

'A Controversial History?' An Analysis of British Attitudes and Responsibility in the Bombing of the *Cap Arcona*, 3 May 1945

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Introduction

The history of the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* is a fascinating but relatively unknown topic in Third Reich and British history. The relationship between the British pilots and the sinking of the *Arcona* is a subject which has had much speculation, but no real academic analysis of existing archival material has successfully been undertaken. The bombing and subsequent sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May 1945 remains a topic which has evaded a detailed scholarly analysis of existing archival research. Laden with over five thousand prisoners from Neuengamme Camp - who had been evacuated to the coast as no "suitable" alternative, could be found - it was subsequently attacked by RAF Typhoons. RAF involvement in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* is portrayed in a distorted light, with some archival sources suggesting that British forces were aware, prior to take off, of the situation that had developed in Neustadt Bay. I present a new approach in an attempt to better understand the issue of British responsibility in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. This article will explore the wider issue of why British forces became desperate to reach the Baltic coast and in turn argue that this desperation side-lined the normal protocols for examining intelligence. Furthermore, the issue of prior intelligence will be explored further in a hope to determine whether British forces knew of the situation in Neustadt prior to an aerial assault on 3 May.¹ The British actions need to be fully investigated in order to develop a clearer understanding as to the overall tragedy.

Decision-Process

As the war raged on it became apparent to some groups of Germans that by January 1945 the Nazis had effectively lost the war.² For the British, along with their

¹ For instance see Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: Dokumentation Das tragische Ende der KZ-Häftlings-Flotte am 3. Mai 1945* (Struve's Buchdruckerei und Verlag, Eutin Germany, 2005); Wilhelm Lange, 'Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der Cap-Arcona-Tragödie', in *Jahrbuch für Heimatkunde*, 54 (2011): 185-195; Günther Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona* (Steidl: Goettingen, 1998); Heinz Schön, *Die Cap Arcona-Katastrophe: Eine Dokumentation nach Augenzeugen-Berichten* (Motorbuch Verlag: Berlin, 1989); Bogdan Suchowiak, *Mai 1945: Die Tragödie der Häftlinge von Neuengamme*, (Rowohlt Verlag: Hamburg, 1985). The only British publication was written by Roy Nesbit, *Failed to Return: Mysteries of the Air 1939-1945*, (Patrick Stephens Limited: Wellingborough, 1988).

² Sir Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-45* (Allen Lane: London, 2011). See also Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2010).

American counterparts a major topic of agenda was how best to manage and divide captured territory. In a secret telegram from Winston Churchill to his then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill wrote 'it is thought most important that Montgomery should take Lübeck as soon as possible, and he has an additional American Army Corps to strengthen his movements if he requires it'.³ Churchill stressed the importance for the Western Allies to reach the Baltic coast with full haste. Reasons for this can be seen in two important stages. Firstly sovereignty of Denmark and secondly to attempt to halt the further advance west of Soviet forces. Within the telegram, Churchill expressed that 'our arrival at Lübeck before our Russian friends from Stettin would save a lot of argument later on'.⁴ The importance of Denmark was clear to the British. As a country to be released from its occupants, the Danish sovereignty could be restored and an attempt to return the country to its pre-war governance could be achieved. Under a Soviet occupation, it was likely the regime would inflict greater misery on a country already suffering from wartime occupation. Furthermore with the capture of a Baltic port Allied forces would be a step closer to organising a sea-routed supply line. Strategically Lübeck provided an encirclement of the North West and allowed Allied forces to push on into Hamburg and further east. This meant a great deal of thought and resources were given to capture Lübeck. With Allied advances causing panic in Nazi movements along the Northern coast, it became increasingly difficult to guarantee the safe passage of convoys from Germany to neutral countries. Allied forces were deeply concerned of a possible escape route to Norway. This myth that SS and *Wehrmacht* troops were fleeing to Norway seems highly unlikely at a time when panic and confusion had outweighed any form of logical strategy.⁵ For instance a British Pilot David Ince later wrote 'everything pointed to a final Nazi retreat into a Northern Redoubt, fortress Norway, using all the shipping available'.⁶ However it seemed highly unlikely, and as many AIR records in the National Archives suggest, in the final months, the German Luftwaffe in particular had abandoned airfields with planes intact.⁷ They had been unable to form any such defence largely due to the lack of fuel. Sir Arthur Coningham notes that 'the panic and destruction which was caused to the enemy turned the retreat into a

³ The National Archives Kew (Hence after TNA) FO 954/32D, Private Office Papers of Sir Anthony Eden Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Telegram from Prime Minister for Anthony Eden*, 18 April 1945: 1.

⁴ TNA FO 954/32D, Papers of Anthony Eden, 1-2.

⁵ See Benjamin Jacobs & Eugene Pool, *The 100-Year Secret: Britain's Hidden World War II Massacre* (The Lyons Press: Guilford, 2004); Daniel Blatman, 'The Death Marches and the Final Phase of Nazi Genocide' in Jane Caplan & Nikolaus Wachsmann (ed.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Routledge: London, 2009).

⁶ David Ince, *Combat and Competition*, (Newton Publishers: Swindon, 1992), 251-52. Also see Imperial War Museum interview (Here after IWM), *David Henry Gason Ince*, Catalogue No. 8651, (IWM: Conrad Wood), Reel 1&2.

⁷ TNA AIR 37/876, *2nd Tactical Air force: Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham on Operations from D-Day to VE-Day*, point, 285.

roul',⁸ thus arguing that logic and organisation was no longer present amongst the German ranks.

Large gatherings of shipping in key German northern ports regularly featured in Air reconnaissance news. For instance 'during April, Bomber Command attacked Kiel several times capsizing the *Admiral Scheer* and damaging the *Emden* by near misses'.⁹ Shipping became increasingly an important topic of agenda for chiefs of staff. Continuous anti-shipping and anti-submarine patrols were being flown in spite of adverse weather.¹⁰ Logic to utilise an air strike, rather than a sea-borne assault was clear. The area, largely across from the Fehmarn Island towards the Danish peninsula was heavily mined. This presented a problem for Allied forces and therefore directed towards an airborne assault as a quicker and less expensive form of attack. More importantly ground forces at present were encountering pockets of fierce resistance, and their assault to the coast was proving difficult. As highlighted in a weekly resume few mines had been swept and this meant that many shipping supply routes remained treacherous and too dangerous to risk valuable destroyers.¹¹ A table (figure 1) is a review of Bomber Command in 1945. From this table, although a total of 11,140 tonnages of bombs were used on naval targets in the final five months, this actually only represents a mere 6.1 percent of the overall tonnage dropped.

Category	January	February	March	April	May	Total	Percentage
Cities	11931	21888	30278	2322	63	66482	36.6%
Troops and Defences	2072	3756	8042	12056	155	26081	14.4%
Transportation	8459	5505	6229	7909	-	28102	15.4%
Naval Targets	129	561	3924	6526	-	11140	6.1%
Oil	9028	14109	18936	5437	-	47510	26.2%
G.A.F	-	-	5	596	36	637	0.4%
Specific Industries	1221	-	11	4	-	1236	0.7%
Miscellaneous	83	70	212	104	83	552	0.2%
Totals	32923	45889	67637	34954	337	181740	

Figure One: Review of Bomber Command Targets for 1945.¹²

⁸ TNA AIR 37/876, point 314.

⁹ TNA AIR 20/1593, *Operations of 2nd T.A.F: June 6 1944 – May 9 1945, Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham and review of S.H.A.E.F. report on air operations in Europe Oct. 1944 – May 1945*, Section on Ports, Piece No.47.

¹⁰ TNA AIR 20/1593, point 49.

¹¹ TNA CAB 66/65/61, *War Cabinet: Weekly Resume (No.298) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation*, (17th May 1945), 268.

¹² See table in Charles Webster & Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-1945*, vol 3 (Naval & Military Press: Uckfield, 2006), 198.

In comparison the records for 2 TAF indicate a different depiction of the events in the final months. During April 1945 4 ships were destroyed with 61 damaged, along with 12 barges destroyed and 149 damaged.

Type	Destroyed	Damaged
Enemy Aircraft in the Air	199	80
Enemy Aircraft on the Ground	97	210
Motor Transport vehicles	1618	6387
Armoured fighting vehicles	22	63
Locomotives	119	900
Goods Trucks	657	2934
Ships	4	61
Barges	12	149

Figure Two: 2TAF targets for April 1945. ¹³

In actual fact, ground installations, rather than naval vessels became the main target. When we look at the records for May there is a drastic change of direction. During the first few days alone some 160 Cargo ships, 9 U-Boats, 4 E/R Boats and 8 smaller craft were either damaged or destroyed.¹⁴ This dramatic increase suggests that the Western Allies did in fact fear an evacuation from the Northern ports, which results in largely sporadic shipping strikes. In fact no less than 130 sorties were flown in a period of just over 60 hours by 184 squadron alone.¹⁵ These figures present a solid foundation that Allied command were keen to eliminate any possible escape route to the North. The need to continually fuel and load planes to continue these shipping strikes highlight a firm commitment by RAF HQ. Combined with a fear of retreat across the Baltic and the only way to really attack Nazi forces over long ranges, air attack was used in a hope to bring the war to a swift and decisive end. There is limited, if any, credible intelligence to suggest that the Nazis final plan was to evacuate to Norway, and therefore this means that the British and USAAF became careless in planning and co-ordinating their strategic attacks. The use of photo reconnaissance had always played a useful role in gaining intelligence as to troop and ship movements. But as the theatre of war came to a final chaotic end, the evidence suggests that the RAF became increasingly reckless and failed to ascertain the proper intelligence required before take-off.

¹³ See table TNA AIR 37/876, *2nd Tactical Air force*, Claims of 2nd Tactical Air Force during the month of April 1945.

¹⁴ TNA AIR 37/876, Table of Claims of 2nd Tactical Air Force during the first days of May 1945.

¹⁵ Derek Leyland Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later: The Story of a fighter pilot*, (The Erskine Press: London, 2005), 213.

Prior Information

Amongst academics and amateurs alike there has always been a shroud of uncertainty in the history of the Cap Arcona of whether the British had any prior information regarding the prisoners being present on the ship. Major Till was a civilian solicitor who joined Number two war crimes investigation team. He was tasked with investigating the disaster at Neustadt bay. Quoted in nearly every detailed account on the Cap Arcona, Major Till noted that:

The intelligence officer with 83rd Group RAF has admitted on two occasions – first to Lt. H.F. Ansell of this team and on a second occasion to the investigating officer when he was accompanied by Lt. H.F. Ansell – that a message was received on 2nd May 1945 that these ships were loaded with KZ prisoners but that, although there was ample time to warn the pilots of the planes who attacked those ships on the following day, by some oversight the message was never passed on.¹⁶

What remains is why this information, as crucial as it was, did not get passed on to the pilots concerned. Also why did RAF intelligence not seek confirmation of the situation? Besides which why does Major Till fail to name the intelligence officer? While we can speculate about the identity of this officer, what is far more intriguing is that Till notes that this confession was documented. He suggested that ‘from the statement volunteered by the RAF intelligence officer’¹⁷ that at some point this statement existed in paper form. I have scoured archives in the UK and abroad and am certain that if it did exist it has since been removed from public consultation. Further as a section of index’s are listed within his report, no.72 is entitled “Reports by RAF”, and like the statement, are also not present in the archives. This would naturally suggest that there was information contained in these reports which the British HQ did not wish to be made public. There have over the years been several FOI requests which have yielded little or no results on this aspect. However all is not lost. There are other pieces of evidence which can be collated to form an answer.

The Swiss delegate in Lübeck, Paul de Blonay was interviewed shortly after the end of the war. In his deposition he claimed that:

In April 1945 I was at the harbour of Lübeck seeing about some shipments of Red Cross Parcels and I noticed a ship SS.Thielbeck at the place where I was accustomed to unload Red Cross petrol supplies. Whilst I was walking past this ship, a box of matches dropped beside me. I could not find who had thrown it. This

¹⁶ TNA WO 309/1592, *Major Till report section B*, 14.

¹⁷ TNA WO 309/1592, 15.

box contained a letter...telling me about the state of some deportees – about 7,000 – in the three ships SS. Thielbeck, SS. Athen and SS. Cap Arcona.¹⁸

With this information in the hands of a neutral spectator, de Blonay documents that on the 2 May he passed this information to the Brigadier who captured Lübeck – Major General “Pip” Roberts of the 11th Armoured division – who is known to have communicated this message on. However, we are not aware of who this was directly communicated to or which department. What is also of interest is what happens to de Blonay after he passed this message on. It seems by all accounts that he merely continued his ICRC duties in Lübeck rather than follow through on the information he had been presented.

Derek Stevenson who flew with 184 squadron later suggested that ‘the following three days were to prove to be the most extraordinary in the history of No 184 squadron, no less than 130 sorties being flown in a period of just over 60 hours’.¹⁹ Furthermore the area of attack and surrounding coastal areas were to be turned into an inferno of burning ships, and wreckage of military units. While reports suggest that there was a large gathering of ships in the bays, the image remained unclear as to really who or what the ships were in fact doing. Stevenson wrote some years later that he had been aware of a report of some large ships in the Bay of Neustadt.²⁰ He claimed that the intelligence officer stated that ‘it’s a bit unusual. We’ve just had a report of some large ships in Lübeck bay ... they’re supposed to be carrying SS... to fight on in Norway’.²¹ Stevenson further recalled his conversation with the intelligence officer. He was informed that ‘I’m sorry, chaps. I really don’t have any more information. The ships are there, that’s all we know’.²² This again supports suggestions that the British disregarded the normal protocols to gain further reconnaissance before ordering a raid to take place.

Similarly flight Lieutenant David Ince later wrote after the war that ‘the shipping strikes went ahead as a result of delays in transmitting the latest intelligence to Air headquarters and the Nazis did nothing to discourage them’.²³ Evidence therefore suggested that sections of the British authorities were clearly aware of the situation in the Bay of Lübeck, but for reasons unknown there was a clear delay in forwarding this information to the pilots concerned. What failed also to help the British was the lack of attention paid to air reconnaissance. Although the British reconnaissance branch relied heavily on good weather prior to any take-off, their intelligence was ‘supplemented by various other sources, including POW interrogation, agents’ report, reports from our

¹⁸ TNA WO 309/873, *Deposition of Paul de Blonay*, exhibit no.42, 119.

¹⁹ Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, 213.

²⁰ Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, 214.

²¹ Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, 214.

²² Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, 215.

²³ Ince, *Combat and Competition*, 252.

attaches in neutral countries, the German press and so on.'.²⁴ The biggest problem facing the British in the early days of May 1945 was that poor weather meant that many necessary reconnaissance flights were grounded. For instance 184 Squadron reported poor weather till lunchtime hindered reconnaissance flights, while Squadron leader Rumbolds also felt that the weather was severely hindering operations.²⁵ I believe that there appeared to be a strong urge to 'pull the final curtain' on the Second World War, and that the British forces who were involved in the final days were tired of the constant fight. However while poor weather hindered the ability of a Squadron to function to its full capabilities, it fails to acknowledge whether intelligence was sort from other means available.

Further evidence of some prior information can be found in various statements given by Dr. Arnoldsson. He received an anonymous letter regarding the seriousness of the situation in Neustadt, and the prisoners aboard the ships.²⁶ Dr Arnoldsson negotiated with an SS-Hauptsturmführer on the keel side of Lubeck. He had been made aware of the situation aboard the ss. Athen, which was being utilised to ferry prisoners to the Cap Arcona. At this time the Athen was holding some 2,200 prisoners. Although Dr. Arnoldsson was unable to offer all those prisoners sanctuary via the Red Cross ships, he did offer to take between 250 and 300 inmates. These prisoners were placed aboard the Lillie Matthiessen and Magdalena. Arnoldsson advised the SS-Hauptsturmführer that they should wait for the arrival of the British forces and hand the prisoners over without fighting. However on the 2 May he returned to the berth of the Athen only to find it had been sent to Neustadt. It was at this late stage he learned from a German officer of the presence of Neuengamme prisoners aboard the Cap Arcona. But amongst the confusion this could be the message received by 83rd Group RAF intelligence, and subsequently mis-interpreted by the RAF.²⁷ Whatever the results of these communications, the Cap Arcona, the ss. Thielbek and ss.Deutschland were attacked leaving their crew and captives struggling for survival in the icy Baltic waters.

Conclusion

The Cap Arcona tragedy remains a topic in Third Reich & British history which still remains a narrative of facts rather than an analysis of facts. British foreign policy was designed to stop the advance west of Soviet forces. Unfortunately this led to a strategy of desperation which meant that careful planning and analysis of credible intelligence were

²⁴ Sebastian Cox, 'The sources and organisation of RAF intelligence and its influence on operations', in Horst Boog (ed.), *The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War: An International Comparison studies in military history*, (Berg: Oxford, 1992), 555.

²⁵ TNA AIR 27/1548/76, *Squadron Number 263 Records of Events*, 01 May 1945 – 31 May 1945.

²⁶ Gedenkstaette Neuengamme Archives (Hereafter GeNA) Ceges-Somas, 29 Jan 1990, *Letter from Swedish Red Cross to Gunnar Nyby*.

²⁷ IMW Misc 94 (1424) *Neustadt: FG Parson's letter to the daily Telegraph*, 18 March 1982.

side-lined. Although German forces were in a state of chaos and confusion, neutral spectators had successfully gained valuable intelligence as to the situation looming in Neustadt. Having made this available to British HQ, the processing of this information was slow. As a result this mis-communication assisted in the death of some 5,000 KZ inmates aboard the Cap Arcona. Therefore Britain's responsibility in the Cap Arcona tragedy cannot be ignored, nor can all the blame be attributed to the German elite. This led to a careless British attack which disregarded important and credible intelligence in the face of a swift and decisive end to the Second World War.

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