



**O**VER the murky waters of the North Sea, a large formation of RAF Mosquito fighter-bombers was heading back to its home base in Banff, Aberdeenshire. It was the evening of April 21, 1945 and the weather was foul, with thick, low cloud and heavy rain. The aircraft had just completed a long-range sortie hunting German U-boats and shipping off the Danish and Norwegian coasts, but by this late stage in the war, with Nazi Germany all but defeated, the crews had, frustratingly, found nothing worthy of attack. Then, from out of the gloom, the RAF airmen suddenly spotted the shapes of 18 aircraft, flying in six sections of three machines apiece, just 150ft (45m) above the waves, heading in

the same direction. As the 'Mossies' closed in, the crews noticed the aircraft bore German markings and each carried a pair of torpedoes under the fuselage.

The enemy bomber force was on its way to raid the east coast of Scotland, but what had been planned by Luftwaffe commanders as a defiant last hurrah in the dying days of World War Two would, in a few short minutes, turn into a disaster for the Germans, and a major victory for the Banff Strike Wing (BSW). It became the final air battle ever to be fought in home skies.

### **OPERATION GISELA**

By early 1945, the shattered remnants of the Luftwaffe's once mighty bomber force were

capable of mounting just minor 'hit-and-run' raids against British coastal targets, often carried out by a single aircraft. The Luftwaffe's last major effort against the UK was Operation Gisela, an 'intruder' attack carried out on the night of March 3, 1945. It was mounted by more than 100 Ju 88s of Nachtjagdgeschwader 2, 3 and 4, which succeeded in shooting down 22 RAF bombers and damaging around a dozen more, mostly Lancasters, as they returned to their bases in eastern England. This followed a major raid on a synthetic oil plant in Kamen, and the Dortmund-Ems Canal at Ladbergen – both in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

On March 20, 1945, the Luftwaffe carried out its final

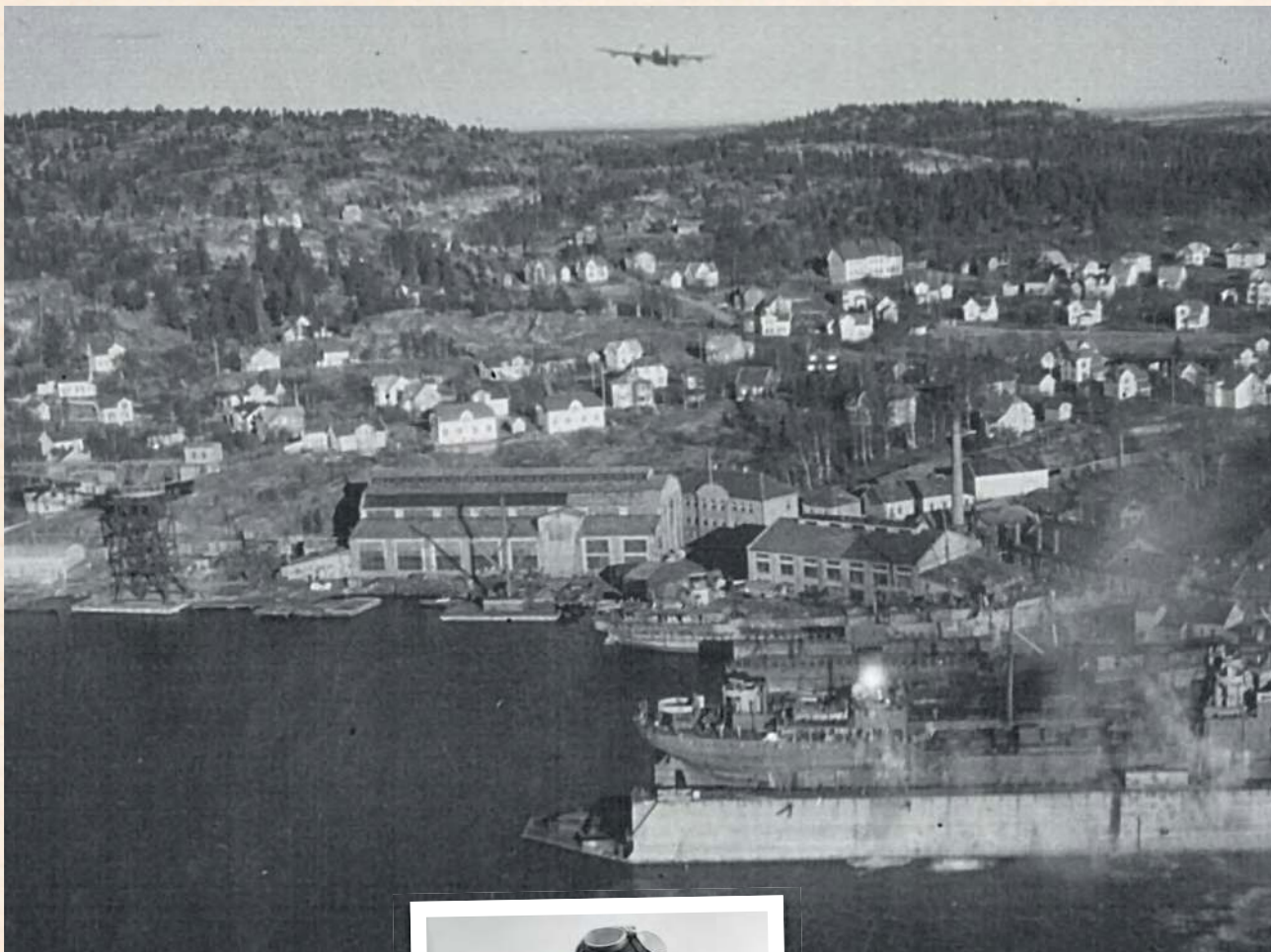
*Far left  
In its first three months of operations, the Banff Strike Wing sank almost 24,000 tons of German shipping in North Sea coastal waters. ALL RAF BANFF TRUST*

*Below  
'Mossies' of 235 Squadron, from RAF Banff in Aberdeenshire, on the hunt for prey.*



# THE LAST BATTLE

**WHEN THE LUFTWAFFE TRIED TO MOUNT ONE FINAL STRIKE AGAINST BRITAIN IN APRIL 1945, IT GOT MORE THAN IT BARGAINED FOR, EXPLAINS STEVEN TAYLOR**



**Right**  
A Banff Strike Wing Mosquito over a Norwegian harbour in April 1945, around the time of the final air battle between the Luftwaffe and UK-based aircraft.

**Right**  
The Banff and Dallachy Strike Wings came under the command of Gp Capt Max Aitken DSO DFC.

**Right centre**  
During one anti-shiping sortie on April 21, 1945, 42 Banff Strike Wing Mosquitos engaged 18 Luftwaffe torpedo-bombers off the Scottish coast during the last German strike mission against Britain.

hit-and-run attack on England, when a single Ju 88 attacked RAF Bottesford, on the Leicestershire/Lincolnshire border, damaging a Lancaster on the airfield.

By mid-April, Churchill's war cabinet thought the German air threat to Britain was all but over. A report prepared by the Joint Intelligence Committee for the cabinet, dated April 21, 1945, confidently declared: "The likelihood of any further attack is extremely remote." Due to the disintegration of the Luftwaffe and chronic fuel shortages, the document added: "The practical difficulties of planning and executing such an operation are already almost insuperable."

Yet even as the report was being typed, on that very same day the Luftwaffe was preparing one final major strike against Britain; its target, the east coast of Scotland. The raid would be launched from the German airfield at Stavanger-Sola in Norway, where the Luftwaffe still had adequate supplies of aviation fuel. A sizeable strike force was mustered too, comprising a mix of Ju 88s and newer, improved Ju 188 torpedo-bombers.

Each aircraft was armed with a pair of 1,764lb (800kg) torpedoes, their



mission being to sink British ships sailing along the Scottish coast. The Ju 88s, under the command of Oblt Friedrich Ebert, were to head towards Peterhead on the northeast coast of Scotland, then fly northwards, while the Ju 188s were to divert south upon making landfall then seek targets around the Firth of Forth. But as the raiders took off from Stavanger-Sola shortly before 6pm that April evening, none of the crews could have known just how disastrous and costly the mission would be.

Just over an hour before the German bombers left their airfield, in Scotland 42 Mosquito fighter-bombers of the BSW, led by OC 143 Squadron, Wg Cdr Christopher Foxley-Norris DSO, had set out on



a mission of their own across the North Sea in the opposite direction. Their task was to attack enemy shipping off the Danish coast. They were escorted by 24 Mustangs of 19 Squadron, based at Peterhead, Aberdeenshire.

### BANFF STRIKE WING

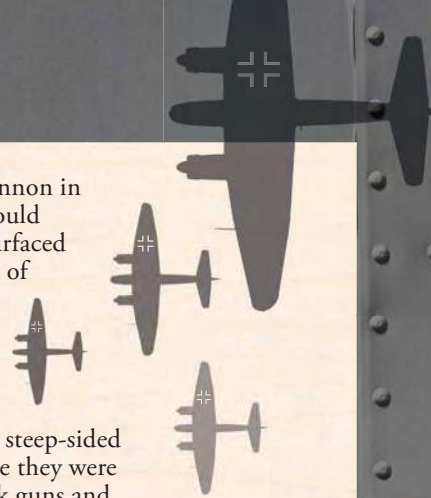
Part of 18 Group Coastal Command, BSW was formed on September 1, 1944 at RAF Banff, Aberdeenshire. It initially comprised 235 and 248 Squadrons



Dallachy, 24 miles (39km) to the west, in late October 1944. Here they joined 455 (RAAF) and 489 (RNZAF) Squadrons, both newly arrived from Langham in Norfolk, to form the Dallachy Strike Wing (DSW).

Under the command of Gp Capt Max Aitken DSO DFC, the son of Lord Beaverbrook, the newspaper magnate and Churchill's Minister for Aircraft Production in 1940-41, the principal job of the Banff crews was to hunt and sink enemy shipping in the North Sea. The vessels transported vital iron ore

four 20mm Hispano cannon in the nose. The Molins could easily blast through a surfaced U-boat and had a range of more than 1,666 yards (1,523m). But it was a highly dangerous job. Enemy vessels were often attacked in their anchorages deep within steep-sided Norwegian fjords, where they were heavily protected by flak guns and Luftwaffe fighters. On January 15, 1945, for instance, five BSW Mosquitos were lost while attacking targets in Leirvik harbour.



**Left**  
Dallachy Strike Wing Beaufighters, as seen here, aided Banff's Mosquitos in attacking enemy shipping. High-sided Norwegian fjords made the task more difficult for both types.



from Norway to Germany.

For this task the Mosquitos were each armed with eight 25lb armour-piercing rockets, while some 248 Squadron aircraft were Mk.XVIII 'Tsetse' conversions. The latter were armed with the formidable 57mm Molins anti-tank gun in place of the standard

## THE LAST RAID

During the early evening of April 21, 1945, Wg Cdr Foxley-Norris's strike force reached the designated area, only to find it blanketed in thick mist and heavy rain. With no suitable targets visible they flew on to search North Sea coastal waters for suitable prey. Finding nothing worthwhile, Foxley-Norris ordered his crews back to Scotland. Keen to reach Peterhead that night in time for

**Below**  
A Mk.XVIII 'Tsetse' Mosquito, with the powerful 57mm gun, also equipped the Banff Strike Wing.

equipped with Mosquito FB.VIs, with 144 and 404 (RCAF) Squadrons flying Beaufighter TFXs. The group's special reconnaissance 333 (Norwegian) Squadron Mosquito flight also relocated to Banff from Leuchars, Fife, by the end of the month. They were joined by 143 Squadron, which had just converted to Mosquitos.

Meanwhile, the Beaufighter squadrons transferred to RAF





**Right**  
A still from gun camera footage of a Mosquito FB.VI banking away, after hitting the 910-ton cargo ship 'Lysaker' in Tetgenaes harbour, Norway, on March 23, 1945. Twelve 'Mossies' participated in the attack, which also left a second German merchantman badly damaged.

### MOSQUITO FB.VI

This Airspeed-built FB.VI is a good example of 'Mossies' employed by the Banff Strike Wing at the time of the battle described in this feature. Mosquito RS504/DM-Z flew with 235 and 248 Squadrons and was almost lost in action on May 4, 1945. TERRY HIGGINS



**"The aerial battle was short and brutal. After five minutes' intense fighting, five Ju 88s and a further four Ju 188s had been shot down, while several others were badly damaged"**

a big victory party to celebrate the virtual end of the war in Europe, the commander of the Mustang fighter escorts requested permission to pull ahead of the Mosquitos, which Foxley-Norris granted.

Thirty minutes later, when they were around 180 miles off the Scottish coast, the Mosquito crews were astonished to see 18-plus Luftwaffe Ju 88 and Ju 188 torpedo-bombers emerge through the darkening clouds. They were flying at low level, in six tight 'vic' formations heading in the same direction as the Mosquitos – towards Scotland.

The aggressive Mosquito pilots wasted no time, swooping in on the enemy bombers with guns blazing, each aircraft jostling for prime firing positions. The German torpedo-bombers proved easy meat for the fast, nimble and heavily armed Mosquitos, and bullet-riddled, blazing enemy planes were soon plunging into the icy waters. The

Operations Record Book of 235 Squadron stated: "The first [enemy aircraft] was seen to burst into flames, disintegrate and crash into the sea. The second attacked with MG [machine gun]... black smoke and oil coming from one engine."

The German crews tried desperately to defend themselves against the relentless onslaught, the gunners in the torpedo-bombers returning fire at their tormentors. But the Mosquito pilots were skilled and determined, and pressed home their attacks doggedly.

### ONE-SIDED ASSAULT

The aerial battle was short and brutal. After five minutes' intense fighting, five Ju 88s and a further four Ju 188s had been shot down, while several others were badly damaged. Battered survivors of the Luftwaffe raiding force jettisoned their torpedoes and escaped into cloud cover, before limping back to Stavanger. The

Operations Record Book of 248 Squadron, a component of the BSW, described the battle matter-of-factly as "a one-sided attack lasting some five minutes".

The Luftwaffe's final offensive operation against the British Isles had been a catastrophe. Twenty-eight German aircrew were killed, including the officer commanding the Ju 88 force, Oblt Ebert. By contrast, the BSW lost no aircraft and suffered no casualties.

After almost six hours in the air, the exhausted but victorious Mosquito crews landed at Banff at around 22:00hrs, their fuel tanks almost dry. At Banff the victory celebrations lasted long into the night and the alcohol flowed freely. When some inebriated crewmen began ringing the local church bell – usually only to be done during the war as

an invasion alert – worried locals called the police, fearing a Nazi incursion of Banff was under way!

The air battle over the North Sea on April 21, 1945 marked the final occasion in which UK-based RAF aircraft clashed with the Luftwaffe in 'home' skies during World War Two. Nazi Germany surrendered 16 days later. The squadrons of the BSW were disbanded or relocated during summer 1945 and RAF Banff was closed in 1946. The wing lost 73 aircraft, with 107 aircrew killed during its relatively brief existence. But in the first three months of active operations, between September and December 1944, the wing's machines had sunk a total of 23,582 tons (23,960 tonnes) of enemy shipping. It continued to take a heavy toll on German coastal traffic for the remainder of the war.

*The author wishes to thank Nigel Smith of the RAF Banff Trust for providing the images in this feature*