

a little over 22. Heavy calls were already being made on the Command to send pilots to the Middle East, and it was also necessary to find instructors for the expanding operational training organisation and for Flying Training Command. In these circumstances there was little prospect of raising the strength substantially within a measurable time. For this and other reasons I agreed soon after assuming Command that the establishment of a fighter squadron should be reduced to 23 pilots.

184. In practice even this lower figure was not achieved for many months. By the beginning of January 1941, the average strength had fallen to 21 pilots a squadron, and it remained at this level until well into the Spring. Since it was thought that the Germans were likely to resume mass attacks on the United Kingdom in the Spring or Summer, this situation caused me some anxiety. The view taken by the Air Ministry was, however, that the general strategic situation and the requirements of other theatres of war justified a reduction in the strength of Fighter Command below the level postulated in the previous Winter.

185. I believe that if the Germans had delivered a second daylight offensive in 1941 with such forces as they could then have mustered, Fighter Command would have given as good an account of itself as in the previous Summer. But no second Battle of Britain was fought. Instead, the Germans turned their attention mainly to other theatres, and the initiative in the daylight battle passed to ourselves.

186. As the year went on, the benefit of the expanded operational training organisation and an increased flow of pilots from the Flying Training Schools began to be felt, so that in spite of substantial losses in offensive operations and the posting of many pilots to other Commands, Fighter Command reached the end of 1941 with a surplus of pilots in the squadrons. The proportion of seasoned veterans was, however, inevitably somewhat low, for of those who had survived, many had been claimed by other theatres and others had been assigned for the time being to other duties.

(c) *Number of Squadrons and Fighting Value.*

187. Of the 67½ squadrons in the Command on 1st November 1940, twelve were specialist night squadrons and the rest were primarily day squadrons. Shortly after this, one of the night squadrons—No. 73 Squadron—was transferred to the Middle East.

188. In December 1940, I estimated that for the adequate defence of the country in the coming Spring, 20 night and 80 day squadrons would be required.

189. The Air Ministry were unable to contemplate the provision of so large a force by the Spring. Instead, an immediate target of 81 squadrons was set and was reached by the beginning of April. This force comprised sixteen orthodox night squadrons (including one "Intruder" Squadron), one aerial mining squadron, and 64 day squadrons. Some of the squadrons had considerably fewer pilots than their establishment, but even so the force was numerically a good deal stronger in first-line

and depth than that which had resisted the German onslaught in the previous Summer. On the other hand the general level of training and experience was somewhat lower. A high proportion of the pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain were seasoned men who had fought successfully at Dunkirk or elsewhere over France and Belgium. The majority of these had now been killed or posted away and had been replaced largely by pilots who had been hurried through the O.T.U.s in the Autumn or whose operational training had been hampered by Winter weather.

190. In respect of equipment the Germans seemed at the time to be drawing ahead. Of the 64 day squadrons in Fighter Command at the beginning of April, 1941, one was equipped with the Spitfire VB and 29 had Spitfires II or Hurricanes II. The rest were equipped with types that were not altogether a match for the Me109F which the Germans were now using. However, it seems that only about half the opposing fighter force was equipped with this aircraft by the early Spring; the other half still had the Me109E. In reality, then, there was probably little to choose between the two forces in this respect.

191. On the other hand we had made a good deal of progress in the practical application of Radar to the problems of night defence, and although we were not yet capable of inflicting prohibitive casualties on the night bomber, we were in a much better position to deal with this menace than in 1940.

192. At this stage the Command was called upon to provide six squadrons as reinforcements for the Middle East, while one squadron—No. 232—was temporarily withdrawn for training in Combined Operations. Before Midsummer, however, the formation of seven new squadrons was begun, so that when, in the middle of June, I was required to intensify my offensive campaign over Northern France, the strength was back at the old figure of 81 squadrons.

193. A further expansion during the second half of the year had always been contemplated by the Air Ministry, although from my point of view it would, of course, have been preferable to have the extra squadrons in the Spring or early Summer. It was now decided that the aim should be to build up the Command, if possible, to a strength of 89 day and 25 orthodox night squadrons by the end of 1941. There was also a new requirement for units to carry airborne searchlights to assist in night interception; for this an additional ten flights, or the equivalent of another five squadrons, were required.

194. In practice the needs of other theatres made it impossible to carry out this programme in its entirety. A decision by the Air Ministry to send Beaufighters overseas, although doubtless justified in the circumstances, reduced the supply of these aircraft at home and so hampered the expansion of the night-fighter force. Again, the desirability of guarding against a German break-through at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean made it necessary for Fighter Command to surrender to the Middle East Command six more day squadrons as a contribution to a force which was to be built up for this purpose. These squadrons left England in December and after they had sailed were diverted, because of events in Malaya, to the