

THE KING WITH THE NIGHT BOMBERS

Sees Raiders Depart and Arrive

The King, it was announced yesterday, has spent a night at an R.A.F. station in the Bomber Command. He saw heavily loaded Wellingtons take off for Cologne and welcomed their pilots and crews safely back after their successful raid on the German city.

It was midnight when the first crew back entered the brightly-lit intelligence room to make their report. As the little group with their squadron leader, an Australian, at their head entered the King was standing with the senior intelligence officer and Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, Commander-in-Chief of the Bomber Command, and Air Vice-Marshal J. E. A. Baldwin, A.O.C. of the group. To these hardened young veterans of the Bomber Command making a report of hazards undergone, of narrow escapes, and of successful bombings of the enemy targets is a matter of routine. To find the King helping in the cross-examination was something new. But the young squadron leader, after his salute, made his report for the King in the same quiet, matter-of-fact tone that he would have used on any ordinary occasion.

"Were you able to drop your bombs on the target?" asked the King.

"Yes, sir," replied the young squadron leader. "The weather wasn't good and we had nine-tenths cloud—this means that clouds almost entirely obscured Cologne,—but I managed to pick up a bend in the Rhine which gave me my direction, and I made my two runs over the target, unloading my bombs on the railway marshalling yards."

"Was there much noise, much opposition?" the King asked.

The squadron leader smiled. "Well, sir, Jerry is still playing foxy," he said. "There were no searchlights, no flak until I dropped my bombs. Then fourteen or fifteen lights came on, making a cone in the sky, and they chucked everything up from the A.A. guns to the apex of the cone."

The sergeant pilot who was second in command of the machine, the air gunner, the wireless operator, and the other members of the crew crowded round as the squadron leader made his report. The King looked at the big-scale map on the wall with coloured pins and stretched tapes marking the route to Cologne, most of it over enemy territory. "Where was your target exactly?" he asked, and the pilot pointed out to him on a small map the exact situation of his objective. The King leaned over the map, absorbed in interest for some minutes.

Then Air Vice-Marshal Baldwin, who knows every young officer in his

command, personally told the King that this squadron leader had expressed a wish to go to America to fly back one of the flying fortresses. When the squadron leader told the King that he had made twenty-three flights over Germany the King asked, "Have you been to Berlin?" and the young officer replied, "Oh, yes, sir, I know that place quite well."

The crew of a second aircraft that had been over Berlin came into the room while this was going on. The King shook hands with the young sergeant pilot who had captained the bomber and asked him how he had got on.

The sergeant pilot, who has made twenty-five trips over Germany, told the King that they had found a lot of cloud. "But we had a bit of good luck," he added. "There was a break in the cloud at the right moment and I could see our objective, a railway station, very clearly just as we dropped our bombs."

The crews of two other bombers which had been over enemy invasion ports were having coffee and smoking cigarettes while their comrades made their report. The King chatted to several of these men, who in R.A.F. parlance were "makee-learns," which means that they had made their first operational flight over enemy territory. The King borrowed the log-book of a sergeant and read the pencilled entries giving the time of attack, details of A.A. guns, and so on. One thing that particularly impressed him was the friendly atmosphere surrounding this stiff cross-examination which all R.A.F. pilots and crews have to undergo after making a raid.

Earlier the King had heard crews being "briefed" for their raids on Cologne. He walked into the "briefing" room with no formality, and pilots and crews, listening to their intelligence officer telling them, "Your target is not an easy one to find," turned to see the King at their side. He heard them being told about cloud and weather conditions and about the German defence.

The King laughed with the bomber crews when the intelligence officer said, "Cologne used to be considered a very hot spot. But it is not so bad now."

Aerial photographs of the most recent raids over Germany and enemy-occupied France interested the King in the intelligence room. He saw pictures which showed vividly bombs bursting and fires raging in the German docks and others showing a very successful raid on German air bases.

When the King asked about air crews Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse told him that the R.A.F. is expanding so rapidly that, although recruiting for air crews is going on very well, there is room for many more men.

The King walked out across the aerodrome to the control tower, where he saw the big, heavily laden Wellingtons take off for Germany. He saw the green flash that means "all clear."

heard the roar of engines, and saw the black monster planes airborne one by one.

In the crew room of one squadron, which has a New Zealand wing commander at its head, the King saw the bomber crews in flying kit, with their parachute harness and their warm-lined jackboots and flying harness, receiving last-minute instructions. They were gathered round a big map spread out on the table with weather charts on the walls as the King took his place beside the wing commander. Among them was a Canadian flight lieutenant, a New Zealand air gunner, and a sergeant pilot who has made twenty-nine trips over Germany.

The New Zealand C.O. told the King that he had been over Berlin more than once. The King heard him telling the crews latest information on clouds and defence and instructing them to make two runs over their target in Cologne. "But you'll have to decide for yourselves what height you will bomb from, what type of attack you will make," said the wing commander.

After dining in the officers' mess the King walked to the sergeants' mess, where the station warrant officer told him they would feel honoured if he would have a drink with them. "I would like to," said the King, and drank good luck to the sergeants in a whisky and soda.

For his last impression of the R.A.F. bombers at work the King went out again on to the 'drome and stood by to watch returning planes make their landings. The great bombers circled low over the station, landed exactly, and expertly taxied to a standstill. Their job was done.