

APPETITE FOR DESTINY



A last-ditch scheme would have seen every available aircraft in Britain thrown at the German invasion, should it have been activated. *Steven Taylor* details the RAF's near-suicidal defence plan



FLEET AIR ARM TRAINEES RUSH TO THEIR TIGER MOTHS, MARCH 30, 1940. THE UBIQUITOUS TRAINERS WERE READIED FOR A VARIETY OF BELLIGERENT ROLES UNDER OPERATION BANQUET HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

RUCTION



The de Havilland DH.82 Tiger Moth was, without doubt, a fine aircraft. With its benign handling characteristics, it proved an ideal primary trainer, and from its introduction in 1932 through to the early 1950s, thousands of prospective RAF and Fleet Air Arm pilots, as well as trainees from more than two dozen air forces, learnt to fly in the unassuming two-seater biplane.

But not even the Tiger Moth's greatest admirers could seriously argue that it would make a credible bomber. But in the dark days of 1940 when a full-scale invasion of Britain seemed inevitable, that was the unlikely role for which the Tiger Moth was considered – and indeed readied – to fulfil.

The employment of the fabled Tiger Moth in an offensive role was a central element of Operation Banquet. This desperate plan would muster a motley assortment of aircraft, including trainers, obsolete biplanes and army co-operation Lysanders, reconfigure them as ad hoc bombers and hold them in readiness to mount a defence, should Fighter and Bomber Command's strength be wiped out by the Luftwaffe.

Conceived in May 1940 as blitzkrieg swept through France and the Low Countries, an operational order was issued by the Air Ministry on the 15th, entitled 'Reinforcement of Bomber Command with Training Command aircraft in the event of an invasion of the United Kingdom.' Twelve days later, as the evacuation from Dunkirk got under way, this contingency was given the codename Banquet.

Strong precedent

Among the aircraft earmarked for this reserve strike force were Avro Ansons of No.6 (Training) Group, which would be hurriedly relocated to 14 Bomber Command stations near the coast when enemy forces landed, along with Westland Lysanders of 22 (Army Cooperation) Group. Even obsolete Hawker Harts, Audaxes and Hinds, then in use as trainers, were to be utilised.

It sounds crazy, but it was not entirely unprecedented nor without merit.

During the German invasion in 1940, the Dutch Army Aviation Brigade's small contingent of Fokker C.X biplanes were, perhaps surprisingly, effective in their role as light bombers, helped by flying at extremely low altitudes. The same aircraft proved a capable dive bomber in the hands of Finnish pilots during the Winter War, too.

One of the Luftwaffe's most effective dive bombers was the Henschel Hs 123, a remarkably resilient biplane used to great effect during the Spanish Civil War and over Poland. It later flew in Greece, the Balkans and on the Russian front until 1944. Additionally, the Heinkel He 50 dive bomber had been relegated to training, but was recalled to the Eastern Front and enjoyed similar longevity.

As for the RAF, the Hawker Hector was a small liaison biplane, but on May 26 and 27, 1940 the Hectors and the newer Lysanders of 613 Squadron flew from Hawkinge, Kent, to drop supplies to the British 30th Motor Brigade under siege in Calais and dive-bomb German columns. It did not save

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ABOVE THE UNLIKELY HECTOR PROVED EFFECTIVE AS A RUDIMENTARY DIVE BOMBER OVER CALAIS, AND COULD MOUNT TWO 112LB BOMBS, A FORWARD-FIRING MACHINE GUN AND A COCKPIT MOUNTED LEWIS GUN NO.4 SQUADRON RECORDS

RIGHT A MILES MAGISTER AT NO.8 EFTS IN SEPTEMBER 1940. THE MAGISTER WAS THE RAF'S FIRST LOW-WING MONOPLANE TRAINER, AND WHILE STILL NEW TO THE FORCE IN 1939 HUGE NUMBERS WERE IN SERVICE. UNDER BANQUET, CONVERTED 'MAGGIEBOMBERS' WERE TO HELP COUNTER THE INVASION OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH

RIGHT A LINE OF MILES MASTERS IN NOVEMBER 1939. THE ADVANCED TRAINERS COULD CARRY A MACHINE GUN AND EIGHT SMALL BOMBS BUT WERE LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN PRESSED INTO COMBAT PRIOR TO BANQUET BEING ACTIVATED. NOTICING THE DEMAND FOR FIGHTERS, MILES DEVELOPED A SIX-GUN STOP-GAP FIGHTER VERSION, THE M.24, WITH AROUND 25 CONVERTED BY LATE 1940 HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

the garrison, but the sorties were successful and had a low loss rate, helping buy precious time for those falling back to Dunkirk.

Banquet Light

The most extreme element of the plan was Banquet Light. This entailed the basic trainers of the Elementary Flying Training Schools (EFTS), mainly Tiger Moths and Miles Magisters, being adapted to carry out level- and dive-bombing attacks against the Germans storming the south coast, the landings expected to be between Portsmouth and Ramsgate. On July 13, 1940, Training Command was instructed to prepare the largest available number of aircraft for anti-invasion operations. It planned to form 70 flights of five aircraft under the operational control of Army Cooperation Command. The Tiger Moths and Magisters would be flown primarily by experienced instructors, though trainees with a “reasonably satisfactory” level of training would also be selected to undertake missions.

Speed was not something any of the aircraft described had in abundance, indeed, the relative slowness and corresponding high manoeuvrability were beneficial. However, the aircraft still had to get over target in airspace that was, at best, contested. The Hector, though slower than the Fokker and Henschel, was capable of almost 190mph. Yet the Magister capped out at around 140mph and the fabled Moth could attain 109mph

at most – and they’d be slower with a bombload.

The trainers also lacked the necessary accoutrements found on dedicated bombers. Except for the Anson, most trainers were unlikely to have bombsights or defensive guns. Nor would they have much armour or other protective measures. Such components were to be fitted where possible, when possible, but not at the expense of delaying an aircraft’s

transformation into a last-ditch bomber. Pre-fitting parts was not an option either, because training of pilots could not be slowed until the plan was activated, as the operational order stated: “As the plan will seriously interfere with training at EFTSs it will only be put into execution when the Air Ministry consider that the situation warrants it.”

Tests and improvisation

Meanwhile, de Havilland dusted down drawings for bomb racks it had designed in the early 1930s for the Royal Iraqi Air Force’s DH.84M Dragons, and 1,500 sets were produced with haste. The racks mounted eight 20lb bombs with either four under each wing or eight on the fuselage (beneath



the rear cockpit), and the payload could be released individually or in one drop.

Throughout July, tests were conducted at RAF Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, and at de Havilland's Hatfield Aerodrome in Hertfordshire with Tiger Moths and Magisters. Perhaps surprisingly, trials of the bomb-carrying Moths proved encouraging, with test pilots reporting the payload dropped cleanly without fouling the fixed undercarriage when in level flight or in a dive of 50/55°. It was also found to be more effective to stow the bombs under the wings, as, with no bomb sights, pilots used the cross-bracing wires to aim.

There were even tests of a 'heavy' bomber version of the Moth. Hereward de Havilland, younger

brother of the company's founder Geoffrey, personally conducted trial flights at the company's site, using a Tiger Moth adapted to carry a single 240lb bomb.

On one occasion, he reportedly attained an altitude of 7,000ft carrying this payload.

Another enterprising engineer, George Hancock Reid, developed a novel, quintessentially medieval, weapon. Following the successful use of paratroops to spearhead the German assault into the Low Countries, it was widely assumed the elite shock force would be employed in any invasion of Britain, and Reid busied himself devising a counter. A RNAS/RAF veteran known for his resourcefulness, Reid earned the DFC for his part in the daring, if unsuccessful, seaplane raid on the Zeppelin sheds at Tondern, then Germany, in 1916. True to his reputation, his inventive mind led to him being attached to the Air Inventions Committee.

After he retired from the RAF in 1926, he co-founded the aero engineering company Reid and Sigrist, which produced some of the first gyro instruments for aircraft.

He was one of many applying considerable innovation to devising an arsenal of aerial weapons to help combat invasion and his particular brainchild was the 'Paraslasher'.

It was as simple as it sounds, a retractable scythe fitted beneath the fuselage of a Tiger Moth on a long pole, designed to slash the canopies of descending airborne soldiers.

Madcap though it was, these were desperate days, and any feasible concept was afforded due consideration by the Air Ministry. In June 1940, trials were carried out at RAF Desford, Leicestershire, home of No.7 EFTS. Squadron Leader George Lowdell AFM

SCARECROW PATROLS

Coastal Command had a wide operational remit, yet early in World War Two it lacked enough aircraft to be able to fulfil all of its myriad taskings.

Countering the U-boat threat was of the utmost importance and the force was quick to utilise the Tiger Moth for this. The trainer was ill-suited to long-range patrols, but it could operate above coastal/in-shore waters for extended periods. Believing continuous surveillance was as off-putting as actual attacks, five Coastal Patrol Flights of Tiger Moths and one of Hornet Moths were deployed near Aberdeen, Glasgow, Birkenhead, Belfast, Tenby and Newquay.

The first of these 'scarecrows' was flown on December 14, 1939, and three days later a suspected periscope was sighted off the coast of Scotland. The U-boat quickly submerged, proving the worth of the patrols.

The scarecrow aircraft carried only a flare pistol and two homing pigeons, and pilots were tasked to keep contacts under surveillance and send a message back so the Royal Navy or RAF could be routed to the threat, while the signal pistol was used to guide destroyers to the contact. The aircraft often flew in pairs, one remaining aloft while the other went to raise the alarm.

The lengthy patrols were uneventful and dangerous, especially during the winter, where two pilots reported falling asleep and coming within inches of ditching in the sea. Just one more contact was spotted before the patrols were stopped in June 1940. On January 25, 1940, two Tiger Moths flying out of Aberdeen tracked a slow-moving oil slick and alerted nearby destroyers. The position was depth-charged but no kill was claimed. However, the now-stationary slick lasted for weeks and was hit again. Whatever it was, it was likely destroyed.

completed multiple low-level slashing attacks against effigies of Hitler and Mussolini fixed on the ground. The trials were no doubt good for morale, but they were also successful. Recognising the strange scythe may actually prove effective, there were proposals to test the Paraslasher against a suitably weighted parachute thrown from an aircraft. Ultimately, it was noted the weapon would be impractical for use by all but the most experienced

BELOW A HAWKER DEMON FOLLOWING A TRAINING FLIGHT IN AUGUST 1940. A TWO-SEAT FIGHTER VARIANT OF THE HART LIGHT BOMBER, THE DEMON WAS SIMILARLY NEARING OBSOLESCENCE. HOWEVER, LIKE THE AUDAX THE DEMON COULD CARRY SMALL BOMBS AND A DEFENSIVE ARMAMENT, MAKING IT A GOOD MATCH FOR OPERATION BANQUET ARTHUR TANNER/STRINGER



SINGAPORE SLINGERS

The Malayan Volunteer Air Force similarly pressed Tiger Moths into the bomber role when the situation in the island of Singapore grew desperate.

By late January 1942, the air defence of Singapore was the responsibility of a dwindling number of Hurricanes and Buffalos. Otherwise, just a handful of Swordfish and Sharks remained to act as spotters for the island's coastal batteries (which, contrary to popular belief, could fire inland) after all other air assets had been withdrawn for the most part. No.1 Detached Flight, MAAF, also remained, operating four Tiger Moths and two Avro Cadets. It was based under Flight Lieutenant Henry 'Harry' Dane at MacPherson Road – literally a road – in Singapore city.

The flight's core tasking was liaison and search and rescue, but it completed hundreds of different missions, including patrols. The flight carried out its last sorties on the morning of February 10, when Harry Dane and Sergeant Nathan lifted off in two Tiger Moths carrying 20lb bombs. As they departed, a journalist caught sight of the pair and recorded: "The Japanese are not alone in the skies this morning, for I have just seen two biplanes fly low over the enemy where they unloaded their bombs. It makes me ashamed of myself sitting here, my heart beating faster than their old motors, when I think what chance those lads had of getting back in their antiquated machines. If ever brave men earned undying glory, those pilots have this tragic morning."

However, both survived, and Dane led the two Moths and single Cadet out of Singapore early the next day, joining other survivors at Pakan Baroe, Sumatra. The ground crews escaped to Batavia by sea.



ABOVE THE LYSANDER WAS A VERSATILE AIRCRAFT MADE FAMOUS BY ITS CLANDESTINE MISSIONS INTO OCCUPIED EUROPE. HOWEVER, THIS AIRCRAFT HAS BEEN FITTED WITH GAS SPRAYING EQUIPMENT FOR TESTING IN 1940. ANOTHER WAS TRIALLED WITH TWO 20MM CANNON FOR ATTACKING INVASION BARGES THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AVIA15/254

RIGHT A DH.82A TIGER MOTH IS 'BOMBED-UP' AT HATFIELD. IN 1940, HATFIELD AIRFIELD WAS USED DURING TRIALS FOR CONVERTED TRAINERS AS PART OF THE BANQUET PREPARATIONS THE ROYAL AERONAUTICAL SOCIETY (NATIONAL AEROSPACE LIBRARY)/ MARY EVANS

pilots and it was taken no further.

Grisly though the Paraslasher was, the RAF's light aircraft were scheduled to deploy an altogether more chilling weapon.

Contaminate the beaches

Banquet was a last-ditch scheme, and therefore utilised weapons of last resort. Five Lysander squadrons were earmarked for spraying mustard gas and other chemicals from canisters attached to the undercarriage.

Notorious for its use on the Western Front and banned by the Geneva Protocol of 1925, the possible deployment of mustard gas had been a matter of debate within Churchill's War Cabinet and the military top brass.

The premier was not an enthusiast of using lethal gasses but advocated retaining a stockpile for retaliatory use. He was also not alone in backing its use in the event of invasion, having the support of the Chiefs of Staff.

On May 30, 1940 he said to the Cabinet: "We should not hesitate to

contaminate our beaches with gas if this would be to our advantage."

The RAF pressed ahead with trials and by July the War Office reported back that the force could mount "gas attack from the air on a considerable scale for a limited period" and stated that spraying gas from low altitudes "would be the most effective method for dealing with troops on beaches".

Satisfied that an effective counter-invasion measure had been found, Churchill ordered an increase in the country's production of mustard gas, which reached 350 tons a week by the end of September.

Once more, the Tiger Moth was considered for weaponisation. Fitted with a tank ahead of the cockpit and crop sprayer-style dispensers under each wing, the trainer was readied to deploy 'Paris Green', a powerful, highly toxic powdered insecticide over the invasion beaches.



The closest Operation Banquet came to activation was the night of September 7, 1940, the day the Luftwaffe launched its first major raid on London. With nerves fraying, 'Cromwell' – the codeword indicating invasion was under way



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– was issued to some units, while in some parts of the country church bells, which had remained silent since the beginning of the war, rang out to warn of imminent landings.

Alarm and false alarm

Amid the panic, a group of off-duty trainee pilots, attached to No.3 School of General Reconnaissance at RAF Squire’s Gate, near Blackpool, who had been assigned to take part in Banquet, were rounded up by police from pubs and clubs. Flown to RAF Thorney Island, near Chichester, the bewildered airmen saw Tiger

Moths being hurriedly fitted with bombs and were informed that they were to attack the German invasion fleet. One of them reportedly fainted!

It was no more than a false alarm, and as the threat of invasion diminished, the prospect of Operation Banquet ever having to be implemented faded. However, even into 1941 exercises connected with Banquet continued. One such manoeuvre served as a cover for the huge organisational effort ahead of the raid on Cologne overnight on May 30, 1942. This was the first of the Bomber Command’s 1,000

bomber raids and involved aircraft from across the force, including its training units.

It was not until late 1943 that Operation Banquet was shelved, though it is unclear whether its retention was due more to its convenience as cover or because of its intended function. Nevertheless, had it been actioned, the chances of survival for the pilots in the slow, unarmoured trainers in skies dominated by the Luftwaffe would have been slim. They stood ready to do their duty, but there is little doubt this was one banquet few in the RAF would have had much appetite for. ●

ABOVE RAF AIRCREW RUSH TO THEIR ANSON AND HARVARD TRAINERS ON SEPTEMBER 30, 1939. THE ANSON FLEW IN SEVERAL ROLES BUT UNDER BANQUET WOULD HAVE BEEN A LIGHT BOMBER. THE US-BUILT HARVARD WAS FIRST ORDERED BY THE RAF IN 1938 AND COULD ALSO CARRY MACHINE GUNS AND SMALL BOMBS
KEYSTONE-FRANCE