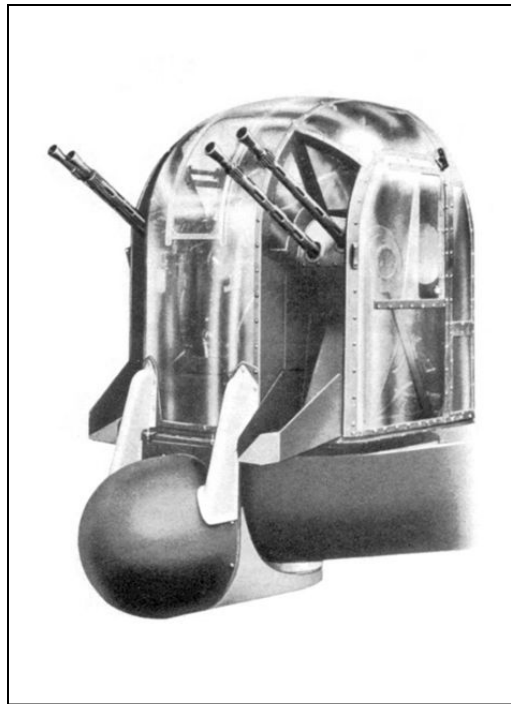


Airborne Gunlaying in Turrets (AGLT) The use of Village Inn



11/12 September, 1944; DARMSTADT:

The previous 5 Group operation against Darmstadt had failed, but this raid proved to be a devastating success. The awful power of the bomber was well demonstrated in this outstandingly accurate and concentrated attack. The 226 Lancasters used the 'spokes of a wheel' method in which each aircraft was given a different direction of attack on the markers, and would then undershoot or overshoot the markers by a given number of seconds. Because of the extensive fire destruction and heavy casualties, the German authorities considered the attack on Darmstadt to be an extreme example of R.A.F. 'terror bombing'. As far as Bomber Command was concerned, this was an important railway communications target.

5 Group suffered the loss of 12 Lancasters and their crews. For 49 Squadron, this operation was of particular importance, for it saw the first operational use of 'Village Inn'. 49, who had pioneered the development of the AGLT system were given the opportunity to be the first squadron to use it in combat.

Throughout Bomber Command, all aircraft had been fitted with "Z" equipment which would transmit the infra-red 'friendly' signal to any 'Village Inn' Lancasters they might come across.

Order of Battle for the night's operation was posted just before lunch; the 9 aircraft (all 'Village Inn' equipped) detailed were as follows:

PB300 S/L Lace
PB355 F/O Burns RCAF
PB373 F/L Lee
PB361 F/O Alty
PB361 F/O Parkin
PB700 F/O Russell
PB349 F/O Furber
PB354 F/O Hay
PB369 F/O Mallinson

All 49's aircraft carried out successful bombing attacks and returned to Fiskerton without loss by 02.39hrs. At interrogation it was revealed that two crews had made enemy contact using their A.G.L.T., equipment and subsequent combats with enemy aircraft ensued.

What follows is a quite remarkable account, given by F/O Leslie Hay or 'Uncle Will' as he became known within the squadron, who was piloting one of these Lancasters. He describes in detail the actions as they occurred during that Monday evening in September 1944. The Lancaster concerned was a Mk III (PB354) EA-G for George. The crew consisted of; F/O L.J. Hay Pilot, Sgt F. Green flight engineer, P/O P.W. Smith navigator, W/O H. Jenkinson wireless operator, F/Sgt A.E. French mid/upper gunner, P/O A.J. Mackay bomb aimer and F/O J.S. Hall the rear gunner.

'Uncle Will' continues:

"Briefing was particularly careful because of the circumstances surrounding the trip. Each aircraft was briefed to lag behind the bomber stream and stacked in echelon upwards as if we were late trying to catch up. These were usually the aircraft that the fighters were able to pick off. We were given individual heights to fly and I found that I was right at the back, the uppermost aircraft. I must say that I wasn't keen on being in that position. It seemed too much like being a staked out goat waiting for the tiger, and would probably be the first to get picked up. There was the possibility that there would be some genuine late comers -there generally were -and their infra red identification or "Z" equipment as it was called was not working.

To overcome this we were briefed not to open fire this side of 3 degrees east (the other side of Paris) unless we identified the aircraft visually as an enemy. We had to be absolutely certain that we were not shooting down our own bombers. It was a bit hair-raising as it seemed to me that we had to leave so much to chance before we could get to grips with anything that might come up. We could only wait and see what happened. "We took-off (21.02hrs) as usual, but later than the other squadrons, trailing behind by working on a time basis, to Reading then the coast - guns tested - bombs fused. Here we go!

We had hardly crossed the French coast when our wireless operator reported that his radar screen (Fishpond) showed that two aircraft were at 2,000 yards and had been there a little while. The rear gunner was unable to pick them up at that range so we just waited. They then moved closer to about 1,500 yards and the rear gunner got them on his radar, their blips sounding on our intercom, but no "Z" equipment was flashing. The night was dark, no moon, but visibility was quite good. We had not expected two aircraft like this and were a bit apprehensive, so I climbed 1,000ft -they followed. I altered course 30 degrees -they followed.

With a further alteration of 60 degrees to bring us back to track, they stayed with us. They must be enemy, but we had no visual identification as per briefing and it seemed to me that we must wait, take the first attack and try avoiding action. At least we knew they were there and we were ready for them. We hadn't long to wait, they drew apart - difficult, whichever side we took the avoiding action we were meat for the other one - but they didn't know we knew that they were there. Wireless operator - 'Coming in from starboard quarter level, 1200, 1100, 1000, 900, 800, (the blips were now rapid) 700.' I turned into the oncoming aircraft and dived. A few moments later, mid-upper said in his best Cockney accent 'I've got him -he's a 188, just gone over the top of us.'

"We breathed again -now we were ready and straightened out. There was no time lost. Wireless operator reported that the other was coming astern, '1000, 900, 800, 700' I dived to port and the rear gunner opened fire and, almost immediately, the enemy dropped back to 1,500yds it seemed to me like the proverbial scalded cat. He never got near us, certainly not within 600yds and was obviously hit.

The two aircraft then flew behind us, close together. (Interesting to think how they were able to locate each other -presumably using us as a reference point) we assumed their R. T. was red hot and wished that we could hear their conversation. In time they were joined by a third fighter and all three flew in a triangle (reported by the wireless operator working on Fishpond). This was real trouble. They then spread out and proceeded to make a series of attacks on us, the wireless operator reported movements, I was working a continuous corkscrew and the rear gunner beat off every attack. It was just as we had practiced so many times over the friendly fields of Lincolnshire.

They attacked again and again, the rear guns were almost out of ammunition with only two guns left firing. I told the bomb aimer to take the ammunition from the front guns to the rear which he endeavoured to do but as he was moving about and therefore not on intercom and could not hear my commentary, he had no knowledge which way I was going to throw the aircraft. Also he was not on oxygen and the floor was strewn with spent shells, but he got the ammunition to the rear just as the fighters after making an attack from 450 yards, broke off 400 yards and abandoned the engagement. We assessed the situation. No damage -as far as we knew - and the guns were reloaded. However, we were disappointed. Why had we not shot any down?

We didn't know it then, but next day when we tested the aircraft we estimated that the probable cause was the ranges sticking due to humidity which meant that the cone of fire did not centre on the enemy. The navigator reported that there had been ten attacks in twenty-nine minutes, and immediately gave us a new course for the target. It has ever since been a mystery to me how he did this. I had been throwing the aircraft all over the sky to evade the enemy, although it was a controlled corkscrew, to the crew it must have seemed like a matter of hanging on and the navigator must have hung on by his eyebrows as he used his hands to hold onto his maps, charts, set squares, rulers, pencils etc: I never did find out. Darmstadt was reached on time and the raid was very concentrated. Being last in, the barrage put up was murderous. Back at base we were greeted by an eager group of radar mechanics and although we were puzzled and elated, we knew that 'Village Inn' worked and it gave us great confidence. It is now a matter of record that after the war, tests were made but the device was abandoned as not being very effective.

I can vouch the inaccuracy of that and suggest that they should have tested it in actual combat -they might think otherwise!"

Records show that the combat took place between 23.00hrs and 23.29hrs on the outward leg. The Lancaster had been flying at 16,500ft; all three enemy aircraft were JU 188's.

The second AGLT contact took place just after midnight; F/O Gordon Burns RCAF (PB355) and crew flying at 16,000ft picked up an unidentified enemy aircraft on 'Village Inn' at 1,200yds astern and up. The enemy closed rapidly to 800yds whereupon the rear gunner, Sgt Ken Robinson, opened fire. Fire was maintained until 500yds then F/O Burns put B-Baker into a corkscrew port, heading for the darker sky. The enemy aircraft followed through the corkscrew, but at 600yds it broke away to starboard and was gone. It had been an auspicious introduction into combat for 'Village Inn'. Training within the squadron continued with extreme confidence and enthusiasm.