

R.A.F. HEAVY ATTACKS ON THE RHINELANDSECRETARY OF STATE CONGRATULATES CREWS

Last night considerable forces of the Bomber Command resumed their offensive against the factories and railways of the Rhineland and the Ruhr. Three great centres of industry, Cologne, Dusseldorf and Duisburg were all heavily bombed. Factories were left burning and in each town great fires made an aiming-point for powerful high explosive bombs.

During the night Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, met many pilots before and after they flew over Germany. He was accompanied by Sir Hugh Seely, Under-Secretary of State for Air.

Sir Archibald first visited a Stirling squadron, where he met the crews and was shown over one of the great four-engined bombers.

He told the crews that "deadly thrusts at the military power of Germany are being made by Bomber Command and in making these thrusts you fellows in the four-engined bombers have a big part to play. You are playing it magnificently."

Later, Air Vice-Marshal J.E.A. Baldwin, the Air Officer commanding this bomber group, took the Secretary of State to another aerodrome where the crews of Wellington bombers were being briefed before taking off for Duisburg. Sir Archibald heard all the detailed instructions that were given to the crews and then he spoke to them.

"It is bomber command" he said, "which is going to be the main instrument of victory. It is the fighters who saved us from defeat last autumn, and it is the bombers who are going to smash the war industries of Germany and break the will to win of the German people.

"The work which you are doing now, and have been doing during the past weeks, is of particular importance because it relieves the weight of the attack upon Russia. The Government, Parliament, and, I am sure, the people of this country want to bring the greatest possible help to the Russians in their struggle.

"The pressure which you exert upon the economic life of Germany, these attacks on the Ruhr where you are going tonight and where the great war industries of Germany are still centred, the attacks on the communications between the Ruhr and the East, your thrusts at the military power of Germany - all will be a direct relief to the Russians in their battle in the East.

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"If we go on hammering at the Germans in the west the time will undoubtedly come, sooner or later, when the German people will insist that the High Command should bring back more aircraft from the eastern front to protect them and to counter-attack us in Britain. That will relieve the weight of the attack upon the hard-pressed Russians.

"That is the importance of the task which you have been carrying out lately and will be carrying out tonight.

"I commend you for the courage and skill and the determination which you have showed in doing it. The work which you have done and are doing will be an example and an inspiration to new crews now coming forward for the greater Bomber Command which will be operating in a few months' time. I thank you for what you have done and wish you good luck for the future and good luck for tonight."

After the briefing, Sir Archibald went on to a night fighter station. He returned to the bomber station in the early hours of the morning to see the Wellington crews on their return from Duisburg.

A young officer rear gunner told him how he had shot down a German fighter into the sea off the Dutch coast.

"The fighter," the gunner said, "opened up with cannon and machine-gun from 400 yards. I directed the pilot so that he could deal with the attack and I got in a burst of 300 rounds. The fighter broke away and went into a vertical dive. Several of the crew saw it hit the sea."

This gunner had taken part in 52 other bombing attacks. He has shot down four German fighters and has got "probables" as well.

The visibility was fairly good and there was moonlight over the target. The squadron had a successful night. The crews reported fierce fires at Duisburg, one of them a quarter of a mile long, which lit up the streets and buildings. A rear gunner said he could see the glow of it from the Dutch coast. There was great opposition from the ground defences and many more searchlights than had been reported from Duisburg before.

"I saw one bomber," an observer told Sir Archibald, "caught in a cone of searchlights and at once it seemed as if every gun in the town was trained on it. In the searchlights the bomber looked to me like a moth round an electric light."

Some of the bombers missed the light altogether. One pilot described how he "sneaked in between two lines of searchlights."

"There was a big fire burning in the target we were after" he said. "It was spreading like blazes. Our bombs went right on the target."

A sergeant pilot who was held by the searchlights for nearly five minutes looped three times before he got away.

"I put the aircraft up and right on its back," he said, "then, when we were upside down we half-rolled off the top of the loop. We did that three times each time diving to gain speed. Finally we got away."

His navigator at one time was head downwards in the astro hatch and his gunners' heads resting against the roofs of their turrets. The wireless operator suddenly found accumulators and an axe tumbling about beside him, and one of the flares was thrown back into the tail of the aircraft just when it was about to be dropped.

Sir Archibald waited until the commanding officer reported that all his aircraft were safely down. Then in the dawn he flew back to London.

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