

Commands, the most effective means possible of checking the withdrawal of Luftwaffe Units to the East—where the German attack on Russia was imminent—and, if possible, forcing the enemy to return some of the Units already withdrawn.

138. A meeting to discuss this question took place at my Headquarters, on 19th June, and was attended by the three Commanders-in-Chief and members of our staffs and by the Air Officer Commanding No. 11 Group and two of his staff.

139. We came to the conclusion that the best plan would be to attack objectives within range of escorting fighters—in other words, to intensify the "Circus" offensive. Since the enemy had reacted most energetically so far to the "Circus" against a target near Bethune on 17th June and another against a target in that area on 21st May, we concluded that the industrial area which included Bethune, Lens and Lille was probably his most sensitive spot. By attacking this area it was hoped to induce him to concentrate in North-East France such fighter units as he still had in the West. Bombers without escort might then hope to reach West and North-West Germany in daylight round the flank of the defences, and this in turn might force the enemy to bring back fighters from the Eastern Front in order to defend the Fatherland.

140. As a corollary to this offensive, night attacks would be made on communications in the Ruhr, and shipping attempting to pass through the Straits of Dover would also be attacked. This two-pronged offensive would, we thought, constitute a threat to communications between France and Germany which the enemy could not afford to ignore.

141. These proposals met with the approval of the Air Ministry, and an agreed list of "Circus" objectives was drawn up. It was arranged that aircraft of No. 2 Group, Bomber Command, should attack them in co-operation with fighters of my Command, and, as a secondary task, should also attack shipping and "fringe targets."

142. On 3rd July, the Air Ministry informed me that the formula defining the object of operation "Circus," which had been agreed upon in February, must be abandoned and that the object must now be "the destruction of certain important targets by day bombing, and incidentally, the destruction of enemy fighter aircraft."

143. Two days later Stirling bombers of No. 3 Group were used in these operations for the first time instead of Blenheims of No. 2 Group. This change, together with the tactical adjustment which the new policy laid down by the Air Ministry made necessary, imposed a slight and temporary handicap on the fighter force. As soon as experience had been gained under the new conditions, a small formation of Stirlings was found to suit the fighters better than a larger formation of Blenheims. Towards the end of the month the Stirlings ceased, however, to be available for "Circus" operations, as Bomber Command required them exclusively for other purposes.

144. During the first few weeks of the intensive period, which may be regarded as beginning on 14th June, our pilots reported outstandingly good results in combat, and

early in July it seemed that something like complete ascendancy had been gained over the opposing fighter force. For a short time in the middle of June the German fighter-pilots had offered determined opposition, but they now seemed, as in the Spring, reluctant to engage unless specially favoured by circumstances.

145. The results reported by our pilots during the next few weeks were not quite so good, although still much in our favour, and at the end of July the Air Ministry decided to review the results achieved up to this time.

146. To assess these results with any approach to accuracy was a matter of great difficulty. Our pilots had reported the destruction of enemy fighters in large numbers; but in operations on this scale there is room for much honest error, and even if the claims were accepted at their face value, it was impossible to know how many German pilots had baled out of their damaged aircraft, descended safely by parachute, and lived to fight another day. We believed that our information about the enemy's Order of Battle was good—as, indeed, it subsequently proved to be—but our knowledge of his capacity to replace losses was scanty. We had good reason to think that so far our attempt to force the Germans to bring back units from the Eastern Front had failed, but suspected that towards the end of July some experienced individual pilots had returned in order to stiffen up the mass. We also had information which suggested that reserve training units in France had been called upon to replace losses. The effect of the bombing attacks was virtually unknown.

147. As for our own losses, so far as Fighter Command was concerned these had been heavy, but not so heavy as to cause serious embarrassment. Our losses in pilots during the first two weeks of the intensive period had been far lighter than at the height of the Battle of Britain; and our losses in aircraft over the same period not beyond our capacity to replace. Bomber Command had lost fifteen aircraft in "Circus" operations since 14th June, and in the course of a daylight attack on German capital ships at Brest and La Pallice had suffered the rather more serious loss of sixteen bombers out of 115 despatched.

148. Losses like this, incurred when attacking an objective on the left flank of the German defensive system, suggested that attacks round the right flank into Germany might not prove such a practicable undertaking as had been hoped.

149. It was in these circumstances that a conference was held at the Air Ministry on 29th July to decide whether "Circus" operations should continue. It was agreed that some of the conceptions formulated at the conference of the Commanders-in-Chief on 19th June had been too sanguine; the daylight bombing of Germany, in particular, no longer looked like being practicable on any appreciable scale for some time to come, and it was agreed that for the medium and heavy bombers of Bomber Command night operations should normally take precedence over day operations. On the other hand it was equally clear that, if anything was to be done to contain the enemy fighter force in the West, offensive operations by Fighters must not cease; and it seemed to