WAR CABINET

AIR ACTION TO BE TAKEN IN THE EVENT OF A GERMAN INVASION OF THE LOW COUNTRIES.

Memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff.

in the 92nd Conclusions, Minute 7, of the Meeting of the War Cabinet held on 14th April, 1940, the Secretary of State for Air was invited "to instruct the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, British Air Forces in France, to place himself in immediate communication with the French High Command, with a view to concerting an agreed plan for the opening phase of air operations in the event of a German invasion of Holland or Belgium."

2. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Marshal Barratt, saw General Gamelin in the evening of 14th April, and attended a meeting of the military members of the Comité de Guerre on the morning of the 15th April. A report of his discussions has been received and is attached as Annex 1.

3. It appears that General Gamelin still makes a clear distinction between the action to be taken in the event of a German invasion of Holland and Belgium and that of Holland alone.

4. Under the first hypothesis, i.e. Belgium and Holland together, the only difference of opinion is in respect of air action. General Gamelin is reported to have said that the French Government had delegated the authority for putting the air plans into effect to the respective Commanders with two reservations.

In the concluding paragraph of his report Air Marshal Barratt explains that he obtained from General Vuillemin an interpretation of what was meant by the term "respective Commanders", namely Generals Gamelin and Vuillemin and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief in respect of attacks on the German columns and Generals Gamelin and Vuillemin and the Chief of the Air Staff representing the British High Command, in regard to military objectives in the Ruhr and elsewhere.

5. Air Marshal Barratt further explains that he had some difficulty in obtaining a clear interpretation and the exact shade of meaning of the reservations. As finally confirmed by the Comité de Guerre, they are attached as an Appendix to the report and read as follows:

"(i) That the two Commanders should agree as to
nature of the objectives and their military importance in relation to the operations envisaged.

(ii) That it is borne in mind that it is not in the French interests to initiate any action against factories or other objectives which would affect the civilian population and that on our two COMMANDS is placed the responsibility of taking the decision to retaliate at the appropriate moment.

6. We have no quarrel with the first of these provisions. The primary factor upon which the choice of objectives which have been considered has depended, whether in the Ruhr itself or to the Westward, has been their military importance in the operation concerned.

7. The latter reservation, however, precludes our initial attacks being directed against anything other than German columns on roads. It would, in fact, prevent the attacks against the defiles west of the Rhine, which Air Marshal Barratt in consultation with General Georges, had selected as objectives for the British bomber squadrons placed in his support on the first night of a German invasion.

8. It is plain from Air Marshal Barratt's report that this restriction was General Gamelin's intention and he made it quite clear to the General that, until this reservation was modified or withdrawn, we could not use our heavy bombers at all. Even so, it was apparent that no arguments Air Marshal Barratt could use would move General Gamelin from his determination to insist on this reservation until Germany had taken the initiative in bombing similar objectives. In a previous telegraphed report on the same interview, Air Marshal Barratt reports that he "was obsessed with a fear of attack on his own road and rail communications".

9. We consider it of the utmost importance that the Germans should not be allowed, once more, to seize the initiative, and take the view that the Allies should do everything possible to upset the German plans by themselves taking the initiative at the right time.

10. We are precluded by a decision of the War Cabinet from initiating air attack in advance of an actual invasion. Nevertheless the action we have proposed by the heavy bomber force against military objectives both west of the Rhine and in the Ruhr itself, coupled with an attack on the advancing German columns if delivered immediately a German offensive develops, might have a profound effect on the progress and success of the German advance.
11. On the other hand, if we refrain from attacking the most profitable objectives at this juncture, not only shall we again be surrendering the initiative to Germany in what may well be the decisive action of the war, but we may seriously reduce the chances of the Allied armies reaching the advanced positions in Belgium which General Gamelin himself agrees it is so vital they should attain.

12. In the second hypothesis - that of a German invasion of Holland alone, the arguments we have adduced apply with even greater emphasis. In his report, Air Marshal Barratt states that General Gamelin when questioned "was equivocal over the case of Holland". He insisted that in this situation French assistance in principle only had been agreed, and asked Air Marshal Barratt to represent the matter home "so that the British War Cabinet could make definite proposals to the French Government as to their joint action in this respect."

13. The Chiefs of Staff have already made such definite proposals. In a memorandum dated 6th April, 1940, which was forwarded to the French High Command for consideration, we urged that General Gamelin should make his initial moves into Belgium the moment the Germans started an invasion of Holland, impressing the vital importance of not waiting until the Belgian attitude is ascertained by negotiation. In his reply dated 11th April, 1940, General Gamelin expressed his concurrence with our views and stated that General Georges had been instructed to settle with General Lord Gort, the execution of the forward movement, "with due regard to circumstances at the time and to Belgium's attitude." From this it seems clear that General Gamelin is again making reservations as regards the action to be taken in this situation. The words quoted can only be taken to mean that in certain circumstances, presumably if Belgium attempted initially to maintain her neutrality, the Allied armies would not in fact advance into Belgium if Holland alone were invaded.

14. It is, moreover, abundantly clear that the French attitude towards air action in this hypothesis will be even more obdurate than in circumstances where France herself is more directly and immediately threatened. The implications of the French attitude should be clearly realised. At the present time, and until agreement with the French High Command on this question of air policy is reached, we are only authorised, in the event of invasion of Holland alone, to initiate bombing action against the advancing German columns; and we have agreed that in the absence of complementary action on land, such attacks - while very costly in casualties - could not materially impede the advance of powerful German forces opposed as they would be by only the weak army and defences of Holland.

15. We have stated our view that, at the present time, a German invasion of Holland would be tantamount to opening up a new phase in the war, and would constitute action which "looks like being decisive" and is a direct threat to our vital interests. It is obvious, therefore, that in the event of such an invasion we should not shrink from using all we have got. Unless we are prepared to take the initiative at this time, we shall be putting ourselves at a grave strategic disadvantage on land.
and laying ourselves open to an immensely increased air offensive when Germany is ready and thus be accepting a situation in which procrastination may have the most serious, if not disastrous consequences.

16. In the face of Air Marshal Barratt's report, it is quite clear that we have nothing to gain by further arguments on the military level. We therefore recommend that the War Cabinet should represent the British view in the strongest and most unequivocal terms to the French Government. In particular, we suggest that the French Government should be told that an invasion of Holland in the present situation forms such a vital threat to the security of this country that, if they cannot agree to the operations we propose, we shall be compelled to reserve to ourselves the right to take independent action.

(Signed) C.L.N. NEWALL.
DUDLEY POUND.
EDMUND IRONSIDE.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.

(The Chiefs of Staff have not yet had an opportunity of seeing this Memorandum in its final form, and therefore reserve the right to make any minor amendments)
ANNEX I.

Headquarters,
British Air Forces in France.

Dated 15th April, 1940.

My dear C.A.S.,

With reference to my telephone conversations of the 14th and 15th April, 1940, and my signal A. 163 dated 15th April, 1940, I forward herewith a report on the discussions held between General GAMELIN, General VUILLEMIN and the Military Members of the Comité de Guerre and myself.

2. Just as I was leaving VUILLEMIN he told me that there was a full meeting of the Comité de Guerre tomorrow morning when some of the points that I brought up might possibly be reviewed. He said, however, that he did not think there would be any alteration in the decision, with which he himself entirely agreed.

(Signed) A.S. BARRATT.

Annex II.
ANNEX II.

Headquarters, British Air Forces in France
15th April, 1940.

REPORT ON DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN GENERAL GAMELIN, MILITARY MEMBERS OF THE COMITE DE GUERRE AND THE AIR OFFICER COMMANDING-IN-CHIEF, BRITISH AIR FORCES IN FRANCE.

1. With reference to Air Ministry letter 846568/D, of Plans, dated 13th April, 1940, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was requested by the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff to approach General Georges on the action proposed under Hypothesis "B" if the Germans were to invade Holland and/or Belgium, in order to ascertain his opinion and explain the reasons underlying the British intentions. After further reference to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff it was decided that it would be necessary to interview General Gamelin on the same subject.

2. At 19.00 hours on 14th April, 1940, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief called on General Georges and explained matters broadly as follows:

(i) That the British War Cabinet had decided that any action by Germany to invade Holland and/or Belgium following on recent events in Scandinavia would constitute a decisive situation in which full Allied effort must necessarily be engaged.

(ii) That the primary concern of initial operations in the air as well as on land would be to establish the Allied armies on a forward position in Belgium.

(iii) That subject to the minimum of diversion that might be unavoidable in the Scandinavian or north German theatre, it was intended to use the full offensive strengths of the Royal Air Force, in the area of the enemy advance in the Low Countries and in the districts east of the Rhine in rear of that advance through which its lines of communication and supply must run.

(iv) The British disposition would be as follows:

(a) Medium bombers would be employed against the German advance, as already arranged.

(b) A small proportion of heavy bomber squadrons would be employed at night against the concentration areas and communications between the Rhine and
Dutch and Belgian frontiers, objectives for which had already been selected by the British and French Staffs.

(c) The balance of available heavy attack would be directed against communications through the Ruhr and other important installations in that vicinity, such as the marshalling yards and oil refineries.

3. It was explained that British heavy bombers could only operate by night if heavy casualties were to be avoided and that day operations by these types against enemy concentrations could only be justified in a situation of real emergency. In night operations only a limited strength of bombers could be employed against the military concentration areas so that the operations against the Ruhr itself constituted no diversion of strength from the primary aim, and in fact would, by damage and confusion contribute directly and importantly to weakening the German advance. The German war industries dependent on the Ruhr could be assailed more easily at the outset of the German invasion of the Low Countries than later on when they have established themselves and their A.A. defences forward in Holland and Belgium. It was also certain that operations against the Ruhr would draw from the battle front numbers of enemy fighters.

4. General Georges appeared to appreciate the weight of these arguments but after asking a few questions made it clear that the real authority on that matter of strategy would be General Gamelin who was also a member of the French Comité de Guerre.

5. At 2030 hours the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief visited General Gamelin and put the same account of the decisions of the British War Cabinet and other reasons before him. General Gamelin replied that the French policy had been discussed by the Comité de Guerre on Saturday, 12th April, 1940, at 1500 hours and their decision conveyed to the British Ambassador at 19.00 hours on the same day. The Ministers, he said, had expressed themselves as generally in agreement with the British intentions. They had in fact actually decided to delegate the authority for putting these plans into effect to the High Military Command, but subject to two provisos.

(i) That there must be complete agreement as to the time and nature of the objectives and their military importance, between the respective Commanders.

(ii) That any bombing operations against areas where civilian casualties might be expected as a result, should only be initiated as a reply to similar action on the part of the enemy.

-7-
The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief pointed out that condition (ii) was not only likely to postpone the attack on the Ruhr but also the prompt attack on the German advance into the Low Countries, for which Allied plans were already completed. He had in mind, particularly, the arrangement whereby German concentration areas and centres of communication between the Rhine and the Dutch and Belgian frontiers were to be attacked immediately infringement took place. The attack of such objectives must inevitably involve civilian casualties and probably damage to industrial undertakings in towns involved. To withhold this attack until enemy bombing with similar results had been experienced and confirmed would almost certainly negative the first night's operations during which the enemy movement would be at its most vulnerable. It might even cost the Allies more than this should the enemy realise and profit by this Allied hesitation. It again left the initiative to him.

General Gamelin pointed out the importance of not precipitating enemy attack on industry, but the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief replied that the objectives already selected in our Plan for delaying the German advance, quite apart from the Ruhr, could be represented by the enemy, if he felt so inclined, as an attack on industry. Furthermore, he thought that Germany would attack Allied industry immediately it suited her, and would not be deterred by any question of precedent. For these reasons he would deeply regret any further surrendering of the initiative.

General Gamelin adhered to the French Ministerial rulings but agreed to discuss the matter further with the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief the following morning, together with General Vuillemin.

The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief attended the Comité de Guerre (Military members only) presided over by General Gamelin, at 1030 hours on 15th April, 1940. He was asked to repeat the arguments he had made the day before in General Gamelin's presence, and this was done.
General Gamelin then handed the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief a copy of the reply of the Comité de Guerre to the British Government.

10. As regards the attack of objectives between the RHINE and the BELGIAN and DUTCH Frontiers.

General Gamelin said that in view of the fact that we had the advantages of an unimpeded advance (air excluded) into Belgium, the cover provided by the prepared demolitions on the Belgian lines of defence and the resistance of the Belgian troops, it was to our advantage not to initiate air attacks on the German lines of communication, particularly in view of the great superiority in strength of the German bombers compared to our own. He also said that neutral opinion had to be considered. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief pointed out that if it suited the Germans to attempt to delay our land advance with their bombers, they would inevitably do so and that they would not pay any attention to the causes of humanity or the opinion of America. The only criterion would be what suited them. He stressed that under these proposals there must be a considerable delay between the receipt of information of German bombing attacks, the decision to start bombing on our part and the carrying out of that action.

11. As regards the attack on Marshalling Yards, Petrol Refineries, and Factories generally in the RUHR area.

General Gamelin was strongly opposed to initiating the attack on this type of target. General Vuillemin supported General Gamelin in this respect and pointed out the 3 or 4/1 superiority of German Bomber forces compared to the French and British. With the very small forces at our disposal he considered it was a grave risk to start this form of bombing in view of what Germany could do to the French and British industries. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief reiterated more than once the arguments that obtained in paragraph 3. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief further pointed out that the British Government considered that a critical stage in the war had arrived, that the invasion of Denmark and Norway, to be followed by Holland and Belgium was a long view strategic plan carefully worked out by the German High Command aiming at the destruction of the British Empire. That if the Germans could establish bases for their air and submarine fleets in all these territories while we did nothing and waited on events, the situation would become extremely serious if not critical. The time had now come to decide to take the initiative in spite of our numerically weaker forces and face facts and fight out the issue. If

* Annex III.
we waited until Germany established herself hoping and imagining that she was not going to attack our vital industries we should be living in a 'fool's paradise', because just as soon as it suited Germany to launch her attack against British and French industries she would do so, with the added advantage that with having taken the extra territory west of the Ruhr she would have a far greater depth of protection in front of her vital area and make it correspondingly more difficult for the Allies to attack this area.

12. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief asked what General Gamelin would do if the Germans -

(a) invaded Holland alone and bombarred Dutch towns from the air.

(b) if they advanced through Holland and Belgium, combined with air attack.

As regards invasion of Holland alone, General Gamelin said that it was outside the terms of reference given by the Comite de Guerre. He asked the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to represent the matter home so that the British War Cabinet could make definite proposals to the French Government as to their joint action in this event. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief said that he thought this had already been done and he knew that certain plans had been laid down for Bomber Command. He also said that General Vuillemin had recently made certain proposals for the support of Holland by French night bombers, and these proposals had been sent to the Allied Military Council in London. General Vuillemin said that this was only a "projet" and that there was nothing definite. General Gamelin again insisted that the British Government should make proposals to the French Government on this matter.

As regards invasion of Belgium and Holland combined with air attack on Dutch and Belgian towns, General Gamelin said the French would regard it in the same light as if delivered on themselves. When questioned further he was equivocal over the case of Holland.

13. As a result of this discussion, a signal A. 163 dated 15th April, 1940, was despatched to the Chief of the Air Staff. Owing to the difficulties of difference in language certain misconceptions arose and the result was that the exact meaning of the decision of the Comite de Guerre of the 13th April, 1940 was misrepresented in this signal.
14. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief had an interview with General Vuillemin at 1830 hours on 15th April, 1940.

The exact meaning of the reply from the Comite de Guerre to the British Government, on 13th April, 1940, was as follows:-

(i) As regards this attack, that there must be complete agreement between the French and British Commands as to the objectives, their nature and their military importance in connection with operations envisaged.

(ii) That it is against the French interests to initiate any air action against factories or other objectives which will affect the civilian population, and that on our two Commands is placed the responsibility of taking a decision to retaliate at the appropriate moment.

15. General Vuillemin went on to say that these should be interpreted as meaning that:-

(i) The decision to launch air attack on objectives to delay the advance of German armies, by Air Forces under the control of General Vuillemin and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, British Air Forces in France, will be taken between General Vuillemin, General Gamelin and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

(ii) The decision to attack German industrial targets, in the Ruhr and elsewhere, by the heavy bombers of Bomber Command will be taken after agreement has been reached between Generals Gamelin and Vuillemin on the French side, and the British Chief of Air Staff representing the British High Command on the other.

(Signed) A.S. BARRATT.

Air Marshal,
Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief,
BRITISH AIR FORCES IN FRANCE.
ANNEX III.

TRANSLATION.

WAR COMMITTEE OF 13TH APRIL, 1940.

Reply to be sent to the British Government.

"The French Government are in agreement on the possibility of starting rapid action without the necessity for again obtaining the joint decision of the two Governments, but with the following reserve:

1. That the two Commands should agree as to the nature of the objectives and their military importance in relation to the operations envisaged.

2. That it is borne in mind that it is not in the French interests to initiate any action against factories or other objectives which would affect the civilian population and that on our two commands is placed the responsibility of taking the decision to retaliate at the appropriate moment."