

IN WORLD WAR II THE FIRST RAID ON OCCUPIED EUROPE MADE BY AN AMERICAN ARMY AIR FORCE CREW WAS MADE FROM RAF SWANTON MORLEY

Most of this article was extracted from *Low Level from Swanton Morley* by Martin W Bowman¹

The arrival of 15th Light Bombardment Squadron and the planning of the raid

The United States formally declared war on Nazi Germany on 11 December 1941. General Henry H ("Hap") Arnold was in command of the USAAF at this time, and it was he who directed its expansion into the largest and most powerful Air Force in the world. The primary strategic bombing force against Germany was to be the Eighth Air Force and he nominated Gen. Carl Spaatz to command it, with Brig. Gen. Ira C Eaker to command its Bomber Command.

Now Gen. Arnold believed that the 4th of July 1942 would be an ideal day for the USAAF to open its strategic bombing campaign against Germany, and this was approved by President Roosevelt. But Gen. Carl Spaatz did not have any of his heavy Bomber Command groups ready for operational missions. The only suitable unit in a reasonably advanced state of readiness was the 15th Light Bombardment Squadron.

This squadron had crossed the Atlantic by sea, arriving at Newport, Wales on 14 May 1942. They then went by train to RAF Grafton Underwood in Northamptonshire, the first of four bases that the squadron would occupy during its stay in England. There they were greeted by the RAF CO, and by Brig. Gen. Eaker, representing the Eighth Air force. The latter said that their arrival "marked the first time in history that any American fighting unit had set foot in England." However, this was a frustrating time for the 15th for initially they had no aircraft and, hardly had they taken delivery of their DB-7 aircraft, than they suffered two fatal accidents.

Note that the Douglas A-20/DB-7 Havoc was a family of American aircraft, and that the RAF called their bomber version the "Boston".

After several moves and more frustrations the 15th arrived in Swanton Morley on 25th June, where, under the command of Capt. Charles Kegelman, they started to train with 226 Squadron RAF in their Bostons. It was soon apparent that most of the senior American pilots were very experienced, and that both squadrons had much to learn from each other. The question was: "Was the 15th ready for their first mission?"

The decision

Gen. Arnold must have been very keen to see the 15th Light Bombardment Squadron go into action on 4th July, despite the fact that it had only arrived at Swanton Morley on 25th June. Of course, everyone was well aware of the emotional significance of this date, and of the worldwide publicity that it would attract. So, on 3rd July, Generals Spaatz and Eaker accompanied Gen. Eisenhower to Swanton Morley, to see how the training with 266 Squadron was progressing, and to meet the American pilots who were being considered for this mission. As a result of the eagerness of the crews and the confidence in the ability of the American pilots expressed by Wg. Cdr. Lynn the C.O. of 226 Squadron, under whose eye they had trained, it was decided that six crews of the 15th Squadron would, on 4th July, join six crews of 226 Squadron RAF in a daylight attack at minimum altitude against four German aerodromes in Holland. All the aircraft were RAF Bostons.

¹ Bowman, Martin W *Low Level from Swanton Morley*, Chapter Six: The First American Raid from England, Air Research Publications, Walton-on-Thames (1995)

The generals met and shook hands with all the American crews who were going on the following day's sortie. It caused them some embarrassment to see such a fuss made out of what the crews of 226 Squadron considered to be just another mission.

The Raid on 4th July

Full details of the raid are given by Bowman. The twelve Bostons were divided into four flights of three aircraft, each flight being assigned a different airfield as its target. These were De Kooy, Bergen Alkmaar, Valkenburg and Haamstede. In his autobiography² Gen. Eisenhower says, "To mark our entry into the European fighting I took time to visit the crews immediately before the take off, and talked with the survivors after their return."

At De Kooy, heavy flak prevented all three Bostons from bombing and the Boston piloted by Lt. Jack Loehrl crashed on the beach. (I have recently found an extraordinary article in a veterans' newspaper called the *Windscream*³ which tells what happened to Loehrl's bombardier/navigator, Marshall Draper, after they crashed.) The aircraft piloted by Capt. Kegelman had an amazing escape. His starboard engine was hit and the propeller flew off. His right wing-tip hit the ground and the fuselage actually bounced on the surface of the airfield. Despite this damage, Kegelman's aircraft machine-gunned a flak-tower before retuning to Swanton Morley on one engine.

At Bergen Alkmaar, one American aircraft was shot down over the airfield and one RAF aircraft was shot down by a fighter on the way home. There were no losses at Valkenburg but, after an error by the RAF pilot who was leading the formation, all three aircraft were forced to bring their bombs home. Haamstede was attacked without loss

Tactically speaking, the mission was a failure, at least as far as the American crews were concerned. It was carried out as planned, but only two of the six planes flown by the Eighth Air Force crews dropped their bombs over their assigned targets. The rest of the pilots failed to recognize their objectives in time to attack, or else ran into such stiff opposition that they could not bomb. Two planes were shot down by flak and one was badly damaged. The British lost one plane, evidently as a result of flak damage plus the attentions of the only enemy fighter to make an effective interception that day. But the American losses did not stem entirely from the inexperience of the freshmen crews, although one of the pilots shot down was reported to have taken insufficient evasive action in the flak area. The fact was, that for some reason the mission ran into exceptionally heavy opposition from anti-aircraft batteries, especially at the two northern aerodromes of De Kooy and Haamstede. It even seemed to the surviving crews that the enemy gunners must have been warned in advance by ships in the Channel which had sighted the Bostons on their trip toward the Dutch coast. The RAF leader of the element attacking De Kooy reported encountering the worst flak in his experience.

Gen. Spaatz considered the mission a "stunt" triggered by pressure in the American press, who believed the people of both the United States and Great Britain needed a psychological boost. However, there is no doubting the skill and bravery of Capt. Kegelman. He was promoted to Major and was awarded the American Distinguished Service Cross for his valour on that Fourth of July mission--the first Eighth Air Force airman to receive the nation's second highest combat decoration.

There is a little space left on this page, so let me finish on a lighter note. A member of 226 Squadron wrote in his diary: "The Americans were a really wild lot, but great fun. I was told they played Cowboys and Indians in the woods around Bylaugh Hall – with live ammo!"

² Crusade in Europe: Platform for invasion, p.69

³The story of Marshall Draper, a WWII P.O.W. whose A-20 went down during the first attack on Germany on July 4th 1942. Available on line as: <http://www.eaachapter499.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/2004-04.pdf>