

(b) *Operations, November and December, 1940.*

19. During the first two weeks in November, London had continued to be the enemy's main target, and was visited by at least 100 German bombers nearly every night. Then, in the middle of the month, came a change. On the night of 14th November, by the light of the full moon, nearly 500 German aircraft delivered an attack on Coventry which lasted from about eight o'clock in the evening until half-past five the following morning. The attack began with the dropping of large numbers of incendiary bombs by a Unit called K.Gr.100, which was known to specialize in this form of target marking. More incendiaries, hundreds of high explosive bombs and a number of parachute-mines followed. The raid wrought great havoc in the centre of the city, severely damaged 21 important factories, wrecked gas and water-mains and cables, blocked the railways, and put four or five hundred retail shops out of action. Three hundred and eighty people were killed and 800 seriously injured. The Civil Defence Services did excellent work, and, though shaken, the citizens of Coventry remained undaunted.

20. The defences were not unprepared for this move. The A.A. guns put up a tremendous volume of fire, and 123 fighter sorties were flown, day squadrons as well as night squadrons taking part. A few enemy aircraft were seen and some of them were engaged, but none of these combats was conclusive. The A.A. gunners claimed the destruction of two bombers.

21. Another such raid on Coventry soon afterwards might have created a serious situation. Fortunately the Germans did not consider a second raid necessary, and on the next night London was once again their main objective. But, for the rest of the month and throughout December, provincial towns and cities, including Southampton, Bristol, Plymouth, Birmingham, Sheffield, Liverpool and Manchester, competed with London for their attention. Clearly they had passed to a new stage in their programme and were now seeking to dislocate our means of production and supply.

22. Although this phase of the offensive did not come as a surprise, the ability of the Germans to reach and find their targets in wintry conditions was disturbing. With the help of radio beacons, directional beam systems, and blind-landing devices, the bombers were able to operate effectively in weather which seriously hampered and sometimes precluded fighter operations. As yet the new methods of interception which depended on radar were not perfected, and the less elaborate methods which we had hoped would tide us over this intervening period were largely defeated by this factor of bad weather. Inasmuch, however, as the enemy bomber crews were mainly reliant upon radio beams and beacons for navigation and bomb aiming in conditions of bad visibility, they were correspondingly vulnerable to radio counter-measures against those aids. There had grown up since the beginning of the war an extensive organisation which had developed a most effective technique for interfering so subtly with radio beams and beacons as to leave the enemy almost unaware of the fact that his own aids were leading him astray.

This organisation had been consolidated shortly before I assumed command, in the form of No. 80 Wing, whose invaluable services were almost entirely at my disposal. Operating in association with other forms of decoy, No. 80 Wing was responsible for deflection of a great number of enemy bombers from their targets, while the information it gathered as to the orientation of enemy radio beams from time to time proved a valuable guide to the air defences as to the enemy's intentions. Indeed, until our night fighters were to become a weapon of any significance against the enemy bombers in March of the following year, radio counter-measures were to contribute as much as any other defensive arm towards reduction of the impact of the enemy bomber offensive.

23. On the night of 19th November, a pilot and crew of No. 604 Squadron, using their A.I. in conjunction with searchlight indications and instructions from their Sector Controller, had succeeded in engaging a large aircraft over Oxfordshire. The crew of a Ju88 which crashed later in Norfolk reported that they had been attacked by a fighter on their way from the South Coast to Birmingham; and it seems probable that this was the aircraft engaged over Oxfordshire. If so, this was the first enemy aircraft whose destruction was attributable to a fighter carrying A.I. and belonging to a first-line squadron, although as long ago as July a success in active operations had been claimed by the Fighter Interception Unit.

24. Up to the end of the year fighters claimed the destruction of only three more night bombers, and none of these successes was attributable to A.I.

25. Many novel and unusual means of dealing with the night bomber were suggested about this time and subsequently. The more practicable of these included the release of a free balloon barrage, other forms of aerial mining, and the use of searchlights carried by aircraft. These are dealt with below under the appropriate headings.

26. On a number of occasions I arranged for fighters carrying equipment which responded to the "beam" transmissions which the Germans used to find their targets to be sent to "hunt in the beam," but the German crews seem to have anticipated this move and were wary. Fighters sent to patrol the points at which the bombers were expected to cross the French coast on their homeward journey, burning their navigation lights, were no more successful.

27. On the night of 11th December, I tried out for the second time, a measure which had previously been given an inconclusive trial over Bristol. Twenty Hampden bombers were sent to patrol at various specified heights over Birmingham during a concentrated attack on that city. The crews reported seeing a large number of enemy aircraft, but the Hampdens were too unwieldy to bring any of them to action. This experience proved, however, that in suitable circumstances interception by purely visual means was possible.

28. Meanwhile we were taking every possible step to improve the chances of interception by more orthodox means. Up to this time such G.L. sets as were available to assist the fighters had been grouped close together in the Kenley Sector. In consultation with General