



On the night of November 14th 1940, the Luftwaffe attacked Coventry. The bombing of Coventry was seen as the biggest test of British resolve up to this stage of the Blitz. Known as 'Operation Moonlight Sonata', over 400 bombers attacked Coventry that night and in the early morning of November 15th 1940.

Coventry was an important engineering and manufacturing city before World War Two and the factories based there played an important part in supplying Britain's military in the early months of the war. For example, *Alvis* (a car company) made armoured cars while Aero manufactured important parts for the RAF. Many of the workforce within the city lived very near to the factory they worked at, so any attack on the factories was bound to hit homes as well.

The Luftwaffe had made a very thorough reconnaissance of the city and knew where the most important factories were. Planning for the raid on Coventry was equally as thorough as the Luftwaffe planned to be as destructive as was possible. Their plan was for a east to west flight over the city followed by a west to east attack. The intention was to create a firestorm within the city that would destroy factories and totally break the morale of the people there. The ultimate aim of the attack was to create such a feeling of shock that the government would sue for peace.

Despite its importance as a manufacturing centre, Coventry was poorly defended against an aerial attack. Less than 40 anti-aircraft guns surrounded the city along with about 50 barrage balloons. One of the unofficial reasons put forward for this lack of defence was that the city was built in a natural dip which it was believed gave the city a natural defence against an aerial attack as at night, especially in the colder months, the city was covered with fog.

The Luftwaffe planned to attack on the next full moon – November 14th. British Intelligence knew a raid was planned to take place – but did not know where. The assumption was that London would be the target. The night of November 14th was very cold and also very clear as a result of the full moon. If it was true that the city's defenses were kept at a minimum because of a nightly blanket covering of fog, it was not to be on this night. The sirens first sounded in Coventry at 19.10. Pathfinder aircraft dropped parachute flares to mark the main targets. Incendiary bombs were dropped first. Many were booby-trapped so that when they exploded, hundreds of red-hot metal shards shot out. This first wave of bombings created over 200 fires. At 21.30, the first high explosive bombs were dropped. They caused extensive damage. By 22.30 Coventry was effectively cut off from the outside, as very few phone lines had survived the bombing and travel was very dangerous as fallen buildings blocked the roads. Not one German bomber was shot down despite thousands of anti-aircraft rounds being fired. During the raid and in the immediate aftermath, it is generally accepted that morale in the city came very close to collapsing. "We were all cowering on the floor – sheer terror." (Ilene Bees). "You stood there petrified." Alan Hartley, ARP messenger during the raid. "First reaction was shock. The second reaction was 'we're not going to let those buggers get away with it.'" Jean Taylor.

The city's fire fighters had to fight the many fires with a limited water supply as most of the mains had been shattered in the attack. By 23.50 the centuries old St Michael's Cathedral had been destroyed. By 01.30 on November 15th, the flames were so intense they could be seen 100 miles away. It was a perfect target for the second wave of bombers that came in at that time. In total the bombing lasted for 13 hours. 500 tons of high explosive bombs were dropped along with 30,000 incendiaries.

Later that day a team from 'Mass Observation' got into the city. As official reporters it was expected that any commentary on their films would follow accepted party lines – lots of damage but the spirit of the people is high; bombing will never dull the British bulldog nature etc. However, in this instance, 'Mass Observation' reported that the city had suffered a "collective nervous breakdown". It was reported that the survivors in the city attacked firemen for failing to stop the fires (even though they could not) and that police officers were also attacked. The government was so angered by this failure to stir the nation's patriotism that it came close to taking over the BBC, which oversaw 'Mass Observation'.

By the time the attack was over, 75% of all buildings in the city were destroyed; 33% of all factories were destroyed and 50% of all homes. Most people had to exist without water, gas or electricity. While 'Mass Observation' had angered the government, it had spoken the truth. On the afternoon of November 15th, a rumour went round the city that a second attack was on the way. By night time, 100,000 people had fled the city for the surrounding countryside. Ilene Bees, who survived the bombing, remembered the "total despair" she and others felt within the city.

There can be little doubt that the city was on the verge of collapsing from a morale point of view. This is why the government was so angered by 'Mass Observation' – it feared that people in other cities might become distraught as a result of the belief that what had happened to Coventry might happen to their city. However, this whole mood of despair changed on November 16th when King George VI visited the city. Observers noted that within the space of a day – and linked to the visit – the 'Bulldog Spirit' that Churchill wanted to capture was very much in evidence. On November 20th, the first of two mass burials took place. In total 568 people were buried. While they were very sad and solemn affairs, people there noted an air of defiance, of not wanting to give in. Within two weeks of the bombing some factories had opened up. While food kitchens appeared, the basics of life had been severely disrupted – water, gas etc. People in the city were offered evacuation. However, only 300 took up the offer. The rest decided to stay in their city. The clear weather allowed the Luftwaffe to film the attack. These films were used in propaganda films in Nazi Germany and the Nazis created a new 'verb', to coventrate, which was their reference to the mass bombing of the city. In later years when the RAF and the USAAF bombed cities in Nazi Germany, they used the words 'coventration bombing' to describe their blanket bombing attacks.

Images of the blitz from IWM: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/15-powerful-photos-of-the-blitz>