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Robin Holmes *The Battle of Heligoland Bight, 1939. the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe's Baptism of Fire* Grub Street Press - £20.

When it was suggested to me by the editor that I review this book both of us failed to spot the date and assumed that it was a book about the naval battle of the First World War. Of course, it isn't and is instead about the first bombing raids of the Second World War. However, I now have the answer to my GCSE students when they have to write their coursework on "*Why did Britain adopt night area bombing?*"

Robin Holmes came to the history of World War II late. He is an electronic engineer, who lectured at Herriot Watt University in Edinburgh, specializing in remotely operated vehicles, or to the uninitiated, remotely controlled tethered submersibles and it was he that found a Wellington bomber, R for Robert, in Loch Ness in 1978, finally raising it to the surface in 1985. The plane is now restored and is on display at the Brooklands Museum, Weybridge, the only surviving Wimpy that fought in the war out of 11,461 built. Not surprisingly he set out to find out the story, not only of R for Robert and the Wellington bomber, and in the process also the story of how the RAF moved from the stone age of strategic bombing into the only way we could attack Germany for most of the war.

The RAF entered the war convinced that it could bomb by daylight and that if they flew in formation they could fend off the German fighters. They set out to attack the German navy in its harbours in three raids in the first three months of the war: 4 September, 3 December and 14 December. None of these raids was effective, mainly because they were not allowed to bomb ships tied up to wharves as this might result in civilians being killed. Instead they lost 2 Wellingtons on 3 December, and 6 out of 12 on 14 December. The last raid ought to have shown the RAF that daylight bombing against modern fast fighters was not feasible, but the real attempt was on 18 December when 24 Wellingtons of 149, 37 and 9 Squadrons set out to bomb the German naval base at Wilhelmshaven. Two of these turned back early with engine trouble, and of the remaining 22 twelve were shot down. Close formation flying was simply not possible for many of the new pilots, and the defensive fire power of the Wellington was not sufficient to deter most of the Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Me 109s.

What emerges clearly is the need for clear leadership and training, and that in some squadrons this was lacking. Pilots need to train their crews and become accustomed to flying together, and if squadrons were going to fly in close formation this needed to be practiced before meeting the enemy. In most cases neither of these had been done. The results were catastrophic and provided the Germans with an early propaganda victory, conveniently occurring on the same day that the *Graf Spee* scuttled herself outside Montevideo harbour. Goebbels claimed that they had shot down 34 aircraft. However, the British press was just as misleading with headlines such as RAF ROUT NAZI SUPER-FIGHTERS; RAF GETS BEST OF BIGGEST AIR BATTLE OF THE WAR – 12 NAZI PLANES SHOT DOWN.

Bomber Command HQ kept its head firmly in the sand and believed that formation flying was still an effective defence, claiming that the losses were the result of poor leadership by the squadron leaders of 9 and 37 squadrons, who had suffered most of the losses. The AOC 5 Group, a certain Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Harris, told his C-in-C on 2 January 1940 that so long as three bombers were in company in daylight, the pilots "*considered themselves capable of taking on anything.*" That morning a daylight sweep of Heligoland Bight by three



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Wellingtons from 149 Squadron saw two shot down. It was this raid that finally persuaded the powers that be that daylight bombing was useless, and thereafter Bomber Command's heavy bombers were confined to the hours of darkness.

Robin Holmes has completed a vast amount of research into this small but important operation. He has interviewed the survivors, both German and British, and made full use of diaries and squadron records. He has shown us just how naïve the RAF was in 1939, but then so were the Germans, replicating these tactics the following year and suffering precisely the same fate. As so often, plans for war do not survive the first contact with the enemy, and this is just as true of air warfare as it is of land and naval warfare

Robin Brodhurst

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