

END OF TIRPITZ



The historians of RAAF till now proudly note that Australian airmen took part in sinking of the biggest ship of Kriegsmarine. Some of them visited Russia in 1944 in the ranks of an air group which successfully bombed the mighty battleship from a Soviet base Yagodnik. A piece of a Russian historian M.N. Suprun was a base for this page. The author of the site made some additions and wants to express his gratitude to Igor Gostev (Archangelsk, Russia) for his great help in collecting of data for this

page. In the beginning of it - picture of an English artist Frank Wootton "Sinking of Tirpitz".

In the end of 1943 the British Admiralty found out that the Germans were preparing a major naval operation with participation of battleship. Under an agreement with the Soviet command the 543rd air reconnaissance group, consisting of three *Photospitfires*, moved to the Vaenga-1 air base in order to enhance surveillance over "Tirpitz". The Spitfires conducted 50 sorties from Soviet air strips in September-November 1943, having done reconnaissance over the main German naval bases in Northern Norway. Due to these flights it became possible to warn the Allied headquarters about the sortie of a German squadron led by "Tirpitz" on the 7th of September. Information about an operation targeted at destruction of Allied bases on Spitzbergen was fully confirmed. The British reconnaissance pilots kept their eyes on the squadron during the whole sortie. Possibly, that's why the *Kriegsmarine* command was made complete the operation before time. In 1943 all aircraft of the reconnaissance group were handed over to the 18th reconnaissance regiment of the Northern Fleet Air Force, and the British pilots returned home.



Tirpitz at her better times...

Sending convoys to the Northern Russian seaports, the British Admiralty feared not without a ground, that they would become a prey for the *Kriegsmarine* surface ships. The Royal Navy prepared an operation on annihilation of "Tirpitz" by an air strike from an aircraft carrier (operation "Tungsten"). In this connection a group of Spitfires was moved again to Vaenga-1 in March 1944 to enhance surveillance over "Tirpitz". The British pilots regularly informed the English mission and the Northern Fleet headquarters about all movements of German ships. It was their merit that in March 1944 after a strike from an aircraft carrier the best ship of *Kriegsmarine* was put out of action for four months. The pilots which had visited Russia, were allowed to wear souvenir Soviet stars along with their battle awards, and the pilots were very much proud of it. As before, all planes were handed over to the 118th Soviet air regiment in the end of May upon the returning of the airmen to Great Britain.



A schematic map of the area of combat activities of the 617th and 9th squadrons of RAAF in September-November 1944 (Archangelsk in the right bottom corner, Kaa-fjord straight below the top in the left corner and Tromsø-fjord is south-west of it)



Such badges were worn by British and Australian airmen, which flew over the Soviet territory, in case of an unplanned landing and encounter with Soviet people: I am an Englishman. Please, inform the British Military Mission in Moscow About Me (the author's photo from the RAAF museum in Perth, WA)

In September 1944 a new operation on annihilation of *Tirpitz* was designed (operation *Paravan*). The base of the German battleship was then out of reach of the Lancaster bombers based in the North of Great Britain. The German justifiably expected a strike from north-west and because of it a sudden attack from this direction wouldn't have been feasible. The RAF Command addressed to the Soviet leadership to provide an air strip in the Soviet North to conduct a sudden strike on the German battleship from the south. An appropriate agreement was quickly concluded.

The best bombers units of RAF: the 9th and 617th Lancaster squadrons were selected for this operation. A photo reconnaissance plane *Mosquito* from the 540th Squadron and two *Liberators* were also included into the air group for transportation of technical personnel. The *Lancaster* carried super powerful *Tallboy* bombs 1,000 pounds (more than 5 t) each. All airmen of the group had made not less than 60 sorties over the German territory and had battle awards. One more Lancaster from the 463rd squadron was included into the group - it had a documentary operators intending to film the oncoming attack on the mightiest battleship of *Kriegsmarine*...

On the 11th of September at 21.41 p.m. the aircraft took off from their air base in Scotland and headed towards Archangelsk. They were being waited for there. A steamship *I. Kaliayev* (on board of which airmen of the 151st RAF Air Wing lived in 1941) had been moved to the Yagodnik air base for accommodation of the British. Two dugouts for 50 men each were also built. When it became known that 40 planes instead of 30 would arrive with passengers as well (all up 334 men), two more dugouts were built over one day. two cutters and two single engine planes were also allocated for the British to provide them with communications with town.

On the 12th of September at 6 a.m. a first *Lancaster* of captain Prier turned out over Yagodnik. The pilot headed towards the radio station immediately after landing. The Lancasters were landing blindly, with no two way coordination, because of bad weather conditions and mismatch between the call sign frequencies of a Soviet and British radio transmitters. That's why only 31 out of 41 aircraft landed in Yagodnik. Soon it became known that two planes had landed in Kegostrov, two - in Vaskov, two - in Onega. One plane landed on each of air strips in Belomorsk, Molotovsk, Chumbalo-Navoloka and Talagy. All these aircraft required small repairs. Fortunately, none of the airmen was seriously injured. The crew of lieutenant Killy, which landed in a swamp near the Talagy village, was the unluckiest. A paratrooper guide, who led the crew to a river where a hydroplane was waiting for them, had to be landed nearby. Four *Lancasters* flew over to Yagodnik some hours later. Six remained on the places of landing.

The airmen spent their first day on the Russian soil on preparation of the aircraft to the operation, on search of lost crews and securing of bombs thrown by Lancasters near Molotovsk and Lapominky during forced landing. On the 13th of September the hosts decided to get familiarized with unknown to them "best English machines". The Soviet engines and technicians highly appraised the English bombers. Each of them who was scrutinizing the machines, compiled a detailed report on the observed for the intelligence department of headquarters. The main attention in the reports was paid to a "secret" bomb-sight of unknown design, a modernized astrograph, which was able to estimate automatically a plane's position, plotting it on sliding film and navigator's map. The Soviet technical personnel didn't miss out two locators and a small hatch on the right hand side of the front cockpit. They managed to reveal that it was designed for casting of foil neutralizing enemy locators. Despite weak protests of the English side, the Soviet aviators discovered a lot more of interesting and educating for themselves.

The operation planned for the 14th of September, was postponed for a day by the British Command. The squadron commanders were busy specifying the flight route along with the Soviet staff officers. The crew members were having a rest. An international soccer game took place that day. Two colonels were amongst the players - chief of headquarters of the Northern Fleet Air Force Loginov and the commander of the British air group MacMullen. A military brass arrived to the soccer field and played a march after each goal. The guests lost 0:6 but were not upset. "Today we have understood how strong is the foe of the Germans on the Russian front, - one of the English players said. - Tomorrow they will find out what the British airmen are capable of".

The 15th of September arrived. Strictly to the plan at 4.37 a.m. the *Mosquito* reconnaissance plane took off to assess the weather conditions in the target area. The skies over the Kaa-fjord were clear. The airmen were in a good mood: each of them considered it as a must to do a contour flight over the deck of *I. Kaliayev* - their Russian home. Everybody was so sure of success that there was no fighter cover...

At 10.00 a.m. the *Lancasters* set their course and at 3.57 p.m. they were over the target. The enemy AA guns kept silent. Suddenly one of the planes, which was flying let of the flag one, left the formation and headed towards "Tirpitz". The flight order was broken and the flight leader lieutenant colonel Tait had to lead the group for another circle. The surprise factor was lost. It took the enemy two minutes to set up a smoke screen with a help of special pipeline circling the fjord. Nevertheless, the mast tops of "Tirpitz" were still seen and the British attacked the battleship having thrown about 90 tons of bombs. One straight hit on the bow part of the ship was achieved and, apart from it, the hull of the ship was damaged by explosions of bombs which had fallen next to it. At 4.04 p.m. The aircraft set a return course and in three hours landed with no losses.

Several Australians took part in this attack - and amongst them a pilot Carey of the 617th squadron whose plane was damaged by enemy flak. The only hit on *Tirpitz* was noticed by an Australian, flight lieutenant Buckham who was flying the filming crew plane. He was the only pilot who after the attack led his plane to the Waddington base in Scotland. Most of his flight was just above the sea in very poor weather conditions. The flight time from Yagodnik to Waddington made up 14 hours 33 minutes - an absolute record for Lancasters.

The *Mosquito* reconnaissance plane pilot was so sure that the bombs had missed the target that he even didn't bother about photography of "Tirpitz". Nobody could confidently say if there had been a hit. A British reconnaissance plane, having made a sortie over the Kaa-fjord several days after, failed to locate the battleship. soon after that the British Intelligence received a radio transmission from a Norwegian patriot Lindberg who lived in the town of Tromso: "Tirpitz has arrived in Tromso, there is a large hole in the bow part of the deck". Five days after the attack a British reconnaissance plane managed to photograph the results of bombing. based on the intelligence from Norway and photographs, specialists estimated that repairs of "Tirpitz" will take at least 9 months. The *Paravan* operation ended successfully.

The planes began to leave Archangelsk. On the 7th of September at 10 p.m. a ceremony farewell was given to the last two leaving planes. the results of bombing had become known by that time and the airmen were leaving with a feeling of done duty. Six damaged *Lancasters* were handed over to the Soviet side without compensation, two of them were repaired in Kegostrov and later used in transport and reconnaissance aviation...

"Tirpitz" had to move further south into the Tromso-fjord because of fear of new attacks from Yagodnik. The ship couldn't move faster than 6 knots and, practically, couldn't make an open sea anymore. the repairs could be made only in Germany. The German Command decided to place "Tirpitz" in shallow waters to prevent its sinking. Dredges began to build dams around the unmoving battleship. Simultaneously about 500 of crew members of the engine compartment were transferred on shore...

The RAF command encountered another problem - flying conditions over the Tromso-fjord lasted for not more than a day a week. Nevertheless, the battleship was within a reach of Lancasters of the 5th air group from air-strips in Scotland. However, more powerful Merlin-24 engines and additional fuel tanks were installed on them. On the 29th of October a reconnaissance plane transmitted that the weather over the Tromso-fjord was improving, and 38 Lancasters of the 9th and 617th squadrons took off. This time heavy clouds filled the fjord half a minute before the attack and didn't allow an aimed bombing. One Lancaster was seriously damaged by AA fire during this attack and had to land in Sweden.

AUSTRALIANS FILMED TIRPITZ SINKING



Australian members of a Lancaster crew filmed the sinking of the German battleship Tirpitz by 12,000lb bombs of the R.A.F. All veterans, the Australians are members of an R.A.A.F. squadron serving in the United Kingdom. Left to right they are: Flight Sergeant E. J. Holden (Melbourne), Flying Officer R. W. Board (Rose Bay), Flying Officer E. H. Giersch (Henty), Sergeant W. Sinclair (R.A.F.), Flying Officer J. W. Muddle, D.F.C. (Gloucester), the captain, Flying Officer B. A. Bucknam (Penshurst), and Flight Sergeant L. J. Manning (Nelson Bay).—
Department of Air photo.

Photo from the Australian newspaper Trove – British and Australian airmen who photographed the moment of sinking of Tirpitz. Australian Buckham – second from the right



Tirpitz immediately after the deadly bomb strike

On the 12th of November the same squadrons at last approached the fjord in clear weather. Australian pilots Kell, Ross, Sayers and Lee took part in the attack. 29 *Tallboys* were thrown. Several straight hits decided the fate of *Tirpitz* - the battleship began to list to the port side and in 10 minute after the attack turned over. In two hours a reconnaissance plane transmitted that only the ship's bottom was seen above the water. Australian airman Buckham managed to photograph damaged and listing "*Tirpitz*" through the smoke screen and smoke of bomb explosions. Thus the best ship of *Kriegsmarine* ended her career.



Tirpitz's bottom above the water...

M.N. Suprun. Britanskiye Korolevskiye VVS v Rossii, 1941-1945. (Iz sbornika "Severnye konvoi: issledovaniya, vospominaniya, documety". Vyp.2. M.: Nauka, 1994)

D. Woodward. Tirpitz. 1953

J. Herrington. Australia in the War of 1939-1945. Air Power Over Europe. 1944-1945. 1963
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