

OVER THE HO

As British forces were evacuated from Dunkirk, RAF Detling in Kent became

The role of RAF Coastal Command during the events of summer 1940 has tended to be overlooked, but whether in the Battle of France or the Battle of Britain its units contributed significantly and tirelessly. This was the case when the British Expeditionary Force was evacuated from Dunkirk under Operation 'Dynamo' from 26 May–4 June, actions in which squadrons of Bristol Blenheim IVFs that detached to RAF Detling near Maidstone, Kent, were heavily engaged.

No 235 Squadron had been stationed at Bircham Newton, Norfolk. On 26 May 1940 it transferred to Detling in order to conduct patrols over the English Channel while 'Dynamo' was ongoing and coastal reconnaissances covering the Channel ports. The first of these took place the day after the move to Kent, Blenheims L9404 and L6909 carrying out a reconnaissance off Nieuwpoort in Belgium. It proved to be an eventful occasion.

The squadron record states, "Own aircraft were in company at 4,000 feet cruising NE coastwise at 170mph. Sighted three unidentified aircraft at 10,000 feet on north westerly course. A group of 15 unidentified single engine fighters passed close

**WORDS: BEN DUNNELL
AND DAVID NICHOLAS**

by without altering course. Blenheims continued course which was bringing them close to the three unidentified aircraft, climbing the while. When only 1000 yards range at the same height it was impossible to determine whether the three aircraft were He 111s or Blenheims. Identification of aircraft as the former was made by turning to port and passing 1000 yards to beam.



"Blenheim 'H' [L6909/LA-H, flown by Flt Lt R. P. Y. Cross, Sgt Spires and AC Norman] was instructed by R/T to break formation and to attack this section from a quarter ahead from port while 'A' [L9404/LA-A with a crew comprising Plt Off Woodger, Plt Off Green and AC MacLachlan] was making a similar attack from starboard. This attack was made simultaneously by 'A' and 'H'. The latter opened fire at 400 yards and closed to 300 yards before breaking away, having seen bursts going into the wing of the third E/A [enemy aircraft]. 'H' was unable to continue

the engagement as port engine cut and enemy fire through Blenheim cockpit had rendered the instruments U/S [unserviceable].

"Blenheim 'A' made attack by overtaking on the starboard side and turning in 400 yards ahead, making a quarter ahead attack on the leader. Sweeping fire made by skidding the aircraft entered No 1 and followed into No 2 of the enemy formation. A long burst of nearly 15 secs was fired and the leader of the formation was disorganised; the leading aircraft almost went out of control. Blenheim 'A' broke away steeply down to starboard and came round to get into position in order to make another similar attack. During this short interval the E/A were able to resume their tight formation.

"After Blenheim 'A' had repeated an exactly similar attack from port the E/A altered course and proceeded inland at high speed. A trail of blue smoke was seen coming from the starboard engine of No 1 E/A. The E/A was not pursued as an intense barrage of AA [anti-aircraft] fire was put up from the shore batteries. Throughout the action the fire of the E/A was controlled — the rear gunners either held their fire or fired unseen. The Heinkels did not fire from front guns as they were

BELOW:
Blenheim IVFs of
No 235 Squadron
including N3541/
LA-E, N3531/LA-F,
L9404/LA-A and
P6958/LA-O at
Bircham Newton on
24 May 1940, just
before the move to
Detling.

VIA ANDREW THOMAS



STILE COAST

home to the Blenheim IVFs of two Coastal Command squadrons

not brought to bear throughout the action. The rear gunner of Blenheim 'A' put in a burst in each attack on the break away and observed hits made. The enemy aircraft were flying in tight formation of one span or less.

"All three enemy aircraft were damaged, hits were observed in the port wing of No 3 and in wings and fuselage of Nos 1 and 2". The pilot of L6909, Dick Cross, was credited with one of the Heinkels as severely damaged.



Part of another unit arrived at Detling on 28 May. This was 'A' Flight of No 254 Squadron, the rest of which was stationed at Sumburgh in the Shetland Islands and committed to the Norwegian theatre. Its four Blenheim IVFs were to join those of 248 on 'Dynamo' patrols, and began operating the following day. One "dived from 7000 to 1000 ft" to inspect a motor torpedo boat of uncertain nationality, which when fired at returned the gesture.

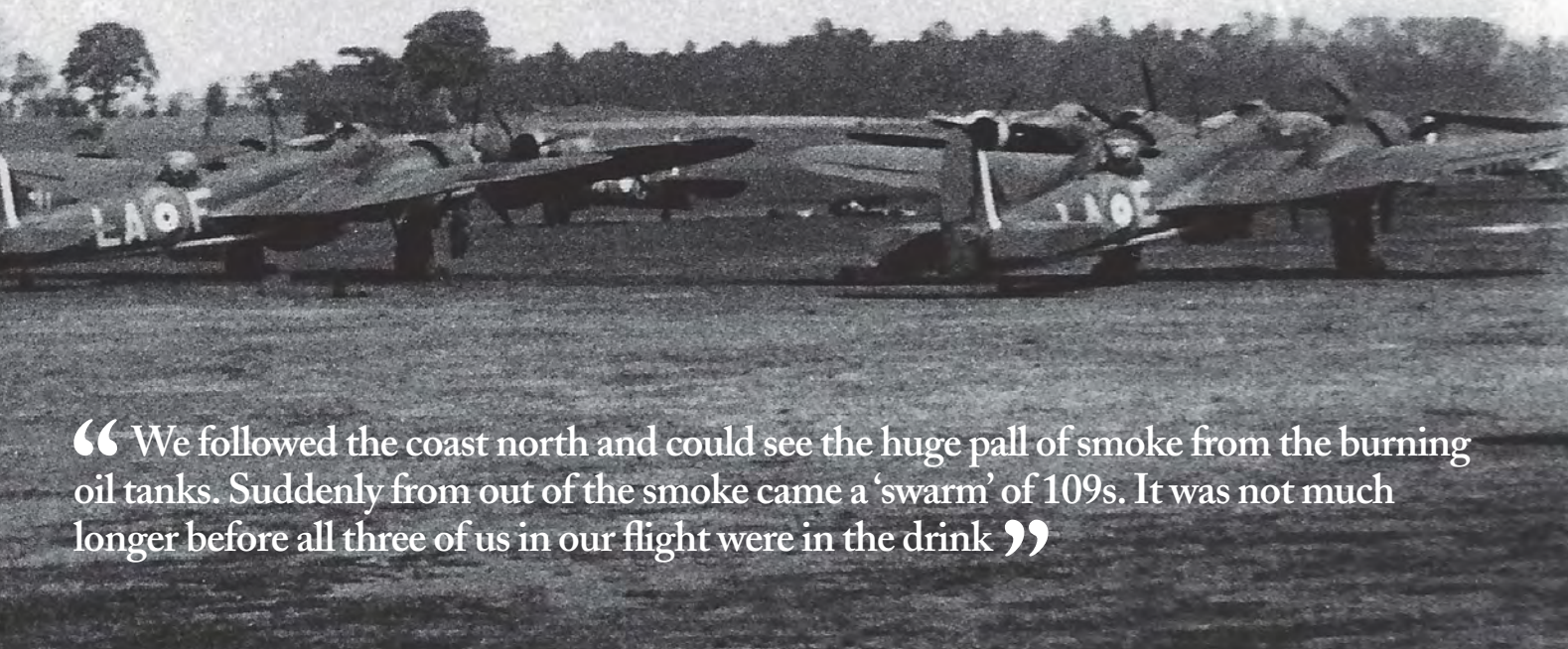
Sadly, 29 May was recorded as, "a black day" for 235. One of the unit's navigators, Sgt Aubrey Lancaster — who was flying with Fg Off John Cronan — recalled, "We were asked to give air cover to the evacuation from Dunkirk... The shelling at

Dunkirk could be clearly heard on Detling airfield when we took off. We followed the coast north and could see the huge pall of smoke from the burning oil tanks. Suddenly from out of the smoke came a 'swarm' of [Messerschmitt Bf] 109s. We had

been told to exercise caution since No 264 Squadron, which had just gone operational with Defiants, was in the same area. However, it was not long before we were shown the swastikas on the wings and not much longer before all three of us in our flight

ABOVE:
P6957/LA-R was the No 235 Squadron aircraft flown by Fg Off Reg Peacock over Dunkirk on 1 June 1940.

VIA ANDREW THOMAS



“ We followed the coast north and could see the huge pall of smoke from the burning oil tanks. Suddenly from out of the smoke came a 'swarm' of 109s. It was not much longer before all three of us in our flight were in the drink ”



TOP: In the foreground of this pre-'Dynamo' view of No 235 Squadron machines at Bircham Newton is L9446/LA-N. VIA ANDREW THOMAS

ABOVE: The turret of a Blenheim IV, in this case from No 236 Squadron, which performed defensive patrols over the Channel as part of Fighter Command during Operation 'Dynamo'. VIA ANDREW THOMAS

were in the drink. We were picked up by boats taking people off the beach and landed at Ramsgate. Our crew were the only survivors.”

The Bf 109s from JG 27 were led by Hauptmann Adolf Galland, who claimed two Blenheims destroyed. The third was credited to Leutnant Igor Zirchenbach. The two crews lost in their entirety were those of Flt Lt ‘Wigs’ Manwaring, described by 235’s diarist as “beloved by all”, and former Rhodesian policeman Plt Off Tony Booth.

During the period that followed, routine patrols were the order of the day. A He 111 was chased “for about 15 minutes” on 1 June after it was seen attacking a British vessel, the German aircraft making off. It was a busy day for No 254 Squadron as well, but also a tragic one. During an early morning sortie a single Blenheim chased away a

“ Observer Plt Off G. W. Spiers had to take the controls of L9481 after its pilot, Fg Off J. W. Baird, was killed in his seat. Bailing out was the only option, and he was picked up by a friendly trawler ”

Ju 88 which had jettisoned its bombs and attempted to attack a Ju 87 until its guns jammed. Shortly before the two Blenheims on this patrol, L9481 and R3630, were due to head back to Detling, they were attacked by 11 Bf 109s while tackling a Ju 87. Both RAF aircraft (it should have been a four-ship, but both No 248 Squadron machines went unserviceable) were shot down, only one crew member surviving. He was observer Plt Off G. W. Spiers, who had to take the controls of L9481 after its pilot, Fg Off J. W. Baird, was killed in his seat. Bailing out was the only option, and he was picked up by a friendly trawler with only minor injuries. An evening engagement with several He 111s, though, resulted in the shoot-down of one of the Luftwaffe aircraft being claimed.

The next day, a sextet of aircraft from 235 conducted a sortie off

SIX WEEKS OF BLENHEIM SUMMER

Another Blenheim IV unit involved in the Battle of France and Operation ‘Dynamo’ was No 53 Squadron, tasked with the reconnaissance role. Among its pilots was Alastair Panton, later to be awarded the DFC and to become an air commodore. He wrote an outstanding personal memoir of his time on 53 during the summer of 1940, *Six Weeks of Blenheim Summer*, which — edited by his daughter, Victoria Panton Bacon — has just been published in a new edition by Penguin. This extract covers the Dunkirk period, and begins on 29 May.

In the small hours of the morning, our ground crews had been busy bombing up our aircraft, and our instructions were uncomplicated. The German field batteries were making life on the beaches uncomfortable; we were given a target area just east of Thieuwpoort and told to bomb any German gun positions we could see. It was a heady, exciting role. All that hot day the attacks continued by a variety of aircraft from England. All our attacks were low-level ones carried out at 200 feet, a method which gave us maximum flexibility; we

picked a target and flew straight at it and over it low down, releasing bombs to arrive on the target more or less at the same time as we passed over it. Low-level bombing was the only method I had practised. As for Farrow and Stride, they had never seen bombs before, let alone been in an aircraft dropping them, and they became increasingly enthusiastic as the day wore on. We made three sorties, all in the Thieuwpoort area, hammering away at German gun positions.

On the way to and from our target areas, we could see the lines of shipping crossing and re-crossing the Channel; bombs and shells exploding among the lines of soldiers on the beaches, and around the shipping standing off them; and air battles in the blue sky above us. It was a gigantic, awesome panorama.

On our third sortie, an extraordinary thing happened. Having lined up my target, I found I was following another Blenheim from an unknown squadron. Not knowing what delay had been set on his bombs, and

not wanting to be blown up by them, I eased off to his port side. As I pressed my release button, the other Blenheim’s bombs exploded, and as I passed over the German guns, a soldier appeared in the air beside our cockpit 200 feet up, still running, with a ludicrous look of outraged surprise on his face which I could clearly see under his helmet.

We were much more lively in the pub that night, but sad about Jasper Johns, who had not returned from his first sortie. Just before closing time, however, Jasper appeared looking very salt-stained and bedraggled, shouting for a pint.

One of his engines had been hit by ack-ack fire, and, losing height steadily, he made his way back across the Channel, aiming to ditch as close to the coast as possible. Just as he was preparing to do this, the Goodwin Sands appeared before him in the ebbing tide and he flopped onto them, where later he was joined by a German Heinkel. The two crews glowered at each other 200 yards apart until a fishing boat from Margate appeared. Jasper and his two sergeants waded out to the boat, which was full of

battered-looking soldiers from the beaches, but the Germans refused to be rescued, presumably hoping to be rescued from drowning by a German boat.

Jasper said that he had had a very cool reception from the soldiers, who, on landing at Margate, had given three cheers for the navy, three more for the fishermen, and three boos for us.

Jasper’s treatment by the soldiers was our first direct experience of the bitterness towards us on the part of the returning BEF, who were infuriated by the praise we were getting from the BBC, which they put down to propaganda. It was understandable that the soldiers should feel as they did; the only aircraft they saw were German ones because we were operating out of sight, above and beyond them. Nevertheless, it was galling for us in view of the casualties we were suffering, very galling, and the record needed to be put straight.

Six Weeks of Blenheim Summer is published by Penguin Books, priced £8.99.





ABOVE: No 254 Squadron Blenheim IVs in formation, captured when the unit was stationed at Aldergrove, Northern Ireland, in 1941. Leading is V5736/QY-D. RAF

Dunkirk to cover the mass evacuation of the BEF. A similar mission took place the next morning, Fg Off Reg Peacock — who was flying Blenheim P6958/LA-O

— reporting, “hordes of men in all kinds of craft, from battleships to a small rowing boat 3 miles off Dunkirk containing 2 soldiers with a Lewis gun, pulling hard for England!”

The official end of ‘Dynamo’ brought changes to the regular round of operations. From 9 June, with significant British forces including the 51st (Highland) Division trapped further south, the emphasis began to switch to the area of Le Havre. Shipping movements into and out of the port had to be covered, for which operation 235 moved down to Thorney

Island, West Sussex. Flying N3531/LA-F on 12 June, Peacock led an offensive patrol to Saint-Valery-en-Caux and Cherbourg. At the controls

of N3533, he took part in another later that same day. The latter was led by Flt Lt Flood, the Australian commander of ‘A’ Flight. The enemy air threat remained, a subsequent patrol having a skirmish with some Luftwaffe dive-bombers, presumably Ju 87s.

Sgt Aubrey Lancaster recalled, “On attachment to Thorney Island we helped to cover the evacuation of the Channel Islands. We were also sent as air cover to a Tribal class destroyer which had taken a scrap destroyer to sink across the harbour entrance at Saint-Malo.

“ Fg Off Reg Peacock reported, ‘hordes of men in all kinds of craft, from battleships to a small rowing boat three miles off Dunkirk containing two soldiers, pulling hard for England!’ ”

During the attempted evacuation from Saint-Valery we were again sent as air cover but got badly shot up ourselves, including having the air pressure reservoir punctured with the result that we had no brakes, flaps or guns.”

Around the middle of the month, most of 235 returned to Bircham Newton, though elements remained on stand-by on the south coast. From there, Peacock in L9252 led a patrol over Guernsey on the 19th, following this with a shipping escort the next day. Those were the squadron’s last operations before the remaining elements went back to Bircham Newton on the 24th. The No 254 Squadron detachment also returned to its parent during June, its tasks in the Channel complete.

On occasion, the missions 235 and 254 completed from Detling had demonstrated the Blenheim’s vulnerability to enemy fighters. Always, though, they served as an illustration of another important attribute: the valiant efforts of their crews, unafraid to go into battle against the odds.

A