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ARTYKUŁ

Royal Air Force in September '39

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Did the British and French air forces limit their combat flights to dropping leaflets over the cities of the Third Reich in September 1939? Such view was formulated in science and popular science articles.

In the work of the well-received and renowned author, prof. Wojciech Roszkowski, we may find only a small mention of the operations of the British and French air forces.¹ Emigration historian Józef Garliński wrote some more on the topic. However, even he failed to avoid mistakes by stating:

“The British flew over the Third Reich only to drop leaflets appealing to stop the war. [...] Only once was there a combat flight targeting the German navy base at the Helgoland island and suffering heavy casualties.”²

A different picture of the activities at the western front can only be found in some publications.³

Perhaps the Polish historians, in formulating their opinions, followed the evaluation of one Edgar James Kingston McCloughry, the deputy commander of the British air force. After all, he wrote in his memoirs: “the activity was limited to dropping leaflets”⁴. The problem is, he used this remark as a reference to the “main drop of strategic air force” and not to all the operations of the Royal Air Force.



**Blenheims Mk. IV. Photo:
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Leaflet operations

The British did not only drop leaflets on Berlin. On the night from September 3rd to September 4th 1939, ten Whitley bombers from squadrons 51⁵ and 58⁶ made their first raid on Germany, dropping around 6 million leaflets over Hamburg, Bremen and Ruhr. The operation of dropping leaflets was conducted intensively for the first two weeks of war.

The British had been preparing for the propaganda war for several years prior. According to the decisions of the air force command, made in September 1938, the leaflet operation was to begin immediately after the declaration of war and before bombing the enemy territory.

The first English leaflet was the two-page *Warnung* dropped on the night from September 3rd to September 4th, and September 8th to September 9th 1939.⁷ The British had been preparing for the propaganda war for several years prior. According to the decisions of the air force command, made in September 1938, the leaflet operation was to begin immediately after the declaration of war and before bombing the enemy territory. In September 1938, the short text of the leaflet was prepared, entitled "*A Message to the German people from the British people*". In April 1939 it was decided that the leaflets were to be dropped over highly populated territories (without major risks of losing planes). The operation "Nickel" was to be conducted from Great Britain, with auxiliary airfields in France where the Blimp Squadron no 1 "M" was to be stationed at as well.

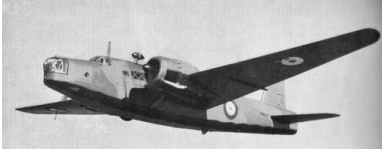
The air operations of dropping leaflets became limited after September 16th due to critical remarks made not only by Poles. The inadequacy of the British actions was the main subject of criticism, since at the same time the Germans relentlessly bombed Polish cities and villages with impunity. The British Supreme Command decided to cease dropping leaflets on September 19th, but already after two days changed its mind. From that point onward, the Royal Air Force conducted such operations two to three times a week.

Combat flights

The British also began combat flights, mainly directed at the German navy, since they feared that the Kriegsmarine would block the British Isles. The admiralty and Royal Air Force prepared the plan "W.A.7(a)". Hence, at the Wyton air base, there was a Blenheim prepared with an observer of the Royal Navy ready to do photographic reconnaissance of the ports in the north of Germany, already on September 1st.⁸

Since September 2nd, 6 squadrons of Hampden planes were put to combat readiness for an hour. In the evening, the bombers' command was informed that around midnight war would be declared on Germany. The

first strike was to be aimed at Wilhelmshaven.



Vickers Wellington Mk. I. Photo:
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The declaration of war came at 11:15 am on September 3rd and at 12:03 one Blenheim Mk IV N6215, piloted by F/O Andrew McPherson from the 139 Squadron, took off to gather intelligence on the German ports. The message about the observed warships was jammed, due to which it was only handed to the command upon landing at 4:50 pm.⁹

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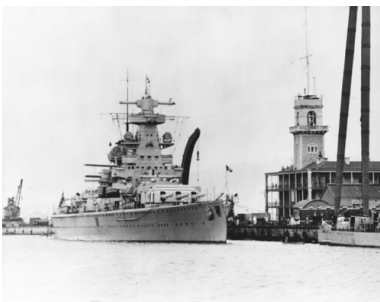
At around 6:15 pm eighteen Hampden planes (44¹⁰, 49¹¹, 50¹² and 83¹³ squadrons) and nine Wellington planes (37¹⁴ and 149¹⁵ squadrons) were sent into action. The Wellingtons returned to their bases at 10:44 pm, while the Hampden planes only around midnight. The German warships were not found due to storms and darkness.¹⁶ Since 8:00 am the next day, 27 Blenheim planes from 107¹⁷, 110 and 139 squadrons were in one-hour alert. Eight observers from the RAF Coastal Command were also to partake in the operation.

The British made another attempt to bomb the German base in Wilhemshaven on September 4th. Fifteen Blenheim planes and fourteen Wellingtons from two squadrons (9 and 149) were sent to action between 2:40 and 4:10 pm.

These actions were very ineffective. In the documents referenced ten years ago by Robin Holmes it was written:

“Squadron no. 149, Mildenhall: L4302 S/Ldr Paul Harris - dropped bombs on the bridge over the Eider river; L4265 F/O Bill Macrae - probably dropped bombs on Brunsbuttel; L4271 Sgt Heayes - turned back, dropped bombs into the sea; L4229 F/Lt J.B. Stewart - probably dropped bombs beyond Cuxhaven; L4263 Sgt Harrison - turned back, dropped bombs into the sea; L4272 F/Lt A.G. Duguid - turned back, dropped bombs into the sea; L4374 F/O A.F. Riddlesworth - turned back, dropped bombs into the sea; L4270 F/Sgt Kelly - turned back, dropped bombs into the sea. 9 Squadron, Honington: Section no 1 - attacked by nine Messerschmitts Bf 109E-1s; L4320 S/Ldr L.S. Lamb¹⁸ - dropped bombs on a trade ship (claimed to have taken down a fighter plane); Wellington I - L4268, WS-? - F/Sgt I.E.M. Borley - shot down (entire crew of five men died); Wellington I - L4275, WS-H - F/Sgt A.J. Turner - shot down (five-men crew died). Section no 4 - encountered heavy anti-air artillery fire from one of the warships: L4278 F/Lt Peter Grant; L4287 Sgt Purdy; L4262 Sgt Bowen.”¹⁹

Three Blenheims from the 110 Squadron attacked the heavy cruiser “Admiral Scheer”. As a result of their raid four bombs hit the ship, but did not explode.



German heavy cruiser (so-called pocket battleship) “Amiral Scheer” at a port in Gibraltar, around 1936 Photo: Wikimedia

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Official U.S. Navy photo NH 59664
from the U.S. Navy Naval History
and Heritage Command, author:
U.S. Navy**

Among others, cruiser "Emden" was damaged. It is worth noting that five Bristol Blenheim planes did not come back from this operation.²⁰

In *The Bomber Command War Diaries* about the operations from September 4th it was written:

"Following the initial reconnaissance conducted by a Blenheim, 15 Blenheims and 14 Wellingtons were sent to bomb the German warships. Five planes from each group did not find their targets due to low clouds. Most of the remaining Blenheims conducted low altitude attacks on the <<Admiral Scheer>> and <<Emden>> cruisers. At least three bombs fell on the <<Admiral Scheer>> cruiser, but did not explode; <<Emden>> was damaged and suffered some casualties when a Blenheim crashed on its deck. Five Blenheims were shot, all or most of them by the AA artillery; 107 Squadron lost four of its five planes. The Bomber Command is certain that the victims of war were: Lt pilot W.F. Barton and his crew (Lt J.F. Ross, Cpl navigator J.L. Ricketts, radio operator/gunman of the 107 squadron). They all died, since Blenheim N6184 was shot down by the artillery of the <<Admiral Hipper>>. There is not much information on the Wellingtons attacking the ships at Brunsbüttel, by the mouth of the Kiel Canal. Four crews reported that they found their targets. Due to navigational mistake, two bombs were dropped on the Danish city of Esbjerg, 110 miles north of Brunsbüttel, and two people were killed. Several Wellingtons were attacked by German fighters and two Wellingtons were MIA."

German admiral Karl Dönitz wrote about the British attack:

"On 04.09 came the first raid of the English air force on the sluices of Wilhemshaven and the ships anchored at the port. With great bravery and sacrifice the English came hedgehopping, although they failed to get much success. Along the officers of the submarines we watched this raid from the floating submarine base in Wilhemshaven. The efficient repelling of the attack gave the officers much optimism."²¹

The losses of the British over Wilhemshaven: four Blenheims from the 107 Squadron (N6184, N6188, N6189, N6240) and one from the 110 Squadron (N6199); in total the British lost seven out of thirty planes taking part in the operation on September 4th 1939.

Losses in men of the 9 Squadron:

- the crew of Wellington I L4268 – F/S Ian Edward Maitland Borley (365199), Sgt George Miller (580160), Cpl George William Park (524855), LAC Harry Dore (531093), AC2 Robert Henderson (618765);
- the crew of Wellington I L4275 – F/S Albion John Turner (561939), Sgt Donald Edward Jarvis (565602), Sgt Bertie Greville Walton (550292), AC2 George Thomas Brocking (546065), AC2 Kenneth George Day (549741) – Becklingen War Cemetery.

Losses in men of the 107 Squadron:

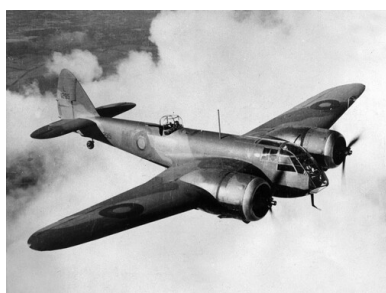
- the crew of Blenheim IV N6184 – F/L William Frank Barton (34213), F/O John Frederick Ross (39340), Cpl James Leslie Ricketts (519859);
- the crew of Blenheim IV N6188 – P/O William Joseph Murphy (39748) – Sage War Cemetery (Germany), Sgt Leslie Robert Ward (564477) – Hamburg Cemetery (Germany)²², AC2 Edward Pateman (548974) – Sage War Cemetery (Germany);
- the crew of Blenheim IV N6189 – F/O Herbert Brian Lightoller (37884), Sgt Owen Lobb Dunkirk Howells (564670) – Sage War Cemetery (Germany), AC1 Ernest William Lyon (546679);
- the crew of Blenheim IV N6240 – Sgt Albert Stanley Prince (580195), Sgt G F Booth (561012) – Stalag 357 Kopernikus, AC1 L J Slattery.

Losses in men of the 110 Squadron:

- the crew of Blenheim IV N6199 – F/O Henry Lovell Emden (36138), Sgt Stanley George McKenna Otty (509143), Sgt Raymond Charles Grossey (516460), AC1 Ralph Evans (537187).

Only in September 1939 the British bomber air force lost 39 planes (including 11 during training flights). 67 people from the flying personnel perished.²⁴ The French air force lost 58 planes with 60 people from the flying personnel dying.

Between September 5th and September 6th single Blenheims did the reconnaissance on the German fleet. One flight was unsuccessful due to low clouds. During the second flight, however, several cruisers and destroyers were spotted five miles away from Helgoland. Again, due to problems with radio communication these messages were only handed to the command after the planes had returned from their flights. As a result of the late hour of the day and assumption that the German warships would have long returned to their bases before the planes arrived - the combat operation was not initiated. During that time, six planes from the 49 Squadron and three planes from the 83 Squadron of the RAF awaited in the state of combat readiness at their bases.²³



Blenheim Mk. I. Photo: Wikimedia

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It is in the interest of the Polish state to keep friendly relations with the authorities of the United Kingdom and to cultivate the memory of the shared fight against the Germans. Hence, the authorities of the Republic of Poland should award post-mortem medals to 24 British pilots fallen during the first raid on the *Kriegsmarine* base. The most appropriate medal in this case would be the Cross of Valour.

The article comes from issue no. 9/2019 from the "Biuletyn IPN"

¹ W. Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia Polski 1939-1945*, Warszawa 2011, s. 13.

² J. Garliński, *Polska w drugiej wojnie światowej*, Londyn 1982, s. 37.

³ T. Pawłowski, *Plan Z i jego realizacja*, „Technika Wojskowa. Historia” 2012, nr 5, s. 13.

⁴ E.J. Kingston McCloughry, *Kierowanie wojną*, Warszawa 1959, s. 113.

⁵ Trzy bombowce Whitley dokonały zrzutu ulotek nad północnymi Niemcami.

⁶ Siedem bombowców Whitley dokonało zrzutu ulotek nad Zagłębiem Ruhry. Dwa bombowce rozbiły się przy lądowaniu na terenie Francji.

⁷ K. Kirchner, *Flugblätter aus England 1939/1940/1941. Bibliographie Katalog*, Erlangen 1978, s. 2, 6-7, 276, 363 – tu wykaz operacji lotniczych z miejscami zrzutu ulotek.

⁸ Zob. *The R.A.F. in the bombing offensive against Germany*, t. II: *Restricted bombing September 1939 – May 1941*, London, b.r.w., s. 55-57.

⁹ The National Archives (dalej: TNA), AIR 27/958/2. Załoga, w której skład wchodził Cdr. Thompson, wykonała 75 fotografii niemieckiej bazy. Zob. także R. Holmes, *The Battle of Heligoland Bight 1939. The Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe's Baptism of Fire*, London 2009, s. 19-20.

¹⁰ Dywizjon stacjonował w Paddington. 3 września 1939 r. wystartowało dziewięć Hampdenów na rozpoznanie Morza Północnego. Były to samoloty: L.4183 (W/Cdr. J.N. Boothman, P/O Hunn, Sgt J.C. Chesters, AC1 T. Gibbin); P.1173 (A/F/L T.C. Weir, P/O W.M. Smith, Sgt F. Watson, AC1 W. Brooks); L.4085 (P/O R.J. Sansom, Sgt V. Coveyduck, AC1 H. Humphreys, LAC. W. Crook); L.4089 (P/O H.W. Robson, Sgt E. Reeman, AC1 W. Davidson, AC2 A. Halfpenny); L.4087 (Sgt E. Farmer, Sgt H. Moyle, LAC J. Sugden, AC2 J. Taylor); L.4100 (F/S E. Cook, Sgt C. Nicoll, Sgt D. Seager, AC1 J. Evans); L.4154 (P/O J.A. Stuart, Sgt J. Smyth, Sgt W. Lodge, AC2 A. Coldicott); L.4074 (Sgt W. Jeffrey, Sgt W. Ison, LAC H. Lacey, AC1 F. Preston); L.4171 (P/O D.J. Penman, Sgt W. Hill, AC1 P. Gurnell, AC1 J. Lyttle).

Samoloty wystartowały o 18.15-18.30, a powróciły między 23.35 a 00.25 - TNA, AIR 27/447/2, k. 9-10.

11

3 września 1939 r. dywizjon stacjonował w Scampton. Wystartowały trzy Hampdeny na rozpoznanie Morza Północnego. Były to samoloty: L.4036, L.4040 oraz L.4093; dowodzili nimi F/L G.F. Lerwill, F/O R.A.B. Learoyd, Sgt T.P. Pratt. Samoloty wróciły do bazy o 22.30 - TNA, AIR 27/480/1, k. 7.

12

Według strony www.raf.mod.uk pierwsza misja bojowa dywizjonu miała miejsce 14 grudnia 1939 r., kiedy to jedenaście Hampdenów brało udział w rozpoznaniu Morza Północnego. Zob. TNA, AIR 27/485/1, k. 7-7v.

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Dywizjon stacjonował również w Scampton. 3 września 1939 r. wystartowało sześć Hampdenów na rozpoznanie Morza Północnego. Zob. TNA, AIR 27/686/1, k. 7-8.

14

Sześć Wellingtonów poleciało na rozpoznanie Morza Północnego 3 września 1939 r. Były to Wellingtony Mk I o numerach L4328 (F/L L.J.S. Dickins, F/O F.L. Witchfield, Sgt Rootledge, AC Betts, AC Lowe); L4332 (F/S Gray, Sgt McCauley, Sgt Ward, AC Baker, Cpl Wardle); L4352 (F/L Apflesy, F/O Vaucman Williams, P/O MacBonmd, Sgt Norris, AC Barston, AC Clark); L4349 (Sgt Fletcher, Sgt Brown, Sgt Rayne, Cpl Curnow, LAC Nattingman); L4347 (F/O Simmons, P/O Sharp, Sgt Stangway, AC Hill, AC Bowen) - zob. TNA, AIR 27/388/1, k. 7-10.

15

Trzy Wellingtony rozpoznawały Morze Północne 3 września 1939 r., 4 września osiem Wellingtonów poleciało zbombardować niemieckie okręty w Brunsbuttel. Jeden zrzucił bomby nad celem.

16

The R.A.F. in the bombing offensive against Germany, t. II: *Restricted bombing September 1939 - May 1941*, London, b.r.w., s. 55-57.

17

Zob. TNA, AIR 27/841/3, k. 15.

18

Załoga tego samolotu zginęła 30 września 1939 r.

19

R. Holmes, *The Battle of Heligoland Bight...*, s. 25.

20

The Daily Telegraph. Story of the war 1939-1941, ed. D. Marley, London 1942, s. 13; I. Majski, *Wspomnienia ambasadora radzieckiego*, t. III: *Wojna 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1970, s. 14-15; C. Bekker, *Atak na wysokości 4000. Dziennik wojenny niemieckiej Luftwaffe 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1999, s. 61-64; K. Dönitz, *10 lat i 20 dni. Wspomnienia 1935-1945*, Gdańsk 2004, s. 61; K. Kuska, *Bomber Command w pierwszym etapie wojny powietrznej nad Europą*, „Militaria” 2008, nr 6, s. 13.

21

K. Dönitz, *10 lat i 20 dni...*, s. 61.

22

Pochowany w tym czasie na wyspie Helgoland.

23

Zob. TNA, AIR 27/690, k. 3.

24

W.R. Chorley, *Royal Air Force Bomber Command Losses of the Second World War*, t. I: *Aircraft and Crews lost during 1939-1940*, Hinckley 2005, s. 14-17.

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