

An Unlisted Swansea Air Raid of 1943

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Between June 1940 and February 1943, Swansea sustained around forty air raids of varying intensity. The figure is imprecise because there is some confusion as to the exact number of attacks which occurred during this period. This, in part, stems from the fact that it was often difficult for the authorities at the time to decide what actually constituted a raid. Thus, in the various contemporary, official Civil Defence lists and in the standard secondary studies which consider Swansea's air attacks, the totals differ, ranging from thirty-nine to forty-five.¹ Yet, mentioned nowhere in any of these lists – both official and secondary – is an enemy action over Swansea which took place during the late evening of Saturday, 13 February 1943. The incident, considered to be a raid by the Research and Experiments Department of the Ministry of Home Security, is described as such in that department's Bomb Census papers for Region 8: Wales, now held in The National Archives at Kew.² However, it was not recorded at the time in any of the local media and it was subsequently never included in any lists or analyses of attacks on Swansea. This is confirmed by a BC4 report form³ of 1 March 1943, among the Bomb Census papers, which describes ordnance dropped on the town on 13 February and which bears the handwritten note, 'not included in Swansea totals'. Appended to this report form was a small piece of paper with a scribbled memo giving instructions to 'Make a new raid in Region 8 called Swansea 13/14. 2. 43'. This appears never to have been done, hence the incident's non-inclusion in any official lists, although, for purposes of the Bomb Census, it was obviously regarded as a raid.

In their detailed description of this incident, the Bomb Census papers stated that an aircraft, flying at 10,000 feet, appeared over Swansea at 23.27 hours on the night of 13/14 February 1943. The aircraft was flying from south to north and was 'displaying normal behaviour'. Its course was plotted in some detail by the Royal Observer Corps (ROC). Shortly before it flew over Swansea, it initially crossed the Gower coast above Oxwich Bay, travelling north, but was then lost until picked up again near Ammanford. From there, the plot took it east towards Merthyr Tydfil, then, turning south, it overflowed Pontypridd, after which it turned south-east and crossed the coast between Cardiff and Newport.

At first, there was some confusion about the aircraft. The relevant BC2 form among the Bomb Census records originally recorded it as '1 Unidentified Friendly', based on initial information from the ROC. As a consequence of this, the aircraft attracted no anti-aircraft fire or interception by night fighters from nearby RAF Fairwood Common. Indeed, the entry for 13/14 February in the Operations Record Book for 125 (Newfoundland) Squadron, the main night fighter unit based at Fairwood, specifically notes [p. 59] 'no enemy activity'.⁴ However, the ROC afterwards changed their mind, saying that 'it was not until she was crossing the English Channel on her way home that she was classified as hostile'. Subsequently, in the BC2 form 'Friendly' was struck through in the description of the aircraft and a manuscript note, 'See overleaf', added.

The additional information thus inserted on the dorse of the form was based on the ROC's log, which recorded reports of flares dropping and explosions occurring at Swansea at 23.27 hours and noted that RAF Fairwood Common and the Operations Centre of RAF No. 10 Group, at RAF Rudloe Manor,⁵ as well as the police had all been notified. At 23.35 hours, following investigation on the ground, Swansea Borough Police confirmed that an explosion had occurred

at Ysgol Street, St Thomas and at 00.45 hours they further reported that a ‘base of flare’ had been found there. However, in these earliest moments, it seemed that some confusion still reigned, since the Glamorgan Police reported the flares and explosions simply ‘as Photographic Flash bombs from our own planes’.

In the event, the ordnance was finally positively identified as a German BLC 50, a fragment of which had made a direct hit on the roof of an outhouse at number 25 Ysgol Street, St Thomas, resulting in very slight damage and no casualties. The report concluded by stating that ‘The nose cap is in the hands of R.A.F. Balloon Command, “Greenwillows”, Sketty’.⁶

The BLC 50 was not an offensive weapon, but was a flare or photoflash bomb used by *Luftwaffe* aerial reconnaissance units to illuminate target areas so that photographs could be taken at night (*Fig. 1*). Describing it, a Civil Defence training manual on bombs and other ordnance explained that:

The Germans use for photographic reconnaissance at night a flash-bomb weighing 30 kg., which is sometimes mistaken for an incendiary weapon. This ‘bomb’ has the outer casing of a 50 kg. H.E., but is fitted with a red painted fuze, similar to that used on parachute flares.... The casing is spray-painted aluminium or khaki and the marking BLC 50 in black letters appears near the tail. Probably an abbreviation for ‘Blitzlicht (or Blitz-leucht)-cylindrisch,’ i.e. cylindrical flashlight type.⁷

As the training manual noted, this type of large flare utilised the casing of the standard SC 50 bomb, which was a thin-walled, high explosive [p. 60] weapon of 50 kilograms, its designation *Spreng Cylindrisch* meaning ‘Explosive, Cylindrical’, the number 50 indicating its overall weight.⁸ However, instead of the SC 50’s usual explosive filling of either amatol, TNT (*Trotyl*) or trialen,⁹ the BLC 50 contained finely powdered aluminium (*Pyroschliff*) which was scattered into the surrounding air by the explosion of its inner core of black powder (*Marine-Geschützpulver*). Due to the heat of the explosion, the aluminium powder burned in the air and, reacting with the oxygen, produced a rapid flash. The BLC 50 had an overall length of 109 cm., its body being 68 cm. long, with a diameter of 20 cm., and its tail being 41 cm. long. Its casing was made of sheet steel, with a heavy nose section. As already mentioned, it bore a resemblance to the SC 50, on which it was based.

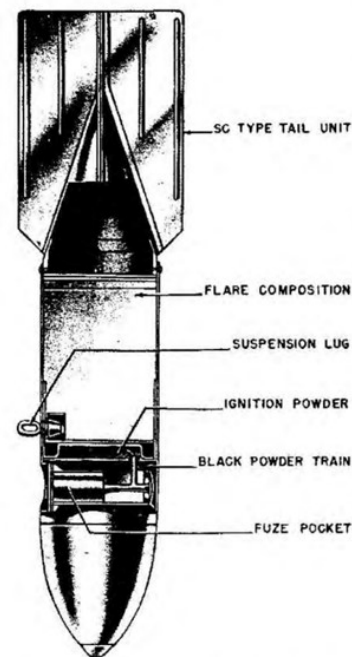


Fig.1. Cutaway drawing of a BLC 50 photoflash bomb, from Departments of the [US] Army and Air Force, *German Explosive Ordnance* (Washington, DC, 1953), p. 82.

After its original misidentification by the ROC, the British authorities eventually recognised the aircraft which overflew Swansea on 13 February 1943 as hostile, not friendly. German sources

reveal that the aircraft in question was a Junkers Ju. 88D-1 (identification code 4U+AH) of *Staffel 1.(F) Aufklärungsgruppe 123* (i.e., the 1st *Staffel*¹⁰ of the 123rd long-range photo reconnaissance *Gruppe*¹¹) (*Fig. 2*). Nicknamed *die Knullenkopfstaffel* (‘the blockhead *Staffel*’), its emblem was a caricature of a block-headed airman holding a telescope¹² (*Fig. 3*). Elements of the *Staffel* were based at the *Luftwaffe* airfield of Buc and occasionally at that of

Villacoublay, situated respectively at 19 kilometres and 13.2 kilometres to the south-west of Paris. Buc had originally been used by the Potez firm to test aircraft prior to the fall of France in June 1940, but it then became the main base for long-range reconnaissance units serving *Luftflotte 3*¹³ (i.e., the Third Air Fleet of the *Luftwaffe*, based in the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France, and which, since November 1941, had its headquarters in Paris).



Fig. 2. Artist's impression of the Junkers Ju. 88-D (4U+AH) involved in the reconnaissance sortie over Swansea on 13 February 1943.

At 21.12 hours on Saturday, 13 February 1943, the Junkers, under the command of *Oberleutnant* Karl Ischinger,¹⁴ took off from the airfield at Villacoublay, shortly after a main bomber force, comprising elements of [p. 61] *K.G.2 (Kampfgeschwader 2)*¹⁵ and *K.G.40*, had departed from other *Luftwaffe* bases in north-west France to carry out a major air raid on Plymouth, which bore the operational codename *Pinie* ('Pine').¹⁶

On this mission, Ischinger's aircraft was beset by difficulties from the start. The first issue which he and his crew encountered was being unable to use their onboard *Y-Gerät*¹⁷ system for navigation. The second problem was that, once they arrived over the target at Plymouth, they discovered that it was hidden beneath a thick blanket of cloud which rendered the attackers' flashlight bombs ineffective. It was therefore impossible to take photographs or even to do a visual reconnaissance. Ischinger, as the aircraft captain and observer,¹⁸ following the standard *Luftwaffe* practice of selecting alternative targets, should need arise, therefore ordered his pilot, *Oberleutnant* Fritz Schlichting, to fly north and instead undertake reconnaissance over Swansea and Cardiff. The ROC's reports clearly show that this is what they did. Having successfully carried out his revised sortie over Swansea and obtained his pictures, Ischinger and his crew safely returned to base, where they landed at around 00.50 hours in the early morning of 14 February.¹⁹



Fig. 3. 1.(F) *Aufklärungsgruppe 123*'s emblem of a *Knullenkopf* ('blockhead') airman with a telescope.

By early 1943, it appears to have been the *Luftwaffe*'s standard tactic to carry out a night photo reconnaissance sortie over a target area in the immediate aftermath of a major bombing raid. Because of unexpected thick cloud cover over Plymouth, Ischinger had to make a fortuitous sortie over Swansea, which proved to be the harbinger of even greater enemy activity over the town a short while later. On 16 February – three nights after Ischinger's aircraft had followed shortly behind the main bomber force which attacked Plymouth on the 13th – another lone Ju. 88 of 1.(F) *Aufkl.Gr.123*, commanded by its observer, *Oberleutnant* Alfred Westphal,²⁰ took off from the airfield at Buc. His mission was similarly to follow in the wake of a main bomber force of thirty-seven Dornier Do. 217s belonging to *K.G.2*, which had set off earlier from the French staging airfields of Évreux, Saint-André and Rennes,²¹ this time for a major raid on Swansea, in an operation codenamed *Wasservogel* ('Waterfowl'), although, in the event, only twenty-five aircraft actually attacked Swansea, between 21.54 and 22.18 hours. The remainder either aborted or attacked alternative targets.²² Westphal's task was to take photographs in the aftermath of what was to be Swansea's final Blitz of the war.²³

Although the Ministry of Home Security described the incident of 13 February 1943 as a ‘raid’, it was perhaps not an air raid in the sense that we would understand, whereby an offensive strike is carried out by aircraft against enemy targets and where destruction of the enemy’s facilities is a clearly intended outcome.²⁴ In this instance, the particular type of ordnance used was not an offensive weapon, but was an instrument for illuminating a target area or, more generally, for lighting up an area of interest to facilitate the taking of photographs for purposes of reconnaissance. Thus the objective of Ischinger’s aircrew was neither to attack enemy targets *per se*, nor deliberately to inflict damage. They were merely taking pictures and gathering intelligence – although, of course, for them that was potentially an [p. 62] extremely hazardous undertaking. The slight damage caused to the outhouse in St Thomas was essentially unintentional, although the BLC 50 flash-bomb, having done its work of illumination, had to land somewhere. Nevertheless, a piece of enemy ordnance had dropped on Swansea and therefore needed to be logged as part of the Bomb Census, thus the Ministry was obliged to classify this incident as a raid, and so it must now be considered as such. Historians of Swansea’s air raids therefore need to add it to the existing lists of known attacks on the town.

Notes

¹ See, for comparison, West Glamorgan Archive Service, D. 32/1; J.R. Alban, *The ‘Three Nights’ Blitz’. Select Contemporary Reports relating to Swansea’s Air Raids of February 1941* (Swansea, 1994), pp. 69-73; K. Pryer, *Luftwaffe over Swansea. A History of the Air Attacks on Swansea, 1939-45* (various edns, Swansea, n.d.); N. Arthur, *Swansea at War: a Pictorial Account, 1939-45* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 34-5.

² The National Archives [hereafter, TNA], HO 198/61. Much of what is written in this article is based on evidence from this file. The Bomb Census was established in September 1940 by the Ministry of Home Security’s Research and Experiments Department to study the effects of air raids on the United Kingdom and to deduce from that study the tactics and methods used by the enemy. Initially, only information from London, Birmingham and Liverpool was collected, but, by September 1941, its scope had been extended to cover the whole of the United Kingdom. The Ministry divided the country into twelve Civil Defence regions, of which Wales was Region 8, with its headquarters in Cardiff.

³ BC4 report forms were completed by the Ministry of Home Security’s Research and Experiments Branch in conjunction with the Air Ministry. The BC4 form recorded details of specific location of the raid, date and time when the bomb fell, type and size of weapon involved, whether the bomb exploded, extent of damage, including the size of crater, information on air raid warnings, and casualty statistics. Each bomb was given a number in sequence, which was recorded on the main Bomb Census map. The BC4 form was often accompanied by a sketch map showing the point of impact of the bomb, or else by a traced copy of a section of the Bomb Census map, marked to show where a bomb fell. The Ministry of Home Security’s Research and Experiments Department and the Air Ministry also jointly compiled BC2 forms, which included details of the administrative area in which an incident occurred, type of aircraft and its altitude, its direction of approach and ‘behaviour’, the number and types of bombs dropped, the weather and any defensive actions taken.

⁴ TNA, AIR 27/922, p. 81.

⁵ Previously known as RAF Box, it was located 8 miles north-east of Bath, between the villages of Box and Corsham, in Wiltshire.

⁶ ‘Green Willows’, a large private house at 18 Sketty Park Road, was commandeered by RAF Balloon Command (whose own headquarters were at Stanmore Park, Middlesex) as the local headquarters for No. 958 (Balloon) Squadron. The squadron was part of No. 32 (Balloon Barrage) Group, Auxiliary Air Force, whose headquarters were at Claverton Manor, near Bath. The unit was formed at RAF Cardington, Bedfordshire on 1 August 1940 and moved to Swansea on 12 August, establishing their headquarters at ‘Green Willows’ on the 14th. On 2 October 1940, the squadron also took over the Patti Pavilion for use as ‘B’ Flight headquarters, a balloon repair shop and as a store for equipment and matériel.

⁷ *Civil Defence Training Pamphlet No. 2 (3rd Edition). Objects dropped from the Air* (London, 1944), p. 24.

⁸ See Alban, ‘Three Nights’ Blitz’, pp. 41-2 and for greater detail, see Departments of the [US] Army and Air Force, *Technical Manual TM 9-1985-2/Technical Order TO 11A-1-26: German Explosive Ordnance (Bombs, Fuzes, Rockets, Land Mines, Grenades and Igniters)* (Washington, DC, 1953), pp. 6-8. Online version at <<https://vdocuments.net/us-army-technical-manual-tm-9-1985-2-german-explosive-army-technical-manual.html?page=1>>.

⁹ Trialen was an enhanced blast explosive developed in Germany and was the near equivalent of the British Torpex. For details, see *German Explosive Ordnance*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Staffel* and *Gruppe* translate loosely into English respectively as ‘squadron’ and ‘group’, but are not the exact equivalents of similarly named units in the RAF. They have therefore been left untranslated.

¹¹ The standard work of reference on aerial photo reconnaissance is R.M. Stanley, *World War II Photo Reconnaissance* (London, 1981), espec. pp. 172-83. See also N.A. Robins, *Eye of the Eagle. The Luftwaffe Aerial Photographs of Swansea* (Swansea, 1993) and *Eye of the Eagle 2. The Luftwaffe Aerial Photographs of Cardiff and Barry* (Swansea, 1995).

¹² H. Rabeder, *The Knullenkopfstaffel. Luftwaffe Long-Range Photo Reconnaissance with Staffel 1.(F)/123 over France, Great Britain, the Mediterranean and over the Reich* (Augsburg, 2017), p. 23. The unit’s nickname and emblem came about because its *Staffelkapitän* in 1937-8, Major, then *Oberstleutnant* Erwin Notti (later, *Generalmajor* commanding *Luftwaffen-Brigade Oberrhein*, 1944-5), used the dialect term *Knullenkopf* as his favourite expression of abuse when giving dressing-downs to his men. In 1939, the *Gruppe* challenged each of its *Staffeln* to create their own emblem, so *1.(F) Staffel* thought that it was an appropriate, tongue-in-cheek idea to adopt as their emblem a block-headed airman with a telescope, to reflect Notti’s opinion of them.

¹³ H.L. de Zeng, *Luftwaffe Airfields 1935-45: France* (2014), online at <<https://www.ww2.dk/Airfields%20-%20France.pdf>>, pp. 284-5, 375-9.

¹⁴ Ischinger, born 24 March 1910 in Stuttgart, was an experienced and highly decorated *Luftwaffe* officer, holding the Iron Cross, 2nd and 1st class. On 7 December 1942, he was awarded the *Luftwaffe Ehrenpokal für besondere Leistungen im Luftkrieg* (the ‘Honour Goblet’ for outstanding achievements in aerial warfare, instituted by Hermann Göring on [p. 63] 27 February 1940) and on 24 June 1943, he received the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold*. See K.D. Patzwall, *Der Ehrenpokal für besondere Leistung im Luftkrieg* (Norderstedt, 2008); K. Patzwall and V. Scherzer, *Das Deutsche Kreuz, 1941-5. Geschichte und Inhaber, Band 1* (Norderstedt, 2001).

¹⁵ On the organization and hierarchy of *Luftwaffe* units, see Alban, ‘Three Nights’ Blitz’, p. 32.

¹⁶ Rabeder, *The Knullenkopfstaffel*, p. 283. Earlier that day, the bomber units involved had flown from their permanent bases in the Netherlands to French staging airfields at Évreux, Rennes and Saint-André, from where the attack on Plymouth was launched (U. Balke, *Der Luftkrieg in Europa, 1941-5. Die Einsätze des Kampfgeschwaders 2 gegen England, und über dem Deutschen Reich* (Augsburg, 1997), pp. 199-200). *K.G. 40* had been specially formed as a unit to carry out anti-ship missions, but it occasionally attacked land-based targets, as on the Plymouth raid and three nights later, on 16 February 1943, when *II./K.G.40*, along with seven aircraft from *II./K.G. 2*, laid mines at Beachy Head, at the same time as a main force from *K.G.2* attacked Swansea for the town’s final Blitz (Balke, *Der Luftkrieg in Europa, 1941-5*, p. 200).

¹⁷ *Y-Gerät* (‘Y-device’) or *Y-Verfahren*, like the *X-Gerät* and *Knickebein* systems also used in *Luftwaffe* aircraft, was a radio guidance system based on Lorenz beams. For details, see R.V. Jones, *Most Secret War* (London, 1978).

¹⁸ Unlike in the RAF, *Luftwaffe* bomber aircraft were not necessarily commanded by the pilot, thus, although he was not the pilot, Ischinger was the captain of the aircraft (and its observer).

¹⁹ The information appearing here about *1(F) Aufkl.Gr. 123*’s reconnaissance operations over Swansea in February 1943 is taken from Rabeder, *The Knullenkopfstaffel*, pp. 283-5.

²⁰ Like Ischinger, Westphal was a decorated flyer. At the time of this sortie, he held the Iron Cross, 2nd and 1st class and, on 18 October 1942, had also been awarded the *Luftwaffe Ehrenpokal*. He was to receive the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* on 26 December 1943.

²¹ Similarly to the arrangements for the Plymouth raid (see note 16 above), these *K.G.2* aircraft had flown earlier that day to these French airfields from their permanent bases at Arnhem-Deelen, Eindhoven, Gilze Rijen and Soesterberg in the Netherlands, so as to be closer to their target and also to minimise the time spent flying directly over large parts of mainland Britain.

²² *Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv*, Freiburg im Breisgau, RL 2-II/308, fos 67-67^v (*Generalstab der Luftwaffe/Luftwaffenführungsstab: Lagemeldung über den Angriff auf Swansea*).

²³ For details of this attack on Swansea by *K.G.2*, see R.T. Pearce, *Operation Wasservogel. The Story of the South Buckham Farm Bomber Crash in Dorset and the Final Raid on Swansea* (Mosterton, 1996). Primary sources relating to the raid will be treated in J.R. Alban, *Swansea’s Final Blitz. Select Contemporary Reports relating to the Air Raid of 16 February 1943* (Forthcoming).

²⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘air raid’ as ‘An attack by aircraft, esp. one in which bombs are dropped on to a ground target’, with the suggested intent of causing destruction.