



SUPPLEMENT

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AIR OPERATIONS BY FIGHTER COMMAND FROM 25th NOVEMBER 1940 TO 31st DECEMBER 1941

The following report was submitted to the Secretary of State for Air on 29th February, 1948, by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Sholto Douglas, G.C.B., M.C., D.F.C. (now Lord Douglas of Kirtleside), former Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, Royal Air Force

PART I: OPERATIONS.

Night Operations.

(a) The Situation on 1st November, 1940

1. At the beginning of November, 1940, the most urgent problem confronting the air defences was that presented by the night bomber. For the first ten months of the war the Luftwaffe had undertaken only minor operations against this country; but in June, 1940, the enemy began a series of small-scale night attacks on ports and industrial towns. During the next two months, while the daylight battle of Britain was being fought, this night offensive gathered momentum. On September 7th London became its main objective, and the scale of attack increased once more. By the end of October the night offensive had become in many respects a bigger threat to the kingdom than the day offensive, which, for the moment at least, had been successfully beaten off.

2. At that stage London had been raided on every night but one for the last eight weeks. On every night but four during those eight weeks at least a hundred tons of bombs had fallen on or around the Capital; Coventry, Birmingham and Liverpool had all suffered attacks of some weight. So far no intolerable harm had been done to industry or the public temper, although many people had been killed and much material loss and hardship had been caused. But there was every reason to expect that the attacks would continue and perhaps grow heavier; for during the last two months the defences had claimed the destruction of only 79 night bombers—a number

equivalent to about a half of one per cent. of the number of night sorties that the Germans were believed to have flown in that time. Obviously, losses of this order were not likely to act as a deterrent.

3. The directive by which I found myself bound when I assumed command on 25th November, 1940, required me to give priority to the defence of the aircraft industry. No formal variation of this directive was needed to make it clear that the defeat of the night bomber must be one of my main tasks.

4. It would be wrong to give the impression that hitherto this problem had been ignored. On the contrary, it had long been foreseen that if the enemy found day attacks too expensive, he would probably turn to night bombing on a substantial scale. But with limited resources it had been necessary to place the emphasis on high-performance, single-seater fighters capable of defeating the enemy by day. Before the war, and in the early stages of the war it was hoped that, with the help of searchlights, these aircraft would also be effective at night.

5. This hope had proved vain. Except at the beginning of the night offensive, when the enemy flew at 12,000 feet or lower, the searchlights were incapable of doing what was required of them. This was partly because they relied on sound locators, which were unsuited to modern conditions, and partly because very often cloud or moonlight prevented pilots from seeing the searchlight beams at the height at which they had to fly.

6. A method of night interception which did not rely on searchlights had been under development (although not continuously) since 1936. This method rested upon the installation in twin-engined, multi-seater aircraft of the radar equipment known as A I.

7. On November 1st, 1940, the Command had possessed six squadrons of aircraft fitted with this equipment. All were Blenheim Squadrons,