

160. Factories distilling alcohol and a number of other targets on land were also attacked in November by fighter-bombers with fighter escort. The fighter-bombers, which attacked from heights below 5,000 feet, suffered rather heavy losses from A A fire in these operations and also in some of their attacks on shipping. In the past the Blenheim bombers used by No. 2 Group for these "shipping strikes" had come up against the same difficulty, despite attempts by accompanying fighters to silence the German gunners by attacks with cannon and machine-guns.

161. Meanwhile, on 21st October, I carried the reduction in the scale of the "Circus" offensive a stage further by imposing on No. 11 Group, as the Group principally concerned, a limit of six such operations a month.

162. In practice there was only one "Circus" after this date. This was carried out on 8th November in conjunction with a high-level fighter sweep and a low-level attack by fighters and fighter-bombers on an alcohol distillation plant. An unexpectedly high wind added to the difficulties of the undertaking, which resulted in the loss of sixteen fighter aircraft and thirteen pilots. Later in the day another aircraft and its pilot were lost in the course of a fighter sweep.

163. Although not by any means disastrous, losses on this scale were unwelcome in view of the shortage of aircraft that was expected to make itself felt during the next few months. I therefore decided to restrict No. 11 Group to three "Circus" operations a month in future instead of six.

164. A few days later the Air Ministry informed me that the War Cabinet had called attention to the desirability of conserving resources in order to build up strong forces by the Spring of 1942. Since the wording of the letter in which the Air Ministry conveyed this information made it clear that no risks must be taken by pressing attacks in unfavourable weather, I now imposed a still more stringent limitation on the Air Officer Commanding No. 11 Group, who was asked to undertake no more "Circus" operations without reference to me.

165. The outbreak of War between the United States of America and Japan in December provided still further grounds for conservation, since it was clear that the supply of aircraft from America was likely to cease or at least be greatly reduced for some time to come. Consequently the constant drain imposed by even minor operations could no longer be afforded.

166. In point of fact, wintry weather was already upon us, and after 8th November no more "Circus" operations were carried out. The intensity of our other offensive operations was also substantially reduced as the year drew to its close.

167. A word must be said here about some of the special offensive operations, outside the normal "Circus", anti-shipping, fighter-sweep and "Rhubarb" categories, in which the Command participated between 14th June and the end of 1941.

168. Reference has already been made to Bomber Command's attack on the German warships at Brest and La Pallice on 24th July.

In connection with this operation six squadrons of fighters from No. 11 Group provided escort for two diversionary attacks on Cherbourg and another fourteen took part in a "Circus" against Hazebrouck, while the equivalent of nine squadrons from No. 10 Group gave support over Brest and the Western end of the English Channel. Since only five squadrons of single-seater fighters with long-range tanks were available, the degree of support that could be given over Brest was necessarily disproportionate to the size of the bomber force, which suffered accordingly.

169. On 12th August a force of 54 Blenheims of Bomber Command attacked two Power Stations at Cologne in daylight. A squadron of Whirlwinds accompanied them on the first 135 miles of their outward journey, and on their return journey a wing of long-range Spitfires met them near the Dutch Coast, while another Spitfire wing made a sweep over Flushing in support. Two "Circus" operations over France by a total of nineteen fighter squadrons and twelve Hampdens of Bomber Command were carried out as diversions. Eleven aircraft of the bomber force despatched against the Power Stations were lost, but Bomber Command expressed themselves as well satisfied with the results achieved. In the light of our subsequent knowledge of the enemy's system of deploying and controlling fighters at that time, it now appears unlikely that diversions so far from the scene of the main attacks could have had any effect on the opposition in that area.

170. On 18th December and again on 30th December, Bomber Command made further attacks on the German warships at Brest. Fighter support was provided by ten and nine squadrons of the Command respectively. As before, the results were satisfactory from the fighter aspect, but once again the bombers suffered substantial losses.

(iii) *Results Achieved by the Offensive.*

171. It would be unwise to attach too much importance to statistics showing the claims made and losses suffered by our fighters month-by-month throughout the offensive.

172. The experience of two wars shows that in large-scale offensive operations the claims to the destruction of enemy aircraft made by pilots, however honestly made and carefully scrutinized, are a most inaccurate guide to the true situation. Moreover, the results achieved by an offensive can rarely be judged by a mere statistical comparison of casualties suffered and inflicted. Except when an operation has been launched purely for the purpose of procuring the attrition of the opposing force, a broader view than this must be taken of the strategic purpose and the extent to which it has been achieved.

173. In the present case the original object was to wrest the initiative from the enemy for the sake of the great moral and tactical advantages bestowed by its possession. Later the Command was entrusted with the task of co-operating with Bomber and Coastal Commands in order, first to prevent the enemy from withdrawing any more flying units from the Western Front after the middle of June, and secondly to induce him to return some of the units already withdrawn by that time. These may be