

129. Between 20th December, 1940, and 13th June, 1941, 149 "Rhubarb" patrols, involving 336 sorties, were flown, of which 45 were rendered abortive by unsuitable weather or other extraneous circumstances. German aircraft were seen in the air on 26 occasions, to a total of 77 aircraft, and on 18 occasions were engaged. The destruction of seven enemy aircraft was claimed for the loss of eight of our pilots, and 116 separate attacks were made on a variety of surface objectives, including ships, road vehicles, airfield buildings, grounded aircraft, artillery and searchlight posts, German troops and military camps.

130. Operations on a larger scale began with a sweep off and over the coast of France by a total of five squadrons of fighters on 9th January, 1941. The first operation with bombers followed on the next day, when dispersal pens serving landing grounds on the edge of the Forêt de Guines, South of Calais, were attacked. Altogether eleven of these "Circus" operations were executed up to 13th June, the objectives for the bombers including the docks at Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne, a number of airfields and one industrial plant known to be working for the Germans. In addition more than forty sweeps were made during this period by fighters without bombers.

131. After the first three "Circus" operations an inevitable difference of view between Bomber and Fighter Commands as to the primary object of these attacks became apparent. The principal aim of my Command was to shoot down enemy aircraft, while Bomber Command, naturally enough, attached more importance to the bombing. It was, however, the view of the Chief of the Air Staff that the bombing of objectives in France with the resources available for operation "Circus" could have no decisive military effect at this stage of the War, and that it would be a pity to spoil the chances of the fighters by making them conform to the requirements of a bomber force bent exclusively on inflicting material damage by bombing, and prepared to linger over the target area for that purpose. On his instructions, the Air Officer-Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command, and myself, held a conference at my Headquarters on 15th February, 1941, when we agreed that the object of operation "Circus" was to force the enemy to give battle in conditions tactically favourable to our fighters. To compel the Germans to do so, the bombers must do enough damage to make it impossible for them to refuse to fight.

132. The early "Circus" attacks were not always successful in producing these tactically favourable conditions, even after agreement on this point had been reached. This was largely because, in practice, there was still a tendency for our forces to operate too low down. There is no doubt that ideally our lowest fighter squadron should never have flown at less than about 18,000 feet, the highest being somewhere about 30,000 feet. To achieve this it would have been necessary for the bombers invariably to fly at 17,000 feet or more. This was not always practicable, if only because of the time required by the Blenheim bombers then used for these operations to reach that height. Nevertheless, it was thought advisable to lay down this principle as a *desideratum*, and this was done when I issued fresh instructions for

operation "Circus" during the third week in February. In the next three operations the bombers flew at heights between 15,000 and 17,000 feet and in the following two at 10,000 and 12,000 feet respectively.

133. Towards the end of May the weather declined, and between 22nd May and 13th June no "Circus" operations were attempted. Up to this point no major fighter battle had occurred, the enemy having been content, on the whole, to pounce on stragglers or otherwise attempt to exploit any favourable tactical situation which might develop. In the absence of such favourable circumstances he had usually avoided combat. In this sense the operations had proved slightly disappointing. On the other hand, statistically the results were fairly satisfactory so far as they went, the destruction of 16 aircraft and probable destruction of a substantial number of others being claimed for the loss of 25 of our pilots; and much valuable experience had been gained. Moreover, by a combination of "Circus" and "Rhubarb" operations our ultimate object, which was to seize the initiative, harass the enemy, and force him on to the defensive, had undoubtedly been achieved.

134. Besides these "Circus" operations, fighter sweeps, and "Rhubarb" patrols, a series of bombing attacks on shipping and what were called "fringe targets" by aircraft of Bomber and Coastal Commands, with fighter escort, were made between 5th February and 12th June, 1941. These operations differed from "Circus" operations inasmuch as the primary object was not to force enemy fighters to give battle, but to damage or destroy the target. The fighter force therefore conformed to the requirements of the bomber force and did not seek battle unless attacked.

135. Sixteen such operations were undertaken during the period stated, the size of the bombing force ranging from three to eighteen aircraft, and that of the fighter escort from one flight to eight squadrons. A number of combats with German fighters developed, in which we claimed the destruction of one German aircraft for approximately every one of our pilots lost. A considerable volume of fighter-reconnaissance was carried out in connection with these operations.

(ii) Operations, 14th June to 31st December, 1941.

136. On 14th June an improvement in the weather permitted the resumption of the "Circus" offensive, and an operation which had been planned towards the end of May was put into effect. A similar operation on 16th June was followed on 17th June by the most ambitious "Circus" yet attempted. This involved an attack on a Chemical Plant and Power Station near Bethune by eighteen Blenheim bombers, escorted by no less than 22 squadrons of fighters. The enemy fighter force reacted vigorously, and although we lost nine pilots, those who returned reported a very favourable outcome of their combats. It seemed that the long-expected "fighter battle on terms tactically favourable to ourselves" had come at last.

137. On the same day the Chief of the Air Staff instructed me to devise, in consultation with my colleagues at Bomber and Coastal