



# *FlyPast* Spotlight

# Handley Page Hampden

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Main picture  
Hampden Is of 49 Squadron  
on the attack. AIRFIX

This month's *Spotlight* shines on the Handley Page Hampden medium bomber – a type that fought against the odds to hit back at Nazi Germany during the early days of the war



# The Handley Page Hampden

Among the RAF's first World War Two bombers, the Hampden was an important (but flawed) part of Britain's war machine

**A**long with the Vickers Wellington and the Armstrong Whitworth Whitley, the Handley Page Hampden has come to symbolise the bravery and sacrifice of RAF bomber crews involved in operations early in World War Two. It was developed in the late 1930s, at a time when the rigours of what lay ahead could only be guessed at.

All three of the RAF's main bombers were soon proven to be ill equipped for the daylight raids that had been envisaged. Losses were great, and even with the human cost removed from the equation, the effectiveness in terms of damage done to the enemy was often less than satisfactory. Like most of its contemporaries, the Hampden was quickly withdrawn from such duties, though it did find a second wind when put to work in other areas, such as torpedo bombing with Coastal Command.

As hostilities drew to a close, the war-weary Hampdens that remained had long since been relegated to secondary roles. Larger and more durable four-engined 'heavies',

such as the Avro Lancaster, flew nocturnal bombing missions, while the Flying Fortresses and Liberators of the USAAF attacked by day. In comparison, the Hampden looked like the product of a previous generation.

## Unusual origins

It may come as a surprise to learn that the Handley Page bomber was designed by a German. Gustav Lachmann had served his country in the Great War, and had actually trained as a pilot, before a serious accident in 1917 curtailed his career. The following year he invented Lachmann Flaps, leading edge wing slats that reduced the stalling speed of an aircraft and improved its resistance to spinning.

Studying engineering after the war, his career took him around the world until he accepted a job with Handley Page in 1929. As part of the company's design team, he developed the Hampden as a twin-engined day bomber in the mid-1930s – Vickers drew up the Wellington to the same specification. The HP.52 prototype

undertook its maiden flight on June 21, 1936. This was followed by an initial order for 180 Mk.I Hampdens, the first of these flying on May 24, 1938.

Despite the significance of Lachmann's role, as the threat of war with Germany intensified, his origins led some to suspect him of being a spy. On the outbreak of World War Two he was interred as an 'enemy alien' on the Isle of Man. Following persistent pressure from his employers he was eventually released to continue his work for the British company. In fact, Lachmann stayed loyal to Handley Page not just for the duration of the war but for the remainder of his career. He died in Chorleywood, Herts, in 1966.

The design of the Hampden was innovative, if somewhat unorthodox. Its 'tadpole' rear end was similar to that of Germany's Dornier Do 17, but its front section – bulbous in profile but extremely narrow – led to crews nicknaming it 'the Flying Suitcase', a less than favourable soubriquet reflecting its cramped conditions. In its claustrophobic interior, four



“The design was innovative, if somewhat unorthodox”

men were accommodated: pilot, navigator/bomb aimer, radio operator and rear gunner.

Powered by two Bristol Pegasus radials, it was armed with up to six 0.303in (7.7mm) Vickers machine guns in the nose, dorsal and ventral positions. Despite the fact that it was soon rendered obsolete as a bomber, 1,430 Hampdens were constructed. More than half (770) were built by English Electric at Samesbury in Lancashire. Handley Page produced around 500, and a further 160 were made in Canada from 1940 to 1941 by Canadian Associated Aircraft.

### Quickly outclassed

Although conceived as a quick and agile ‘fighting bomber’, the Hampden’s frailties soon became all too clear. The RAF’s 49 Squadron was the first to receive the type in September 1938, followed by No.83, with both units based at Scampton, Lincs. A total of 226

Hampdens were in service with eight squadrons when war broke out, and these unfortunate units suffered considerable losses during early, daylight sorties.

By the time the war ended, a total of 714 Hampdens had been lost on operations, almost half the number built. The toll in human life was considerable – around 1,800 crew members were either killed or listed as missing. After a savage introduction, which nevertheless led to the award of the Victoria Cross to Sgt John Hannah who tackled the flames of a burning aircraft (see page 74), and to Flt Lt Rod Learoyd (see panel), the focus quickly shifted to night raids and mine-laying.

Bomber Command withdrew its Hampdens in 1942. The type did go on to operate with some success with Coastal Command as a long range torpedo bomber from 1943. The TB Mk.I was fitted with a single torpedo in an open bomb bay, along with a 500lb (230kg)

Flt Lt Roderick Learoyd’s 49 Squadron Hampden P4403 at Scampton. PETER GREEN COLLECTION



### Hampden Victoria Cross

The Handley Page Hampden was vulnerable to attack, both from the air and ground. Flying P4403 ‘EA-M’ with 49 Squadron on August 12, 1940, Flt Lt Roderick Learoyd pressed home an attack on an aqueduct over the River Ems in Germany despite sustaining severe damage to his aircraft. As he commenced his bomb run at just 150ft, his machine was caught by searchlights and bombarded by flak. Learoyd nevertheless dropped his bombs on the target and nursed his crippled Hampden home. Believing that a night landing would be too dangerous, he circled until morning light, finally bringing his crew home safely. He was awarded the VC on September 9, 1940. The medal is now on display within the Imperial War Museum’s Lord Ashcroft Gallery.

bomb under each wing. It also served as a maritime reconnaissance aircraft. In addition, 144 Squadron and RAAF 455 Squadron were put to good use escorting Arctic convoys, flying from Soviet bases. The 23 aircraft involved were subsequently left to the Russians, and were used by the 3rd Squadron of 24 MTAP (Anti-shiping Wing) of the Soviet Navy until at least 1943. (See page 78.)

Very little came from a Napier Dagger powered variant, known as the Hereford, due to engine cooling problems, and most were eventually re-engined as Hampdens. The few Herefords that survived were used by training units – those built in Canada went to 32 OTU, but even these suffered an unusually high attrition rate, resulting in around 200 ‘semi-retired’ examples being flown from the UK as replacements.

Thrown into the cauldron of World War Two, the Hampden was a machine from which vital lessons were learned. It is best remembered for this, and even more so for the courage of its hard-pressed crews. ●

**Main picture**  
Handley Page Hampden I AT137 ‘UB-T’ of 455 Squadron RAAF flying in May 1942. RAF MUSEUM

**Above left**  
L4032 was the first Hampden to roll off the production line. KEY