

# RCAF CIRCUS OPERATIONS

A Circus was a small number of Bomber Command aircraft escorted by a large number of fighters, the light bombers of 2 Group being the primary aircraft for the missions. The targets were small and generally situated in NW France, within range of the “short-legged” RAF fighters. It was hoped the Luftwaffe would be enticed to come up and fight and be overwhelmed by the escorting fighters. It was meant to be a war of attrition rather than one of strategic importance. Exactly when the code-word ‘Circus’ came into being is obscure, but one imagines someone of WW1 vintage likened the mass of aircraft to be akin to the German Flying Circuses they had seen above the trenches during 1917–18.

The New Year of 1941 arrived and within a week thereof came the first plan to fly an offensive operation across the Channel. This took place on January 10<sup>th</sup>. It was flown by six Blenheims of 114 Squadron to attack an airfield, and an ammunition dump in the Forêt de Guines, just a few miles inland from the French coast, south of Calais. It was escorted by three squadrons of Hurricanes and six squadrons of Spitfires. The Germans did not react.



**408 Squadron RCAF Hampdens as used on ‘Circus’ operations**

## Circus 96

The RCAF first Circus took place on 17 September 1941 when six Hampdens of 408 Squadron set out to bomb the Shell factory at Marquise. 408 was led by S/Ldr W. J. Burnett DFC RCAF. Five of the bombers were damaged. Burnett's aircraft was among them and he lost his hydraulics, so was unable to open his bomb doors. In the end the bombers aborted the attempt as they were unable to identify the target and brought their bombs home. An air gunner claimed a 109 damaged.

OPERATIONS RECORD BOOK							APPENDIX _____	R.A.F. Form 541.
DETAIL OF WORK CARRIED OUT								
By 408 Squadron, R.C.A.F.							<b>SECRET</b>	PAGE No. 1
FOR THE MONTH OF September, 1941								
DATE	AIRCRAFT Type & Number	CREW	DUTY	TIME		DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REFERENCES	
				Up	Down			
17th	Hampden AE 351	S/Ldr. Burnett Sgt. Dillon Sgt. Reynolds Sgt. Morgan	Bombing Marquise	13.35	19.50	CIRCUS OPERATIONS: BOMBING SHELL FACTORY AT MARQUISE. Sorties A 43 and A 48 <del>xxxx</del> inclusive were carried out by 6 Hampdens of this squadron in daylight. They rendezvoused with the fighter escort at Dungeness and set course for the French coast. Heavy and accurate flack was encountered on and in from the coast with <del>some</del> light flack as well. The weather over France was very good but the leading Navigator Sgt. Dillon was unable to observe the target resulting in all six aircraft bringing their bomb load back. All aircraft suffered damage by flack except AE 245 which came through unscathed. Four separate attacks were made on the formation by M.E. 109 F's. One A/B in particular closing in to 50 yards before breaking off the engagement. This aircraft then dived towards the sea with smoke pouring from it and the formation claim it as destroyed. Tracks flown - Base - Heading - Dungeness 4 miles S of Hurdlot - Smer - Marquise Area - Gravelines - Huxton - Base.	A 43	
"	AE 297	F/O Caldwell Sgt. Marshall Sgt. Haines Sgt. Williams					A 44	
"	AE 245	F/O Constance F/O Hardingham Sgt. Corrie Sgt. Nevills					A 45	
"	AE 360	F/Lt. Clayton F/O Dench F/Sgt. Foster Sgt. Howell					A 46	
"	AE 286	F/O Campbell Sgt. Woods Sgt. Russell Sgt. Pearce					A 47	
"	AE 187	Sgt. Hall Sgt. Watts Sgt. Williams, C.J. Sgt. Allington					A 48	

## Circus 97

Six Hampdens from 408, and led by its CO, W/Cdr N. W. Timmerman DSO DFC RCAF, were assigned to go for the marshalling yards at Abbeville the next day. Five mixed Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons were providing the Close Escort position, 402 from Hornchurch, 607 from Debden, plus 41, 129 and 616 from Tangmere. The Polish Wing gave Escort Cover, with Target Support provided by North Weald and the other three squadrons of the Hornchurch Wing. 12 Group gave Forward Support.

The weather was not good. 10/10th cloud with fog or mist over the English coast and Channel that gave way to ground haze over France although it was clear above. RV had been planned above Hastings and the bombers reported their arrival had been right on time, although no fighters appeared. After circling for twenty-five minutes the Hampdens broke off and went home.

18th	"	AE 289	W/Cdr. Timmerman D.F.C. F/O Fisher Sgt. Young F/Lt. Morgan	Bombing Abbeville	13.05	16.15	DAYLIGHT ATTACK ON MARSHALLING YARDS AT ABBEVILLE. The formation was over the rendezvous position (Rye) 3 minutes before time. They circled around until 15.50 a total time of 1 hour 23 minutes but no fighter escort appeared, and the formation set course for bases. The French coast could be plainly seen but the English coast was obscured by a belt of 9/10 cloud 30 miles wide at 7000 ft. It was considered that the fighter escort could have rendezvoused as the cloud was only 1000 - 2000 feet thick. Group recall signal was received at 15.55 hours.	A 49
"		AE 267	F/Lt. Danley MacKenzie Sgt. McGrail Sgt. Howells Sgt. Read					
"			Sgt. Book Sgt. Fraser Sgt. Wilkinson Sgt. Appleby.					

## Circus 100B

On September 20th, six Hampdens from 408 Squadron, again led by its CO, W/Cdr Timmerman, again going for the Abbeville marshalling yards, escorted by the Biggin Hill Wing, plus one squadron from Debden, with Kenley flying Cover. Visibility over France was good despite ground haze. The bombers released 1,900lbs of ordnance (six bombs), five of which were seen to burst in the centre of the target. The bombers had no trouble with either flak or fighters.

20 <sup>th</sup>							
	* AE 245	W/Cdr. Timmerman D.S.O., D.F.C. F/O Fisher Sgt. Young F/Lt. Morgan	Bombing Abbeville	13.46	17.20	BOMBING MARSHALLING YARDS AT ABBEVILLE. The formation rendezvoused over Eze 3 minutes before time and set course for the target. The route being Base - Eze - Target - Eze - Base. No opposition from flak or fighters was encountered on the whole journey by the formation and good results were obtained. The bombing run up was made on 135° M at 14,000 time 15.34. The bomb load was 6 - 1900 lb bombs five of which were seen to burst in the centre of the yards. Photographs taken do not show the bomb bursts but bombs on their way down over the run.	A 55
	* AE 148	Sgt. Beck Sgt. Fraser Sgt. Wilkinson Sgt. Appleby					A 56
	* AE 267	F/Lt. Dunlop-Mackenzie Sgt. McGrail Sgt. Williams Sgt. Haines					A 57
	* AE 288	F/O Houghton F/O Monkhouse F/O Bishop Sgt. Callan					A 58
	* AE 287	S/Ldr. Altmann Sgt. Henderson F/Sgt. Walker Sgt. Egg					A 59
	* AE 190	Sgt. Bradley Sgt. May F/O Maitland Sgt. Horton					A 60

## Circus 102

This operation on the 21st was timed to coincide with Circus 101 and there is no doubt that a number of German pilots were back on the ground and in the process of re-arming etc., when the alarm came. The Hampdens of 408, led by S/Ldr Burnett, escorted by North Weald, plus one squadron from Debden, with Hornchurch and Biggin Hill as Cover, flew high above the low haze and in good visibility reached and attacked the Lille railway repair shop, dropping 1,900lb and 500lb bombs from 15,000 feet, some of which exploded around the target but others went into nearby fields. Flak was heavy and all six bombers received some sort of minor damage. One Me109 dived on the formation but sheered off when met by return fire from the Hampdens' gunners.

DATE	TYPE & NUMBER	CREW	DUTY	Up	Down	DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REFERENCES
21 <sup>st</sup>	Hampden AE 361	S/Ldr. Burnett, D.F.C. F/O Courts Sgt. Reynolds. Sgt. Morgan	Bombing Lille	13.25	18.00	BOMBING RAILWAY REPAIR SHOP AT LILLE. The rendezvous with the fighter escort was made over Hunston exactly on time. The weather on the South coast and over occupied territory was exceptionally good. Flak of heavy calibre was encountered at Bailloul and Armentieres. The target was identified and a run up on 117° was made, height 15,000 ft. Bomb load for five aircraft 1 - 1900lb on each and for aircraft AE 139 four 500 lbs. G.P. Three of the 500 lbs overshot target but one hit the track south east of the target. Three direct hits by 1900 lbs were seen on target. One 1900 lb was dropped safe owing to release gear being hit by flak. One 1900 lb dropped off on bomb doors being opened but was later seen to have hit a large factory on the west of Lille. Very intense heavy accurate flak was encountered over Lille and continued until past Bailloul resulting in all six aircraft being hit but the formation held together. One M.E. 109F attacked the formation but sheered off when Hampdens opened fire. Route out Base - Hunston - Lille and Base.	A 61
	* AE 139	F/O Caldwell Sgt. Marshall Sgt. Williams Sgt. Haines					A 62
	* AE 288	F/O Constance F/O Hardingham F/O Van Den Bok Sgt. Neville					A 63
	* AE 245	F/Sgt. Titcombe Sgt. Dillon Sgt. Thomas Sgt. Crawley					A 64
	* AE 360	F/Lt. Clayton, D.F.C. F/O Deach F/Sgt. Foster Sgt. Howell					A 65
	* AE 197	F/O Campbell Sgt. Wood Sgt. Russell Sgt. Pearce					A 66

According to 408 Squadron's records, six Hampdens, led by S/Ldr Altman, took off to bomb a power station at Mazingarbe on the 22nd but were recalled after 1½ hours. Whether it was meant to be a Circus is unclear.

22nd	* AE 972	S/Ldr. Altman F/O Fisher F/Sgt. Walker Sgt. Ragg	Bombing Mazingarbe	13.35	18.00	ATTACK ON MAZINGARBE POWER STATION. These aircraft set out to bomb the Mazingarbe Power Station in company with fighter escort but returned to base after receiving Group recall signal, being airborne 1½ hours.	A 67
	* AE 297	F/Lt. Dunlop					A 68

This ended the RCAF's involvement in Circus Operations. The last Circus was flown by Bomber Command was in August 1943 by which time the 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF had been formed and it had other priorities. The Luftwaffe also had its hands full with USAAF daylight operations and did not have aircraft to spare to chase after half a dozen RAF light bombers.

#### Sources

- Fighter Commands Air War 1941 RAF Circus Operations and Fighter Sweeps Against the Luftwaffe—Norman Franks
- 408 Squadron Operational Record Books



During a Circus raid in August of 1941, a Blenheim bomber dropped the only recorded 'non-offensive' article dropped during Circus operations –a replacement artificial leg for Douglas Bader, the legless RAF fighter Ace who had been shot down and captured a few days earlier.