



# THE LOST

During the spring and summer of 1940 an RAF Blenheim

**ABOVE:** The third Blenheim IV in this line-up at Watton in early May 1940 is P4852/UX-O, which sank U-31 on 11 March that year but was lost in the disastrous Gembloux mission on 17 May. Of the others, P6915/UX-A was badly shot up by a Bf 109 over Abbeville on 7 June, P4828/UX-K was lost near Hesdin on 22 May and R3618/UX-N close to Poix on 8 June.

P. H. T. GREEN COLLECTION

Five Messerschmitt Bf 109s against a single Bristol Blenheim. There was only likely to be one outcome. That was the situation encountered by Fg Off John Blake with his crew of Sgt Tom Weightman and AC1 Sam Middleton on 27 February 1940. Engaged in an anti-shipping reconnaissance to the Heligoland-Elbe area, their Blenheim IV, P4842, was intercepted by Bf 109s from Jagdgeschwader 77 and was shot down by Oltn Gerhard Jahny, though he identified his victim as a Wellington. This was the first of No 82 Squadron's many casualties over the coming months. Twice, those casualties were so heavy that the unit virtually ceased to exist. By any standards, it was an appalling toll.

When the so-called Munich Crisis erupted in September 1938, 82 — which had received Blenheim Is to replace its Hawker Hinds earlier that summer — prepared for possible

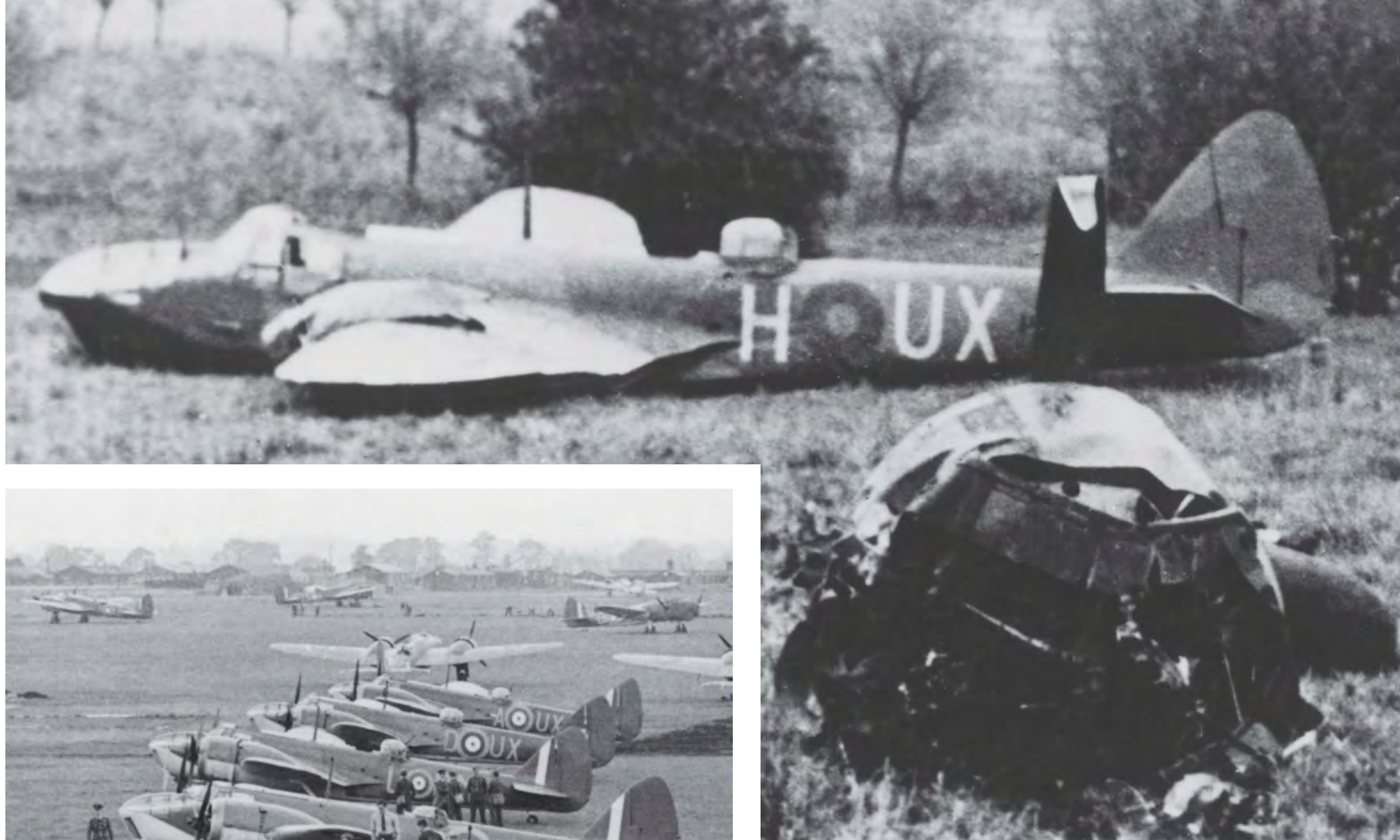
attacks on German power stations, a hazardous task. During June 1939 Wg Cdr S. H. Ware became CO just as his outfit received the more effective long-nosed Blenheim IV, the first of which, P4828, arrived on 13 August. Within days it began moving to Watton in Norfolk alongside the Blenheims of No 21 Squadron, and stood confident and ready for the coming conflict. Such optimism proved rather misplaced.



No 82 Squadron flew its first operational sorties on 27 September when three crews briefed for a reconnaissance of north-western Germany, from which Plt Off Ford's crew brought back some good photographs. The charismatic Wg Cdr the Earl of Bandon, known in RAF circles as 'Paddy', assumed command on 4 December, not long before his unit had its first combat. On 20 December it dispatched

five Blenheims on an armed reconnaissance over the North Sea, during which they bombed some enemy minesweepers. A Bf 109E of II./JG 77 intercepted the formation and one Blenheim was damaged, but the fighter was itself driven off, having taken some hits. Not always would 82 get off so lightly.

Activity over the German Bight continued in early April, one formation attacking a flotilla of patrol boats 95 miles off the Danish coast on the early afternoon of the 1st. The Blenheims were intercepted by Bf 109Es of 5(J)/TrGr 186, and P8867 was shot down by Ltn Otto Hinze with the loss of Fg Off Glyn Harries and his crew. Three days later, six of 82's aircraft flew a recce to Wilhelmshaven, looking for warships in bad weather. They had been seeking out the invasion force, including the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, heading for Norway. On the 6th they attacked



# SQUADRON

bomber squadron was wiped out — twice **WORDS:** DAVID NICHOLAS

them, the cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and destroyer escort at sea, but achieved no hits.

When the German Blitzkrieg against France and the Low Countries opened on 10 May the No 2 Group

Blenheim squadrons were stood to, but they were not called into action until the 12th, after the Wehrmacht had broken through in the Netherlands.

There were desperate attempts to destroy bridges and during the afternoon 82 attacked bridges over the Albert Canal, escaping without loss. Further strikes against armour thrusting into Holland were flown during the next few

days, one example occurring on the 15th when the CO flew P4828/UX-K to lead an attack against troop concentrations at Monthermé in the face of accurate flak.

The German advance was

relentless and the situation became increasingly desperate. At dawn on the 17th, a dozen Blenheims led by Sqn Ldr Miles Delap left Watton to bomb enemy armour on a crossroads near the Belgian town of Gembloux,

15 miles south-east of Brussels. The expected fighter escort did not appear, so 82 pressed on unescorted at 7,500ft. Near Nivelles they met a fearsome flak barrage, and P8830/UX-T in the lead section, flown

by Fg Off Bob McConnell, went down in flames. He and the gunner became PoWs, but the observer, Sgt Fulbrook, evaded capture. The remainder opened formation and climbed to 9,000ft (2,700m), where they were attacked from astern by 15 Bf 109s. Delap ordered the formation to close up, but before it could do so three or four Blenheims were seen to go down. One by one the remainder were hit.

Flying P8858/UX-W, Sgt T. Morrison recalled, "A petrol feed pipe of my starboard engine was severed and it lost revs immediately, which threw me out of formation. I dived steeply, taking evasive action". Behind him the sky was full of falling, blazing Blenheims. Only Morrison's crew in their badly damaged aircraft returned to Watton, where it was written off. Eleven aeroplanes had been lost, and of the 33 aircrew 22 died and three were taken prisoner. 'Paddy' ➤

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**ABOVE:** An early loss for No 82 Squadron during hostilities: Blenheim IV P4861/UX-H saw little of the war, being wrecked when both engines failed on take-off from Weston Zoyland on 18 September 1939.

D. WYLDE-SMITH

**ABOVE INSET:** Dispersed at Wyton in July 1940 are Blenheim IVs from several units including No 82 Squadron. The aircraft coded UX-D in this rather oddly framed shot is R3708, in which Plt Off Percival shot down an Hs 126 on 10 June.

RAF WYTON



**ABOVE:** Messerschmitt Bf 109Es of 5./JG 77 on stand-by at Aalborg around the time of the disastrous attack by No 82 Squadron in August 1940.

VIA JOHN WEAL

Delap's P4852/UX-O came down near Laon with a dead gunner, but he and his observer eventually returned. It was a shattering blow for the squadron, which had essentially ceased to exist.

With remarkable drive and energy, the Earl of Bandon used what remained and re-formed his squadron. Phoenix-like, on the evening of 20 May he flew P6925/UX-Z to lead six aircraft in an attack on armour near Oudenaarde. It was an incredible show of resilience.

Subsequently 82's Blenheims continued in vain attempts to blunt the advancing Panzers and cover the British Expeditionary Force as it retreated toward the Channel coast. Boulogne fell on the 24th

when the bulk of the BEF ended up surrounded at Dunkirk. That morning an attack was made on armour near Saint-Inglevert, and in the evening Bandon in R3618/UX-N led a strike on Gravelines.



Once the Dunkirk evacuation was complete, No 2 Group switched its efforts to locations further south to cover the withdrawal of the 51st Highland Division. These sorties incurred losses from flak and fighters, but of an attack on the late morning of 8 June Sqn Ldr Philip Sutcliffe in P6895 recalled, "Raid on AFV [armoured fighting vehicle] on road south of River Somme. Came across a Henschel 126 which

George Whitehead had a go with his twin turret guns. He believed he shot it down."

A formation led by Sutcliffe on the afternoon of 10 June successfully attacked armour at Fleury-sur-Andelle near Rouen, and Plt Off Percival in R3708/UX-D shot down another Hs 126. The gallant 51st Division surrendered on the 12th and those British forces left in France were in a parlous state, though missions against German armour continued. The squadron lost three aircraft on 13 June, and on the 18th Sutcliffe led 82's final attack of the French campaign, against armour en route to Cherbourg. It had been a brave but bloody period for the squadron.

France surrendered soon afterwards, and No 82 Squadron turned to more strategic targets such as airfields, Amiens being bombed on the 19th. Two days later it mounted its first raid on a target in Germany. It continued in this vein through June and July, objectives including possible invasion barge concentrations in the Channel ports. There was a change of command on 1 July when 39-year-old Wg Cdr Edward Lart took over.

With the Battle of Britain helping disrupt Luftwaffe bomber activities, early on 13 August a dozen crews briefed for an attack on the airfield at Aalborg in Denmark. This was home to the Ju 88As of KG 30 and Bf 109Es of IL/JG 77, while the He 115 floatplanes of KüFlGr 506 flew from the adjacent fjord anchorage. Led by Lart, in T1934/UX-R, a dozen Blenheim IVs set out at 08.40hrs, 'A' Flight from Watton and 'B' Flight from Bodney. Flying



**AVM the Earl of Bandon when he was AOC No 224 Group in Burma.**

VIA ANDREW THOMAS

## THE ABANDONED EARL

Born as an elder twin into the Anglo-Irish aristocracy in August 1904, Percy Bernard entered the RAF College Cranwell in 1922. Two years later he succeeded to the family title and became the 5th Earl of Bandon. He was generally known in the RAF as 'Paddy' Bandon or, more irreverently, 'the abandoned Earl'.

On commissioning, in 1924 he joined No 4 Squadron and later became a qualified flying instructor (QFI). He flew with No 216 Squadron during the 1930s before returning to instructional duty and staff posts. In January 1940 he was promoted to wing commander and appointed to command No 82 Squadron. After the disaster on 17 May it was his strength of character that prevented the unit from being disbanded, such that he led it on a raid three days later. He received the DSO

for his time with 82, later becoming the station commander at West Raynham and Horsham St Faith. In late 1942 'Paddy' Bandon moved to India and, as an air commodore in July 1944, became air officer commanding No 224 Group in the Arakan during the Burma campaign. Unofficially, of course, he flew there regularly — wearing flying officer rank!

Returning to Britain, the earl commanded the Royal Observer Corps before becoming AOC No 2 Group in Germany. As AOC No 11 Group in 1953 he was responsible for planning the Queen's Coronation Review flypast. On promotion to air marshal in 1957 he became commander-in-chief of the Far East Air Force at the height of Operation 'Firedog' in Malaya. The Earl of Bandon retired as the commander, Allied Air Forces Central Europe in 1964. He died during 1979.

across the North Sea in four vics at low level, Sgt Baron turned back with a fuel problem. The remaining 11 machines crossed the Danish coast about 50 miles south of their target, but their route gave sufficient warning for the enemy as to the likely target. The ground defences were therefore fully alerted and nine Bf 109s of 5./JG 77 were scrambled.

Flying up the Jutland Peninsula, the Blenheim formation ran in on the target at low level in fine, sunny weather, but encountered a veritable hail of fire from the airfield's flak defences. Within moments five of the Blenheims went down, the first being T1933/UX-C in which Plt Off Douglas Parfitt's crew died. Next was R3800/UX-Z flown by Flt Lt Syms, which fell inverted in flames and crashed just offshore. Syms and Sgt Wright somehow managed to bail out, though Sgt Ernest Turner, the air gunner, was killed. Incredibly, although Sgt Blair's R2272/UX-T was shot down and crashed inverted into the Limfjord the crew escaped, albeit seriously injured. More than a year later the observer, Sgt Bill Magrath, escaped from a transit camp at Rouen. Linking up with a Resistance chain he made it back to Britain via Spain and Gibraltar, a feat that earned him the Military Medal. Next was R3821/UX-M flown by Plt Off Earl Hale, which crashed onto Aalborg airfield with the loss of its entire crew.



As the surviving Blenheims, some already damaged by flak, egressed from the target area the Messerschmitts pounced on them. All the No 82 Squadron aircraft were shot down. Among the pilots claiming victories were Ofw Robert Menge, Ofw Rudolf Schmidt, Ltn Horst Carganico and Ltn Müller-Reinsberg. After bombing, Sgt Johnnie Oates put his mount, T1889, right on the deck in a desperate attempt to evade the Bf 109s, but to no avail. With a fighter on his tail his wingtip hit a fence post and the Blenheim cartwheeled into the ground. It was a veritable miracle that all three of the crew survived, though Oates broke his back. His was the last Blenheim to fall.

In all, 20 of the aircrew who reached Aalborg were killed and the survivors, eight of whom were severely injured, were all captured. The dead, among them Edward Lart and his crew of Plt Off Maurice Gillingham and Sgt Gus Beeby, ➤



**ABOVE:** The awful sight of Blenheim IV R3800/UX-Z inverted and on fire after being hit by flak over Aalborg at 12.20hrs on 13 August 1940 presaged the aircraft crashing into the sea just 50 yards offshore and exploding. It was the second of the squadron's aircraft to come down during this mission. Even so, two of the crew bailed out and survived. Shocked and injured, Sgt K. H. Wright, the navigator, was helped ashore having landed close to a moored Heinkel He 115 floatplane. F. WEBER VIA GRAHAM PITCHFORK



**ABOVE:** Plt Off Earl Hale (right) and his crew in front of Blenheim IV R3821/UX-M, in which they died at Aalborg during the 13 August raid.

VIA M. HODGESON

were all buried in a local cemetery with full military honours. Ironically, the award of the DFM to Beeby was announced soon afterwards and that of the DSO to Lart in early 1941.

For the second time in three months No 82 Squadron had been wiped out while tasked against a heavily defended target, unescorted, in daylight. Shortly after this debacle daylight raids by Blenheims without fighter escort were halted. Undaunted, Wg Cdr J. C. MacDonald DFC arrived the next day to replace Lart and once more began to rebuild the squadron. By 8 September it was back in action

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when three aircraft flew a recon of harbours on the Dutch coast. Only the CO's aeroplane returned.

No 82 Squadron moved to Bodney on 1 October. From there

were mounted attacks on Channel ports, sea defences, airfields and oil targets, though as the year progressed the unit increasingly operated by night. These were no sinecure, as was demonstrated on the night of 3-4 December. In a raid against Essen, only T1813 dropped bombs, but on the return flight its crew, headed by Sqn Ldr McMichael, had to bail out in bad weather. All on board Sgt Norman Cartwright's mount were killed in a landing accident at Manston; the same fate befell those on Plt Off Tom McCartney's aeroplane, which crashed near Southend. Sgt Butcher's crew in N3594/UX-F came down on the continent and became PoWs, meaning just a single aircraft made it home.

Wg Cdr Sam — later Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord — Elworthy DSO DFC AFC assumed command as No 82 Squadron brought a bloody year to a close, though 1941 was to be little better as the No 2 Group Blenheim units assumed a dangerous new role, attacking coastal shipping. Still, this was a unit that knew little other than considerable heroism in the face of significant risk.



## U-BOAT KILL

On 11 March 1940, No 82 Squadron gained a unique niche for itself in the annals of World War Two. During a patrol into the Heligoland Bight, when flying off the east Frisian island of Borkum at 1,000ft, Sqn Ldr Miles 'Paddy' Delap and his crew in Blenheim IV P4852/UX-O spotted a submarine moving slowly on the surface. By clever use of cloud they made a surprise attack, dropping four 250lb bombs from an altitude of just 500ft before the vessel could submerge.

Two of the Blenheim's bombs struck Kapitänleutnant Johannes Habekost's U-31, which went down with all hands. This was the first U-boat to be sunk by an aircraft unaided during the war, a notable scalp. Delap received the DFC and Sgt Wyness, his observer, the DFM, the unit's first decorations of the conflict. Having been sunk in shallow waters, U-31 was salvaged later in the month. It returned to service, only to be sunk off the coast of Ireland by HMS *Antelope* on 2 November 1940.