To Group Captain
Harris. DFC.

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my article, so here it is:
a piece of RAF history.

The Raid on Wilhelmshaven on 18th December, 1939,

by Nos. 9, 37 and 149 Squadrons of the R.A.F.

by

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1. Background

No. 149 Squadron Mildenhall, was in No. 3 Group. This Group, equipped with the latest and best armed bomber in the Royal Air Force, was earmarked for day bombing which included the task of attacking the German Navy as and when found at sea.

2. Training

No. 3 Group had, until immediately before the War, been a night bomber Group armed with the Handley Page Harrow. Our training then had been totally different, with no formation flying, so vital to survival in daylight operations. Almost overnight we became a day bomber Group, but formation flying was not our forté. This was apparent on long distance flights by the whole Group, supposedly in formation, over France shortly before the War, with the idea of building up French morale. Only one Squadron, No. 214, formated well; otherwise it looked more like a race than a formation flight. I was then a Flight Commander in 214 Squadron. Ours was the only Squadron in the Group that could fly in perfect formation. Our Commanding Officer was an old friend of mine, under whom I had served in Palestine in the middle Thirties. The Group did three flights to Marseilles and one to Bordeaux. No. 214 Squadron was on all of them, and in one case we led the whole Group, but the other Squadrons were scattered all over the sky with little semblance of any formation. There were basically two schools of thought: close formation relying on concentrated firepower and mutual support, and loose formation relying on manoeuvrability but at the sacrifice of firepower and mutual support. The latter school unfortunately ignored the immensely superior manoeuvrability and speed of the fighter. No. 214 Squadron adhered to the former school.

3. Phoney War

Until the invasion of France in 1940, we in the Royal Air Force suffered from what is known as the Phoney War. This is not fully understood today. Our directive was simple but silly. No civilian might be killed or injured and only naval ships attacked at sea. We were virtually not allowed to drop our bombs on land. Transgression could, and did, involve being taken off flying and put in an Operations Room. This was before Churchill came to power. A friend of mine was doing a sweep in the Heligoland Bight when he was fired at by minesweepers, he did a run up at 10,000 feet and dropped his bombs, fortunately missing his target. A few days later I happened to pass the A.O.C.'s office and I asked him what he was doing there; he said, "I am waiting to receive a rocket", and I said "What on earth for?" and he told me the story. He was taken off flying and put in an Operations Room as a punishment for attacking ships that had fired on him because they were apparently requisitioned trawlers and not, ab initio as it were, naval ships. This shows the extreme punishment that could be inflicted on people who transgressed.

4. Squadron Independence

Our Squadrons had their own ideas and whimsies about formation flying, and Group Headquarters laid on no Group Formation Training, a fatal error. Lessons of the pre-War French flights were ignored. However, it laid on active operations in which Squadrons which had never before flown together were sent into action. Some Squadrons actually had Commanding Officers of the 1914-18 War vintage, who did no flying whatever. I started the War with one, but forunately he left shortly before we started our operations in December, when Wing Commander Kellett arrived and transformed the Squadron - just in time. None of these non-flying types should have been commanding Squadrons; our High Command was at fault. You cannot lead a Squadron if you cannot fly the aeroplane with which it is armed. When this is clearly

understood one realises why the other Squadrons did not survive, and No. 149 Squadron did, on 18th December, 1939. No. 149 had a Commanding Officer who was a brilliant leader and who knew his job; the other Squadrons did not and they had Flight Commanders leading who, though able leaders, were inexperienced and did not stick with the formation. The result was that our formation was weakened and 149 Squadron, with three aircraft of No. 9 Squadron, ably led by Flight Lt. Peter Grant, was left alone to fight the ultimate battle.

5. Armament

Most Wellington 1's had Vickers turrets which were useless. Sights did not follow the guns and the ammunition belts stuck in the ducts. But soon Fraser Nash turrets were fitted in the 1A's including a Fraser Nash retractable under-turret, a "Dustbin", which rotated through 365 degrees and when firing aft could fire two degrees above the horizontal which was very useful, backing up the rear gunner against stern attacks. All turrets, front, rear and mid under, had two .303 Brownings firing 1,000 rounds per minute; and the 1,000 round belts, one to each gun, were fed in efficiently. Our gunners were volunteer ground crew and not well trained: we had no Gunnery Leaders then and the only training they had was when they were able to come up with us when not working on the ground. I was posted to 149 Squadron about one month before the War and I am bound to say that I was not happy with what I found. I had, as stated earlier, a non-flying Commanding Officer and my flight had done little formation flying. I brought with me my own crew and also another crew, Jimmy Briden as Captain and Billy Brown as Second Pilot. Looking back it seems that we were posted there to hot up the Squadron's formation flying and prepare it for battle. We were particularly lucky in that Archie Fraser Nash used to drive up fairly frequently in his Bentley and fly with me, testing his own turrets and guns. We also had a partner of his who came up and did much testing with us. By 3rd December, when Kellett led 24

Wellingtons to Heligoland we were in fairly good form. We bombed through heavy flak, but sank only one small ship. Our gunners were moderately trained, and with the turrets and guns working well, we were ready for battle. On this raid we saw but few fighters and Kellett led well but a little bit too fast, so I could not keep up with him and when we got back he asked me if he had led all right and I said "Go a little slower next time". This is a particularly important point as, had we not gone on that raid together, and had he not realised the need to fly slower so that I could keep up with him, he might have led too fast on the Wilhelmshaven raid with the result that 149 Squadron and the three aircraft of 9 Squadron would have been annihilated. On the Heligoland raid of 3rd December, N2980 was flown by Flight Lieutenant Stewart, a Canadian. Although the flak was heavy at Heligoland we all survived and we were not attacked by fighters. I see from my log book that I took over N2980 on 10th December and flew it four times with my crew before 18th December, by which time my gunners were used to the guns, could fire them well and operate the turrets efficiently, thanks to Fraser Nash, even if we were not particularly crack shots. Now we come to the big day.

6. Wilhelmshaven, 18th December, 1939

Briefing: On the evening of 17th December my Commanding Officer and I were summoned to Group Headquarters together with the Commanding Officers of 37 and 9 Squadrons to be briefed, for a Group Operation the next day, a sweep in the Heligoland Bight area searching for the German fleet. Kellett was to lead. As a comparative newcomer he had never had the chance to practice formation flying and bombing with the leaders of 9 or 37 Squadrons, to impose his will on them, or formulate any plan for bombing or fighting either as a Group or by Squadrons or by Flights; or to discuss our tactics in the face of fighter attack. A brilliant pilot, no better leader could have been chosen for this impossible task and our Squadron, 149, had the honour of providing nine aircraft and leading the whole Group, totalling 24 aircraft.

Kellett had Lieutenant Commander Rotherham with him, a Fleet Air Arm Officer, to identify enemy ship and aim the bombs provided the targets were not too close to land. In the event there was a battleship there, but moored in the dock. At the briefing I was told that Peter Grant was to fly with me; this was the first time that we had ever flown together and my parting words to him were "Stay close to me whatever happens", and this, fortunately for us all, he did most ably.

7. The Formation and Outward Run

Our twenty-four Wellingtons were divided into four flights of six aircraft each, Kellett leading with six of 149, and I in N2980 on his starboard side with three of my own flight and three of 9 Squadron's led by Grant. We were in boxes of six stepped up in order not to mask our guns, not an easy position for Grant. On Kellett's port side were six aircraft of 9 Squadron and 37 Squadron were tail-end-charlies, obviously the most vulnerable position, unless they kept very close and flew above Kellett. To have flown underneath and behind him would have masked the fire of his rear gunners and been obviously dangerous. I cannot remember if there was any discussion on this matter but all I know is that 37 Squadron did not stay with us for long. I will discuss, at the end of this article, the difficulties of formation flying of the kind we were doing. 37 Squadron were flying in pairs, not in "Vic" formation of three like the rest of us, but in line astern stepped down: it was more manoeuvrable but had obvious disadvantages since the rear guns could shoot down their own people. Only one aircraft of 37 Squadron returned home, "Cheese" Lemon, who lowered his flaps by mistake over the target instead of opening his bomb doors and, having leapt suddenly into the air, descended at great speed to the sea level and managed to weave his way home in spite of heavy fighter attacks. Had he not made this mistake he would probably have been wiped out with the rest of his Squadron. I kept very close to Kellett all the way out, and ensured that Grant kept close to me. Kellett flew at

exactly the right speed so I had no difficulty in formating with him. The other Squadrons seemed to be far away and running their own show in an independent, but dangerous sort of way. The further they were away the nearer I kept to my leader.

8. The Engagement

Kellett led us over the Heligoland Bight but saw nothing and then he steered for Wilhelmshaven. On the run in at 15,000 feet there was heavy flak, accurate for height, but fortunately trailing behind us and as it kept catching up, my rear gunner, Jimmy Mullineaux, kept saying "Hurry up, Sir its catching up on us". Meanwhile, the fighters were collecting above us like flies waiting for us to clear the flak before they attacked. With my eyes glued on Kellett, I saw nothing. He told me on our return that there was a Pocket Battleship in dock but we could not attack it because of explicit instructions to this effect: no risk of bombs on land. The Phoney War!

9. Once clear of the flak, Kellett and I were on our own with ten aeroplanes. There should have been twelve but two returned early about half-an-hour out from England. The other two formations of 9 and 37 Squadrons had disappeared. One of Kellett's four aircraft went down in flames early on so the battle was finally joined for some thirty minutes between our nine aircraft and the Germans; we were entirely on our own and N2980 behaved immaculately, as did my crew. I kept as close to Kellett as possible and Grant clung to me like a limpet, flying really well. So our nine aircraft presented a concentrated but unattractive target with nine rear turrets and nine "Dustbins" to contend with, the front turrets had, of course, very little shooting and, I think fired only once.

10. Wellington N2980

The events inside N2980 were exciting. I, of course, saw almost nothing, my eyes being fixed on Kellett, survival depending on maintaining formation. My second pilot, Flying Officer Sandy Innes, a splendid Scotsman, was at the Astrodome to control our gunners. This he did magnificently, like a commentator at a football match, so I knew what was going on. My rear gunner, Aircraftman Jimmy Mullineaux, eventually fired all his ammunition, 1,000 rounds per gun; so Sandy nipped down to him with short spare belts of 300 rounds each so that Jimmy was able to keep firing one gun while loading the other in between attacks. Sergeant Austin, my Navigator, manned the "Dustbin". A.C. Doxey in the front turret had a dull time, except once.

11. Fire Control, Turrets and Guns of N2980

While I could see nothing I knew exactly what was happening from Innes's narrative. As far as I remember all our guns worked well, unlike those of some other Squadrons which I believe froze at 15,000 feet. Those of N2980 worked perfectly in the Fraser Nash turrets; we had tested them on the way out and I had done a lot of air firing with Fraser Nash, to whose turrets we undoubtedly owed our lives.

12. Bf. 110 Attack on Kellett

I did, however, see one fighter, a Messerschmitt 110 which suddenly shot across my bows in a vertical turn doing a complicated and well executed attack on Kellett. It seemed to black out the sky and, considering how close I was to Kellett, his attack was brilliantly timed not to crash into me or any of my other aircraft, I do not know how he did it. Naturally, our six front gunners, who had as yet fired no shots in anger, all let fly and he went down pouring out smoke. A.C. Doxey in my front turret had his foot grazed by a bullet. Naturally, all our front gunners claimed a victory and we were convinced of this. We now know from the German records that no Bf. 110 was

destroyed, although some were damaged, as ours certainly was. But that pilot certainly deserved to survive.

13. The crew of N2980 fought superbly. My Navigator, Sergeant Watson, later a Wing Commander, manned the mid under "Dustbin" retractable turret which fired through a useful 365 degrees, and Jimmy Mullineaux, my Rear Gunner, got an immediate and well merited D.F.M. for his efforts. I enjoyed writing his citation. Sandy Innes was decorated later but sadly did not survive long. I was fortunate with my crew. Flying with them was a pleasure.

14. The Run Home - Flying Officer Jimmy Briden - No Self Sealing Tanks

Flying number 3 on my port side was Flying Officer Jimmy Briden with his Second Pilot Billy Brown, who was posted to 149 Squadron from 214 Squadron with me. As soon as we were clear of the fighters I was able to take stock of my flight. All seemed O.K., except one, poor Briden; I could see petrol streaming from his port tank. Our tanks were not self sealing. Finally, some fifty miles off our coast his engines failed. I followed him down and he ditched successfully. I got a D.F. fix on him and I did a run over the aircraft low down and released my dinghy which was situated at the rear of the starboard engine nacelle. I did this in case his had failed. The aircraft was still floating. However, it was not intended that the dinghy should be released in the air, only after ditching; so, to my horror, it stuck on my tailplane and for a moment I thought I was going to join Briden. However, apart from severe vibration all was well so, having done all I could, I tottered home and landed at the first aerodrome I could find. N2980 was but little damaged; it had acquitted itself well but poor Briden and Brown were not found, the whole crew was lost. I fear their dinghy must have been holed by a bullet, and the sea was cold.

15. Since our guns and turrets were of vital importance, it was my policy, as far as possible, to give each crew its own aircraft to get used to them. They had to know their guns and make them work. Having annexed N2980 for myself and flown it four times, air firing and bombing before 18th December, my crew were completely integrated with the aircraft and its guns.

16. The Inquest, a Light Interlude

The star turns that day in my crew were Mullineaux and Innes. The others merely had fewer opportunities. A few days later the C in C Bomber Command, Ludlow-Hewitt, came to see our Squadron in person. This was quite an occasion. Our A.O.C., Baldwin, the Station Commander, Franky Coleman, Kellett, and others all crowded into Kellett's office while Ludlow-Hewitt, surrounded by a galaxy of Staff Officers, asked questions. Star turn, Aircraftsman first-class, Jimmy Mullineaux, was brought in so that the C in C, Ludlow-Hewitt, could talk to this hero, which indeed he was (I was very proud of him), but after a time it was all too much for him; the emminent "Brass Hats", the questioning and the Braid so affected him that my highly strung, modest, little Jimmy suddenly said, full of courtesy and respect to the last, "May I faint please", which he promptly did, into the arms of Sandy Innes, who carried him out. He was but an AC1 and very young, one of the first D.F.M.'s of the War. Later I took him and my whole crew with me to reform 7 Squadron with Stirlings and when we parted he was unfortunately shot down over Germany and was a Prisoner of War for the last half of the War.

Notes on Formation Flying

A few notes on formation flying are relevant. Kellett was accused of flying too fast by the survivors of the other Squadrons. This is nonsense. He flew perfectly; I stayed with him without difficulty. He did not go too fast for me. The fact is that the others were untrained in formation flying and were not led by their own Commanding Officers, who in turn had not

discussed, or practiced formation flying with Kellett. It was like trying to form a football team of people who had never met each other before and had never played together as a team, and had different ideas about the rules.

The leader of a flight must know the difficulties facing each individual in his flight. Leading my box of six stepped up I had to understand the feelings and difficulties of the other five pilots. Kellett leading his lot had the task of flying in such a way that I could keep in touch with him. Neither too fast nor too slow. In a turn, it is obvious that the aircraft on the inside of the turn are going slower than those on the outside. If the leader flies too slowly the aircraft on the inside may stall and fall out of the sky. If he turns too fast the aircraft on the outside cannot keep up, while the only aircraft that can follow him without much difficulty are the tail-end-charlies, who, of course, are going at the same speed as the leader. A large formation can obviously be turned only very slowly, and the bigger it is, the slower must be the turn. Had we attacked the German ships in Wilhelmshaven, we should have done it in close formation so that our bombs would have straddled the ship like a carpet. Individual bombing by Squadrons or Flights would have broken up the formation and would have been extremely dangerous because the fighters would have jumped us. Once formation was lost it was not easy to regain it. A single aircraft can do this by opening the throttle and belting ahead to catch up but the leader of a flight cannot easily do this; he has to keep his flight together and fly a bit faster, but not so fast that the formation disintegrates. Knowing this I kept close to Kellett from the moment we took off until we finally broke up after the engagement. There is no doubt that the other two Squadrons left us because they were untrained. One cannot blame them for this because we had been given no previous opportunity to fly together, and Kellett had no chance to discuss the matter with them and impose his will upon them as a leader. Formation flying requires the highest discipline, skill and practice.

On the run out I saw 37 Squadron, as it seemed to me, almost on the skyline, they were a long way off, not practising close formation flying on Kellett, essential for survival. So they were wiped out except for "Cheese" Lemon who was lucky to get home, the only survivor of his Squadron. We survived simply because Kellett's leading was immaculate, we kept in close formation, our guns worked and our two losses in 149 Squadron were almost certainly due to having no self sealing tanks.