



STUNTED Potential

Above
A He 177A-3 wearing an Eastern Front fuselage band and I/KG 50's badge on the nose.

Below
Heinkel He 177A-5/R6 KM+UD of 6./KG 100, 1944. PETE WEST-2016

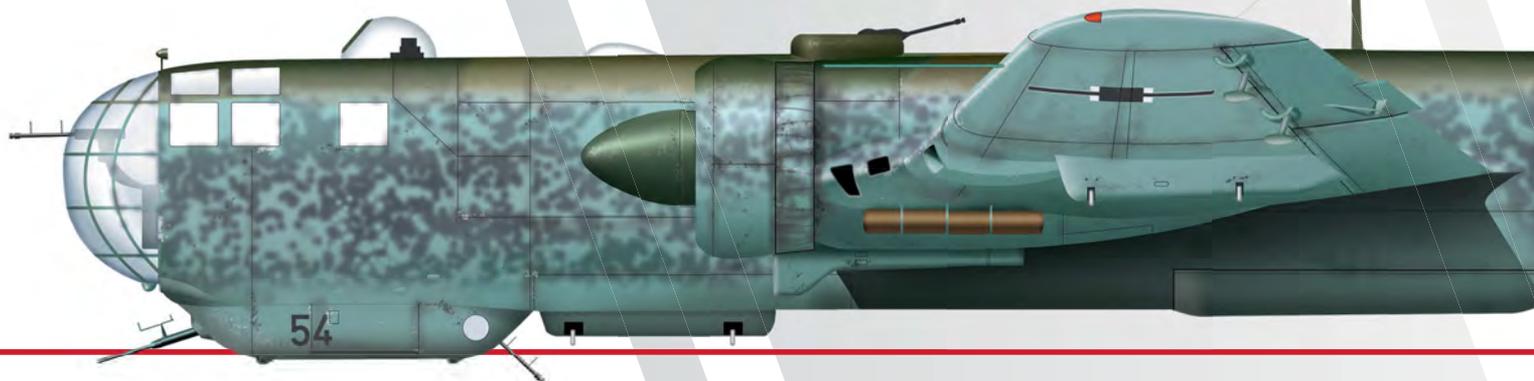
From the start, the Heinkel He 177 was plagued by political and military interference as well as considerable technical problems. Luftwaffe requirements that it should be capable of dive-bombing meant that the fuselage had to be strengthened, even though the chances of such a large airframe ever succeeding in that role were negligible.

In early 1938, when the requirement for a long-range

heavy bomber was issued, German industry did not have an engine powerful enough to provide the range, speed and altitude required. Daimler-Benz had a solution: the pairing of two DB 601s in each wing, linked via a gearbox to a single airscrew. Named the Greif (Griffon), the He 177 had the *look* of a twin, but it was the Luftwaffe's only true long-range heavy bomber and, effectively, four-engined.

But this four-into-two format

would cause the 2,000hp (1,492kW) power units to run hot. To solve the problem, *and* reduce drag by not having radiators, Daimler-Benz devised a revolutionary evaporative cooling system. This, however, was found to be insufficient, so a radiator system had to be fitted that created a vicious circle of increased drag, needing still more power – the production standard He 177A-5 using 2,950hp engines.





IT COULD HAVE BEEN THE LUFTWAFFE'S MOST FORMIDABLE BOMBER, BUT THE HEINKEL HE 177 FAILED TO DELIVER WHAT IT PROMISED. CHRIS GOSS EXAMINES ITS EARLY OPERATIONS

During its first flight, on November 19, 1939, the two 24-cylinder inverted 'vee' DB 606s, which were paired DB 601s, overheated (production examples used DB 610s). This and myriad other problems, and the loss of a number of prototypes, meant it was not until early 1941 that the first production aircraft, the He 177A, began flight testing.

A shortage of defensive armament, engine failures and delivery delays

took another year to sort out, only for another problem to emerge in early 1942: as flight testing continued there was a spate of broken con-rods, resulting in holes in the crankcase through which oil flowed, causing serious engine fires. Other problems were solved by replacing aluminium rivets with harder duralumin types.

Manufacturing faults then arose in the propeller pitch change mechanism, which could also result

in engine fires, so it's not surprising the He 177 quickly earned the nickname 'Reichsfeuerzeug' – the Reich's (fire) lighter. ➔

Above
'Encounter Over the Bay', by Keith Hill, depicts Wing Commander Tappin's Mosquito night fighter downing an He 177 over the Bay of Biscay on December 28, 1943. <http://aviation-artist.com>



COSTLY DEBUT

Twenty-one months after the prototype's maiden flight, I Gruppe of Kampfgeschwader 50 (I/KG 50) was formed in July 1942 at Brandenburg-Briest under the command of Major Kurt Schede (see the panel opposite for details of Luftwaffe ranks). Destined never to achieve full Geschwader size, I/KG 50 became the first operational unit to receive the Greif.

In December 1942, the unit moved to Zaporozhye in the Soviet Union with seven aircraft for winter operational trials, but quickly became involved in resupplying Stalingrad. Schede was killed on one

Right
Series prototype He 177V-6 in late September 1941. It had been assigned to IV/KG 40 the previous month.



fulfil its requirements as an anti-shipping weapon.

Despite the setbacks, the Luftwaffe wanted the He 177 combat-ready: a replacement was urgently

required for the Focke-Wulf Fw 200 for maritime strike. In September

1942, under the command of Hptm Ernst Pflüger, I/KG 40 moved to Fassberg to start training on the He 177. Hptm Walter Rieder's 8/KG 40



Above
ObIt Heinrich Schlosser (left) of 10/KG 40. The figure on the right is believed to be Hptm Roman Dawczynski, IV/KG 40's commander.

of the first missions – on January 16, 1943 – the unit losing 28 aircrew during this period.

Hptm Heinrich Schlosser then took over I/KG 50, taking it back to Germany at the end of January. He reported: "Engine fires in the air have been responsible for the loss of five [He 177A-1s], a casualty rate of 26%... Due to the location of the engines to the rear of the pilot, fires are generally not discovered until it is too late."

Resuming bombing, and then anti-submarine trials and training, I/KG 50 also contributed to the development of the Henschel Hs 293 anti-shipping glider bomb – which carried a 1,100lb warhead, a small rocket motor accelerating the missile to about 370mph before cutting out after 12 seconds. The weapon coasted to its target in a shallow glide, guided by the bomb aimer whose vision was aided by a small flare in the bomb's tail. Once perfected, the Hs 293 was able to



Luftwaffe ranks, abbreviations and Royal Air Force equivalents

OBERST	OBERST	GROUP CAPTAIN
OBERSTLEUTNANT	OBSTLT	WING COMMANDER
MAJOR	MAJOR	SQUADRON LEADER
HAUPTMANN	HPTM	FLIGHT LIEUTENANT
OBERLEUTNANT	OBLT	FLYING OFFICER
LEUTNANT	LT	PILOT OFFICER
STABSFELDWEBEL	STABFW	WARRANT OFFICER
OBERFELDWEBEL	OBFW	FLIGHT SERGEANT
FELDWEBEL	FW	SERGEANT
UNTERFELDWEBEL	UFW	NONE
UNTEROFFIZIER	UFFZ	CORPORAL
HAUPTGEFREITER	HPTF	NONE
OBERGEFREITER	OBGF	LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN
GEFREITER	GF	AIRCRAFTMAN, 1ST CLASS
FLIEGER	FG	AIRCRAFTMAN, 2ND CLASS

followed in March 1943.

On October 25, 1943, I/KG 50 was redesignated II/KG 40 with Heinrich Schlosser handing over command to another former Condor contemporary, Major Rudolf Mons, who had been responsible for Erprobungs und Lehrkommando He 177, the Greif's trials unit. At long last it looked as if the He 177 was ready for battle.

MISSILE ATTACK

During the afternoon of November 21, 1943 an Allied convoy was heading north from Gibraltar. Condors of KG 40 had detected the shipping at 10:15 hours and a force of 25 He 177s from II/KG 40, led by Mons, took off from Bordeaux-Mérignac between 12:08 and 12:28, each armed with two Hs 293s.

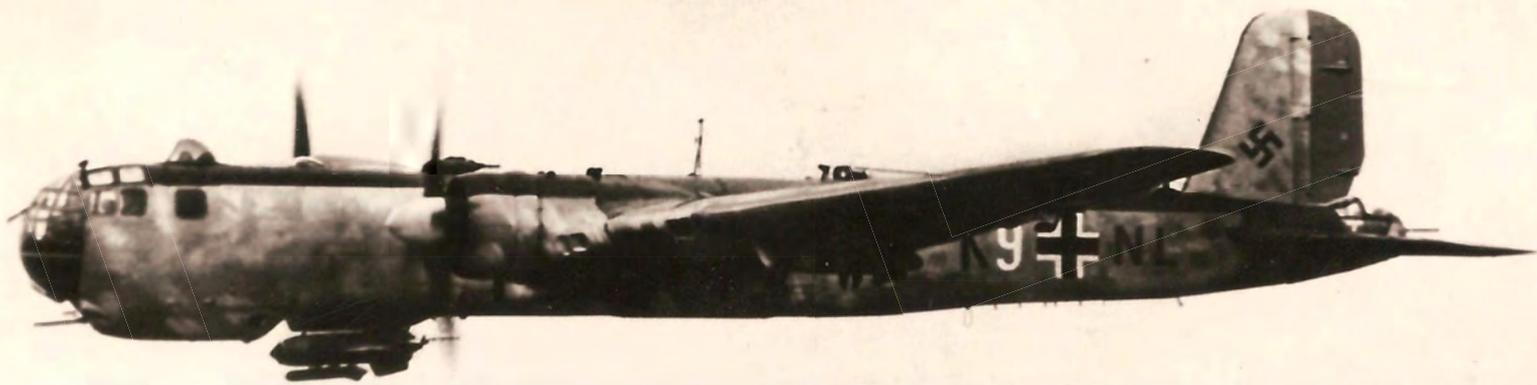
When the convoy was 420

Below

An unidentified He 177A-3 after what is believed to have been an engine fire.

"...engine fires in the air have been responsible for the loss of five He 177s, a casualty rate of 26%... Due to the location of the engines to the rear of the pilot, fires are generally not discovered until it is too late..."





managed to avoid being hit through high-speed manoeuvres and firing off flares to confuse the missile operators.

Most of the He 177s landed by 23:59, but the Germans had suffered casualties. Hptm Herbert von Berg's He 177A-3 failed to return. Another 'A-3, captained by Obfw Gerhard Freyer, crash-landed south of Bordeaux, bursting into flames. Five crew were killed, a gunner surviving.

Another He 177A-3 ran out of fuel and the crew baled out, the bomber crashing between Poitiers and Cholet. Four more were damaged by flak – Fw Naaff noting the effectiveness of the anti-aircraft fire which shot down his missiles.

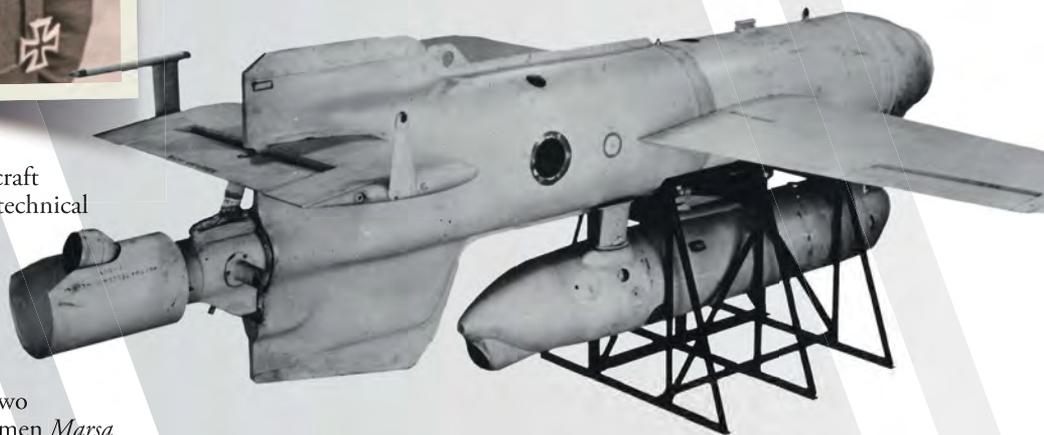
MEDITERRANEAN STRIKE

Five days later the target was a convoy in the Mediterranean. At 07:50 on November 26 a Junkers Ju

88 reported 22 merchant ships and 15 escorts headed for Alexandria and a single Bristol Beaufighter flying overhead. As the day progressed, a strike was planned.

A force of 18 Heinkel He 111s of II/KG 26 and 15 Ju 88s of III/KG 26 carrying torpedoes would be preceded by 20 missile-armed He 177s from II/KG 40 led by Rudolf Mons. The attack was to take place north of Djidjelli, on the Algerian coast, as the sun was starting to set.

Just after take-off, Obgf Hans Kauf, gunner on the He 177A-3 flown by Fw Alfred Naaff, shouted that he could see flames coming from the starboard engine – the 'Reich Lighter' was living up to its name. With his aircraft laden with full fuel and weapons, Naaff tried to get back to Bordeaux-Mérignac but crashed south of Bordeaux, the



Top
A He 177A-3 carrying a single Hs 293 underneath the forward fuselage.

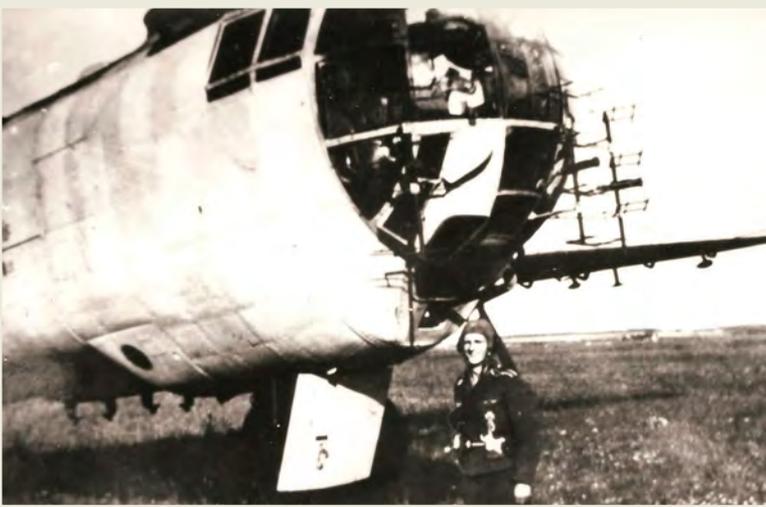
Above
Obflt Rudolf Mons in 1941.

Right
A Henschel Hs 293 anti-shiping glider bomb.

miles northeast of Cape Finisterre, Spain, 20 aircraft (five had returned with technical problems) attacked at 17:00. Using the 6/10ths cloud cover, the missiles were fired from between 1,300 and 2,000ft, predominantly against two stragglers, the merchantmen *Marsa* and *Delius*.

Both vessels were hit by Hs 293s from Hptm Alfred Nuss' He 177. The *Marsa* was set on fire and was last seen afloat the following day, one crew member losing his life. Seven were killed on the *Delius*, but the badly damaged ship managed to make it to Liverpool. Other crews noted near-misses on other ships, while the frigates HMS *Calder* and *Drury*

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American pilot Capt Joe Bogart, a passenger on the *Robna*, recalled: "I watched the action from the deck, beginning with the intensive bombing of our escorting warships and the air-to-air combat.

"I was transfixed by what I thought was a He 177 flying at a low altitude of 2,000ft and close enough for me to see the swastika on the tail. Seconds later I saw a small aircraft below it which was streaming smoke and making a 90° left turn towards the convoy. At a terrific speed it flashed just above the *Robna's* bow where anti-

Left
A He 177A-7, thought to be from II/KG 40, fitted with FuG 200 Hohentwiel anti-ship radar.

Below
Unidentified crew from II/KG 40 with an He 177A-5 behind, Bordeaux-Merignac, 1944.

Bottom
Missile-equipped He 177s of II/KG 40 at bomb-damaged Bordeaux-Merignac, early 1944.

bomber bursting into flames. All the crew got away from the inferno but the flight engineer, Fw Alfred Hoffmann, died in hospital. A broken crankshaft was to blame.

Rudolf Mons attacked with just six He 177s between 16:44 and 17:15. One crew claimed a destroyer sunk while a second damaged another. A third He 177 reported hits on a transport and a fourth struck another destroyer which sank six minutes later. The fifth He 177 suffered a technical problem with its Hs 293s while the final bomber's crew noted damaging another destroyer.

In reality, just the troopship *Robna*, credited to Hptm Hans Dochtermann, was lost. But the human toll was terrible: 1,138 military personnel and crew were killed.



Below right
He 177A-5 'V4+AS' of
Eastern Front-based
8/KG 1.

"At approximately 17:00, the attack developed and our four aircraft were scrambled. Fg Off Tom Froggatt and Sgt J S Williams got busy in a big way and destroyed two He 177s. These are the first '177s we have encountered"



aircraft fire stitched the left wing, causing it to fold, and hit the sea and blew up very close to a nearby troop transport. "I turned around to see a second [missile] making that same 90° left

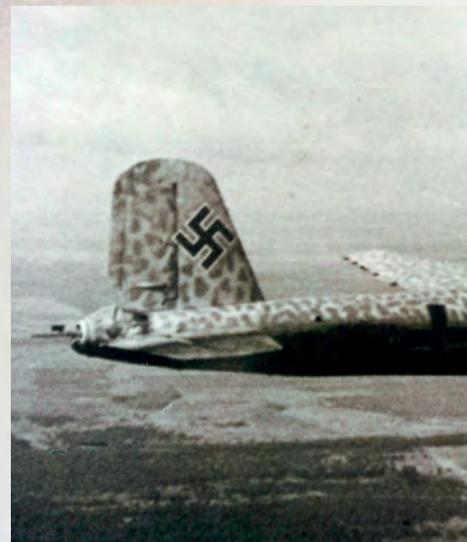
turn, time it heading but for me. For a second I thought it was going to hit the sea and then the nose came up... It then penetrated the *Rohma's* port side just above the waterline, blowing a huge hole there and a second hole on the starboard side."

CLAIM AND COUNTER-CLAIM

At this point Allied aircraft intervened. Spitfires of the French Groupe de Chasse I/7 claimed a mix of types, misidentifying the He 177s as Fw 200s or even Dornier Do 217s. Beaufighters of 153 Squadron reported three destroyed and two damaged.

The squadron's Operations Record Book relates: "At approximately 17:00, the attack developed and our four aircraft were scrambled. Fg Off Tom Froggatt and Sgt J S Williams got busy in a big way and destroyed two He 177s. These are the first '177s we have encountered.

"Flt Sgt Ken Boulton and W/O Reg Hoille also had joy; they



destroyed one He 177 and damaged two others. Their aircraft was rather badly mauled by return fire and to get it back to Tabor was a very fine feat of airmanship."

A Beaufighter of the US Twelfth Air Force's 414th Night Fighter Squadron, flown by 2nd Lt Frank Clark, also claimed to have destroyed a He 177 while Bell P-39s of 347th Fighter Squadron of the 350th Fighter Group reported damaging one.

The Germans claimed to have shot down two "Mosquitos" and four Spitfires, three by the crew of Hptm Bernhard Eidhoff. In fact, the only other Allied casualty was a Beaufighter flown by Wg Cdr Ian Stephenson and Sgt Cyril Sherbrooke of 153 Squadron. Their demise was reported by Lt de Bellefont of GC I/7 who saw a He 177 shoot down a Beaufighter at 17:15.



Uffz Karl Enz, Major
Rudolf Mons' observer, was killed with him on November 26, 1943.



Above
An He 177A-5s of II/KG 40.

Left to right
An He 177A-5 of 6/KG 1
in the summer of 1944.

Obfw Hans Probst of
6/KG 40, the flight
engineer in Oblt Fritz
Noll's crew. Both were
killed on November
26, 1943.

The commander of II/
KG 40, Hptm Walter
Rieder.

CARNAGE

In comparison, the losses suffered by II/KG 40 were appalling. Rudolf Mons and his crew of five failed to return as did those of Hptm Arthur Horn, Oblt Fritz Noll, Hptm Alfred Nuss, Hptm Egon Schmidt and Oblt Gerhard Strube.

On returning to Bordeaux, the He 177A-3 flown by Obfw Georg Judemann crashed; killing the pilot and three crew. Another ditched off Montpellier, killing one.

Thirty-five aircrew were declared missing, six were killed and eight wounded or injured.

The second wave from KG 26 also suffered casualties. Uffz Rudolf Winter's and Fw Rudolf Corio's He 111s were posted as missing. A Ju 88 ditched off Palma with no crew casualties and Obfw Kurt Laufs' aircraft was reported missing. The battered formation returned to

France led by Hptm Dochtermann. Leadership of II/KG 40 went to Hptm Walter Rieder.

CAUGHT UNAWARES

The next few weeks were quiet as the battered unit recuperated. At 06:30 on Christmas Eve, six He 177s took off for an uneventful armed reconnaissance of the Bay of Biscay.

The second sortie of the day was very different by 13:30, when four Beaufighters were spotted. The quartet, from 143 Squadron, had taken off at 09:50 from Portreath in Cornwall. Leading the patrol was an Australian, Sqn Ldr Bill Moore, a Battle of Britain veteran.

Spotting two He 177s at 12:50, Moore led the attack, closing in to 200 yards and opening fire. But he got too close to the defensive armament of the He 177A-3 flown

by Lt Richard Kranz and, to the horror of the other three RAF crews, there was a "vivid flash in front which caused aircraft 'N' to disintegrate". Moore and his navigator, Plt Off Phil Froment, were killed instantly.

The remaining Beaufighters – flown by Flt Sgts David Howley, Bob Gilchrist and 1st Lt R S Dymek – went into the fray. Dymek set the starboard engine of Kranz's He 177's on fire; it hit the sea, broke up and burst into flames. There were no survivors.

The remaining five He 177s returned to find bad weather and had to divert to Lorient. The following afternoon they attempted to return to Bordeaux.

Obfw Johann Behr's He 177A-3 only just made it airborne before disaster struck. Sqn Ldr Walter Dring of 183 Squadron related





Above
Left to right: Fw Werner Warschefski, Obfw Georg Judemann, Obfw Hans Bose and Uffz Rudolf Wildt. All were all killed in an accident at Bordeaux-Merignac on November 26, 1943.

Right
He 177A-3 'F8+KP' of 6/KG 40. ALL CHRIS GOSS ARCHIVE

in his combat report: "I observed an enemy aircraft taxiing on the runway and preparing to take off. I made an orbit of the aerodrome and saw that [it] was airborne.

"I gave the order to my section [Flt Lt R Hartley and Fg Off C N Wally] to go into line astern and, doing a half roll, I dived on the aircraft which was at a height of about 500ft, closing in rapidly. At about 400 yards, I gave a short burst, following this with another at about 300 yards and giving a final burst from about 200 to 150 yards. I saw strikes in front of the aircraft and on the port engine which was set on fire. Return fire was experienced from the dorsal turret ahead of the tail.

"After the attack, I broke away to port to avoid hitting the aircraft and, looking over my shoulder, saw my No.2 and No.3 had delivered their attacks and that the aircraft was going down in flames in a 45° dive. I saw no-one get out and later saw it burning on the ground, smoke rising to a height of 500ft." Four of the crew were killed in the crash.

BLOCKADE-BREAKERS

From December 21, 1943 the German navy requested maximum reconnaissance sorties to support blockade-breaking vessels *Alsterufer* and *Osorno* returning to the Bay of Biscay. The activity had not been missed by the Royal Navy and RAF Coastal Command. Five British and two French warships were involved, even though the *Alsterufer* had already been crippled



by a 311 Squadron Liberator on the afternoon of the 27th and later abandoned.

The next day, German warships sent to escort the blockade-breakers were intercepted by US Navy Consolidated PB4Y-1s of Fleet Air Wing 7 and then by HMS *Glasgow* and *Enterprise*. The attacks sunk destroyer Z27 and torpedo boats T25 and T26, and took the lives of some 400 German sailors.

On the afternoon of the 28th, the He 177s of II/KG 40 finally made an appearance, 16 taking off to hunt the Royal Navy. Six returned because of poor weather and one with engine problems.

Nine He 177s reported seeing the British warships but could not attack as the cloud base was too low and visibility too poor to launch Hs 293s. Four He 177s encountered a US Navy PB4Y-1 Liberator of VB-110 captained by Lt Cdr James Reedy before all five aircraft quickly disappeared into the gloom.

Earlier that afternoon, eight Mosquitos of 157 Squadron had

taken off from Predannack to give fighter cover to the Royal Navy. They met up with a number of warships but started back for base just before 18:00. Seven minutes later Sqn Ldr Herbert 'Taps' Tappin spotted a lone He 177 ahead and more bombers and a PB4Y-1 off to port.

The Mosquitos concentrated on the solitary Greif, as the combat report relates: "On sighting, our aircraft [the He 177] opened up and started violent evasive action, mainly up and down, and opened fire with rear armament. The leader closed in to 600 yards and fired a short burst from port and then making another attack from starboard.

"Fg Off D W Davison was seen to attack after this with unobserved results. Sqn Ldr Tappin's aircraft was hit by return fire and, with the cockpit filling with smoke, a quick check was made. This revealed no oil

pressure or temperature on starboard engine and strike by an explosive bullet on starboard wing.

"A further attack was made from 10° starboard, range 400 yards, and strikes were seen mid-fuselage and a large white glow appeared, the aircraft catching fire, gradually losing height and attempting to ditch but, on contact with the sea, it blew up." There were no survivors from the He 177A-3, flown by the experienced 32-year-old Hptm Bernhard Eidhoff.

On the morning of New Year's Eve, II/KG 40 flew one more sortie, a reconnaissance of the Bay of Biscay. Ironically, there were many sorties staged by Fw 200s, which should have been replaced by He 177s from December 28, but the Fw 200s had been forced to soldier on.

It had not been a good operational start for the Greif. After months of technical problems, 1944 proved to be equally challenging. By that time, it was too late for the He 177 to make any noticeable impact on the air war. ●