

assistance to the Royal Navy in their task of safeguarding the convoys whenever they were within range of our fighters. At the same time, attempts were made to place the matter on a more satisfactory basis, and in particular to obtain from the Air Ministry a clear statement of the Command's duties in respect of shipping and the degree of priority to be accorded to them. These attempts culminated at the end of October and beginning of November, 1940, in the receipt of a series of communications from the Secretary of State for Air which gave renewed sanction to the Command's existing practice of protecting convoys whenever possible by holding fighters at readiness rather than flying standing patrols; confirmed that the defence of the aircraft industry was still the primary task of the Command; but added that convoys, and also flotillas and minesweeping craft, must be protected so long as their protection was practicable.

93. This pronouncement did not end my predecessor's perplexities, since—perhaps inevitably—it neither defined the practicable nor assisted him to determine how much of his resources he would be justified in diverting from his primary task to what was clearly a secondary—and yet, apparently, essential—one.

94. The difficulty of the problem will be the more easily grasped if it is borne in mind that, at this stage of the war, practically the whole resources of the Command could have been expended on either of these rival tasks, without glutting the appetite of the Minister of Aircraft Production in the one case or the Naval authorities in the other.

95. The renewal of mass attacks on shipping at the beginning of November brought fresh demands from the Naval authorities. Accordingly, my predecessor again asked the Air Ministry, this time by means of a formal letter, to clarify their policy in regard to the fighter protection of shipping. In this letter he placed before the Air Ministry a series of proposals based on the practice which had grown up gradually within the Command.

96. No reply to this letter had been received when I took up Command, and I therefore assumed the Air Ministry's tacit consent to the proposals. Henceforward three degrees of fighter protection for shipping were recognized, namely *close escort*, to be given only in special cases and by prior arrangement; *protection*, which meant that specified fighter units were detailed to defend specified shipping units in a given area and over a given period, either by flying patrols or remaining at readiness; and *cover*, which meant that note was taken of the position of the shipping, and arrangements were made to intercept any aircraft which appeared to threaten it.

97. Fortunately the scale of attack against coastwise shipping declined considerably after the middle of November. In the circumstances the Naval authorities remained, to all appearances, reasonably contented with a standard of protection which would probably not have satisfied them had the attacks of early November continued.

98. Only four ships were sunk by air action within fighter range in December 1940, and only two in January 1941, as against eleven in November.

99. Apart from operations against shipping, the enemy continued in November to make the fighter and fighter-bomber sweeps over Kent and Sussex which had been a feature of his operations in October. But in November these sweeps were made at less extreme altitudes than in October, perhaps to avoid causing condensation trails or to reduce the strain on pilots. Consequently they were rather easier to counter. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy's fighters as well as his dive-bombers, and in this month No 11 Group claimed the highest proportion of enemy aircraft destroyed to their own pilots lost which had yet been recorded.

100. The fighter sweeps virtually ceased in the middle of December and were resumed on a reduced scale in February. In the meantime the Germans made a number of so-called "pirate" raids on aircraft factories and similar objectives. These raids were made by single aircraft, flying over carefully prepared routes, often in cloudy weather. The German pilots showed great skill in taking advantage of every favourable circumstance of topography and weather to elude the defences. Although the raids were too infrequent to do much harm to our war potential, they caused some anxiety and resulted in great pressure being put on me to provide local fighter protection for the threatened factories.

101. The unsoundness of this method of defence, which, if carried to its logical conclusion, would have been impossibly extravagant and would have exposed our fighter force to defeat in detail, needs no elaboration. Nevertheless the Minister of Aircraft Production was so insistent that eventually I devised a scheme whereby a number of aircraft factories were to be allotted fighters for local defence, these to be piloted by the firms' own test pilots. Although put into effect later in the year, the scheme achieved little practical success and was eventually allowed to fall into abeyance. As to its thorough unsoundness from the military viewpoint there can be no doubt; but I think that it may have been worth while at the time simply for its moral effect. Workers who, seeing no fighters in the immediate neighbourhood of their factory, were unaware of the protection that they were receiving from the general air defence system, may have been and probably were heartened by the knowledge that there was a fighter on the factory airfield expressly for the purpose of defending them.

102. A more important measure taken at this stage concerned the flying of Balloon Barrages. On the outbreak of War the intention had been to fly the balloons at all times. This practice proved so expensive, chiefly because of the large number of balloons carried away or damaged by bad weather, that it soon gave way to a system whereby balloons were close-hauled in doubtful weather and raised only on the approach of hostile aircraft. The disadvantage of this system was that the weather conditions in which balloons were likely to be close-hauled were precisely those in which a "pirate" raider might hope to approach its target undetected, or at least without its purpose being divined in time for the barrage to be raised. Thus, if the barrage commanders interpreted their freedom to close-haul the balloons too liberally, there was a risk that