WAR CABINET.

AIR OPERATIONS AND INTELLIGENCE.

SIXTEENTH WEEKLY REPORT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR.

(Previous Report Paper W.P.(39) 166.)

The accompanying report on Air Operations, and Intelligence for the week ending midnight, 24th December, 1939, is submitted to the War Cabinet.

(Signed) KINGSLEY WOOD.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.
1st January, 1940.
BOMBER COMMAND.

1. Operations in the Heligoland Bight, 18th December.
The most important operation of the week was the raid into the Heligoland Bight on 18th December. A force of twenty-four Wellingtons was sent out with orders to attack enemy warships sighted in the Schillig Roads or at anchorages off Wilhelmshaven. Two aircraft were compelled by engine trouble to return without reaching their objective.

2. A battleship, one heavy and one light cruiser, and five destroyers were found in Wilhelmshaven harbour and were photographed, but as the ships were lying in close proximity to buildings, no attempt was made to bomb them. A very large liner, probably the Bremen, which was seen lying at Bremerhaven was also left unmolested, and the only bombs dropped were aimed on four large fleet auxiliaries in the Schillig Roads; the results were not observed.

3. Vigorous opposition was encountered both from anti-aircraft fire and from fighter aircraft. Between thirty and fifty attacks were made within half an hour by aircraft of various types, among which ten Messerschmitt 109's and fifteen Messerschmitt 110's were identified in the air at one time. Four Wellingtons were seen to be shot down by fighters, and three, which were holed in the petrol tanks, flew off in the direction of Holland. Two aircraft came down in the sea on their way home (the crew of one of these has been rescued) and three are still missing. Twelve Messerschmitts, six of each type, were shot down by the aircraft which have returned, and it is believed that six others were destroyed by the fire of the Wellingtons which are missing.

4. Search for the "Deutschland", 21st December. A report was received on December 20th from our Air Attache at Copenhagen.
Copenhagen that a large German warship, possibly the "Deutschland", had been seen steaming north from the Great Belt at about 4.30 p.m. that afternoon and was likely to be off the south-west coast of Norway during the following day. Twenty-four Hampdens set out in search of it at first light on the 21st; while eighteen Wellingtons swept a wide area in the south-eastern section of the North Sea and Coastal Command reconnaissances were intensified and extended by eleven aircraft toward the Skaggerak. Additional heavy bomber forces were held in readiness to move at short notice. Although the warship in question was seen to return southward on the afternoon of the 21st and no concrete results were obtained, the whole operation was a useful and successful test of the possibility of maintaining large scale combined activity even under extremely adverse weather conditions.

5. Offensive Patrols. An offensive patrol over German seaplane bases was maintained nightly except for the nights of the 21st and 22nd when it was interrupted by bad weather. On the night of the 23rd, patrols were extended in a propaganda raid over Bremen and Hamburg, during which over a million leaflets were dropped. The opposition encountered was never serious and was limited to searchlights and to scattered anti-aircraft fire. Bombs were dropped on flare paths and over navigation lights seen at sea. No bombs were dropped on land. The results of this bombing were naturally difficult to observe directly; but evidence is accumulating that since the institution of these patrols there has been a very marked diminution of German air activity over the North Sea during the hours of darkness.

6. Reconnaissance Flights. Regular daylight reconnaissance was also maintained over the Heligoland Bight; but only small enemy naval units were seen. On the 24th there was a sharp encounter with a party of small vessels which opened
heavily anti-aircraft fire on a formation of seventeen Wellingtons. This was countered by bombs, but the day was cloudy and observation of results was indefinite.

7. ADVANCED AIR STRIKING FORCE. Regular fighter patrols were maintained with no outstanding incident except the attempt on the 22nd December to surprise a section of three Hurricanes. A formation of Messerschmitt 109's, probably seven or eight in number, dived on them suddenly from cloud and two Hurricanes were lost. One Messerschmitt is believed to have been shot down and another badly damaged, perhaps destroyed, but so far no wreckage has been found.

FIGHTER COMMAND.

8. In spite of the increased enemy activity over the North Sea early in the week few enemy aircraft crossed the British coast. One hundred and six patrols, involving three hundred and forty-seven aircraft, were sent up and a number of friendly aircraft were identified. The only contact with enemy aircraft was with two Heinkels off the Firth of Forth on the 22nd December. The enemy were severely mauled, but disappeared into a cloud bank and were not actually seen to fall into the sea.

9. Special patrols of Blenheim fighters were established off the East Coast on the 20th in order to protect the Lowestoft fishing fleet, and have been regularly maintained except when hindered by fog. Since their establishment there have been no enemy attacks on fishing vessels, and no contact with enemy aircraft has been made.

10. In co-operation with Coastal Command and with the Air Component of the Expeditionary Force, Fighter Command has provided escorts daily, except when hampered by fog, for leave boats bringing troops from France. Twelve patrols of three aircraft each were flown but no enemy aircraft were encountered.
11. In this and in previous weekly summaries it will be noted that the number of Fighter Command patrols sent out is very large in comparison with the number of enemy aircraft intercepted. It must be remembered that every aeroplane observed which is not at once identified requires investigation by Fighter Command and that under present conditions a high proportion of the supposed "raiders" subsequently turn out to be friendly. It will be appreciated, therefore, that the measure of success achieved by the Fighter Command patrols, and the magnitude of the burden which this Command is shouldering, are much greater than would appear from the number of enemy aircraft intercepted.

COASTAL COMMAND.

12. Fifty-five routine and ninety-five special patrols were flown during the week and escort was provided for convoys on forty-seven occasions. In addition, special anti-submarine patrols were maintained for leave boats bringing British troops from France. There were four encounters with enemy aircraft, in which shots were exchanged without decisive effect. On one of these occasions the enemy was in the act of attacking a trawler when disturbed by one of our aircraft on convoy duty and driven off.

13. Mines were detected and reported on eight occasions. Submarine activity seems to have been on a reduced scale during the week; only one suspicious submarine was seen and as it was found in a British submarine lane it was not attacked.

14. On the 20th December aircraft of the Command were responsible for the rescue of six survivors of the Swedish ship "Listor" from a raft on which they were adrift far out in the North Sea.

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AIR COMPONENT. BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

15. Fighter patrols were regularly maintained and two major photographic reconnaissances of Eastern Germany and the Siegfried Line were successfully carried through, as well as the usual reconnaissance patrols.

OVERSEAS COMMANDS.

16. Anti-submarine patrols were carried out in the Indian Ocean by aircraft from bases in India and the usual patrols and convoy escorts were maintained in the Mediterranean. In Palestine there were eight sorties during the week and air action was taken against two villages in the Jerusalem and Nablus area. One casualty was inflicted by air action.

AIR INTELLIGENCE.

GERMAN ACTIVITY.

17. Mine-laying by German seaplanes and possibly also by adapted landplanes was continued at intervals during the daylight hours, but only one suspected mine-laying raid took place at night during the period. On the 17th and 18th there were very widespread attacks by German aircraft on defenceless vessels, mainly drifters. Thirty-one such craft were attacked in two days, seven were sunk and four damaged.

18. The attacks were usually made by landplanes acting in pairs and using numerous small bombs as well as machine-gun fire. The bombing was not conspicuously accurate even from low altitudes. The attacks were organised over a wide area and were rarely close enough to the English coast to be countered by the ordinary fighter defences. Numerous unidentified raids recorded by Fighter Command during the week were probably part of this campaign, which slackened greatly as soon as fishing was confined to thirty miles off shore and a standing patrol instituted.
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19. The Wilhelmshaven raid produced much useful information about the organisation of the German air defences, in particular as to the disposition of Flak ships and other anti-aircraft units, and as to the capabilities of the new Messerschmitt 110. A high opinion has been formed of the speed and manoeuvrability of this aircraft, but the losses suffered by the Wellingtons during the operation are to be attributed more to the concentration in one area of a large number of German fighters than to the technical characteristics of the enemy aircraft engaged. A careful study is being made of German fighter tactics and of the general layout of the defensive system.

20. There has also been a brief encounter over the North Sea with the new Junker 88 bomber; and there is evidence that Heinkel III's and possibly also Dornier 17's (both landplanes) have been adapted for mine-laying.

21. Our Air Attache at Stockholm reports that the delivery of eight naval reconnaissance aircraft promised to Sweden by Germany has been delayed. There have on the other hand been substantial sales of German aircraft and aero-engines to Holland.

OPERATIONS BY THE FRENCH AIR FORCE.

22. During the past week the activities of the French Air Force have greatly increased. Reconnaissances were made over the lines and some extended to considerable depth into enemy territory. During the night of 22nd December, leaflets were dropped over Munich and also over Eppingen and Pforzheim. Fighter aircraft made over four hundred flights, but without engaging the enemy.
THE FINNISH WAR.

23. Russian air activity has been intensified during the past week and on the 19th there were widespread air raids on the principal Finnish towns. Many aircraft were involved, but the bombing seems to have been ill-organised and inaccurate, and little damage of military importance was done. Russian strategic bombing has, in the main, been concentrated on the single supply road to Petsamo from the rail head at Rovaniemi, on the railway running North West from Helsinki, on Finnish aerodromes, and on the Mannerheim Line.

24. It is reported that the Russians have increased their air strength in Estonia from two hundred and fifty to five hundred, and have concentrated about one hundred and fifty bombers and one hundred fighters on the Finnish frontier. The loss of thirty-six S.B. bombers and one I.15 fighter is well authenticated.

25. It is estimated that the Finnish first line strength on the 8th December was fifty-four Army Co-operation, fifty-nine fighters, thirteen coastal reconnaissance aircraft, eighteen bombers, a total of one hundred and forty-four, mainly of British types, which does not include aircraft on order at the beginning of the war. The Finnish bombing force is well placed for a strategic blow at the Murmansk Railway, on which the whole Russian effort in the Northern sector depends. It has already made some determined raids and done a certain amount of damage to the line, but wastage is inevitable, especially at this season, and bomber reinforcements are most urgently required. It is impossible to give accurate figures for Finnish losses, but out Air Attache at Stockholm reports that five out of the eighteen Finnish bombers are now out of action.
26. Two squadrons have been organised in Sweden, of twelve Gladiators and twelve Hawker Harts, equipped with skis, and are ready to move with the Swedish Volunteer Force to the neighbourhood of Uleå when the approval of the Swedish Government can be secured. Apparently two of the Italian aircraft ordered before the war have reached Finland, and six are on their way; the fate of the others is uncertain. The purchase of some seventy Fokker planes is being completed in Holland, and arrangements are in progress for the receipt of aircraft and supplies via Bergen and Narvik.

NORWAY.

27. It is reported that the Norwegian air patrol of the Kattegat is to be discontinued as the aircraft are required to reinforce the patrol on the Narvik route north of Kristiansund. It is impossible at the moment to withdraw aircraft for this purpose from the far Northern area round Tromso.
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