed the year before the outbreak of war.

It's easy to assume that the damage shown in rubble-strewn archive footage of devastated cities was caused by high-explosive bombs. However, a post-Blitz survey by the British Air Ministry revealed that for each ton of high explosives dropped, roughly 1¾ acres were destroyed, but for each ton of incendiaries dropped at least 3¼ acres were devastated. Likewise, even today, it is little known that around eight different variants of IB were used against Britain, nor the dates they were deployed.

The basic and most common type of German incendiary bomb was the 1kg B1E Elektron weapon (ARP code: I.B.). Although mainly associated with the Blitz, the B1E was actually invented in 1918, but the conflict ended before the Kaiser's men had the chance to use it. In violation of the Versailles treaty, the Germans conducted secret trials with the weapon between 1929-1935 and took the opportunity to test it in the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, the Nazis must have been building great stocks of the B1E for some years as surviving ▶

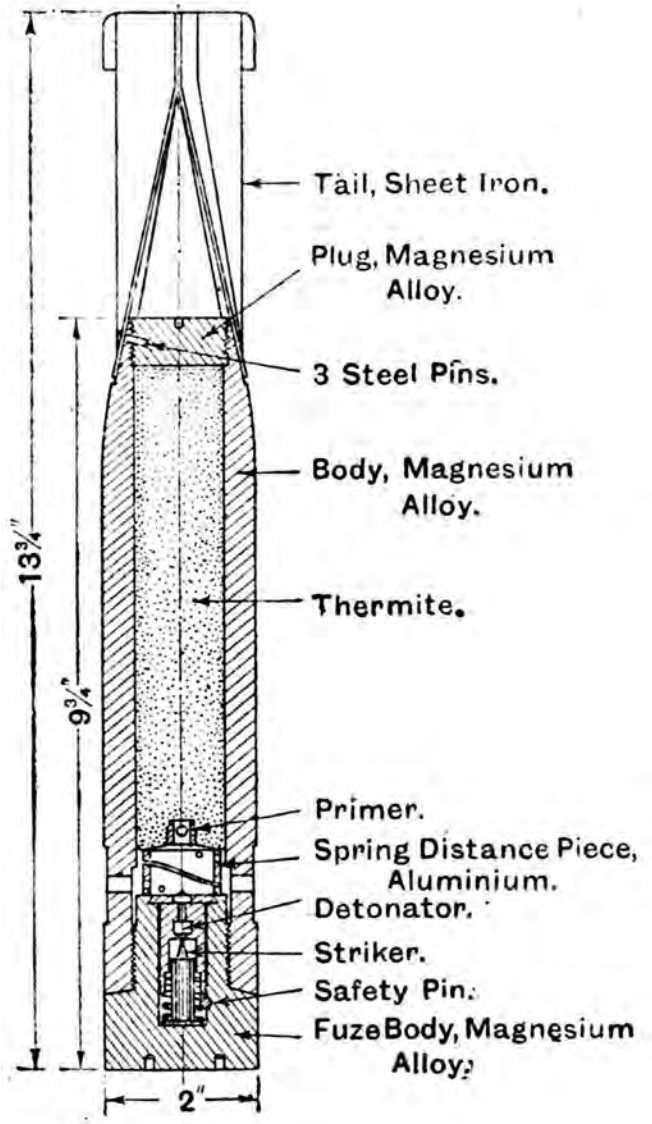
ABOVE *One of the most memorable posters of the war, 'Beat Firebomb Fritz', showing a devilish German B1E incendiary bomb, was introduced in September 1941. Much sought after, this poster can fetch up to £750.*
(ALL IMAGES AUSTIN J RUDDY)

LEFT *The standard B1E German incendiary bomb, first used against Britain in 1940.*

RIGHT *The base of this B1E has obviously just been extinguished by an ARP firefighter after it had fired on impact, leaving this small melted burn hole.*

BELOW *An illustration in official ARP Handbook No.14: The Fire Guards Handbook of 1942 showing the internal structure of the B1E incendiary bomb.*

BOTTOM *The B1EZ-A incendiary had a small penthrite explosive charge screwed into the rear of the bomb, below the tail.*



examples dropped on Britain bear the manufacture date of 1936.

The bomb comprised of a tapering, three-fin, sheet metal tail, with an inflammable magnesium body and a thermite aluminium iron oxide powder filling. The very simple AZ 8312 nose impact fuse contained an inertia pin that on landing, struck a small percussion cap which initiated the weapon's filling, in turn igniting the magnesium body, ejecting molten metal, setting fire to its surroundings, for up to 15 minutes. The bomb burned at 4,500°F (2500°C), sufficient to melt steel.

In the 1940-1941 Blitz, IBs were mainly released in clusters of 36 from 'Molotov Bread Basket' containers, the idea being to swamp a target, making it harder for firefighters to tackle all the bombs dropped. As the war developed, container sizes grew, so by 1944, the AB 1000-2 container could distribute 620 IBs.

Special Luftwaffe pathfinder bomber units, such as KGr 100, a Beleuchtergruppe (Firelighter Group), would arrive first over a UK city, dropping IBs and parachute flares to mark the target area for the incoming waves of bombers. It was highly effective and would take another two years before RAF Bomber Command developed and used these tactics itself.

The Luftwaffe's concentrated fire-bombing is largely the reason why Britain's city centres have lost many of their most historic buildings:

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once ignited, their wooden composition was near impossible to save. However, if tackled early enough, individual IBs could be extinguished by water sprayed from stirrup pumps or smothered by sandbags. One former Leicestershire Home Guard even stated that he and his colleagues once buried burning incendiaries in a field with horse dung, adding: "It did the trick – but didn't smell too great!". Indeed, even cigarette cards showed householders how to tackle firebombs.

Twenty years ago, the standard B1E was a frequent staple of militaria fairs, fetching around £25. Now, prices have rocketed and depending on condition, can sell for £150.

BOOBY-TRAPPED

In an effort to deter such firefighters, the Germans introduced an anti-personnel element into around 10% of their IBs. Operational orders of 1 Fliegerkorps for September 7, 1940, the first major attack on London, reveal that a percentage of the Dornier 17 bombload was to comprise of B1EZ, or explosive incendiaries. This was the B1EZ-A (ARP code: Exp.I.B.), the standard incendiary, but with a small quarter-ounce (7g) penthrite explosive charge screwed into the rear of the bomb below the tail, which was heat-detonated after two minutes. It was identified by a letter 'Z' stamped near the tail and a red letter 'A' painted on the nose which was later omitted. (An alternative, the B1EZ-B, with an explosive charge in the magnesium nose, was not used on Britain). The prices for an inert B1EZ-A today can reach £200.

LEFT *From 1943, the Germans introduced an explosive version of the steel-nosed B1.3E incendiary, called the B1.3EZ-B. It had a half-ounce explosive nose plug, identified by a visible circular groove in the nose.*

RIGHT *In 1942, the Germans introduced the larger B2.2E-Z incendiary. Essentially a regular B1E with a large anti-personnel explosive nose, it proved lethal against firefighters.*

BELOW *Also from 1942, the Luftwaffe dropped captured stocks of French incendiary bombs, of a design similar to their German counterparts, on Britain.*

Although the flat nose of the B1E was designed to penetrate domestic roofs, sometimes it caused the bomb to just bounce off harmlessly into the street. To avert this, from 1942, the Germans introduced a steel-nosed 'tile-breaker' version, the B1.3E (Civil Defence code: S.N.I.B), raising the bomb's weight to 1.3kg, giving it greater penetration. Often mistaken today for the standard B1E, it's rare and can sell for £155 on the open market these days.

From late 1943, the B1.3E also came with a quarter-ounce explosive tail pocket (B1.3EZ-A) and a half-ounce explosive nose plug, the B1.3EZ-B (CD code: N.Exp.IB), which detonated up to five minutes after landing. It also was marked with the letter 'Z', but had a painted red letter 'B', later stamped 'B' or 'ZB', plus a visible circular groove, in the nose. Again these are now very hard to find and they can command up to £200.

FRENCH CONNECTION

But it wasn't just their own bombs the Luftwaffe dropped on Britain. In the speedy occupation of France, the Germans captured stocks of French air force IBs (CD code: INC), of a design similar to their German counterparts, but with a slightly different tail configuration. There were various types, with three, six and eight vanes, the body half-painted red. Very rare, these were dropped in limited numbers, notably on Bristol and Surrey, in spring 1942. They can also fetch £200. ▶

RIGHT *During the 1944 Steinbock Raids on Britain, the Luftwaffe deployed their final model of anti-personnel incendiary, the 2kg B2EZ. Distinguishable by its long tail, the nose on this example has been repainted incorrectly.*

BELOW *B1E incendiary bombs burning in a London street during a night raid in the 1940-1941 Blitz spit molten magnesium.*

Following the Blitz, Britain reorganised its firefighting organisations into more professional and better trained bodies. From August 1941, the Auxiliary Fire Service and regulars were combined into the National Fire Service and civilian firewatchers were enrolled in the Fire Guard. Their first major test would come in spring 1942, when the Luftwaffe resumed raids on British towns and cities with the Baedeker Blitz.

From May 1942, the Germans introduced the longer and heavier 20in 2.2kg B2.2E-Z incendiary (CD code: I.B.E.N. - IB Explosive Nose). Designed to penetrate deeper into buildings, essentially, it was a regular B1E with a large 3½-ounce TNT anti-personnel explosive nose, sometimes painted red, attached by a central adaptor. It exploded up to eight minutes after landing and proved lethal against firefighters, with several recorded deaths of those who tried to tackle the new bomb.

BETTER TRAINING

Following the introduction of the I.B.E.N., Fire Guard training was revised to counter its effects. However, in January 1944, the Luftwaffe launched the retaliatory Steinbock Raids or Baby Blitz on southern England, attempting to replicate the firestorms that RAF Bomber Command were reaping on Germany.

As part of these attacks, the Luftwaffe deployed a new anti-personnel incendiary, the 2kg B2EZ (CD Code: I.B.S.E.N. - IB Separating Explosive Nose), distinguishable by its long tail and five-inch explosive nose. This contained a two-ounce penthrite charge that was blown off on landing and detonated after seven minutes, again, to catch firefighting parties who would have arrived by this time.

However, with their revised training, Britain's firefighters were better prepared to face these new anti-personnel devices and casualties were thankfully few. Indeed, the Steinbock Raids also marked the peak performance of the nation's Civil Defence services, who were able to blunt the damage done. By this time, for example, the Fire Guard were extinguishing more incendiary bombs than the fire service, relieving pressure and allowing brigades to tackle larger fires. Although the Luftwaffe had not been completely defeated, by September 1944, the Fire Guard were stood down; Britain had beaten Firebomb Fritz.

Both these final two types of incendiary are very scarce – indeed, more so than the much sought-after German SD2 'Butterfly' anti-personnel bomb – and can command a price of £600-£700.

"BRITAIN HAD BEATEN FIREBOMB FRITZ"