CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, February 5, 1940, at 11-30 a.m.

Present:


The Right Hon. Sir Samuel Hoare, Bt., M.P., Lord Privy Seal.

Admiral of the Fleet the Right Hon. Lord Chatfield, Minister for Coordination of Defence.

The Right Hon. Lord Hankey, Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. W. S. Morrison, K.C., M.P., Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister of Food (Item 7).

Sir Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office.

Rear-Admiral H. M. Burrough, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff.

The Right Hon. Anthony Eden, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.

Sir Horace J. Wilson, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury.

Lieutenant-General H. B. S. Massy, Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Air Vice-Marshal R. H. Peck, Director-General of Operations, Air Ministry (Items 1-4).

Secretariat:

Sir Edward Bridges.

Sir Rupert Howorth.

Colonel L. C. Hollis, R.M.

Mr. P. Hemming.

Lieutenant-Colonel V. Dykes, R.E.

Lieutenant-Colonel E. I. C. Jacob, R.E.
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1. The Director of Operations, Air Ministry, said that, on Saturday, attacks had been carried out on shipping off the East coast by 16 German aircraft. All except four of these had taken place off the coasts of Scotland and Northern England, as South of the Wash the visibility had been extremely low. 117 Fighter aircraft had been sent up, and five of the enemy aircraft had been intercepted. Of these three had been shot down, and one was believed to have fallen into the sea on its way home. Our aircraft had sustained no loss.

There had been no operations on Sunday, nor had any enemy aircraft been reported.

Examination of German aircraft which had been shot down by our fighters showed that the modern all-metal aeroplane would stand very heavy punishment. Each one had more than 250 bullet holes in it. The Heinkel was difficult to shoot down from the stern, as, although the rear gunner was probably nearly always killed at once, the pilot was well protected by the metal struts of the fuselage, and by the bomb stowage compartments. In most cases, the aircraft had been brought down through damage to both its engines. The petrol tanks were self-sealing, and several aircraft had reached home on one engine. In reply to the Minister without Portfolio he said that the latest Heinkel would be much more vulnerable to cannon than to machine gun fire.

The Lord Privy Seal suggested that a visit by an Officer from Headquarters, Fighter Command, to the various lifeboat crews on the East coast, who had had such a very hard time recently, would be greatly appreciated, and would show that Fighter Command recognised the need for co-operation between the lifeboats and the defending aircraft. The crews of these lifeboats ran the risk of being affected by the air attacks on neighbouring lightships, and if it were possible to arrange that lifeboats on their way out to shipping in distress were protected by fighter aircraft, the morale of the crews would be sustained.

The Director of Operations undertook to investigate this suggestion, and to carry it out if it were practicable.

The Assistant Chief of Naval Staff said that the Admiralty had prepared a letter to the National Lifeboat Institution recognising the work of the lifeboats, and they were arranging for the letter to be handed to the Institution by the Duke of Kent.

The War Cabinet took note of the above discussion.

2. The Assistant Chief of Naval Staff described the arrangements made for the movement of the third Canadian troop convoy.

He also referred to the dispositions taken to intercept the two German ships reported to be carrying munitions to Murmansk. Bad weather had prevented air reconnaissance for these two ships, and no recent information as to their whereabouts was available.
Details of the enemy air attacks on East coast shipping on the 3rd February were given. 17 attacks in all had been made, in which the Norwegian ship Tempo had been sunk and three others considerably damaged. Minor damage and casualties to personnel had also occurred on other ships. A disturbing feature of these attacks was the report that four merchant ships had been unable to sail from the Humber recently owing to the difficulty in obtaining crews. There was some unwillingness to sign on in ships plying along the East Coast. The urgent necessity was to find some form of counter to the German air attacks. Practically all ships were now sailing either in convoys or in groups. This would be of great assistance to Fighter Command in providing air escorts. Three escort ships accompanied each convoy, and experience showed that the German aircraft were unwilling to attack ships which could retaliate against them. The small coasting vessels had suffered most seriously, and less progress had been made in fitting them with anti-aircraft weapons than in the case of the ocean-going ships. This was partly due to the short time which coasting ships spent in harbour. Plenty of 12-pdr. guns were available, and the Admiralty had now taken powers to detain coasting ships in harbour long enough to fit the guns on to them.

In discussion, it was agreed that the difficulty in obtaining crews might be the beginning of serious trouble. It was essential that no reference to it should be made in the Press, and the Admiralty would take the necessary steps to this end. The Admiralty was already in close touch with the Ministry of Shipping on the whole question of obtaining crews.

Continuing, the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff said that 2 officers and 44 ratings had been saved from H.M.S. Sphinx, which had been lost while being towed to harbour after having been bombed on the 3rd February. The tow had parted three times, and the ship had been abandoned during the night. The total casualties, which included the commanding officer, who was killed in the first attack, would amount to about 40. H.M.S. Boreas, which had taken off the crew of H.M.S. Sphinx, had damaged her stem when going alongside.

Enemy attacks on trade on the 3rd February were as follows:—

S.s. Armanistan (6,800 tons), torpedoed and sunk 120 miles west of Lisbon when in convoy, escorted by 2 French vessels. The crew had been picked up by a Spanish ship.

S.s. Laertes (3,800 tons), bound to Amsterdam, had struck what was probably a floating mine in the Channel 6 miles south of Hastings, but was proceeding under her own power.

There had been no enemy attacks on trade on the 4th February, but the French ship Marie Dawn (2,100 tons), which had lost touch with the convoy, had anchored in what proved to be one of our minefields off Harwich. When weighing anchor a mine had exploded, damaging the ship. The master had ordered the ship to be scuttled, as he thought she would be a danger to navigation.

The attack reported by H.M.S. Viscount on an enemy submarine 40 miles south-west of Land's End was thought to have been successful.

There were believed to be about 4 enemy submarines off Lisbon. Recently considerable activity had been reported among the German merchant ships in Spanish and Portuguese ports, and there were rumours that the Germans intended to form a convoy of these ships, together with others from South American ports, which would be escorted home by their submarines. It would have been possible for some of the German ships which had left South America to reach an area off the Portuguese coast about this time. The area in question was within the French zone.
An explosion had occurred in the minesweeping trawler Firefly on the 3rd February, as a result of the detonation of a mine which was being recovered. This had resulted in several casualties to personnel and some damage to the superstructure of the vessel, which was being towed to Leith. An enquiry into the incident was being made.

The War Cabinet—
(i) Took note of the above statement.
(ii) Invited the Minister of Shipping to submit a report shortly on the present position in the manning of merchant vessels on the East Coast trade.

3. The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that there was nothing to report from the Western Front.

In Finland there had been no change in the situation. The big attack made by the Russians on the 1st February had penetrated the Finnish line, but the Russians had subsequently driven out. They had renewed their attacks on the 3rd, but with less vigour, and had been repulsed.

In reply to the Lord Privy Seal, the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that Brigadier Ling had returned from Finland, as had the two men who had gone there with British equipment for the Finns. Apart from our Military Attaché, we now had three Officers in Finland on a special mission, and two Intelligence Officers interrogating Russian prisoners.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

4. The War Cabinet took note of Weekly Resume No. 22 by the Chiefs of Staff (W.P. (40) 42).

5. Sir Orme Sargent referred to telegram No. 238 (R.), dated the 4th February, 1940, from His Majesty's Ambassador, Tokyo, reporting a further communication from the Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs. The Japanese Government had agreed to state that they had instructed Japanese shipping companies to refuse passage to any individual of a belligerent country who was embodied in the armed forces of that country, or was suspected of being so embodied. But they were now asking for the return of at least eleven of the Germans instead of nine as previously agreed. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had agreed to the increase of the number of Germans to be returned from nine to ten, or, if necessary, to eleven.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer welcomed the settlement effected, but thought the actual formula not very satisfactory. In fact we proposed to rely upon a "gentlemen's agreement" with the Japanese Government which we could not refer to in public. The fact that a settlement had been reached would be announced on Tuesday, the 6th February, 1940, and the Notes would be published on the ensuing day. Our announcement would be made in the House of Commons, and he thought it much better that it should not only deal with the future, but should also state that
we had agreed to the return of some of the Germans in question. Owing to the difference in time between Tokyo and London, there was a risk that telegraphic reports of the Japanese announcement on Tuesday might reach London before our statement in the House of Commons. It seemed desirable to arrange that any such reports, if received, should not be published in Tuesday's evening papers, before the statement had been made in the House of Commons.

The War Cabinet—
(i) Took note of the above discussion.
(ii) Invited Sir Orme Sargent to confer with the Ministry of Information with a view to ensuring that particulars of the settlement with the Japanese Government, if reported by telegram from Japan, should not appear in British newspapers until after the statement to be made in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, the 6th February, 1940.

6. In reply to a question by the Minister without Portfolio, Sir Orme Sargent said that he thought that M. Gafencu's absence from Bucharest at the meeting of the Balkan Entente accounted for the Roumanian Government's delay in replying to the aide-memoire which the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had handed to M. Tilea, the Roumanian Minister in London, on the 30th January, 1940. When the reply was available, it would, he thought, be preferable for it to be communicated to Sir Reginald Hoare in Bucharest, rather than by M. Tilea to the Foreign Office in London.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

7. The Lord Privy Seal said that on the 2nd February the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Food Policy had considered the date of introduction of meat rationing and the amount of the ration, and had recommended the War Cabinet to approve the following proposals, put forward by the Minister of Food:

(a) That the weekly individual ration should be of the value of £1. 10s., equivalent to weight of 1½ lb. of meat with average bone.

(b) That provision of meat outside the ration should be made for meals in restaurants, industrial and other canteens, and at other forms of catering establishments, including schools, clubs, &c., by allocating a limited quantity of butchers' meat, possibly amounting to 60 per cent. of their normal requirements, to such establishments, to be served "free of the coupon." The amount of meat so earmarked to be controlled upwards and downwards according to the supply situation.

(c) That the Minister of Food should announce these proposals in the House of Commons on Tuesday, the 6th February, and should at the same time announce that the actual rationing of meat would begin on Monday, the 11th March, 1940.

The meat supply position was better than it had been early in December last, when the question had been considered by the War Cabinet. This enabled the meat ration to be generous and permitted the exclusion from the ration of meat consumed in restaurants, canteens and other similar communal institutions. Meat meals at such places would be "free of the coupon." This avoided the minor inconveniences incidental to the rendering of
fractions of a coupon when meat meals were consumed away from home. The Sub-Committee favoured acceptance of the Minister of Food's proposals.

In reply to questions, the Minister of Food informed the War Cabinet that it would be possible to vary the amount of the ration, and also the amount of meat earmarked for communal institutions according to the supply position. Rationing could not begin until 26 days after the amount of the ration was announced. Owing to recent abnormal weather conditions, there had been a substantial falling off in the amount of home supplies offered to the Ministry, but the latest figures showed an upward tendency.

Meals for necessitous and other school children would be covered in the general communal food arrangements.

Mr. Ernest Bevin, the Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, had strongly favoured these communal arrangements on the ground that, the Trade Unions having agreed in the national interest to reduce the normal dinner hour interval in works, it was desirable that the workers should not have to devote any of this reduced time to questions arising on their coupons. It was recognised that there might be difficulties, e.g., in the mining districts, where some pits had canteens and others had not. This might cause some trouble between adjoining pits.

In conclusion, the Minister of Food pointed out that the amount of the ration now proposed compared very favourably with any meat ration authorised during the Great War.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer pointed out that the arrangements now proposed did not include a supplementary ration to workers employed on heavy manual labour. He found it difficult to justify the grant to members of the Fighting Services on service in this country of a much larger ration than was allowed to workers engaged on heavy manual labour.

The Lord Privy Seal informed the War Cabinet that the question of Service rations was to be considered by the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Food Policy later that week.

As regards the proposal for a meatless day, the Catering industry much preferred the arrangements now proposed, which would, in effect, attain the same objective, namely, reduced consumption of meat.

The Minister of Food agreed with the Lord Privy Seal and thought that a meatless day would, from the propaganda point of view, have a depressing effect.

The War Cabinet—

Approved the recommendations of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Food Policy set out above.

Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1, February 5, 1940.