

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

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IN THIS ISSUE ...

A change of focus this month and a look at the controversy which surrounded the creation of the Path Finder Force, initially proposed as the Target Finding Force, in the summer of 1942.

At the centre of the row was Arthur Travers Harris, head of Bomber Command, who signed himself 'Bert' in his forthright letter to Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), who replied in his usual calm and logical style.

12 June 1942, Harris to Portal

I understand the Conference on the Target Finding Force has now been postponed. I have had my third Conference with my Group Commanders on this subject this morning. Each Group Commander brought with him his best Target Finding Squadron Commander. All were utterly opposed to the formation of a Target Finding Force on the lines which hold favour in the Air Ministry. The reasons are those which I have given you personally from time to time, and many others.

Briefly their arguments are that we already have a Target Finding Force by a process of selecting the best squadrons and best crews to lead attacks. All were insistent that there was nothing particular to be gained from these selected crews belonging to one Unit and living on one aerodrome. There were, on the contrary, overwhelming considerations against the proposal from the point of view of morale, practicability, etc, etc.



After reiterating that all attending were 'decisively and adamantly opposed' to the proposition, Harris continued scornfully:

The only dissentient was an ex-Squadron Commander from Feltwell (where the Target Finding Force idea originated), now on 3 Group staff. But he could offer no reasoned argument for

the constitution of such a special force beyond asserting that he wanted to find the target as often as possible. Which naive statement received of course the chorused reply of "and so say all of us".

Yours ever, Bert.

The unfortunate anonymous ex-Squadron Commander from Feltwell had obviously been sat upon very heavily by Harris and his allies. In fact, this 12 June 1942 Conference explains a great deal about the hostility by certain Commanders of other Groups to the Pathfinders once they had been formed.

THE FOLLOW-UP

Portal replied two days later. The following is an abbreviated version of his very detailed reply:

14 June, 1942, Portal to Harris

Please do not think that I fail to understand the objection to the “corps d’elite” idea. To pack one unit with experts at the expense of other units **which have to do the same job** is most unsound and bad for morale. This is emphatically **not** what we are proposing. The TFF would have an entirely different and far more difficult task than the ordinary “follow up” squadrons and this creates both the need and the justification for having a formation containing none but expert crews.

[...] You say that there is nothing particular to be gained from bringing the selected crews into one unit and locating them together on one aerodrome. As we see it, this is the essence of the problem. Without this close association there could be no continuity of technique; there could be no day to day improvement of method; and we could not ensure that the plans and briefing for each individual operation were similarly and clearly interpreted and acted upon by the force as a whole. In effect it would mean perpetuating the present rule-of-thumb tactical methods by segregated crews rather than introducing the finesse and polish which one would expect from a well-trained and co-ordinated Target Finding Force. The problem confronting us is clearly so great that nothing less than the best will do.

[...] What we need to aim at is an effective degree of illumination and incendiaries in the right place and **only in the right place**. It is our opinion that this admittedly difficult task can only be done by a force which concentrates upon it as a specialised role and which **excludes those less expert crews whose less discriminating use of flare or incendiaries in the vicinity of the target have recently led so many of our attacks astray**.

[...] I am reluctant to impose the Air Staff proposal upon you when you object so strongly to it. I would therefore like to discuss the subject with you tomorrow [...], and I hope we shall be able to formulate an agreed scheme. [...]

Yours ever, C Portal

Harris continued his pugnacious opposition until given a direct order by the Prime Minister, which was relayed through Portal. However, he categorically refused to call the new force the Target Finding Force. And so it was that the Path Finder Force came into being on 16 August 1942.



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