

50 metres to the right and bingo!

I was born in Kingsbury Maternity Hospital on 20 January 1941 at the height of the blitz. My parents had bought a semi-detached house at 136 Fleetwood Road, Dollis Hill in 1938 for £230. Being close to the big industrial estate at Park Royal my father rented a small cottage at London Colney near St Albans as a safe place for my mother and me, but as summer came and the bombing scaled down we moved back into the house in Fleetwood Road.



My mother outside 136 Fleetwood Road

My father was by now in the Army, initially at East Grinstead and then going out to North Africa for the *Torch* landings in December 1942. My brother was born at the beginning of August 1943 and my mother brought us up with the help of her sister and mother, both of whom worked in local factories. My maternal grandfather, George Leo Sansom, had served in the cavalry in the First War and spent the whole of the Second War in the Auxiliary (later National) Fire Service.



My father in the back garden 1942. The brick structure in the neighbouring garden is similar in construction to a communal shelter.

On my third birthday, in 1944, Germany started a fresh bombing campaign against Britain, known as the 'Little' or 'Baby' Blitz, but formally as operation *Steinbock*. The campaign, mainly directed against London, was in retaliation for allied bombing of Berlin. On the sixth raid, on Friday 18 February, around 200 German bombers flew from bases from the Netherlands to Western France. That evening my mother, Aunt Gladys, my brother and I were at home.



My grandfather George Leo Sansom by now in the NFS

In inner city areas there was a wide range of air-raid shelters, some providing protection from a direct hit. In the suburbs, we generally enjoyed three forms of shelter offering protection from blast but not a direct hit. For individual homes with gardens there was the Anderson shelter, made of corrugated iron and semi submerged, with the spoil then used to cover the iron roof. For homes without gardens there was the Morrison shelter, in effect a steel cage with solid top and wire mesh sides, measuring 6'6" by 4' wide and 2'6" high. We had one of these in the sitting room. In the street spaced at about 150 metre intervals were communal air raid shelters. These were built of brick with 14" walls and one foot thick concrete roofs: they accommodated around 50 people on benches and the doorway was protected by a blast wall. There was one opposite our house.



Communal shelter

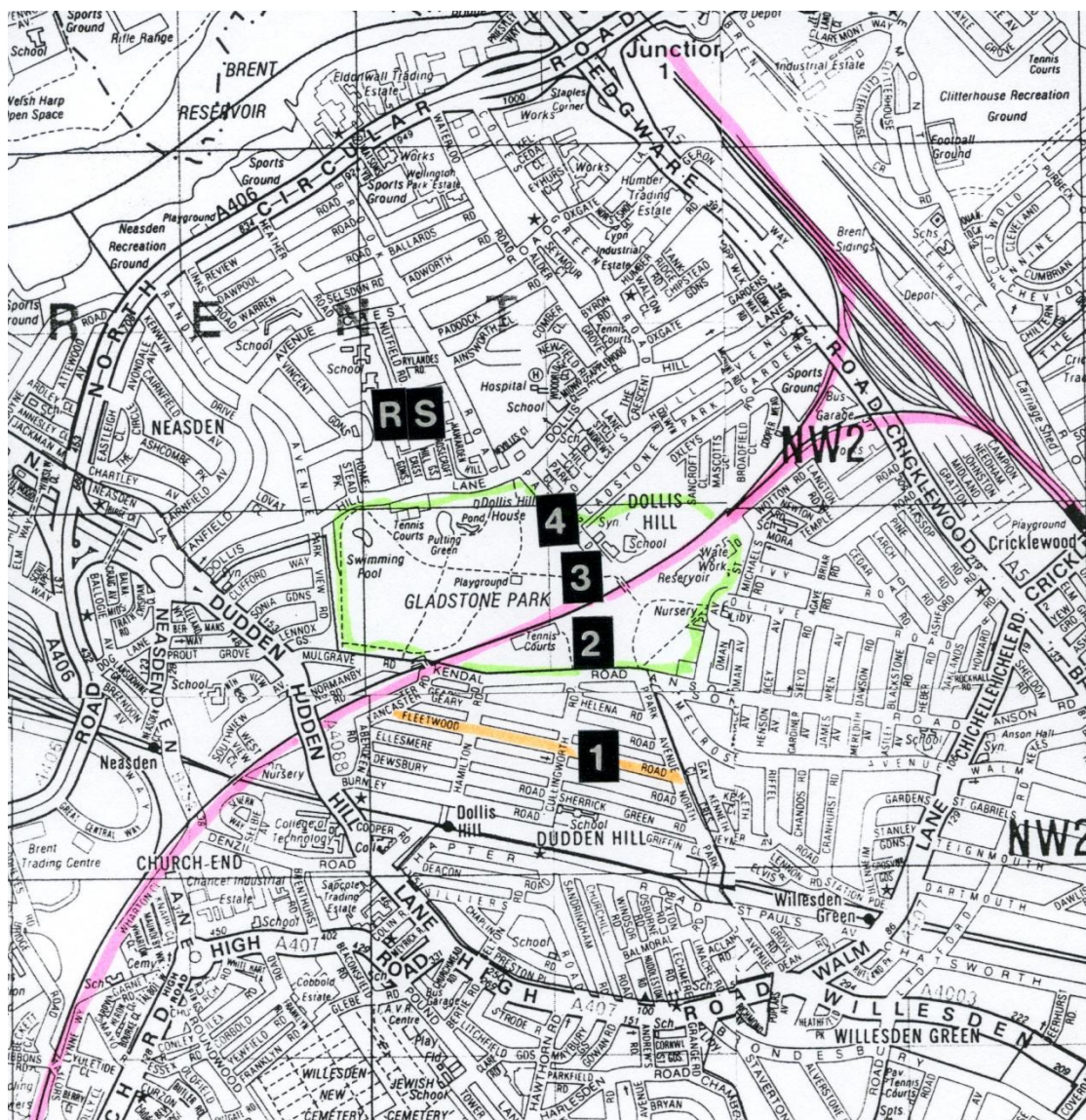


Morrison shelter

At 0036hrs on Saturday morning, 19 February 1944 the sirens in Willesden began to wail. Subsequent events were sufficiently traumatic that a few details leading up to the climax of the raid are imprinted on my mind. The four of us took refuge in our Morrison shelter as the battery of ant-aircraft guns in Gladstone Park, mainly manned by WRENs, began firing.

I remember being frightened and then noting that my Mickey Mouse doll was across the room and demanding that my aunt recover it which she did. As we huddled together the noise got worse and suddenly there was a huge bang and the room was full of flying glass and powdered plaster. This was followed by a number of huge detonations. My mother and aunt were trying to persuade me that the noise was merely the guns firing, but then there was shouting and air raid wardens coming to bring us across the road to the communal shelter. Some time later my grandfather turned up, I think with his fire appliance, having learned that a bomb had landed on Fleetwood Road and desperate to know whether or not his family had survived. We had, but others were not so lucky. The all-clear sounded at 0148hrs.

It transpired that four 500kg bombs had been dropped in a stick and the first had destroyed six houses on our side of the road some 50 metres away. The remaining bombs fell in Gladstone Park, one on the AAA site (casualties not reported), one near to the main railway line linking all the radial routes north out of London and the last in open ground next to Dollis Hill Synagogue. Now a listed building this had been built in 1937, designed by Sir Owen Williams.



The pattern of bombs. RS is the GPO Research Station. Fleetwood Road is outlined in orange, the important rail link line in pink and Gladstone Park in green.

Dollis Hill had a significant Jewish population, both migrants from London's East End but also many from central Europe having fled Nazi persecution. Thus opposite us were the Glicksmans, next to them Manny Tuckman the local greengrocer, down the road at 152 the Kelmans (father the Rabbi at the Beth Hamedrash synagogue in his garage) and our immediate neighbours the Jacobs.

The bomb that dropped in Fleetwood Road reportedly landed on no116, according to reports leaving a crater 37' across and 7' deep. I believe it more likely that the bomb fell on no120. It demolished six houses on the north side of the road and killed three members of the Ellery family at no120 – Joan aged 23 (who died on the 20th at St Andrews Hospital), her mother Violet (56) and grandfather John Triggs Ellery (81). Surprisingly it also killed Jeanette and Reuben Lewis, a Jewish couple who lived at 123 Fleetwood Road, opposite 120 but which did not receive a direct hit. Perhaps they were in the open making their way to a communal shelter.



114-124 Fleetwood Road. The six houses built in 1947 on the site of those demolished on 19 February 1944. No 116 is to the far left.

The raid on 18/19 February 1944 was the heaviest since May 1941. 182 civilians were killed. The Luftwaffe lost nine aircraft. Had the Fleetwood Road bomb landed 50 metres to the right, someone else would be writing this story!

SECRET - M. of H.S., R. & E. Dept. and A. MINISTRY				BOMB FORM B.C. 4.		Serial No.
Region: 5 County: Group: 6.C.				Total Casualties:		Sheet No.
Adminis- trative Area: Willesden, B.C.				Killed M F C	Warnings P	Date: /19-2-44
				S/I M F C	and R	U:30...
				L/I M F C	Times W	U:45...
A	B	C	D	E		F
Bomb No. & time of fall	Size & type of bomb & X or U	Judged by F or D	Crater size and type of soil	Location and damage notes (Grid reference if no plot is made)		Additional notes by R. & E. Dept. Technical Officers
24 0115	500 Kg X	C	27' X 9' B Clay	Well rear of St. Raphael's Way 250' West of junction with Lewis Crescent and St. Raphael's Way then 142' R/A. No damage.		
25 0115	500 Kg X	C	37' X 7' A Clay	Well XXXXXX rear of 116 Fleetwood Road 265' East of junction with Collingworth Road and Fleetwood Road then 76' North R/A. Damage: S.A. Distance 59' Frontage 66' to Park S.B. ditto 85' ditto 88' D. Damage up to 400' Damage to Water Main.		
26 0120	500 Kg X	C	Filled in 40' Diam.	Well in Gladstone Park, 173' East of junction with Collingworth Road and Kendle Road then 173' at R/A. No damage.		
27 0120	500 Kg X	C	36' Water	Well in Park 440' East of XXXXXX Railway bridge, then 200' north of centre of railway. No damage.		
28 0120	500 Kg X	C	46' X 5' B Clay	Well in Park Allotments 90' South of junction with Dollis Hill Avenue and Park Side then 79' West of Park Side. No damage.		
				Position and damage notes		

The Bomb census report for Willesden for 19 February 1944

What was not generally known was how close the final bomb of the stick came to causing a major impact on the war effort. Some 200 metres to the north-west was the GPO Research Station where the *Colossus* computers for Bletchley Park were being built in great secrecy. Although Luftwaffe target plans have been destroyed, it is unlikely that Dollis Hill was a target.



136 Fleetwood Road in 2015. Somewhat idiosyncratic paintwork, but the original stained glass in the front door panel remains.

While my grandparents and Aunt Gladys remained in Willesden for the rest of the War, we were evacuated to Great-Aunt May at High Wycombe, but not before thieves had stolen some of my parents' possessions, including wedding presents. The event blasted itself into my memory: what I don't remember are the hordes of psychologist offering post-traumatic stress counselling. Probably because they didn't exist. We returned after the War, I started school at Gladstone Park Primary in 1946 and when not learning my times tables spent happy hours playing on the several bombsites in the area.

The total number of civilians killed and missing in the UK in the Second World War is estimated at 62,000, nearly all from bombing, with more women than men, as might be expected.

The Steinbock raids - the 'Baby Blitz'

The Germans planned a series of air raids to begin in early 1944 as a reprisal for the RAF and USAAF bombing of Berlin. The new offensive was codenamed Operation 'Steinbock' and was set to begin in January 1944. The British codename for the raids was 'Capricorn'. The Angriffsfuhrer England (Attack leader England - Obstl Dietrich Peitz) was ordered by Goering to intensify the air war over Britain, by means of concentrated attacks on cities, especially industrial areas and ports.

In addition to the bomber units reconnaissance was provided by Ju 188s of 3.(F)/122 based at Soesterberg. Most of the bomber units were based in Germany or the Netherlands, but were forward based before each raid at Dutch, Belgian and French airfields including Coulommiers, Juvincourt, Laon/Athies, Laon/Couvron, Melun Villaroche, Montdidier and Sailly-Lorett.

The figures in the table are from the official history *The Defence of the United Kingdom* by Basil Collier (HMSO 1957), which gives aircraft available at 524 bombers of which 462 were serviceable. The target markers had a key role given the low level of training of most of the crews.

In general the bombers flew out in streams at around 16,500ft to a turning point at which they aimed for their targets and after bomb release they reduced height to fly back over the Channel at 500ft. The navigation system in use was *Y-Verfahren*. It comprised a single but complex VHF beam to provide precise track guidance transmitted through the *Wotan II* transmitter.

Associated was a distance measuring system with a second *Anton* transmitter/receiver. Accuracy was such that a specific large building could be hit at 120 miles range but aircraft height was critical since the system worked on line of sight. Unlike the earlier *Knickebein* system, *Y-Verfahren* depended on specialist equipment and specially trained crews.

Further, only one aircraft at a time could use the system with a time separation of about five minutes. The first set of flares marked the initial point about five minutes out from the target which was marked by a cluster of flares of two colours. The flares were renewed by selected crews from the main bomber force. The main raids were reportedly preceded by FW190 and Me410 aircraft dropping Window (Duppel).

In respect of weapons, 70% of the load was expected to be incendiaries and the balance 500kg or 1,000kg high explosive bombs using a sensitive mix of trialen and hexogen.

The Luftwaffe order of battle within Luftflotte 3 (Fliegerkorps IX) at 20 January 1944 comprised:

Unit	Type	Codes	Nos*	Base
KG2				
Stab	Do 217M-1	U5+*A	3/3	Soesterberg
I (1,2,3)	Do 217M-1	U5+*HKL	35/3	Eindhoven
II (4,5,6)	Ju 188E-1	U5+*MNP	35/3	Soesterberg
III (7,8,9)	Do 217M-1	U5+*RST	38/3	Gilze Rijen
V (14,15,16)	Me 410A	U5+*EFGJ	27/2	Lille/Cambrai
KG6				
Stab	Ju 88A-4	3E+*A	3/3	Brussels
I (1,2,3)	Ju 88S-1	3E+*???H	41/41	Chievres
II (4,5,6)	Ju 88A-4	3E+*MNP	39/3	Le Culot
III (7,8,9)	Ju 88A-4	3E+*RST	41/37	Melsbroek
KG30				
II (4,5,6)	Ju 88A-4	4D+*MNP	36/3	Eindhoven
KG40				
I (1)	He 177A-3	F8+*H	15/1	Chateaudun
KG54				
Stab	Ju 88	B3+*A	3/3	Wittmundhaffen
I (1,2,3)	Ju 88	B3+*JKL	36/2	Wittmundhafen
II (4,5,6)	Ju 88	B3+*MNP	33/3	Marx
KG66				
I (1,2,3)\$	Do 217K-1,	Z6+*HJKL	45/2	Montdidier
	Ju 88S, Ju 188			
KG76				
Stab	Ju 88A-4	F1+*A	5/4	Laon/Couvron
I (1,2,3)	Ju 88A-4	F1+*JKL	33/3	
KG100				
I (1,2,3)	He 177A-3	5J+*?KL	31/27	Chateaudun
	or	6K+*K		and Rheine
SKG10 (Schnellkampfgeschwader)				
I	FW190A-4, 5	TF+*R(1)	25/2	Amiens
	G-3	BK+*W(2)		

Geschwader in bold, then Gruppe (Roman numerals) and Staffeln (Arabic numerals)

. * Establishment/ Actual strength

\$ Target markers

Air defences

Air Defence Great Britain

Many fighter units were placed under separate command for the forthcoming invasion of mainland Europe. There were ten day fighter and eleven night fighter units assigned to home defence and in addition six night fighter squadrons intended for the invasion force were temporarily assigned to home defence. The disposition of these units at 18 February 1944 (night fighter units in italics) was:

10 Group ADGB

Exeter	610	Spitfire VC
	616	Spitfire VII
	406	<i>Beaufighter VIF</i>
Colerne	131	Spitfire IX
	65	Spitfire IXB
	151	<i>Mosquito XII/XIII</i>
Odiham	402	Spitfire VB,C
Fairwood Common	263	Typhoon IB
	456	<i>Mosquito II,XVII</i>

11 Group ADGB

Tangmere	41	Spitfire XII
<i>Ford</i>	418	<i>Mosquito II</i>
	29	<i>Mosquito XII/XIII 2TAF 85 Group</i>
Detling	118	Spitfire IXC
Hawkinge	501	Spitfire IX
<i>West Mailing</i>	85	<i>Mosquito XII/XIII</i>
	96	<i>Mosquito XIII</i>
Hornchurch	504	Spitfire IXB
Lympne	137	Typhoon IB
<i>Bradwell Bay</i>	605	<i>Mosquito VI</i>
	488	<i>Mosquito XII,XIII 2TAF 85 Group</i>

12 Group ADGB

Coltishall	64	Spitfire VC
	234	Spitfire VB
	25	<i>Mosquito XVII</i>
<i>Coleby Grange</i>	68	<i>Beaufighter VIF</i>
<i>Church Fenton</i>	264	<i>Mosquito XIII 2TAF 85 Group</i>
<i>Acklington</i>	409	<i>Beaufighter VIF 2TAF 85 Group</i>
<i>Castle Camps</i>	410	<i>Mosquito XIII 2TAF 85 Group</i>
<i>Scorton</i>	604	<i>Beaufighter VIF 2TAF 85 Group</i>
Woodvale	316	Spitfire VB
Llanbedr	350	Spitfire IXB
Valley	125	<i>Beaufighter VIF</i>

13 Group ADGB

Tain	186	Spitfire VB
Ballyhalbert	303	Spitfire LFIXB
Snailwell	309	Mustang I
Ayr	611	Spitfire VB
<i>Drem</i>	307	<i>Mosquito XII</i>

Intruder units

There were in addition some six Mosquito intruder squadrons, most either a part of 100 (Bomber Support) Group Bomber Command or due to become part of the Group. The aircraft were involved in *Ranger* patrols over enemy territory and typically around airfields to seek out and attack enemy aircraft near their own airfields. Some of the units were primarily involved in supporting allied bomber streams. In general, the roles of these six squadrons were not significantly different from the ADGB night fighter squadrons which also ranged across the Channel.

Predannack	157	Mosquito II/VI	100 Gp from
Ford	418	Mosquito II	
West	141	Mosquito II	1
	239	Mosquito II	1
Little Snoring	169	Mosquito II	1
	515	Beaufighter II	100 Group
		Mosquito II	

There was also a total of about 2,600 heavy AA artillery pieces deployed, a larger number of light AAA and Z rocket batteries. Finally, there remained an extensive balloon barrage.

Other fighter units

There was also a total of 29 day fighter squadrons across the country committed to 2 TAF and working up for D-Day in June 1944. These were not generally involved in operation *Steinbock* but are listed for the sake of completeness. The notes after each unit show Wing/Group.

122	Spitfire IX Mustang III	Gravesend	2TAF 122/83
132	Spitfire VB	Castletown	2TAF 125/83
453	Spitfire IXB	Detling	2TAF 125/83
602	Spitfire VB	Skaeabrae	2TAF 125/83
401	Spitfire IXB	Biggin Hill	2TAF 126/83
411	Spitfire IXB	Biggin Hill	2TAF 126/83
412	Spitfire IXB	Biggin Hill	2TAF 126/83
403	Spitfire IXB	Kenley	2TAF 127/83
421	Spitfire IX	Kenley	2TAF 127/83
416	Spitfire VB, IXB	Tangmere	2TAF 127/83
302	Spitfire IX	Northolt	2TAF 131/84
308	Spitfire IX	Northolt	2TAF 131/84
317	Spitfire IX	Northolt	2TAF 131/84
66	Spitfire LFIXB	Hornchurch	2TAF 132/84
331	Spitfire IXB	North Weald	2TAF 132/84
332	Spitfire IXB	North Weald	2TAF 132/84
129	Spitfire IX	Peterhead	2TAF 133/84
315	Spitfire VC	Heston	2TAF 133/84
310	Spitfire LFIX	Ibsley	2TAF 134/84
312	Spitfire VB,C,LFIXB	Ibsley	2TAF 134/84
313	Spitfire VC, IX	Ibsley	2TAF 134/84
222	Spitfire LFIXB	Catterick	2TAF 135/84
349	Spitfire VB,C,IXE	Friston	2TAF 135/84
485	Spitfire VB	Drem	2TAF 135/84
340	Spitfire VB,IXB	Perranporth	2TAF 145/84
341	Spitfire VB,IXB	Perranporth	2TAF 145/84
91	Spitfire XII	Hutton Cranswick	2TAF 85
124	Spitfire VII	West Mailing	2TAF 85
322	Spitfire VB	Hawkinge	2TAF 85

The raids

21/22 January 447 sorties of which only some 200 inland penetrations, 40 or so reached Greater London (500 tonnes of bombs 268 of which fell on land). 16 aircraft believed destroyed. 14 dead, 74 injured.

29/30 January 285 sorties, 130 penetrated, 30 reaching Greater London (158 tonnes of bombs on land). 51 killed, 124 injured.

The first two raids cost 57 aircraft and crews.

3/4 February 240 sorties, 167 tonnes of bombs. 33 killed and 34 injured.

13/14 February 230 sorties, 161 tonnes of bombs on land.

18/19 February 200 sorties, 120 aircraft plotted over UK. 185 tonnes of bombs on land, 139 of them on London. Most bombing confined to one attack lasting 30 minutes; 480 fires in London, 24 in surrounding areas. 180 killed, 463 seriously injured. Nine aircraft lost. Units definitely involved were 2/KG2, 6/KG6, 9/KG6, 3/KG54, 6/KG54, 1/KG66, 2/KG66, 2 and 3/KG100. Dense clouds covered London and target marking must have been by flares rather than marker bombs. There is a view that raids were more accurate when the crews bombed against flares rather than when the ground could be seen. 35 aircraft from the Netherlands joined 45 from France 30 miles east of Harwich at 0030hrs between 12,500 and 25,000ft. 120 more entered the UK between Winterton and the Thames to be attacked by 1,487 rounds of 3.7 AAA fire. These were the aircraft which attacked Greater London, together with about half the east coast force, returning home via the South Coast. The Country was clear by 0150hrs.

From the bomb census reports for the date at least 28 separate bombs dropped in the Borough of Willesden. At least five of these were 500kg (1,100lb), one dropped on St Raphael's Way, Neasden and the other four between Fleetwood Road and Dollis Hill Avenue. Of these latter four the first landed to the rear of 116 Fleetwood Rd at 0115 hrs destroying six houses and damaging many more to a radius of 400ft.

The second fell in Gladstone Park 173 ft to the east of the junction with Kendal Rd and Cullingworth Rd, allegedly causing no damage although it should have fallen on the site of the AAA battery. The third fell in the Park 44' east of the railway bridge and 200' north of the centre of the railway. Again no damage is cited although it must have fallen near the balloon base. The fourth bomb fell in Park allotments 90' south of the junction of Park Side and Dollis Hill Avenue and 79' to the west of Park Side. Yet again no damage is claimed despite being adjacent to a synagogue.

On the census form there is no reference at all to casualties either killed, seriously injured or lightly injured: in reality there were five civilian deaths and possibly casualties at the AAA site. Although the bombers crossed the coast at 0030hrs, the first air raid warning in Willesden was broadcast at 0036hrs and the all clear sounded at 0148hrs.

20/21 February 200 sorties, 160 tonnes of bombs, 118 on London. Government buildings in central London known to be targets. 216 killed and 417 seriously injured.

22/23 February 185 sorties, 167 tonnes, 75 on London. 29 killed, 78 seriously injured. 9 aircraft claimed destroyed.

23/24 February 161 sorties, 114 tonnes, 49 on London. 160 killed, 53 missing, 348 seriously injured.

24/25 February 170 sorties, 128 tonnes, 89 on London. 74 killed, 1 missing, 183 seriously injured. 13 aircraft claimed destroyed.

1/2 March 165 sorties, 166 tonnes, 65 on London. 34 killed, 1 missing, 89 seriously injured.

Eleven raids mainly against London since 21/22 January to mid-March then target changed to Hull. By 20 March 252 aircraft available. By the end of May when the offensive petered out 4,251 sorties had been flown carrying 2,812 tonnes of bombs, 27% of which hit any targets. Loss rate was 7.7% of sorties.

Monthly Luftwaffe losses were:

January	57
February	72
March	75
April	75
May	50
Total	329 (71% of initial serviceable aircraft)

Units added during the course of the operation included Stab/KG30 Ju 88A-4 Bretigny, III/KG30 Ju 88 Orly, III/KG100 Do 217K-3 with Fritz-X radio guided bombs.

In his operational order dated 3 December 1943, Goering had required that *"....fighting strength of the units remains absolutely unimpaired. This is in view of the necessity to maintain a permanent defensive capability against the ever-present threat of an attempted enemy invasion in the west."* Operation Steinbock was, then, not a success. Indeed the bomber force was so depleted that it was of very little value in countering the Normandy invasions in June 1944.

Bibliography

Collier, B *The Defence of the United Kingdom* HMSO, London, 1957

Conen, J *The Little Blitz* Fonthill Media, Stroud 2009

Mackey, R & Parry, SW *The Last Blitz: Operation Steinbock* Red Kite, Walton-on-Thames, 2011

Price, A *Blitz on Britain 1939-1945* Ian Allan, London, 1976

Wakefield, K (ed) *The Blitz Then and Now Vol 3* Battle of Britain Prints, London, 1990

© V Flinham March 2016