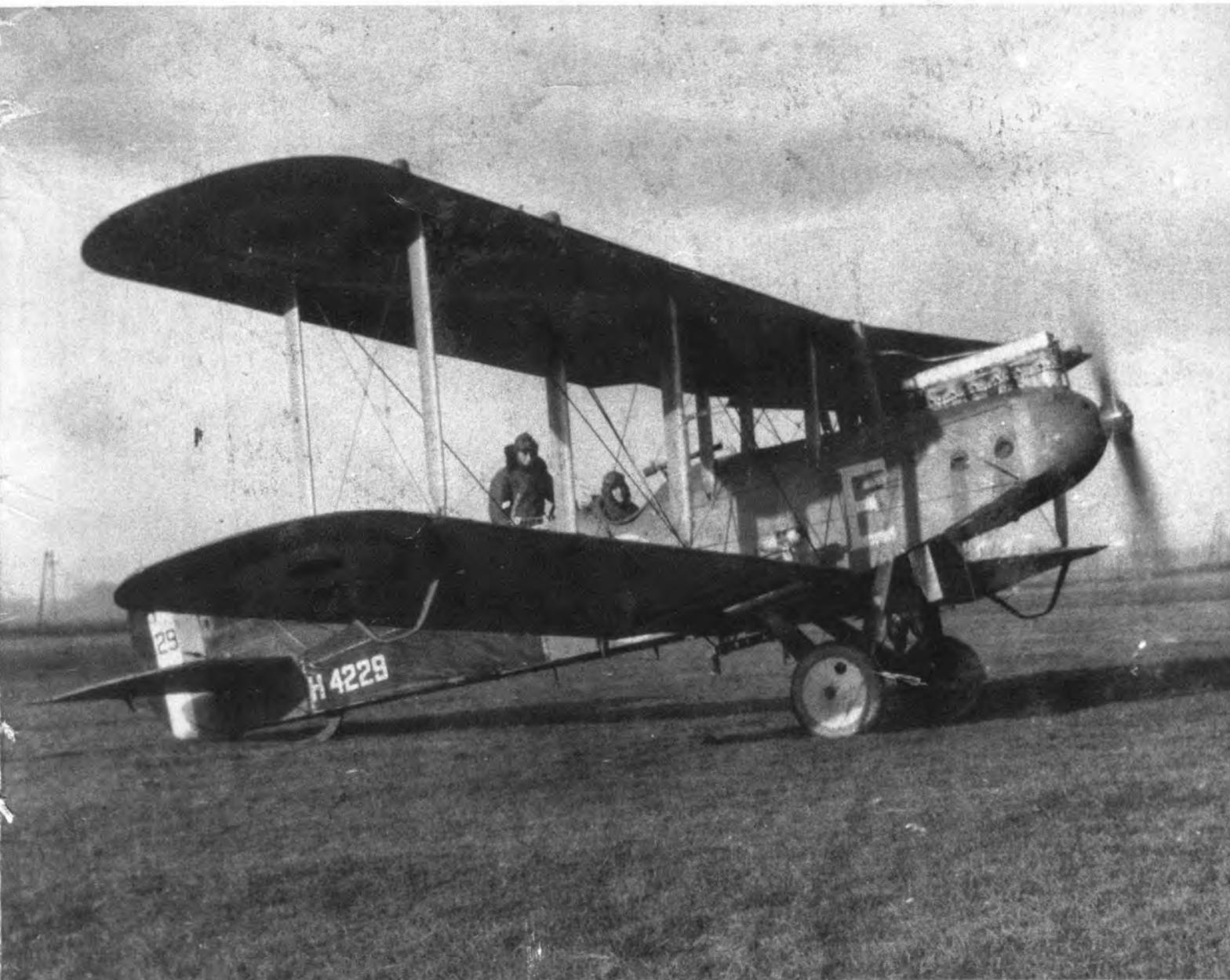




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*Dusk is our dawn, and midnight is our noon;
And for the sun we have the silver moon;
We love the darkness, and we hate the light;
For we are wedded to the gloomy night.*

Paul Bewsher — 1918
The Night Bombers

At the outbreak of WW1 in August 1914, the British Government planned to dispatch an Expeditionary Force comprising both land and air elements to France immediately. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) went across the Channel during the first fortnight of the war, supported by the RFC with four squadrons. The Admiralty decided very quickly they could best support our other forces by sending some Marines and a mobile raiding party to Belgium. This was the famous RNAS Armoured Car Squadron under command of Commander C.R. Samson RN, which wreaked havoc over some three months up and down the French/Belgian border country.¹

After November 1914, the Armoured Car Squadron was withdrawn in favour of a more permanent RNAS presence in the area. No 1 Wing, followed by No 4 and 5 Wings, were established at various sites around the port of Dunkerque (Dunkirk). These locations were invariably referred to collectively as RNAS Dunkerque. St Pol was two miles southwest of the port, Coudekerque one mile south, Petite Synthe three miles west-southwest, Bray Dunes five miles east and Bergues five miles south. A mixed bag of machines served in the area, Avro 504s, Nieuport 10, 11 and 12s, Moranes, Farman F40s, Voisins, Caudron GIV etc. Later came Sopwith 1½s and Short Bombers and, much later, DH4 and DH9a machines. The work they undertook included spotting for monitors, scouting from the coast, engaging enemy seaplanes and aeroplanes, reconnaissance of Zeebrugge and Ostend with their docks and canals, bombing these targets in daylight and at night and attacking Zeppelins and their sheds.

The Sopwith 1½ Strutters were with 5(N) Squadron (5th Wing) who used them as escorts to the bombing Caudron GIVs and Farman F40s. The Short Bombers of 7(N) Sqn, which were land conversions of the Short 184 Seaplane, first saw action on 15 November 1916, when four attacked in a night raid on Ostend, dropping a total of 32×65lb

Dunkerque Days & Nights

by Peter Wright

Leading Aircraftman Observer/Gunlayer William Henry Neve RNAS served with 7A, 14 Sqn RNAS and 214 Sqn RAF 1917/1918.

:R.J. Neve

bombs.²

Public Record Office file AIR 1/2131/207/115/2 is titled 'Establishment of RNAS Handley Page Squadron of 10 Machines — Dunkirk 1917' detailing the setting up of this unit on the French coast. The Handley Pages went to 7(N) Sqn (5th Wing), which (wing) had originally been formed at Dover in January 1916 and moved to Coudekerque the month following.³ No 7(N) Sqn was commanded by Sqn Cdr John Babington DSO, while 5th Wing came under Wing Commander D.A. Spenser Grey. In April 1917, 7(N) Sqn commenced operations with the four HP 0/100 machines transferred from the Handley Page Training Squadron at Manston and, from elements of 7(N), was formed at the end of July 1917, No 7A Sqn RNAS to operate as a separate unit, also flying the HP 0/100. 7A was under the command of Sqn Cdr Herbert George Brackley DSO.⁴

According to *War in the Air*, Vol IV, page 95, by mid August 1917 this pair of squadrons operated a total of 20 Handley Pages, which is borne out if one checks the allocations of serial numbers to the squadrons and delivery dates. PRO file AIR 1/2014/204/309/6 — Allocation and Acceptance of Handley Page Aeroplanes — June 1916 to January 1918 — shows machines serialised 1455, 1464, 1465, 1466, 3115, 3118, 3119, 3123, 3124, 3125, 3126 and 3127, a total of 12, allotted to Dunkirk by April 1917. Of these, 1464 was soon struck-off strength, it having been wrecked on 2 January 1917 while piloted by Flt/Sub/Lt Millson. After delivery of the above-listed bombers, came 3121, 3122, 3128 to 3135 inclusive to 7(N)/7A Squadrons; 3137 sent to Dunkirk, was lost on the night of 25/26 August 1917 soon after delivery. These aircraft were each powered by a pair of 250hp Rolls Royce Eagle II (early a/c) or IV, in-line vee engines, typical engine identification numbers being 'RR7/Eagle/43' and 'RR6/Eagle/58' etc. They usually carried a crew of three, the pilot with his observer up front and a gunlayer in the rear compartment. Often a fourth member would accompany the crew, to act as an additional gunlayer. The observer could also be a gunlayer as well as being responsible for aiming and dropping the bombs. The designation 'gunlayer'⁵ in this case, was taken from naval terminology for what, in the later RAF, would be classed as an air gunner.

In December 1917, 7A Sqn was renumbered to 14(N) Sqn, still under the 5th Wing. Further Handley Page aircraft were delivered in the Spring of 1918, listed in the squadron records as C3487, C3489, C3492, C9642, C9644, D5401 and D5402. These later machines were the HP 0/400 model, the majority having a pair of RR Eagle VIII engines with horse-

*Fanciful Carlton Ware porcelain model of an armoured car of the Marine Brigade led by Cmdr C.R. Samson in Belgium early in the war.
:P.F.G. Wright*



power to 360 hp or with other improvements such as a new fuel system with wind-driven pumps. Some squadron machines carried flight codes on the sides of their fuselage, typical examples being 'A2' on B8811, 'B3' on 3135, 'C1' on 3128 and 'D3' on 3123, one character each side the cockade.

When the first O/100s led by 3115, arrived at Couderkerque, they were envisaged as playing a wholly naval role patrolling sea-traffic, ports and coastal reconnaissance with any necessary bombing to be in daylight. Official thinking soon changed when 3115 was shot down in daylight into the sea off Ostend on 26 April 1917, by a single-seat seaplane. Flt/Sub/Lt Hood and three crew were rescued and made prisoners-of-war. Thereafter, HPs went into night bombing and carried this through to the end of hostilities. The O/400 was able to carry a mixed bomb load of either 8×250lbs, or 16×65lbs with 8×112lbs, or 3×350lbs or from July 1918, one large 'SN' monster of about 1650lbs.⁶ The first machine to drop such a bomb in anger was C9643 and it was released by Sgt/Obs L.A. Dell of 214 Sqn on the night of 24/25 July 1918. The O/400 carried three to four Lewis guns and a Type 54A wireless transmitter/receiver. The aircraft had outer wings which folded back to lie alongside the fuselage and in this manner, a single machine could be accommodated within a canvas 'Nestler' hangar, with internal clearance dimensions of 5 feet each side, 2 feet fore

and aft and a single foot in height. The squadron had one other type of aircraft on strength, a BE2c 9970 flown from Dover to Couderkerque on 15 December 1917, by Flt/Sub/Lt V.E. Sieveking DSC. This was the squadron 'hack', flown by many of the pilots to keep their hand-in on something smaller; the CO Sqn Cmdr Brackley also used this machine.

William Henry Neve with whom our tale continues, was born on 14 May 1898, son of Frederick Wright Neve and Florence Neve, the Postmaster of Cranbrook in Kent, where the family home, Elm Villa, was situated. Young William attended Cranbrook Grammar School where he also enrolled as a member of the School's Officer Training Corps, Junior Division. On completing his schooling in September 1914, he entered the legal world as an Articled Clerk with a firm of solicitors. However, at the age of 18, he volunteered to join the Royal Naval Air Service, having first attended an interview board. He took with him three character references as well as his Record of Service and Qualifications (Army Form B.2075) in the OTC. He was accepted into the RNAS, officially joining on 16 May 1916, and went to Crystal Palace for his induction and initial training. His service number was F14447 and he was posted to Felixstowe Naval Air Station as a rating, where he immediately applied to be trained as an Observer/Gunlayer.

*Early RNAS bombing raids from Dunkerque were carried out using a few Short Bombers. Here, the prototype, 3706, is being prepared at Manston in August 1916.
:H.C. Vereker*



*Handley Page 0/100
prototype 1455 at
Northolt. It later
served with 7A Sqn.
:J.M. Bruce/
G.S. Leslie collection*



On 12 February 1917, he was sent to the Admiralty Air Station at Eastchurch on a training course in aerial gunlaying, which included a spell at HMS *Excellent*, School of Gunnery on Whale Island, Portsmouth. His training notebook for this period makes interesting reading — lectures and demonstrations on bombing techniques and bombs; their construction, filling, fusing, markings and arming. The book has notes on various explosives and detonators together with instructions on bomb-sights, the Lewis gun and Vickers light automatic, with special attention paid to the old problem of jamming. Notes were also taken on the 2 pounder Davis Gun.

Back at Eastchurch in July, he was detailed for foreign draft, given his inoculations and a khaki uniform. After four days leave, Bill was posted to 7A RNAS Heavy Bombing Unit at Couderkerque, leaving Eastchurch for Dover on 21 July 1917 where he took passage in HMS *Brighton* for his cross-Channel trip to Dunkirk. It was then but a short land journey of a mile to Couderkerque and No 7A Sqn. As Neve arrived at the aerodrome, an enemy air raid was in progress, an event which repeated itself frequently. The RNAS pressure from the Dunkirk area was a real thorn-in-the-side to the opposing German forces operating from the Belgian ports and the seaward end of the Western Front.

The main enemy bombing unit in Belgium was Bombengeschwader 3 (Hauptmann Ernst Brandenburg), with bases at Gontrode and St Denis Westrem. Using 24 Gotha GIV twin-engined machines, this unit carried out both daylight

and night attacks on England (Operation *Türkenkreuz*) and frequent raids against the Dunkirk area.⁷ On 24 July, Neve notes in his diary that he was unpacking and stowing bombs and that in a couple of days he would be joining 'my machine' 3125. This in fact materialised, but later, because his machine for the next 4½ months was to be Handley Page 3121. On 27 July he was 'cleaning the guns aboard' and next day, he stood by for a raid on Bruges, but was not called.

The weather at this period of August 1917 had been extremely wet and the aerodrome was in rather a mess, such that he notes 'issued with sea boots' and 'too muddy for take-off'. It was to be the night of Thursday 9 August 1917 that he went on his first raid in 3121 as AC1/Gunlayer in the rear compartment, to the pilot Flt/Sub/Lt W.A. Scott, with Leading Mechanic R. Bager as observer. This was to be his regular crew. William Neve's log-books provide a real delight for the historian, in that he carefully described in detail, each flight he undertook. We can do no better than reproduce his notes against each raid in which he took part. For his first case they read:

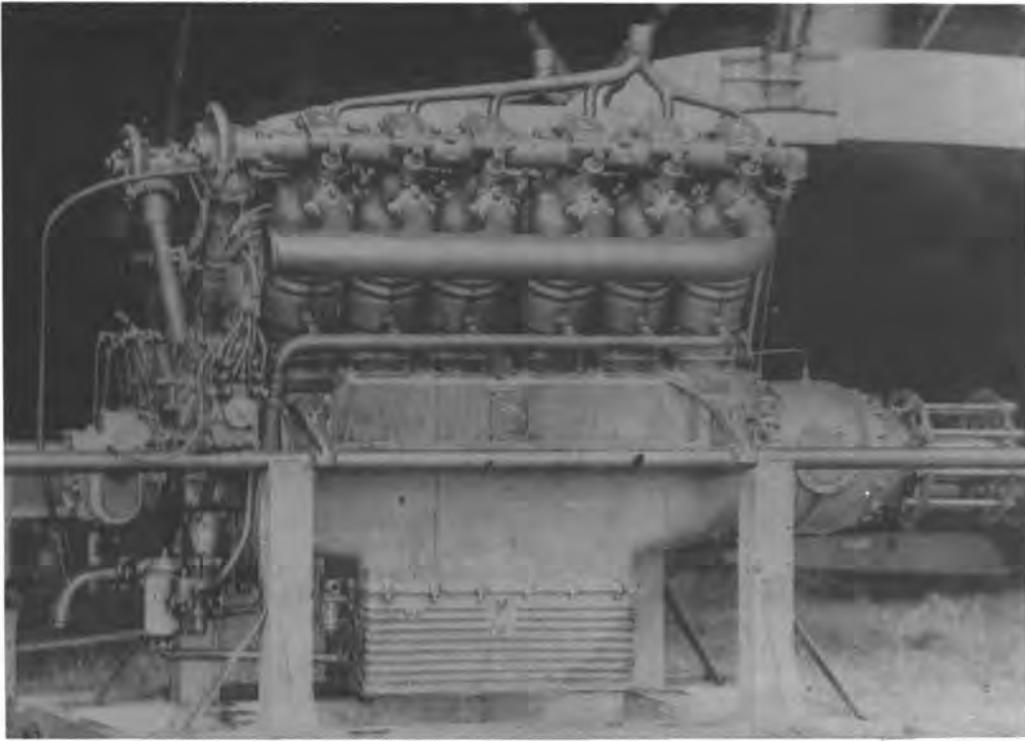
Target: Ghisteltes Aerodrome, 1 hour 54 min, height 4500 feet. Dropped 12×65lb bombs in two runs over the target. We were caught by searchlights each time, thus being unable to observe the results of the bombs. I fired four pans and Bager the observer fired two pans of ammunition. There was no moon.

Ghisteltes lay 6 miles south of Ostend.

On 1 August he was promoted Leading Airman with a suitable increase in his flying pay. On the 15th he went on

*The main thrust of
7A/14(N) Sqn
bombing attacks was
conducted initially
using the Handley
Page 0/100. Here,
3123 'Split Pin' is
seen at Redcar in
September 1917.
Flying with 7(N) Sqn
it was shot down on
31 October 1917 and
its crew became
prisoners of war.
:J.M. Bruce/
G.S. Leslie collection*





*Two hard working
250hp Rolls Royce
Eagle II engines
provided power for the
Handley Page 0/100.
The later Mk VIII
version produced 360hp
for the 0/400.
:H.C. Vereker*

his second raid in 3121 with the same crew, this time to Thourout, 15 miles south of Bruges. 14×112lb were dropped, 3 hours 7 minutes flying at 3000 feet:

Raided rolling stock and dumps. The visibility was absolutely rotten, thick heavy mist. We were hanging about the objective for an hour. We dropped in singles. The searchlights were unlucky owing to the mist. Still no moon.

The night following, the same machine took them against Thourout Aerodrome, dropping the same weight of bombs, 1 hour 43 min flying at 5000 feet:

Raided Thourout Aerodrome etc as on the previous night. Visibility was quite good and the bombs were dropped in three runs over the target. A cowl of the port engine was flapping about for the best part of the way back, also a flying wire was found to have broken in the bracket. Again there was no moon.

13 other Handley Pages from Coudekerque had taken part.

The port engine of 3121 suffered burnt-out valves on 22 August and she underwent a change of engine to rectify the matter; a test flight on the 25th proving all was well again. That night, 3137 was lost with its crew, Flt/Sub/Lt H.H. Booth the pilot, AM Canning the observer and AM P.M. Yeatman the gunlayer, while raiding the enemy

aerodrome at St Denis Westrem. Another attack on the aerodrome at Ghisteltes took place on the night of 31 August/1 September 1917, with Neve again as rear gunlayer in 3121:

14×112lb bombs, 1 hour 21 minute flight at 5500 feet — the bombs were dropped in two clusters in two separate runs over the target. As during the last raid on this objective, we were caught by the searchlights. Bob fired five pans and I seven at the searchlights, moving objects etc etc and generally having a good time. There was a moon on this occasion.

For the next three nights he was involved each time in a raid on Bruges Docks. After the night of 2/3 September he wrote:

This was my first raid to Bruges Docks and I expected to have a warm time by all accounts, but there was no excitement at all. One run was made over the target and a fire was caused in the first cluster of bombs. The visibility was very good indeed with the moonlight. We were second machine away and first there.

After 3/4 September:

Bruges Docks once again. The visibility as last night was exceedingly good until we got to the objective where we found a very thick smoke-screen. The AA gave us a warm reception, one piece of shrapnel going through the engine (radiator) cowl,



*Coudekerque, 1917.
Observer/Gunlayer Neve
(on the right) illustrates
the size of the 500lb HE
bomb. On the left, its
smaller brother is a
112lb HE bomb. Behind
is a 'Nestler' portable
hangar housing an
0/100 with its outer
wings folded back.
:R.J. Neve*



What is the collective noun for such a group?
An 'explosion' of aitch ees!

:R.J. Neve

very narrowly missing the petrol pressure pipe and radiator of starboard engine. The bombs were dropped in two groups.

Then 4/5 September:

Once again Bruges Docks. It seems my luck to have runs at the same places every time. The visibility was very good again. Going up the coast to the Mole then turned inland and followed the Canal. Bombs were dropped in one long run from the submarine shelters to the West Basin. It was beautiful and moonlight. The AA was fairly active but we were not hit. Returned over the sea.

A total of 18 tons of bombs was dropped by the squadron during the three nights.

A German raid on London took place on that night; eleven aircraft got through and several well known areas of the capital were damaged. The two main enemy aerodromes from which the Gotha GIV bombers operated were St Denis Westrem (3 miles SW of Ghent) with Staffeln 13 and 14, with 12 aircraft; and Gontrode (1 mile SW Ghent) with Staffeln 15 and 16, another 12 machines. It was to the

former that the night raid of 10/11 September 1917 by 7A was directed. Again in 3121, G/L Neve recorded that they were airborne for 2 hours 20 minutes at 4700 feet, taking 14×112lb high-explosive to 'rearrange' the aerodrome:

Raided St Denis Westrem aerodrome. The visibility was very poor. Bombs were dropped in two lots, 6 being on the west side of the aerodrome at 11.37 and 8 in a straddle along the south near the sheds. In the last lot there was an explosion which appeared to be too large for a bomb alone. I fired one pan at the searchlights. There was no moon but we were able to see fairly well.

There were now 16 Handley Pages at Dunkirk.

Out again the night following to Thourout Aerodrome, the Handley spending 2 hours aloft at 3400 feet:

Raided Thourout Aerodrome but the visibility was very bad. The bombs were dropped between 10.45 and 11.15 in three lots. The first and last groups were dropped where the aerodrome was estimated to be situated. Finding ourselves over Roulers and seeing a train, we had a shot at it but were unable to observe the results at all.

The other Handley Pages on this raid were 3119, 3128, 3129, 3130, 3131, 3133, 3134 and 1455. Not long after, Dunkirk was heavily shelled and our bases attacked from the air, with much damage. Bill Neve now had a break of 17 days because his Handley had to go into the 'Shorts' hangar for an engine change with new controls fitted. Flt/Lt Scott had gone on leave and Bill welcomed the break. It was at this time of the war that the German Flying Command decided to activate Riesenflugzeugabteilung 501 with their giant 'R' type machines. On 28 September 1917, Bombengeschwader 3 and Rfa 501 sent 25 Gothas and 2 'R' type to raid London at night, but were frustrated from reaching their target by cloud and scattered their loads over Kent and Essex. However, on the night following, a smaller force attacked London and four got through. Casualties were 14 killed and 87 injured; considerable damage was done to Waterloo Station and rolling stock. To counter this, 7A sent their Handleys to bomb St Denis Westrem aerodrome, which must have caused consternation to the returning Gothas who found that their home base had been mauled. Bill recorded in his Log Book that 3121 for the first time carried 4×250lb and 8×65lb bombs on a 2 hour 10 minute flight at 6000 feet:

Raided St Denis Westrem Aerodrome. The visibility was extremely good, being almost able to make out the Tommies making an 'Up lads and at 'em'. The bombs were dropped in a straddle right across the middle of the aerodrome in a line from SW to NE. One which hung-up dropped amongst the sheds at the south of the 'drome. A new officer was up front having a look around, possibly Flt/Sub/Lt Costain.

Following our attacks on St Denis Westrem and

The left hand Mercedes DIVa power plant of Zeppelin-Staaken RVI R27/16 of Rfa 501. The photograph is dated 2 October 1917. R27/16 was lost on the night of 7/8 March 1918 due to fuel failure.
:J. Proven





A Gotha GV. With the Gotha GIV these aircraft formed the main equipment of the German Belgian-based bombing squadrons. In this photograph, the fuselage cross has been partially converted from its original 'Eiserneskreuz' form. :C.F. Grant

Gontrode, two flights of Gothas were dispersed from the former to Mariakerque (3 miles NW of Ghent) and a further two flights from Gontrode to Oostacker (5 miles NE of Ghent). Flights 16 and 17 remained to make up the total strength of Bombengeschwader 3 to 36 aircraft. One of the regular targets of 7A were the docks at Bruges, but on this occasion it was ordered to attack the lock gates at Zeebrugge. The Bruges basin for German submarines, destroyers and MTBs, had its outlet to the sea via a canal and a pair of lock gates which, if they could be damaged or destroyed, would lead to the 'bottling up' of considerable enemy naval strength. It would also make the canal tidal. On the night of 1 October 1917, Handley 3121 with its regular crew plus PO Clarke, took 2×250lb and 10×112lb on a total 2 hour 5 minute flight at 5600 feet, against the lock gates:

Raided lock gates at Zeebrugge. Three runs were made over the target and the searchlights caught us before dropping each time. The AA was very hot. Nine holes were in the upper and lower starboard planes, one fair sized piece going through the inner plane strut which was almost severed and another piece cut through the compression strut of the lower starboard plane, while another bit went through the starboard back window. The bombs were dropped 5, 2 and 5 at 10.28, 10.40 and 11.50. I fired 7 pans at the lights.

The gates were not destroyed! A total of 22 Gothas from Bombengeschwader 1 attacked Dunkirk while the Handleys were away, and caused great damage to the area.

A note in Daily Routine Orders stated that members of the Lower Deck could now opt for training as pilot and Kille, Young and Bager were all accepted. This meant that 3121 was now without L/M Bager, her usual observer/gunlayer, so Bill Neve was thereby selected to replace him. This would mean that on future raids, Bill would fly 'up front' with his new pilot, now promoted to full Flight Lieutenant and with a DSC. Neve would now man the nose Lewis, aim and drop the bombs and act as observer. His next raid entailing his new duties was against Lichtervelde railway junction, 20 miles south of Bruges. On the night of 9/10 October 1917, 3121 carried 4×250lb and 6×112lb bombs on a 2 hour flight at 4500 feet. AM F. Spencer was the rear gunner:

Raided the dumps at Lichtervelde, the visibility was poor. Going east to Thourout we turned south picking up the line. Bombs were dropped 3, 2, 3, 2. One searchlight caught us and worried us continually with a little AA and some Green Devils, but poor shooting. This was my first trip as observer with F. Spencer as back gunlayer. Afraid I made a colossal mess-up but could be partly excused by weather conditions and not being used to the guiding lights etc.

Two more raids on the docks at Bruges were concluded on consecutive nights, 14/15 and 15/16 October. Rear gunlayer for these was B.S. Hillier. The efforts were only partially successful because the Handley was well-caught by the

searchlights on each night. Bill had a break from operations for over a week, then on 26 October, Scott, Spencer and he took 3121 with 4×250lb and 6×112lb bombs to again attack Lichtervelde Junction and railway station. The mission lasted 2 hours 5 minutes and the altitude was 5000 feet.

Raided Lichtervelde Railway Station. It was a glorious night, visibility being very good with a three-quarters moon. A strong wind was blowing about west. A run was being made over the objective but due to a misunderstanding, the pilot Lt Scott sheered off. In the second run a long slow straddle was made but appeared to be a little short and to have a drift to the east. 8 bombs were dropped and the remaining two in another run, but I did not observe the result of them. The searchlights caught us and once held us for between 5 and 10 minutes. On the return journey the AA gave us a very warm reception near Ghistelles. 33 separate shrapnel holes were made, all wings being hit, the port top plane catching the majority. One control wire was completely cut through, whilst an aileron wire was almost severed. Spencer fired three pans at the lights.

This target was again on the receiving end of 3121's 'hate' on the night of 6/7 November 1917. Neve as observer and bomb-aimer complained that the passenger on this occasion, Obs Sub/Lt Clarke, got in his way 'up front' and put him off his routine. They got back safely to Couderkerque. Neve had now flown on 16 raids in the four months he had been with 7A, and was due for some leave. On 8 November he rode in a squadron car to Boulogne, catching the boat to Folkestone and travelled on to London for 10 days leave.

On 5/6 December, he joined pilot Flt/Lt V.R. Gibbs DSC along with Obs Sub/Lt W.H. Matthews as gunlayer in 3121 on a raid to St Denis Westrem aerodrome. This pilot took the Handley to 7000 feet on a 1 hour 40 minute flight, with 4×250lb and 6×112lb bomb load.

Attempted a raid on St Denis Westrem, the visibility was not good, so went to Bruges. Machine did not climb well so seeing lights at Engel aerodrome, dropped three 112lb bombs there. The lights went out just before dropping. Continuing to Bruges, one run was made from SE to NW. Shooting not particularly good but not wasted.

The enemy Gothas had achieved a certain amount of success in their attacks on London and the south-east, but the psychological effect on the population far outstripped the tactical value of these raids. However, it must be said, the attacks had diverted two British fighting squadrons from the Western Front, brought back to reinforce the not-too-effective Home Defence units already operating. Riesenflugzeugabteilung 501 was again in action during the closing months of the year, with their Giant 'R' type machines, in an attack on England.⁸ On 6 December 1917, 19 Gothas and 2 Giants (almost certainly Zeppelin-Staaken R VI bombers), set out for a fire raid on London. 18 reached England but only eight, which dropped nearly 400 incendiaries, reached the capital. The overall result however

Fabric from Handley
Page 0/100 3121
retrieved by Obs/GL
Neve after the machine
crashed near
Couderkerque on the
night of 12/13 December
1917.
:P.F.G. Wright



Another piece of fabric
from 3121 showing
shrapnel damage
sustained over
Lichtervelde Railway
Junction on 26 October
1917. Autographed for
Bill Neve by the pilot,
Flt Lt W.A. Scott DSC.
:P.F.G. Wright



did not match the enemy's expectations. For the night of 10/11 December, Neve flew with Flt/Sub/Lt Webster (pilot) and Obs Sub/Lt Matthews (gunlayer), on an attempted raid on Bruges Docks. The machine again did not climb well and they patrolled up and down the coast, wading up the AA defences of Dunkirk and Calais. The remainder of the squadron were detailed to other targets.

Unknown to Bill Neve, this was to be his last flight in 'his' machine 3121, for the following night she was taken by an experienced senior officer Flt Cmdr C.H. Darley DSC with Wing Cdr T.A. Cull DSO as observer and Capt Gilmour RFC as gunlayer, on another attack on the docks at Bruges. The weather was totally unfavourable with driving rain and on his return to Couderkerque, the pilot could not see the ground and crashed the machine one mile east of the aerodrome. The crew survived but old 3121 was a write-off! Neve's Log Book was signed-off by his CO at the year's end, showing Bill to have flown on operations for over 34½ hours. The page carried a nice new rubber stamp impression dated '1 Jan 1918' and with 'No 14 Squadron RNAS', confirming the renumbering of 7A as from 9 December. Neve's 'Sailor's Pay Book S.43A' was likewise updated and signed-off by Warrant Writer H. Reed for the Fleet Paymaster.

Mentioned earlier was the fact that the enemy had dispersed flights of their bombers to other aerodromes around Ghent. It was therefore not at all surprising that 14(N) Sqn should set out to attack these. The New Year of 1918 had brought much bad weather which curtailed the Handley's operations, but on the night of 25/26 February, Bill Neve flew in 3133 piloted by Flt/Sub/Lt B.A. Millson with Sgt/Obs A.A. Parker up front and Flt Sub/Lt J.V. Ould sharing the rear compartment with Bill. The raid was on Oostacker Aerodrome, 2 hours 50 minutes airborne at 6000 feet with a load of 14×112lb HE. Handleys 3129, 3130 and 3132 also flew:

Raided Oostacker Aerodrome. Weather conditions were cloudy but the visibility was very good. Going northwest, skirted Bruges and picked up Ghent Canal and followed it to Ghent Darses then turned east over the 'drome. Three runs in all were made, west to east, northeast to southwest and north to south. Good shooting was obtained the first run but am unable to report on the other two. The bombs were dropped 6-3-5. On the return journey we got as far south as Roulers when the sky became very clouded. Tracers were fired at us over Oostacker 'drome and village and were a red colour. Very little AA and few searchlights.

On 10 March 1918 the squadron withdrew to Alquines Aerodrome, 15 miles east of Boulogne, for a short stay, as

the enemy's bombing of Dunkirk was becoming a bit of a nuisance. The machines flew in vic formation, 3130 leading with 3132 (L) and 3134 (R); 3135 (L) and 3133 (R) and 3129 bringing up the rear. They returned to Couderkerque on the morning of 26 March and that evening, Neve shared 3135 with pilot Flt/Sub/Lt E.F. McIlraith (a Canadian from Lanark, Ontario), and Obs Sub/Lt F. Porter in a long-distance raid to Valenciennes railway junction. They carried 12x112 bombs and were airborne for 6 hours at 7000 feet; part of a force of 10 machines, five from 7(N) and five from 14(N); seven reached the target:

The visibility was exceptionally good but it was very cold. We arrived at the objective but could not see the junction, so sailed on and the bombs were dropped on some huts and a junction probably Tournai. Then turn west and afterwards north, the compass jammed and with that, and heavy clouds coming up, the pilot and observer lost themselves. Getting to the coast, the fuselage tank was turned on but the pressure failed to act and we were forced to land. We did not know in which country we were and so while the pilot and observer went off to find out, I stood by ready to fire the machine should it be hostile country. They were unable to find out and so two piped down whilst one kept watch. At six they went off again and about seven, Mr McIlraith returned, Mr Porter having gone on after finding out that we were in France alright. He returned about 11 with 60 gallons of petrol, having walked into Le Havre to the ASC Petrol Depot. In the meanwhile we were well attended by the country people, who supplied us with milk, cakes, apples, tea and toast, so we did quite well altogether. I had to go to Le Havre for more petrol, getting back about three. Filling up, we got the engines going without much trouble and crowds of people saw us off. Mr Porter fired a white Very's light and half a pan of

ammunition. Arrived back at Couderkerque about six amidst the congratulations of the chaps.

On 1 April 1918, came the big change of title with the amalgamation of the flying services into the Royal Air Force. 14(N) 5th Wing became 214 Sqn 65th Wing and Gunlayer Neve got a '2' in front of his service number. Promotion had made him a Corporal. The squadron lost two machines on the night of 11 April in an attack on coastal batteries around Ostend/Zeebrugge. These aircraft were certainly 3129 and 1462. The crew of the latter was J.R. Allen (Canadian) the pilot, with Capt Paul Bewsher and Lt Purvis. The crew of 3129 was Lt McIlraith the pilot, Lt Matthews and Lt Clark. The aircraft had been badly damaged by accurate AA which stopped an engine; the machine eventually falling into the sea and Allen was drowned, but the others survived. 214 had flown in a joint raid with 207, but Bill Neve was not detailed for this raid.

On 23 April 1918, St George's Day, the famous naval attack with blockships and a landing on the Mole was carried out against the Bruges Canal at Zeebrugge. This was mainly an attempt to block-off access to the North Sea for German naval forces, especially submarines in Bruges Docks, and deny them use of the port. At the time, it was generally successful in its aims, blocking-in 12 submarines and 23 motor torpedo boats. However, the canal was cleared by 14 May. Despite this raid, the bombing squadrons kept up their attacks on the area. The night of 18/19 May saw 3135 carry out another mission against the Zeebrugge lock gates. This was the first occasion on which Bill dropped 550 pounders, three of them, but only two on the target as the



*'Knees bend, arms stretch'! Mechanics of 14(N) Sqn get in some 'centipedic' exercise with an 0/100 at Coudekerque.
:R.J. Neve*



*A change of propellers for 0/100 3122 of 7A/14(N) Sqn. Beneath the nose is a landing light and, above it, is the bomb sight.
:R.J. Neve*

*Handley Page 0/100
3135 of 7A/14(N)
Sqn being recovered
for rebuilding after
a major crash at
Couderkerque. It
eventually went to
the Independent
Force at Nancy.
:J.M. Bruce/
G.S. Leslie
collection*



narrative makes clear. The machine suffered AA damage:

Departing at 10.45 we went up the coast to Furnes, where we turned back to nearly the 'drome, then heading ENE and following the coast we got to Nieuport. Here we turned out to sea but kept the coast in easy view. The revolving light at Ostend was going also the EA warning, red and green lights at frequent intervals. Arriving at Zeebrugge we continued beyond for a while and then turning round, we made our first run from NE to SW. The AA was very hot and the searchlights were a nuisance all the time. In a long glide over, we went from 8000 to 3500 feet, but I washed out the run on account of the searchlights and not wishing to waste the bombs. Picking up our height again by going up to Holland we got to 7000 feet and made our second run. Exactly the same thing occurred, but knowing I had the right line of sight, I dropped by judgement still on the glide out to sea. At 3000 feet we turned SW and kept the coast in view to Nieuport where we turned inland. The port engine was boiling very violently, so we throttled right down, then the starboard one began to boil and so using them alternatively, we just managed to make home, but could not even taxi across to the hangars.

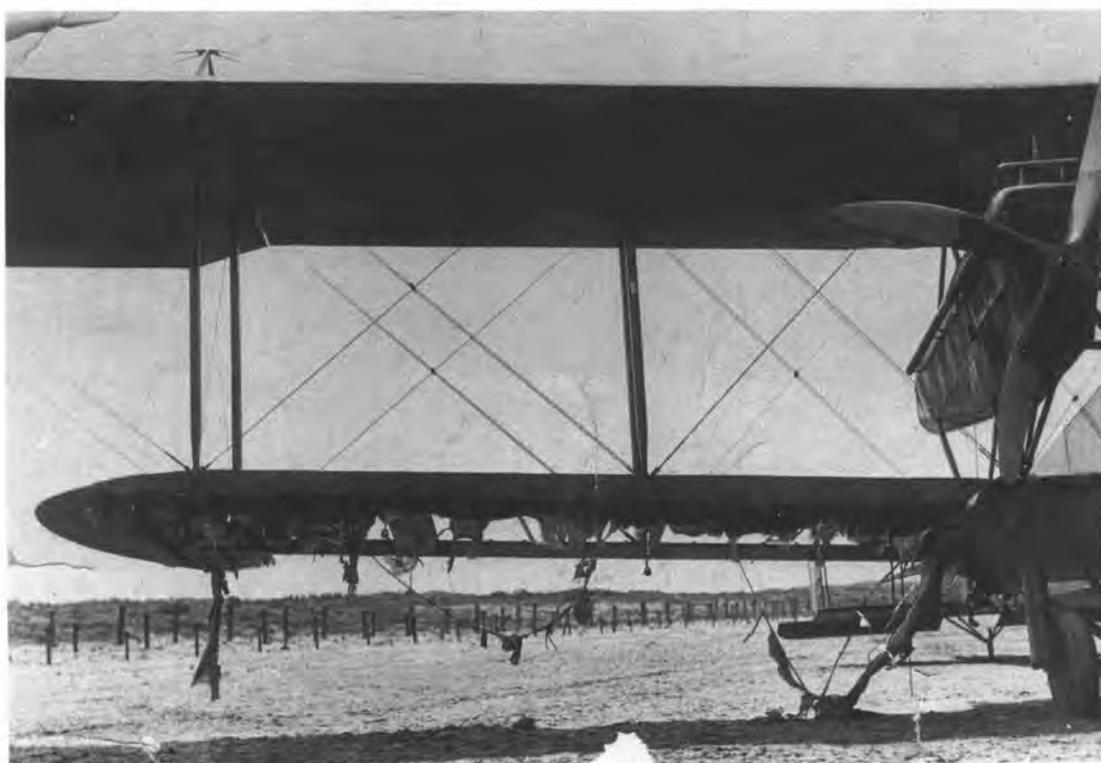
On leaving the target, one bomb hung up and Murphy in the back fired the gun to attract our attention, and pointed to our starboard plane. We saw that the whole leading edge had gone

and that fabric was flapping about under the engine. When we landed we realised how lucky we were to escape because neither of the spars had been touched, but a lump of shrapnel had gone right through the top port longeron. I had dumped the third bomb in the sea.

The Germans sent their Gotha and Zeppelin-Staaken bombers out on the night of 19/20 May 1918 — their last and biggest aeroplane raid on England.⁹ The following night 214 Sqn paid them back with an attack on their aerodromes. Flt/Lt McIlraith was pilot, Neve observer and AC1 W.P. Murphy the gunlayer, in 3125, which placed 14×112lb on St Denis Westrem:

Leaving at 10.45, we steered due east picking up our height so quickly that we crossed the lines at 6000 feet. Passing Thourout, we continue to the Bruges-Ghent Canal. Following this, we circled over Ghent several times but I could not make out the 'drome for a long time. We took a random run from east to west but the searchlights caught us; I dropped seven bombs. Making a second run, I got the 'drome beautifully and straddled NW to SE over the sheds and hangars. The AA was light but the 'lights caught us on the second run. We returned over Ghistelles and landed in good order, except for the pressure which had to be at the release all the way.

*Parked on the
sands at Fort
Mardyck west of
Dunkerque,
214 Sqn Handley
Page 0/100 3125
shows the effect of
accurate AA fire
after a raid on the
Bruges Canal on
10/11 June 1918.
:R.J. Neve*





Group photograph of 214 Sqn RAF at St Ingelvert late in 1918, framed by two Handley Page 0/400 and with a 'SN' bomb as the centrepiece. :R.J. Neve

It was about this period that 214 began using the 0/400 version of the Handley bomber more widely and on 27 May 1918, Cpl/Obs Neve was airborne in C3492, one of the small batch of 12 built at the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough. Bill noted in his Log that they were up between Furnes and Abbeville for map-marking and petrol consumption test. This machine was flown by three pilots for experience, one hour each. Fl/Lts H.R.W. Ellison, G.L. Fraser and Nichols. Again on the night of 30/31 May, Neve was aloft in an 0/400, this time C9644. Taking 14x112 pounders to Bruges Docks, the pilot was Capt T.Q. Studd and observer, Sgt/Plt L.A. Dell. The next night, 214 again attacked the docks, and this time using 3125 with Flt/Lt H.A. McCormick, a Canadian from Pembroke, Ontario, as pilot. Bill Neve was duty observer and had a good run at the target without the bother of searchlights spoiling the fun:

As before we started off while it was still daylight and got our height. We crossed the lines and arrived at Bruges. Intending to make a run N to S, I got down below preparatory to the drop. Arriving at the Canal, I used the lights to guide the pilot along it, but he would take no notice. Going up top I steered him clear and we then patrolled the Dutch coast to get our height again. We then started a second run from NE to SW taking us right over the objective. Arriving back at the 'drome, we found that a small Hun machine had bombed the camp - four killed and seven wounded.

Another two-nights' raid on the docks and the Zeebrugge Canal took place on 4/5 and 5/6 June 1918. Neve was again in 3125 with McCormick and Pte H. Williamson as gunlayer. For the first raid, a straddling attack was made on the Canal with 112 pounders and after the second raid, the returning Handley was diverted from Couderkerque to land nearby on the beach. The foreshore was often used by our returning machines when enemy 'planes were attacking 214's base, as they were on this night, in force. If diversion to the beach had not been available, the Handleys would have had to circle Dunkirk sometimes for an hour or more, waiting to land, and their fuel was usually low. Several entries in Bill's Log Book mention the beach at Fort Mardyck west of Dunkirk, with the landing and overnight parking of Handleys there.¹⁰ Log extracts state:

Arriving back at the 'drome, we fired the usual white light and got three reds in answer. Flying round about and firing landing flares now and again for an hour, we suddenly caught sight of aircraft on the beach and making for them, got the correct signal for landing. We were the first to do so, when we discovered that it seemed the whole of the German Air Service had been let loose on good old Couderkerque aerodrome. We flew back the next morning.

The Germans were now using two-seaters at night against our bombers. Firing tracer and explosive incendiary ammunition, these aircraft did not make life easy for the Handleys. On 6/7 June 1918, Neve went with his usual 3125 in at attack on Oostacker Aerodrome. The pilot was Flt/Lt W.S.B. Fraser, who took-off at 9.50pm for

a flight lasting 2 hours 53 minutes, maximum height was 6000 feet:

We picked up our height as usual between Bergues and the lines and on approach to the target all the searchlights came on together with the AA, so we doubled back 'tout suite'. We picked up our course again and made two runs at the 'drome, north to south then east to west with good spread of load. Turning for home, we found that the old 'drome had again been bombed and a couple of fires were burning. Once more we landed on the beach at Fort Mardyck. Returning home the following morning, we found the aerodrome in an awful condition and that my hangar was one of those burnt up. The CO ordered us to Spyker for a good rest until the next day.

The enemy attack on Couderkerque had been a mass one of 40 aircraft which had dropped 470 bombs. Nevertheless, the Handleys were again active on the night of 10/11 June with

The cover of a dinner menu for 7(N) and 7A Squadrons at Coudekerque in October 1917. The artist was Flt Sub-Lt Paul Bewsher and a list of suitable targets is shown.

:P.F.G. Wright





*Italian Air Service
Caproni military
Ca.5 (Ca.44 or
Ca.46) 11610, with
Fiat engines. Late
in 1918, the
USNAS Northern
Bombing Group
was due to use this
type at St Ingelvert,
but with the
unreliability of the
Fiats, operations
never really got
under way.
:J.M. Davis via
Noel Shirley*

a run to the Bruges Canal and Zeebrugge, Neve the observer in 3125. They again landed on the sands, returning the following day.

Their next raid was a close thing in which they were lucky to get back from Bruges; the narrative tells the story:

Once more we started off to raid Bruges Docks and the Northern Darse. Leaving the ground at 9.25, we hung about until it was dark, then we went over Thourout Junction and dropped one or two bombs. Continuing to Bruges, we approached from the NE at a height of 11000 feet then glided in to 6500 feet to drop. Bombs having gone, the searchlights got us and then the AA gave us a real pasting. Putting our nose down and opening out the engines, the speedometer (sic) was around 101 and it was 2500 feet before we got out of the searchlights. According to orders, we again landed at Fort Mardyck and then found that our bottom starboard plane had been shot away (see photo — PFW).

We had only three ribs with main stays and compression struts left and practically no fabric at all, otherwise we were alright.

This happened to HP 0/100 3125 with its usual crew of McCormick, Neve and Williamson.

The RAF realised that the enemy planned to carry out further widespread night bombing of the airfields around Dunkirk. This would mean the Handleys on the ground at Couderkerque were vulnerable, so the usual move was instituted to disperse the machines to the beach area at Fort Mardyck. Flt/Lt Nicholls with Bill Neve took D5402 (a Birmingham Carriage Co built 0/400), off from Couderkerque and 10 minutes later put her down on the beach:

Last machine to leave after waiting for another to land. We

made a good landing but were quite a long way from the parking area. Through damn rotten luck we struck a soft patch and tipped up on our nose, but doing no real damage apart from straining it.

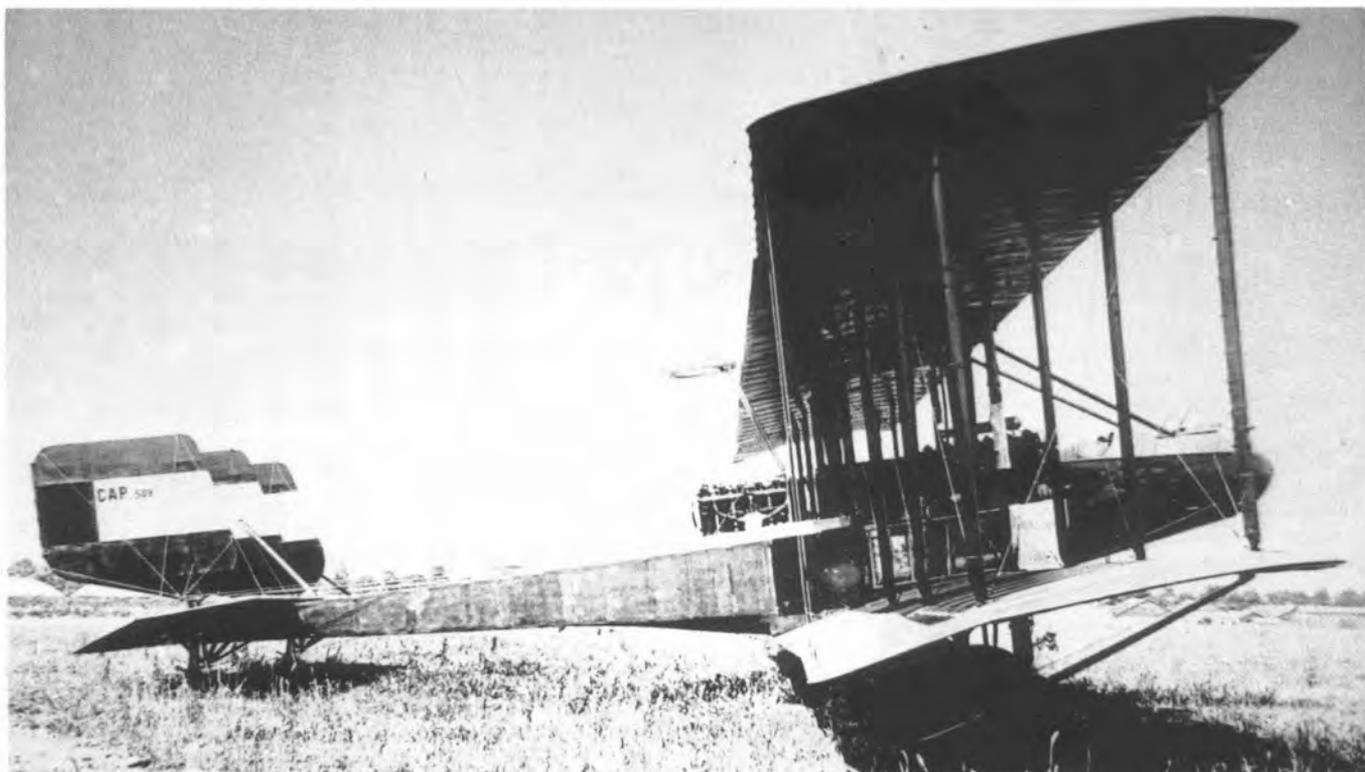
Sure enough, Bogohl dropped 17500 kilos of bombs on the Dunkirk airfields on the 13/14 June 1918. They were making life at Couderkerque almost untenable with repeated bombing attacks. After nearly every RNAS operation, the Handleys were having to land on the sands owing to enemy activity and bomb-damage to their base. It made sense to relocate the squadron, therefore on 29 June, No 214 withdrew to St Inglevert aerodrome, sited midway between Calais and Boulogne.

June passed into July, and on the night of the 13th (unlucky?), 0/400 C3489 piloted by Lt G.L. Fraser with Cpl Neve as observer and 2/Lt E.C. Fletcher as gunlayer, lifted-off from the new base. Their attack was to be on Oostkamp Aerodrome, 5 miles south of Bruges. Before reaching the target, the Handley was fired on near Varsenaere by an enemy two-seater, one of whose phosphorous bullets hit Bill Neve in the back of his left thigh. Despite this, he dropped his bombs before passing-out. An engine had also been shot out of action, but Lt Fraser got the machine back to our side, crossing the lines at low altitude and landing on the beach. The Handley was hauled-up to the dunes to make it less visible to the enemy.

The injury had caused a fracture in the middle of Bill's femur and damage to the muscles. Operated on at 3am on



*Caproni Ca.5
(Ca.44) B-19 of the
Northern Bombing
Group. This
machine crashed
at Dijon on
2 September 1918
on its delivery
flight from Milan.
Ex-Italian serial
11589; a small
USAS cockade is
painted on the left
rudder.
:C.D. Dushane via
Noel Shirley*



Some later Ca.5s were powered by three 250hp Isotta-Fraschini engines in place of the Fiats. Thus powered the machine was identified as 'Type Ca.45'. :1361st AV Sqn via Noel Shirley

the 14th, he was then moved to Calais Hospital suffering an awful journey in an ambulance car. On 26 July 1918 he crossed to England, to No 16 Canadian General Hospital; it was the end of his war!

Of course, the raids by 214 went on right up to the night before the Armistice. By now, members of the United States Naval Air Service were serving with the squadron, some

helping to crew the Handleys.¹¹ See Appendix for fuller details of the USNAS Northern Bombing Group. During offensive operations, five of 214's machines had been lost on the enemy side of the lines. Two complete crews along with three other personnel were killed, the others being prisoners-of-war. The squadron's 0/100's were eventually all replaced by 0/400s, the former being sent to the

Close up view of the torpedo racks on a Caproni Ca.3 (Ca.33). This type was a forerunner of the Ca.5 which the Northern Bombing Group planned to use when operating with 214 Sqn RAF. :1361st AV Sqn via Noel Shirley



Independent Force at Nancy, to continue the war against German industry.¹²

The journalist and poet Flt/Lt Paul Bewsher DSC, flew with 7A/14(N) Sqn from Dunkirk and his book of poems *The Bombing of Bruges*, Hodder & Stoughton (1918), is now a sought-after item by followers of WW1 aviation history. An extract prefaces this article. His other book, *Green Balls*, was originally published by Wm Blackwood & Sons in 1919, and covers his further experiences flying in Handley Pages from Luxeuil and Dunkirk. The book is now available as No 12 in the Greenhill Classics series, as advertised in this Journal. Bewsher died in January 1966 at the age of 71.

To summarise, the naval bombing squadrons operating from the Dunkirk area were called upon to do too much by too many authorities. Their offensive efforts were thereby spread too thinly over too many targets to be really effective. They were called upon by the Vice-Admiral Dover Patrol to hit naval targets; by the War Office to support the land battles by destroying communications and supplies; by Home Defence to attack the aerodromes of the German bombing squadrons in Belgium. No real prolonged concentrated effort was made on any of these targets, such as the enemy attacks on the Aircraft Depot at St Pol in September 1917. About 40 of their machines dropped a total of 123 tons of bombs over seven consecutive nights, and created tremendous havoc.

William H. Neve, now a Sgt/Obs, spent over 20 months in hospital and in recuperation, to be discharged from the RAF at Blandford in March 1920. He was granted a 30% disability pension, his wound causing a life-long problem with normal walking. Nevertheless, he was proud of the days he had spent with his squadron and helped to found and was President of the 214 Squadron Association. He organised 214 Squadron (Victor BI) 50th Anniversary Guest Night at RAF Marham in September 1967 and presented the squadron with his WW1 target maps. Bill died at the age of 74 in 1972.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am obliged to my colleague at work, Ray Neve, for his kind action in allowing me access to his father's Log Books, documents and photographs. What a treasure these turned out to be. As usual, due thanks must also go to fellow-members of Cross & Cockade for their assistance: Rex Brown, Dick Layman, Paul Leaman, Stuart Leslie, Noel Shirley and Harry Woodman.

FOOTNOTES

1. Samson, Air Comm C.R., *Fights and Flights*, E. Benn (1930); also files PRO AIR 1/724/76/1 — Force sent to Belgium, August 1914; AIR 1/724/76/3 & 5 — Work done during the war.
2. C&C Journal Vol 5 No 2 page 69.
3. AIR 1/1824/204/201/4 — Record of Movements of the 5th Wing RNAS and its squadrons, January 1916 to March 1918.
4. DSO DSC CdeG, 'Brackles' to his friends. After the war, sometimes Chief Pilot of Handley Page Transport Ltd; Air Superintendent of Imperial Airways Ltd and with BOAC post-WW2 as Assistant to the Chairman.
5. Gunlayer was originally the specialised naval term for a member of a ship's gunnery team, being responsible for the laying or training of the guns to the target before firing.
6. The designation 'SN' has never really been explained. Suggestions have been put forward that the letters possibly stood for 'Special Naval' or that these large bombs were designed to be dropped initially on Essen in the Ruhr, hence 'SN'. Do readers have an answer?
7. Photos of these aircraft are in C&C US Journal Vol 20 No 2 p151 (1979) and an article in Vol 23 No 1 (1982). This unit was sometimes called the 'Englandgeschwader'.
8. During its operations, Riesenflugzeugabteilung (Rfa) 501 used only Zeppelin-Staaken RIV, V and VI machines, the unit comprising six aircraft and 750 personnel. It was supported by a Riesenflugzeugersatzabteilung (Rea) — Giant Aeroplane Support Section.
9. The force comprised 38 'G' Type, 3 'R' and 2 'C' machines which set out, but only 18 'G', and 1 'R' reached London. The number given in *The German Giants*, Putnam (1962) and in *The War in the Air*, Vol 5, OUP (1935), differ slightly. In all, over 111000 kilos of bombs were dropped on England in 22 raids by aeroplanes.
10. In 1940, used by the British Expeditionary Force for its historic evacuation.

11. Air Historical Branch file in the PRO, reference AH/15/217/1.
12. See C&C GB Journal Vol 12 No 1, article on the Independent Force bombing raids.
13. PRO AIR 1/62/15/9/97 — US Northern Bombing Group — Operation and Policy, September 1918.

APPENDIX

The United States Naval Air Service Northern Bombing Group

When America entered the war, she was almost totally without an effective air force and had to call upon the Allies to supply the necessary operational aircraft she needed. Many French machines were purchased, some also from Great Britain and a few from Italy. A joint US Army/Navy procurement team was established in Europe although the usual inter-service rivalries and jealousies abounded and things did not run very smoothly.

The United States Naval Air Service formed their Northern Bombing Group in April 1918, to be based in the Dunkirk/Calais area of Northern France. The Group was to comprise a Day Wing with Marine pilots flying DH4/DH9 bombers and a Night Wing with Navy fliers operating the Caproni Ca.5 (Ca.44) three-engined machine, which had been ordered from the makers. An Aircraft Acceptance Park at Eastleigh was allotted to the Americans by the British authorities, for the receipt and checking of aircraft ordered by the Americans from various manufacturers. The Caproni bombers were to be collected and ferried by US aviators, from the factory airfield near Milan, to St Inglevert aerodrome or Eastleigh, as necessary. This alone was a daunting undertaking for Navy men not experienced in flying large landplanes.

The three 200hp Fiat A.12bis six-cylinder engines which powered the Caproni were so badly assembled and unreliable that they caused much worry and concern to the crews. Many of the machines were lost in crashes while on delivery and those that reached St Inglevert were immediately grounded until the engines had been rebuilt and other troubles sorted. The first Caproni left the factory airfield on 23 July 1918, numbered as B-1. Each machine was then consecutively numbered B-2, B-3 etc, in order of their departure. Deliveries to B-19 were apparently completed.

The Northern Bombing Group was under the command of Capt D.C. Hanrahan, a US Navy regular line officer, rather than a naval aviator. The Night Wing was temporarily attached to 214 Sqn RAF at St Inglevert and for operations, came under control of the Vice-Admiral Dover Patrol, 5th Group RAF. Owing to the unreliability of the power units, the Capronis were to be confined to short-range bombing missions such as Zeebrugge Docks and Ostend.¹³ In fact, B-5 was the only US machine to complete an operational mission, when on 15 August 1918, she was part of a 214 Sqn night raid on Ostend Docks. The Caproni was piloted by Ensign L.R. Taber with Ensign C. Fahy as co-pilot/observer and Electrician D.C. Hale as gunlayer. B-5 had arrived from Milan on 11 August and shortly after her raid, was written-off in a crash near Dunkirk on 23 August. Some machines delivered later, Caproni Ca.45s, were fitted with Isotta-Fraschini motors, but arrived after the Armistice.

To gain operational experience while they waited for their Capronis to be pronounced airworthy, a number of USNAS personnel flew on raids as part of 214 Sqn crews in the Handleys. The O/400 had also been put into production in America, this version being powered by a pair of 350hp Liberty 12-N engines. A few of these US-built bombers reached England at a late stage of the war, but it is fairly certain that none went to France for operational use. Vol 14 No 1 of C&C Journal has an illustration on page 41 of some US O/400s, more than likely taken at Ford Junction or the AAP at Eastleigh.

According to PRO file AIR 1/498/15/319/3 — American Naval Aviation participation in the Great War — active larger-scale operations of the NBG began on 13 October 1918, with a daylight attack by DH4 and 9 aircraft on railway lines at Thielt. The NBG had earlier been offered to the American general Pershing, but he declined to use it. In all, 69 tons of bombs were dropped on the enemy by the American Group crews, before hostilities ended.

I am especially obliged to my American friends Dick Layman and Noel Shirley for their help in supplying

additional information for this appendix and photographs to go with it. Further reading on the USNAS in WW1 can be found in the following publications:

Naval Aviation in World War 1 — Chief of Naval Operations, Washington D.C. (US Govt Printing Office, Washington D.C. 20402 — \$1.25)

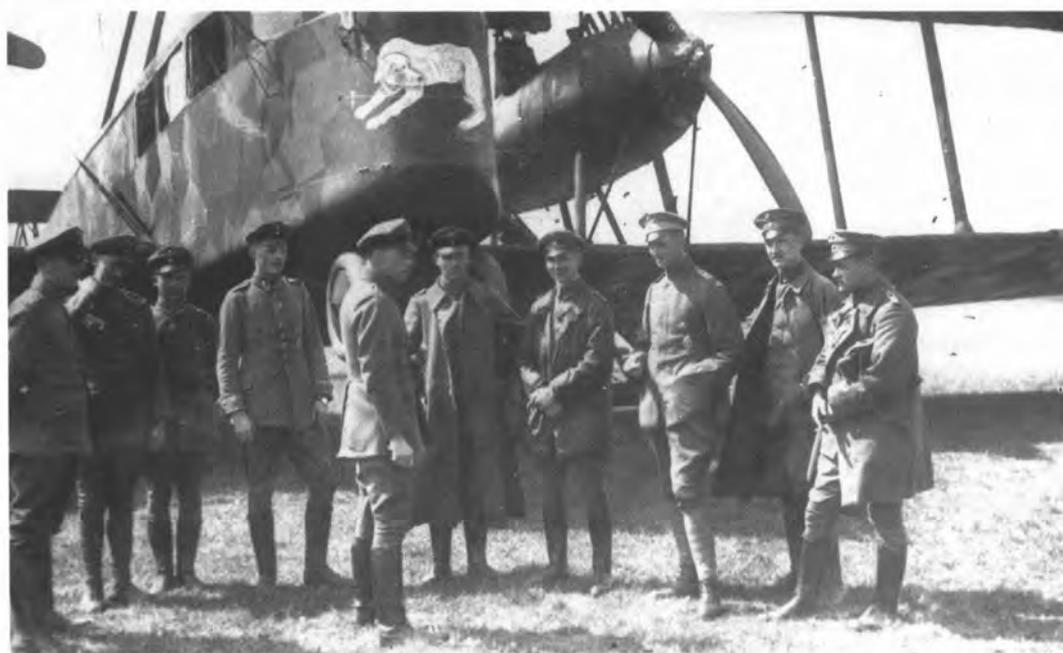
History of United States Naval Aviation — Yale University Press (1949)

Careers of U.S. Naval Aviators (Nos 1 to 2000) — Naval Aviation Register, Washington (1967)

Cross & Cockade (US) Journal — Vol 4 No 1 (1963) & Vol 25 No 2 (1984)



*Staaken R.VI (Albs) 36/16, nearest the camera, and R.VI (Av) 33/16 of Rfa 500.
:CCI*



*Hptm Schilling and officers of Rfa 500 in front of Staaken R.VI(Av) 33/16.
:CCI*



*Obltn Meyer in front of Staaken R.VI 30/16.
:CCI*