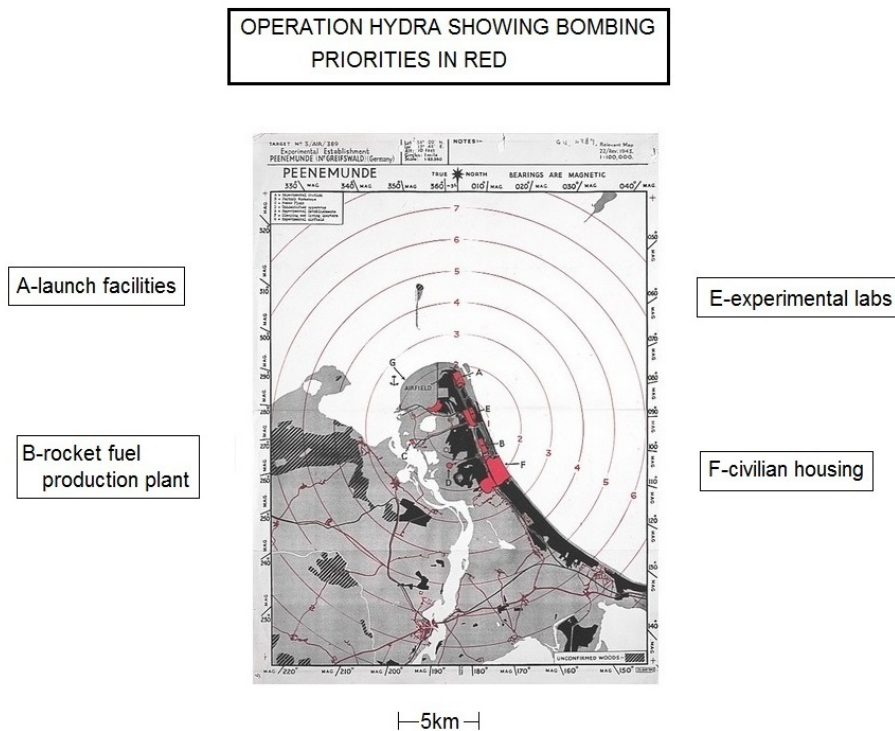


OPERATION HYDRA-THE BOMBING OF PEENEMUENDE

On the night of August 17-18th, 1943 the British launched a 596 heavy bomber attack on the town of Peenemuende along the Baltic Sea in northern Germany. The attack went under the code name of Operation Hydra and was the brain child of Winston Churchill and Duncan Sandys with the explicit intention to kill as many scientists and engineers working at the newly discovered secret German rocket facility nearby. The British had just found out about this research facility through a combination of aerial photographs, a spy network, and the Polish underground and recognized that it required immediate attention considering that the rockets such as the V1 and V2 being developed there would surely be used against them by Germany to accomplish what the earlier Blitz had failed to do. A plan for bombing Peenemuende was quickly developed in the early summer of 1943 and led to the following plan of attack-



The bombing raid consisted of three parts. The first was a direct attack on the civilian housing areas starting about midnight of August 17-18th. Because of the long distance from the nearest English base the bombers had no fighter escort protection and had to rely on moonlight using a master bomber to indicate the drop zones by the release of

flares. The first flare fell short by a few kilometers from target F and pointed instead at the unmarked foreign worker work camp at Trassenheide killing well over 300 guest laborers. A repositioning of a second flare located its intended target whipping out a good part of the town of Peenemuende-Karlshagen. I happened to be on the receiving end of this second bomb drop of phase one. During this phase the bombers encountered little flack although they were flying at only 8000ft to improve bombing accuracy. Also there were no opposing night fighters present because the British earlier that evening sent a few planes toward Berlin making the Germans think the attack was to be on Berlin. The fighters were thus essentially grounded in an area around that city.

The second bombing phase targeted the construction factory for rockets and fuel generation (B). It caused some damage but nothing major. The third phase was aimed at the experimental facilities (E) which included research facilities such as their supersonic wind-tunnel, and engine development, and guidance and control sections. Again the damage was minor, as was the case further up the coast where the airfields and launch facilities (A) were located. The damage to parts E and A were relatively small and work could be resumed almost immediately. During the last portion of the air-drops the deception by the British was recognized and the German night fighters were released to engage the British bombers over Peenemuende. The fighters were able to shoot down some 40 British Lancasters and Halifaxes sending some 215 British airmen to their death. The goal of killing German scientists and engineers was a failure considering that only two members of the rocket team were killed. These were Dr Walter Thiel , a rocket engine specialist, and chief engineer Walther. The death toll in Peenemuende itself was about 180 Germans by what I could see some fifty years later by counting the number of raid victim plaques in the Peenemunde cemetery. This relatively low number of civilian casualties was in part due to basement air-raid shelters provided to the population and also by the inability to hit targets with an accuracy of not much more than 200 yards on such a small target as Peenemuende. In retrospect the operation Hydra raid was considered by the British to be only a partial success since it held back rocket development by only two month, killed only two scientists at a loss of 6.7% of its bomber force. This bomber loss was among the highest loss rates of all subsequent bombing raids over Germany during the rest of WW2.

Now let me get to my own part of the story concerning the night of Aug 17-18, 1943. Our family was living at the time in Peenemunde since my father (Dr. Hermann H. Kurzweg) was recruited to the army rocket research facility by Dr. Rudolph Hermann to head up supersonic wind-tunnel research into rocket stability at supersonic speeds. Our family moved there in 1939 and both my sister (born in 1940) and brother (born in 1943) show Peenemuende as their birthplace. On the night of August 17th 1943 as air-raid sirens sounded our whole family rushed to our basement shelter. We lived in a row house so thin cement partitions between adjacent basements had been installed a few month earlier to allow escape in case one's home was destroyed. We huddled there, my mother aged 29, our maid Erna about 24, my sister aged 3, my younger brother aged only three month and myself aged six. My father that night was at work and so was not with us. The bombs exploded around us for about three hours until the all clear signal was given. Luckily our home was not hit directly. We had been taught earlier to keep our mouths open when

bombs fell nearby in order to prevent eardrum rupture from the resultant shockwaves. The British were using a total of 1800 tons of bombs including the 1000 and 500 lb variety, incendiaries and bombs with delay fuses. Upon emerging from our basement shelter we saw fires everywhere and noticed that none of the houses remaining had roofs. It was a total destruction of Peenemuende as shown in the following picture-

TYPICAL DAMAGED ROW HOUSES AFTER THE AUGUST 17-18, 1943
BOMBING OF PEENEMUENDE



Escape tunnels between neighboring basement air-raid shelters often saved the lives of trapped civilians

Note the pines are looking like palms after having their lower branches blown off or incinerated.

Upon leaving the shelter, my mother with help grabbed a few chairs and light sofa and took our family about a hundred yards to the edge of the town close to the Baltic. It was also near the Trassenheide labor camp which was established late in 1942. As I have already mentioned the labor camp suffered many casualties estimated at well over 300 due to the master bomber's bombing error in locating the first flare. We stayed in the open where my mother had taken us for the rest of the night twice receiving warnings from passing soldiers that there were time delay bombs buried near where we were sitting. But we gave this no heed. Also I remember charred and burned corpses of dead foreign workers from the Trassenheide camp being collected by camp residents and soldiers.

The next morning about 8am my father showed up on a bicycle from his work at the supersonic wind tunnel facility. Out there they had received minimal damage but Peenemuende itself was essentially destroyed. He managed to get us on a convoy out of Peenemuende and a few days later our family moved into my grandmother's summer house near Bad Reichenhall in Bavaria. Later we moved to Kochel also in Bavaria and

near Oberammergau. A day after we had left Peenemuende my father went by where we had spent the previous night in the open and found a huge 30ft diameter crater there. So we were very lucky twice that night. For our family the operation Hydra was also a blessing in disguise. It caused the wind-tunnel operation to be moved to Kochel south of Munich which happened to be in the American zone at the end of the war. In 1946 my father was brought to the US on operation paperclip and the family followed a year later. He first set up a supersonic wind-tunnel facility at the Naval Ordinance Laboratory at White Oak, Maryland just outside of Washington DC. He later became chief scientist at NASA. As I always tell people, this move to America was why I now speak English instead of Russian. Remember that the Soviets took over a good part of eastern Germany including Peenemuende at the end of WW2. So you can say I became an American instead of a Russian because of Operation Hydra.

I was able to revisit Peenemuende for the first time in 1999 after the fall of the Berlin wall. Here is a picture of me standing by a road sign in Peenemuende



In looking around the area I could not find where we used to live as this area was probably bulldozed years ago. But I did find the remnants of the oxygen generating plant and the intact power station which now houses a museum. Also I found many large craters created by 2000 lb British bombs precisely 75 years ago in the forest going toward the Baltic beaches. Many of these craters now have large pine trees growing out of them.

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For further reading I can recommend –

(1)-“The Mares Nest” by David Irving which gives further details on Operation Hydra.

(2)-“The Rocket and the Reich” by Michael J. Neufeld which discusses the development of the V2 rocket in detail.

U.H.Kurzweg

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Gainesville, Florida, USA