

1940

GREED FOR GOLD

Just prior to the German invasion of the Netherlands, the National Bank of Belgium transferred part of its gold reserves to the Bank of France in Bordeaux for safe keeping. When France was attacked, Belgium asked the French bank to transfer the gold to London. The gold was transferred, but not to London, instead it was forwarded on to a French bank in Dakar. On October 29, 1940, the French bank promised to return the gold to Belgium but Pierre Laval, Foreign Minister in the Vichy government of Marshal Petain, sent it on to Berlin. There it was melted down, supplied with false seals and documentation and transferred to the National Bank of Switzerland by the Germans. The value of this gold was 378.6 million Swiss francs. Around 218 million francs worth of this treasure was resold by the Swiss to fund its banking operations. In 1945, France restored the gold that was entrusted to her in 1940 but Switzerland claimed that only 160 million francs worth was held in its banks.

FIRST AIR STRIKE

The first air strike of the war from carrier-borne aircraft was from the British carrier HMS Furious. On April 11, 1940, 18 Swordfish from 816 and 818 Squadrons took off from the deck of the carrier to bomb enemy ships in Trondheimsfjord, Norway. All returned safely.

BRITAIN CONTEMPLATES BIOWAR

In 1940, work began in Britain on biological weapons. One idea put forward was for cattle-cake to be impregnated with Anthrax and dropped by RAF planes to infect Germany's livestock. (Tests with a powdered form of Anthrax were carried out on flocks of sheep with devastating results.) This idea was adopted and about five million such cakes were made but were never used operationally. During the war, Germany manufactured three kinds of nerve gases, Tabun, Sarin and Soman. At the end of the war the Allies uncovered hundreds of tons of such material in Austria.

HAUL OF NAZI NAVAL TECHNICIANS

During a routine inspection of the Japanese merchant vessel Asama Maru on January 21, 1940, in the Indian Ocean, officers of the British cruiser HMS Liverpool discovered twenty-one German civilians on board. All were highly qualified technicians being sent to Japan to service German surface raiders and U-boats soon to be operating in the Pacific area. The technicians were removed and interned as prisoners-of-war but as Britain was not at war with Japan at this time the Asama Maru was allowed to proceed to her destination. Some weeks later, on February 29th, Britain handed back nine of the technicians to Japan after Japan agrees not to send them back to their homeland.

CASUALTY LIST

The first Royal Air Force casualty list of the war was released on January 31, 1940. It listed 758 RAF personnel killed and 210 aircraft lost. (A total of 69,605 members of the Royal Air Force lost their lives in World War II. In Bomber Command alone, 55,888 servicemen and women died.)

AUSCHWITZ (oSWIECIM)

Construction of what was to become the largest of Nazi concentration camps started in May, 1941. Located some 50 kilometres south-west of Krakow it eventually covered an area of 40 square kilometres including the nearby camp of Birkenau and 45 sub-camps. Seven villages were evacuated, 123 houses demolished and some 2,000 people deported before thousands of slave workers moved in to start the building. Unlike other camps, all with wooden huts, most of the barracks in Auschwitz were built with bricks and mortar. These brick barracks remain today exactly as they were during the war. The oldest known survivor of Auschwitz, Antoni Dobrowolski, a Pole, died on 21st of October, 2012, in the Polish town of Debno. He was 108 years old.

BLITZKRIEG'S FIRST VICTIM

The Belgian fortress of Eben Emael, south of Maastricht, was the first fortification on the Dutch/Belgian border to suffer the ferocity of Germany's 'Lightning War'. At 5.20am precisely, nine German gliders landed on the large concrete roof of the Fort. The 700 garrison defenders were caught completely by surprise as the 55 man assault team poured from the gliders to place explosives charges against the steel-capped gun cupolas. The defenders held out until 7am the following morning when German ground forces linked up with the assault team.

A BIZARRE UNIFICATION PROPOSAL

In a last desperate attempt to save France from capitulating and to keep her army fighting, Churchill and General De Gaulle proposed that Britain and France become one united nation. In a telephone call from London on June 16, 1940, to the French Premier, Paul Reynaud, the message stated:

"The two Governments of the United Kingdom and the French Republic make the declaration of indissoluble union and unyielding resolution in their common defence of justice and freedom against subjection to a system which reduces mankind to a life of robots and slaves. The two Governments declare that France and Great Britain shall no longer be two nations but one Franco-British Union. Every citizen of France will enjoy immediately citizenship of Great Britain; every British subject will become a citizen of France. All the armed forces of Great Britain and France will be placed under the direction of a single War Cabinet."

The proposal caused an uproar in the French Cabinet of which Churchill wrote "Rarely has so generous a proposal encountered such a hostile reception." Without Cabinet support, Reynaud resigned as premier and a new government was formed under Marshal Pétain at 11.30pm on June 16, 1940. Pétain immediately negotiated an armistice with Germany. The former World War II hero of Verdun was later tried and sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment. He died in 1951.

FIRST RAF BOMBING OF GERMANY

The first of the 4,000 lb bombs dropped on German soil was on the city of Emden on March 31, 1940, when two Wellington bombers raided the city. Each bomb carried a parachute to retard its descent. In 1940, 14,369 tons of bombs were dropped on Germany by the RAF. In 1941, 34,954 tons and in 1944, 579,384 tons were dropped. Later, Joseph Goebbels was to say that Germany would carry out a mass extermination of Jews throughout Europe in reprisal for Allied air bombings of German cities.

THE BOMBING OF LONDON

The first bombs fell on London on August 24, 1940. The Blitz started on September 7 and lasted until May 11, 1941. The worst tragedy of the Blitz was when 430 persons were killed when a bomb hit a school in West Ham being used as an air raid shelter. A direct hit on the Bank underground station killed 58 persons. A bomb hit the water pipe above the Balham Street underground tube station causing the tunnel to be flooded, 68 people died. The last night of the Blitz, on May 10, 1941, a total of 1,436 persons were killed. Just over 20,000 lives were lost during this period. In Britain, as a whole, 51,509 deaths were from bombing. (In November, 1940, there were around 3,000 unexploded bombs waiting to be rendered safe around London.)

GENERAL FELDMARSCHALL

The highest rank in the German army with an annual salary of 36,000 Reichsmarks. On July 19, 1940, Hitler created twelve new GFMs. During the course of the war, ten were sacked. Of the many active GFMs three were executed after the July Plot of 1944.

FIRST BOMBING RAID ON BERLIN

This air-raid occurred on August 25/26, 1940, just two days after the German Luftwaffe had mistakenly bombed London, a forbidden target at that time. Of the 81 RAF bombers taking part, 27 failed to locate the target and five were shot down. A year later, on August 8, 1941, the Russians bombed the city for the first time. The first bombs to fall on Berlin were a handful of incendiaries dropped from a French civilian transport plane, a converted Farman NC 2234 operated by the French Navy, on June 7, 1940. The crew threw the incendiaries out of the passenger entry door. It is not known what damage, if any, was done. (In all, Berlin suffered 363 air raids during the war. The last RAF raid was on March 24, 1944, when of the 810 aircraft that took part 72 were lost.) In 1945, Berlin experienced its first occupation by foreign troops in nearly 140 years. Napoleon's first occupation

lasted two years from 1806 to 1808. His second occupation in 1812 lasted one year. The Allied occupation after World War II lasted 45 years from 1945 to 1990.

AIR RAID CASUALTIES

In the six months from May to November, 1940, the RAF had killed 975 German civilians in air raids over Germany. At the same time, road accidents in Germany had killed 1,845 persons. German air raids on Britain for the same period killed around 15,000 people.

BRITAIN'S FIRST CASUALTY

The first civilian killed in an air raid on Britain was James Isbister during a German raid on Scapa Flow in the Orkneys on March 16, 1940. A bomb fell near the Brig of Waith, killing 27 year old Isbister. On a previous raid on November 13, 1939, during an attack by a Heinkel bomber on the Shetland Islands, all that resulted was a large bomb crater in the countryside and the only fatality was a rabbit, which gave rise to the famous WWII marching song 'Run Rabbit, Run'.

There is some speculation that the rabbit was actually purchased from a local butcher and placed in the crater for effect ... or a laugh; but either way, this must be the world's most famous dead rabbit!

BRITAIN'S NEXT CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

On April 30, 1940, anti-aircraft fire shot down a German Heinkel 111 bomber while on a mine laying sortie off the east coast of England. The bomber crashed onto a house in Upper Victoria Road in Clacton-on-Sea in Essex killing the occupants, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Gill. They became the first civilians, of more than 60,000 killed in England during the war. Frederick and Dorothy Gill were buried in an unmarked grave in the Burrs Road Cemetery. In 1994, the grave site was discovered and a proper Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone was erected and dedicated on the 59th anniversary of their deaths.

The German aircraft was actually on a mine laying operation over the North Sea, but the crew became disorientated due to heavy fog. Flying blindly until just before midnight the Heinkel crossed the coast near the radar station at Bawdsey in Suffolk. Anti-aircraft batteries along the coast at Bawdsey, Felixstowe and Harwich opened fire on the bomber. Ironically, the Heinkel did not receive a direct hit, but it is thought that exploding shells underneath the aircraft caused considerable damage to the aircraft controls. Eyewitnesses have said that it does appear that the pilot tried desperately to find a landing area because he released flares as his plane circled Clacton and Holland-on-Sea before flying out to sea again, then returning at a considerably lower altitude. The German bomber hit the chimneys of a number of houses before crashing on the house occupied by the Gill family. After the bomber crashed, the live mine that it was carrying exploded and this is what caused the unintentional, but spectacular damage.



FIRST AMERICAN CASUALTY

The first American military officer killed in the war was Air Corps Captain, Robert M. Losey. While in Norway in 1940, on a meteorological mission, the country was invaded by Germany. Anxious to observe the front line fighting, Losey was caught in an air-raid on the town of Domras. Sheltering in the mouth of a tunnel, he was killed instantly by shrapnel from a German bomb.

RAF BIGGIN HILL

The most famous of the fighter stations that took part in the Battle of Britain. Situated on a small rise on the North Downs of Kent just south of London it achieved fame on May 15, 1940, when its fighter aircraft shot down its 1,000th victim, a feat not rivalled by any other fighter station. The first of the thousand was a Dornier 17 shot down in November 1939, the last a FW-109. To celebrate the 1,000th, a kill shared by French pilot Rene Mouchotte and Englishman Jack Charles, Vickers, the makers of the Spitfire, threw a fabulous party for all Biggin Hill pilots at Grosvenor House in London. Everyone of importance from the Air Staff down to the chorus girls from the Windmill Theatre were invited. That night, around thirty London taxi drivers volunteered to give the pilots and their guests a free ride home. The station became the home for short periods of time to many famous pilots including Douglas Bader, Stanford Tuck and Sailor Milan. During the course of the Battle of Britain a total of 1,736 enemy aircraft were destroyed by pilots from Biggin Hill. Losses to the RAF were 915 aircraft destroyed. In the specially built Chapel of Remembrance are the names of 453 pilots from fifty-two squadrons from eleven countries, killed in action. On June 18, 1940, Winston Churchill gave his famous speech to the House of Commons, ending his speech with "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour'".

LEGLISS PILOTS

The famous Douglas Bader was not the only legless pilot to engage the enemy from Biggin Hill and other RAF Airfields. A lesser known pilot, Colin Hodgson, started his war service in the Royal Navy in 1939 as a trainee pilot in the Fleet Air Arm. On May 12, while flying a Tiger Moth he was involved in a mid-air collision with another Tiger Moth the result of which he lost both legs to amputation. After many months learning to walk again on 'tin legs' he received a letter of support from Douglas Bader. From that moment on Colin was determined to become a Spitfire pilot. Eventually he was allowed back into the Fleet Air Arm as a ground control officer. Finding this rather boring he applied for entry into the Royal Air Force. His application was granted and soon he found himself serving in airfields in South-West England. In February, 1942, he flew a Tiger Moth for the first time since his accident. Then he was upgraded to a Proctor, then to a Swordfish. In the middle of April he qualified as a pilot. On September 19, 1942, he climbed into a Spitfire for his first solo flight in this type of plane, a fulfilment of his most cherished dream. In an operational sortie over northern France from Hawkinge he suffered oxygen failure and was forced to belly-land his Spit on the nearest green field. Badly injured about the face he woke up in a German hospital near St Omar realizing that he now was a prisoner-of-war. Soon he was nursed back to a reasonable state of health and put on a train for Dulag Luft P.O.W. camp near Frankfurt. Eventually he was repatriated to England in exchange for German P.O.W.s held there. Back in England again he was put under the watchful eye of the plastic surgeon Archie McIndoe at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead. After the war and after various jobs on 'civvy street' Colin met and married June Hunter a fashion model in July 1949. After she died he married a French woman, Georgina. Flight Lieutenant Colin 'Hoppy' Hodgkinson died aged 76 having achieved 2 kills. He is survived by Georgina.

VICHY AIR ATTACKS ON GIBRALTAR

On September 24-25, 1940, the Vichy-controlled French Air Force attacked British military installations at Gibraltar dropping 600 tons of bombs on the fortress but caused minimal damage. This was in reprisal for the British naval attack on French warships at Mers-el-Kabir on July 3, 1940, and for the attempted occupation of Dakar on September 23rd. After this attack, a total of 1,400 Gibraltarian women and children were evacuated to England mostly to the Wandsworth area of London. The Vichy Government of Pétain broke off diplomatic relations with Britain because of the attack on Mers-el-Kabir and urged a declaration of war against Britain. The French World War II air ace, Colonel Rene Fonck, had organized some two hundred Vichy French pilots who were prepared to join Germany in the fight against Britain. Eventually the idea of war with Britain was rejected by Foreign Minister Paul Baudouin who said "War with Britain would worsen France's already pitiful condition".

THE ALTMARK INCIDENT

The Altmark was a 13,580 ton tanker and supply ship serving the German battleship Graf Spee. Survivors from the nine ships sunk by the Graf Spee were now Prisoners of War on the Altmark. On February 16, 1940, after a hectic search by The Royal Navy, the Altmark was located in the Jossing Fjord on the southern tip of Norway where she had taken refuge from the pursuing British destroyers. In violation of international law, the British destroyer HMS Cossack (Captain Philip Vian) entered the Fjord and with an armed party boarded the Altmark. After a brief skirmish, in which seven German sailors were killed as they attempted to lower a boat to escape, the crew was overpowered and 299 British prisoners freed. Some members of the Altmark's crew were fired upon as they fled across the ice during the boarding. It was this incident that caused Hitler to accelerate his plans for his occupation of Norway, believing that the British would not respect Norwegian neutrality. The Altmark was later converted back to a tanker under the name Uckermark.

On November 30, 1942, while anchored in the harbour at Yokohama, Japan, the Uckermark sank after a huge explosion ripped the vessel apart while the crew were having lunch. The cause of the explosion was thought to be a spark from tools used by a repair gang working near the fuel tanks. Forty-three crewmen from the Uckermark died plus an unknown number of Chinese and Japanese labourers working on the deck. Anchored nearby and also sunk by the explosion was the Australian passenger liner Nankin and the German raider Thor which had captured the Nankin when only five days out from Fremantle en route to Colombo. Thirteen of the crew from the Thor also died.

MY FELLOW AMERICANS ... LET'S GO HOME!

In May, 1940, the US Ambassador to London, Joseph Kennedy, urged the 4,000 or so Americans living in Britain to pack up and go home. This appalled his President, Franklin Roosevelt, by his pessimism about Britain's chances and his sympathy with Hitler's Germany. Over seventy responded to this plea by joining the British Home Guard instead! Called the 1st American Squadron of the Home Guard, it was led by General Wade H. Heise. Kennedy, who told Roosevelt he expected Germany to win the war, was hostile to the whole idea, fearing that they would all be shot as 'francs-tireurs' when the Germans occupied London. The British Home Guard was abolished on December 3, 1944.

BOMBER COMMAND'S UNPLANNED FIRST KILL

In the first British air attack on a mainland German population centre, 36 RAF planes bombed the rail-yards of Monchen-Gladbach, near Dusseldorf, on May 10, 1940. The raid killed just one person ... an Englishwoman! Three RAF bombers were lost.

A FLIGHT SCHOOL TAUGHT A LESSON (August 16, 1940)

Two German JU 88 bombers dropped their bombs on the RAF airfield at Brize Norton in Oxfordshire, setting fire to 46 fully-fuelled parked Oxford trainers of No. 2 Service Flying Training School. Six others were badly damaged, as were 11 Hurricanes parked nearby.



The Hurricane. (The first Hurricanes sent to France during the winter of 1939/40 had 2-bladed propellers. They were replaced by the three bladed version before the "Battle of Britain" started. Metal, instead of fabric covered wings were also introduced)

C.O.R.B. (Established June, 1940)

The Children's Overseas Reception Board successfully organized the evacuation of 1,530 children to Canada, 353 to South Africa, 577 to Australia, 202 to New Zealand and 838 to the USA. Within ten days of its opening, CORB received 211,000 applications. Disaster overtook them on September 17, 1940, when the ship City of Benares was torpedoed while on its way to Canada. Seventy seven children died in the lifeboats from exposure while awaiting rescue. (See Maritime Disasters, 1940.) About this time over 1.4 million children and young mothers were evacuated from the larger cities in Britain to safer havens in small country towns and villages. From London a total of 241,000 children were evacuated.

LUFTWAFFE BOMBS ITS OWN COUNTRY

On May 10, 1940, three Luftwaffe planes, HE 111s, bombed the German town of Freiburg by mistake, killing 24 people including thirteen children. In overcast weather the crews thought they were over the French town of Dijon. The fragments of the bombs found later, confirmed the bombs as German, but German propaganda claimed the raid to be a terror attack by the French Air Force, justifying subsequent bombing of French towns.

(The first 'terror bombing' of population centres was on January 29, 1932, when Japanese bombers destroyed Chapei, an eight square mile suburb of Shanghai in which over a thousand died. On March 3rd the fighting ended and Japanese military forces moved into the city.)

UNIQUE BRITISH SUBMARINE CAPTURE

The only British submarine to be captured at sea was the HMS Seal. On May 5, 1940, she was damaged while laying mines in the Kattegat (between Denmark and Sweden). Attempting to reach Sweden, the badly damaged HMS Seal was spotted by two Arado seaplanes which proceeded to drop bombs around the wallowing submarine. Realizing that the ship would inevitably be sunk, the captain, Lt. Cmdr. Lonsdale, surrendered by waving a white sheet from the conning tower. One of the Arados then landed on the water and took the captain on board. A radio message to a nearby German fishing trawler on submarine patrol, the Franken, soon had the entire crew of HMS Seal on board as P.O.W.s.

FIRST MAJOR WARSHIP SINKING OF THE WAR

The first major warship sunk by air attack during wartime was the German light cruiser Konigsberg. Skuas from HMS Ark Royal flew 330 miles on April 9, 1940, from the Naval Air Station at Hatston in the Orkney's to dive-bomb the ship anchored in Bergen harbour after it was damaged by Norwegian shore batteries. The Konigsberg, unable to defend herself against the Skuas was sunk by two fatal bomb hits.

OPERATION 'FELIX' ABANDONED

The German code name for the capture of Gibraltar, the Canary Islands and the Cape Verde Islands. Issued on Directive No. 18 by Hitler on November 12, 1940, it was never put into operation, and in January, 1941, the plan was shelved partly because of the refusal of Spain to join the Axis. Spain was in no position to fight another war, the civil war of 1936-39 had left the country a shambles, many of her cities in ruins.

BRITISH AIR RAID CASUALTIES: LATE 1940

During the month of November, 1940, a total of 4,588 British civilians were killed in air raids by the German Luftwaffe. Another 6,202 were injured. This was a decrease of the previous month, October, when 6,334 civilians lost their lives and 8,695 were injured. In December, 1940, this had decreased to 3,793 killed and 5,244 injured. In the last three month period of 1940, 44,717 men, women and children had been killed in Luftwaffe bombing raids.

DANGER! UXB

These ominous signs (Unexploded Bomb) sprouted up on many streets in London during the Blitz. Many enemy bombs failed to explode on impact with the ground and many were of the delayed action type set to detonate hours, even days, later. One of the most dangerous assignments was the disposal of these weapons. Bomb disposal squads from the Army, Navy and Air Force travelled the length and width of Great Britain to find and render safe these unexploded bombs. In the early months of the war the life expectancy of these real-life heroes, who risked their lives every day, was about ten weeks. A large number, believed to be around 100, of unexploded bombs still lie buried deep under the streets of London. As their fuses would have long since corroded, some borough councils decided on a policy of 'Let sleeping dogs lie'. Many awards for bravery were given out to the bomb disposal personnel. The Royal Navy received 22 George Crosses and 127 George Medals. The Royal Engineers were awarded 13 GCs and 114 GMs and the Royal Air Force 7 GCs and 14 GMs.

DUNKIRK (May 26-June 4, 1940)

In the now-legendary ten day evacuation from Dunkirk 'Operation Dynamo', a fleet of 861 ships and small boats set sail from ports around Britain in a desperate attempt to save the Allied troops trapped on the beaches. Within ten days a total of 224,585 British soldiers, exhausted, demoralised and hungry, were picked up and brought home. At the same time, 112,546 French and Belgian troops were also saved. Unfortunately, about 40,000 French soldiers had to be left behind, causing a certain amount of bitterness among the troops. This withdrawal was made possible by the brave stand taken by the French First Army troops in holding the perimeter against the onslaught of the German Wehrmacht. These soldiers all became prisoners of war. A total of 231 rescue boats and six destroyers were sunk during the operation. The RAF Fighter Command lost 106 planes compared to the 258 lost to the Luftwaffe. The Dunkirk evacuation was one of the most dramatic withdrawals in British military

history and when it ended on June 4, the army had left behind 63,897 vehicles including 289 tanks, 11,000 machine guns and 1,200 artillery pieces, all the equipment of virtually the entire British Expeditionary Force. When Churchill addressed Parliament on June 4 he said "We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory, wars are not won by evacuations".

During the evacuation from Dunkirk, the big mistake the Germans made was the use of the Stuka dive bomber. If the Luftwaffe had used horizontal bombing instead of dive bombing, the losses to the British Expeditionary Force would have been far greater.



British and French troops await evacuation on the 'Small Boats'

THE STUKA DIVE BOMBER

The Junkers JU-87B Stuka was designed by Hans Pohlmann and first flew in 1935, ironically, powered by a Rolls Royce engine. Future models were powered by a Junkers Jumo 1,200hp engine. The spats over the wheels were fitted with air activated sirens which gave out a terrifying high pitched scream. Attacks were carried out at an 85 degree angle to give pinpoint accuracy on whatever target they aimed at. Top speed of the Stuka was 237 mph (380 kmh) at 13,000 feet.



The Stuka Dive Bomber.

CHURCHILL ORATION AT ITS BEST ... OR NOT?

After the Dunkirk evacuation, Churchill delivered his memorable 'WE shall never surrender' speech to the House of Commons. Later in the day, the speech was broadcast by the BBC to the rest of the world. What the listeners didn't know was that the speech was read by 37 year old actor Norman Shelley of the BBC repertory staff who impersonated Churchill's voice. Winston had said "I am rather busy, get some actor to do it".

BREECHES BUOY LIFE-SAVING RECORD

Owing to a navigational error, on October 17, 1940, two British destroyers, HMS Fame and HMS Ashanti, ran aground in fog and drizzle at Whilburn on the river Tyne. HMS Fame caught fire as fuel pipes in the engine room ruptured. Thinking that the invasion had started, defence lookout posts on shore raised the alarm and at 5am National Fire Service crews and Volunteer Life Brigade units from South Shields and Sunderland arrived at the scene. In about five hours a total of 272 crewmen from the two ships were brought ashore by Breeches Buoy thus establishing an all-time world life-saving record for a rescue of this type. The two destroyers were eventually refloated, repaired and returned to service.

BARRAGE BALLOONS

A comforting sight to many during the war years. "a plastic bag filled with hydrogen" was how one news reporter described them. Sixty feet in length and thirty feet high when fully inflated with 20,000 cubic feet of hydrogen, these balloons seemed to hang from the sky around every city in Britain. The risk of a lightning strike was a big worry to the ground operating crews. Just after midnight on July 26, 1940, a total of 28 balloons in the Bristol, Avonmouth and Filton area were struck by lightning and brought crashing to the ground in flames. In late September, 1939, a severe storm tore loose many balloons from their moorings causing around sixty of them to drift as far away as Sweden. Another problem was RAF planes from surrounding training schools, striking the balloon cables. This happened on a number of occasions with fatal results for the pilots.

OPERATION 'OUTWARD'

The code name given to the British plan to attack Germany by small cheap hydrogen filled balloons 2.4 metres in diameter. In all, 99,142 of these balloons were launched against Germany, the first from a launching site near Felixtowe in Suffolk on March 20, 1942. A total of 45,599 of these balloons, launched from France, carried a trailing steel wire intended to strike power lines thus causing a short circuit. Also attached to many of the balloons was a 2.7 kilo bag filled with flammable material which would burst into flames when over the target and start fires in Germany's dense forests. After the French surrender the idea was shelved. The last balloons were launched from Britain on September 4, 1944. Outwards greatest success was on July 12, 1942, when a wire trailing balloon struck a 110,000 volt power line at the Bohlen Power Station near Leipzig causing a fire which completely destroyed the power station buildings.

Moonlight Sonata

On the night of November 14/15, 1940, the German Luftwaffe, under the code-name 'Moonlight Sonata', bombed the English city of Coventry. Founded in 1043, the city had a population of a quarter of a million in 1940. Industries in and around Coventry included the Armstrong Whitworth aircraft factory and the Hillman, Daimler and Standard motor vehicle factories. The raid, personally led by General Albert Kesselring, destroyed 50,749 houses and shops and killed 554 of its citizens and wounded 865. The 14th century St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry's most famous building, was destroyed. Churchill knew beforehand, through Ultra intercepts, that Coventry was about to be bombed, but to evacuate the population or to engage in great strength the bomber fleet as it approached, would have alerted the Germans that their Enigma security system, "My most secret service" as Churchill called it, had been penetrated. This tragic decision that the British Prime Minister had to make was the only way to protect Ultra, one of the most important weapons of victory in the whole war.



The Ruins of Coventry Cathedral.

LIFEBOAT SURVIVOR RECORD

Poon Lim was a steward aboard the British merchant navy vessel the SS Ben Lomand. En route from Port Said via Cape Town to Paramaribo in Dutch Guiana (Surinam) in South America, the ship was torpedoed by the German U-boat U-172 on November 23, 1942, off the coast of Brazil. Swimming in the water, Poon Lim spotted an empty life raft which he reached and climbed in. With no other survivors in sight he soon realized he was alone and drifting with the ocean swell. Keeping alive with fish he caught with a crude fishing line and hook, he eventually was rescued by a Portuguese fishing boat which took him to Belim Para in Brazil, 1,101 kilometres from where his ship sank. There, the British consul arranged for him to return to Britain. Back in Britain he was awarded the British Empire Medal and the Ben Line Shipping Company presented him with a gold watch. Poon Lim was the sole survivor of the forty-seven man crew and now holds the world's record as the longest lifeboat survivor, 133 days.