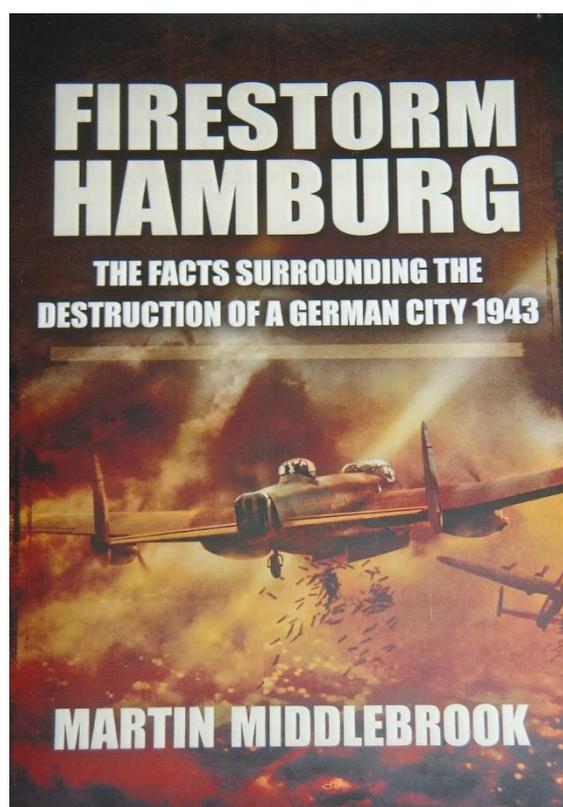


**BOOK REVIEW****FIRESTORM HAMBURG****THE FACTS SURROUNDING THE DESTRUCTION OF A GERMAN CITY 1943****BY MARTIN MIDDLEBROOK****FIRST PUBLISHED BY ALLEN LANE****REPUBLISHED BY PEN & SWORD AVIATION****ISBN 978 1 78159 035 5**

As the title of this first class book suggests it is about the intense bomber raids carried out by the RAF and USAAF VII Bomber Command, Eight Air Force on the city of Hamburg, in Northern Germany in late July and early August 1943.

From the beginning Martin Middlebrook outlines his intentions and format of this book for the reader. Wider aspects of the Second World War are mentioned, and technical descriptions are kept to a minimum, which keeps the readers mind focused on the unfolding story. He has incorporated numerous eyewitness accounts from Allied and German aircrews as well as those of the citizens of Hamburg who survived the bombing. Differences between the organisation and operational aspects of the RAF and USAAF are comprehensively explained. The latter undertook daylight raids bombing specific military and industrial targets.

During the early months of the war the RAF had undertaken day and night time operations against selected military targets to minimise damage to populated areas. However, with increasing aircraft losses this course of action was not sustainable. In February 1942 Sir Arthur Harris was appointed Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Bomber Command. His firm intention was to crush Germany by concentrated and intensive bombing of their cities. His policy was endorsed when the British Cabinet agreed to 'area bombing' whereby large areas of a city would be devastated in the belief that the 'morale of the enemy civil population' would be undermined.



In May 1943 Sir Arthur Harris had circulated to his group commanders of his intention to destroy Hamburg. Subsequently it was proposed that the first raid on the city would take place on the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> July but was cancelled due to the weather conditions until the following night. The author in plain and straightforward language explains how the bombing raids were conducted. A Pathfinder Force would drop Target Indicators over a selected aiming point for the main bomber force to unleash their high explosive and incendiary bombs.

Precise details are given by the author of the defensive precautions the Germans adopted to protect their cities against bombing. For close defence the city of Hamburg had searchlights and flak towers, built of reinforced concrete between 1942 and 1944, equipped with anti-aircraft guns for air defence. The Kammhuber Line was the name given by the Allies to the German air defence system established in 1940. It consisted of a series of coastal sectors equipped with radar, searchlights, and night-fighter aircraft. Each sector was capable to direct the night fighter into visual range of the leading bombers. A counter measure 'Window' was developed by the British. Bundles of aluminium coated strips were dropped by the incoming bomber force approximately 80 miles from the coast to distort the enemy radar images making it difficult for radar operators to identify and track the aircraft.

During the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> July 1943, 791 aircraft of RAF Bomber Command took off in good flying conditions to bomb a selected target area of Hamburg. Full and vivid descriptions of the raid are given by eyewitnesses and its destructive consequences, particularly in the areas to the north of the River Elbe. Accounts are also given by civil defence and the emergency services who were overwhelmed by the intensity of the raid. Included in this section of the book is an extract from Hamburg's Fire Department Log.

A follow up daylight operation on the 25<sup>th</sup> by 123 aircraft of the USAAF bombed the Blohm & Voss Shipyard and the Klöckner aero-engine factory. They encountered enemy fighters and the accuracy of their bombing was hampered by the billowing smoke from burning buildings bombed in the previous raid. Reconnaissance flights over Hamburg by the RAF resulted in the cancellation of night time operations on the 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> due to the smoke and weather conditions. This did not prevent the Americans, who undertook a daylight raid on the 26<sup>th</sup> which caused further devastation including the destruction of a power station which reduced Hamburg's power supplies by 60%.

Sir Arthur Harris ordered a maximum effort against Hamburg on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> July. Brigadier-General Fred Anderson, commander of the USAAF VII Bomber Command flew as a second pilot with the RAF. The 735 aircraft dropped 2,326-tons of bombs two miles east of the

aiming point onto a populated area of the city. Apart from high explosive bombs, small 4lb incendiaries bombs landed on roof tops and larger 30lb devices penetrated deeper into buildings. It had been a hot day in Hamburg and a combination of the weather conditions and incendiaries created fires of increased intensity which developed in a 'fire storm'. The author does not hold back on the horrific circumstances endured by the citizens of Hamburg where burnt and shrunken bodies littered the streets and those in bomb shelters perished. Accounts from survivors reinforce the reality of their situation. Approximately 40,000 civilians died in this raid. For RAF Bomber Command their second raid was an outstanding success as area bombing had brought to a halt the normal life of the city of Hamburg.

The Americans carried out another raid of the 28<sup>th</sup> and on the night of the 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, the RAF bombed Hamburg for the third time. The Pathfinders failed to mark the selected aiming point and the Barmbek district of city was practically destroyed. A fourth raid took place on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> of August. Parts of Hamburg were bombed but a significant number of bombs were dropped on the town of Elmshorn.

Over 8,000-tons of bombs had been dropped on Hamburg and the surrounding areas in these raids and the RAF could claim justification for area bombing. The author interestingly raises the question that could this raid, with the prospect of further raids on other German cities, have brought about a German surrender. For those who lived through bombing campaigns, not only in Germany but in the Great Britain and other European cities, initially were frightened, confused, and fearful of further raids. However, life carried on amongst the widespread destruction and blossomed into a determination to endure until victory was achieved.

With regard, to the concept of area bombing, the author asks pertinent question as to why? Drawing on the views expressed by eyewitnesses and others who experienced 20<sup>th</sup> century aerial bombing he has produced a balanced analysis and thoughtful conclusions. He has also taken, into account the views of those who were opposed to the area bombing campaign by the RAF and the resentful attitudes towards those who had carried out the bombing.

Estimates vary as to the number of people who died in these raids but a general, consensus gives the figure of 55,000. The casualties were buried in four mass graves in Ohlsdorf Cemetery, Hamburg, the fourth largest cemetery in the world. Within the cemetery are plots containing the graves of 683 First World War casualties and 1,443 of the Second World War, half of whom are RAF aircrew and of those 169 died during the air raids on Hamburg.

Martin Middlebrook had produced an eminently readable book in which the story flows page by page. Although today the RAF bombing campaign can raise adverse opinions from some

modern observers the public in Great Britain, at that time were broadly supportive. The reality and consequences of the 1939-1945 war were death and destruction on large scale. The author has given much time and consideration to the facts about the bombing of Hamburg which the reader can reflect upon. The text is accompanied by black and white photographs, flight path maps, appendices with orders of battle for the RAF, USAAF and Luftwaffe, casualties, acknowledgements, bibliography, and index. Firestorm Hamburg is a highly commendable addition to any bookshelf.

Roger Coleman