

CZECH PILOTS' BATTLES

With the 23rd anniversary of the death in a crash on May 4, 1919, of M.R. Stefanik, virtual founder and first general of the Czechoslovak Air Force, it is fitting to recall the successes of Czech pilots now flying with Fighter Command by day and night,

Since April 1 this year, they have destroyed 15 and a half enemy aircraft, 11 and a half in the past 11 days. Of the total, ten and a half have been shot down by two night fighter pilots. Included in the Czechs' victims are four Do.217s, five He.111s, four Me.109s, an F.W.190, and a Ju.88. The half share is in the destruction of a Do.217.

All ten bombers - Heinkels, Dorniers and a Ju.88 - were destroyed at night, eight by Flight Lieutenant Charles Kuttelwascher, 26-year-old flight commander in the squadron with which he once served as a sergeant.

Appropriately enough, Flight Lieutenant Kuttelwascher chose Monday night, May 4, to shoot down three Heinkels over their base in Northern France.

A pilot officer who fought in France and the Battle of Britain, and who now flies with a Czech observer in Wing Commander Max Aitken's Beaufighter squadron, destroyed two Heinkels and shared a Dornier 217 on the night of April 30. It was the second time he had "bagged" two, the other occasion being on the night of October 12 last, when Ju.88s were the victims of his guns.

Describing the destruction of the two Heinkels on April 30, this pilot officer said:-

"We were flying at over 10,000 feet when we first saw the enemy aircraft, which, I could see by its silhouette, was an He.111. I closed in slowly until I could see it well enough to open fire with cannon and machine guns.

"I followed this burst with another from closer in, and this resulted in the starboard engine blowing out. Pieces flew back at my machine and then the whole enemy aircraft blew up.

"I continued on patrol, and soon afterwards spotted another Heinkel. I overtook him and opened fire. He must have seen me just before, however, because he turned to starboard and dived.

"It didn't help him much, because I followed and gave a long burst which blew out one engine and sent him down in a fast spin."

A warrant officer, a flight sergeant, and two sergeants have also had a hand in the Czech successes, for, with a pilot officer, they have between them destroyed the four Me.109s and an F.W.190 while taking part in fighter sweeps over Northern France.

Just over a week ago Dr. Benes, the President of Czecho-Slovakia, visited an R.A.F. station in the South-East to decorate some of his countrymen.

He took the opportunity then of thanking the British ground crews which serviced the Czechs' aircraft and of paying tribute to their "splendid spirit and mutual understanding since it provides the most certain road to our common victory."