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"ROOF OVER BRITAIN"

STORY OF HEROIC GROUND DEFENCES

The story of the defence of this country by our air fighters has been told; but they did not constitute the whole of our defence system. Other materials went to the making of a roof over our heads and the War Office and the Air Ministry have combined to describe our static defences -- A.A. guns, searchlights, balloons and the Royal Observer Corps. The story is told in a ninety page illustrated booklet entitled "Roof Over Britain" prepared for the War Office and the Air Ministry by the Ministry of Information and obtainable at H.M. Stationery Office or any bookseller, price 9d.

The Start

At the beginning of the war, the roof was only a fairly tough framework but if September 1938 be taken as a starting date with its rather humiliating improvisations, it will be seen that our anti-aircraft defences have developed ahead of schedule. Added to this efficiency of the builders has been the patience and later the fortitude of its personnel. They have had to fight their battle often from stations isolated from anybody's home and after many weary months of inaction during which they have always in all weathers kept on their toes.

What the Guns Do

Shooting down a plane is not easy and all the difficulties are explained in the booklet. All the greater credit for the results. During the first two years of war A.A. guns brought down 600 planes; three times they have shot down more than 50 German planes over this country in a week and during one week the score was seventy. But the number shot down is by no means the only measure of anti-aircraft efficiency and value. There is a graphic chapter showing how the guns also prevent accurate bombing and stop the enemy reaching his objectives, especially by night. Another important function of the guns is to point the position of enemy aircraft to our fighters. It is team work of the highest order. The wing forwards, the A.A. guns, manoeuvre the ball into the right place for the centre-forward - the fighter - to kick the goal.

The Man in Command

The brains behind the machine of anti-aircraft command are revealed in a description of its building up, and its success is in no small way due to its leader, General Sir Frederick Pile, who has known how to get the best out of his staff and to the fact that he has been to scientists the kind of patron they dream about. All their ideas have been tried once at least and tried quickly. That is why in so short a time the basis of our A.A. defences has been changed from a bluff to a buckler.

The progress in research and its results have been great. The methods of fire control have advanced as far as the Rolls Royce from the hansom cab.

The Observer Corps

Any account of how the A.A. defences developed must include the story of the Royal Observer Corps and here tribute is paid to their uncanny accuracy in identifying aircraft. Their 1,400 posts throughout the country have been manned by men and women, mostly part-time workers, who give what time they can from their normal work. They cannot shelter from bad weather nor can they have a fire to warm them as it would have been seen from above, but they have never relaxed their day and night watch since August 24, 1939.

Signals and Ordnance

Another girder of the roof is the work of the Royal Corps of Signals. The whole defence system is based on first class communications and when raids come these lines get interfered with and that is where the signal men come into action. The book gives several stories of the dangers and difficulties of this work. The other great supporting arm of A.A. command is the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, which supplies and maintains all the guns and instruments, all the lights and the generating sets.

The Searchlights

The story of the searchlights is a thrilling one, not hitherto appreciated by the general public many of whom formed the opinion that they were more danger than protection. But in fact they are the night fighters friends. They often indicate to them the position and course of the enemy aircraft. Incidentally, it is not uncommon for an aircraft to be illuminated to the eye of the fighter and be invisible from the ground. There are other jobs done by searchlights. They guide our own aircraft home and they also watch the seas and direct the rescue parties to the spot when a man bales out over the water. They also illuminate the balloons and save our men crashing into them and they spot and mark the position of mines which fall into river and sea.

A Strange Visitor

One of the most dramatic chapters in the book concerns the arrival of a mystery plane which was plotted across the country and was eventually to land the Deputy Fuhrer Rudolf Hess in Scotland.

Provincial Blitz

The reader is taken through the blitz on the Humber, not, as the authors explain, because it was greater or less than any other blitz but because its stories of almost incredible heroism and cool execution of orders are typical of most of the raids in other parts of the country. These men all over the British Isles made sure that even if the bomber got through, he did not always get home.

From the Ground

The authors take us again through the Battle of Britain but this time we see the fight from the ground. There are first the attacks on the convoys, then on the harbours and dockyards, followed by the ports and the airfields. Finally came the great day, the September Sunday when 185 enemy planes were brought down. Here for the first time is the anti-aircraft side of the picture.

The Great Barrage

Nobody who lived in London during the blitz will forget that Wednesday when the guns spoke their fiercest. How it was all arranged is told in a chapter on the Great London Barrage. London was not adequately defended at this time but the German attacks made it imperative that they should be improved and reinforcements were brought from all parts of Britain and in 24 hours the number of guns had been doubled. Guns cannot go fully into action just when they have been moved into position and there did not immediately appear to be any improvement.

But at ten o'clock on the Wednesday a conference was held at Command Headquarters with the determination that whatever had gone before, on that night the enemy should be met with a barrage the like of which had never been seen or heard before. At twelve-thirty a very earnest consultation with scientists and experts of all sorts was called. The Gun Position Officers from every site in London were directed to attend, in addition to Battery Brigade and Divisional Commanders.

Its Success

The result was remarkable. It astonished and heartened the Londoners and it surprised the enemy who was driven from 1,200 feet to 22,000 feet. Many turned back and nine were shot down by A.A. fire, which kept up all the night. For many days the London gunners had a ceaseless procession of alarms so that the layers were almost unconscious as they tried to keep the eyes focussed on the dials.

The enemy soon decided that the gun sites would have to be attacked and although not one single battery was put out of action, there were many severe bombing incidents and as many tales of gallantry and disregard of danger.

Women in War

A highly successful experiment which caught the public fancy more than most developments in A.A. organisation - the employment of women - is given merited attention in the book. As early as 1938 General Pile invited Miss Caroline Haslett, the woman engineer, to inspect a battery in the Surrey Hills so that she could give her opinion of women's capacity to do the work. She spent several Sundays there and gave the answer which was to prove so right. Women man everything except the guns in Heavy A.A. units and man them extremely well. They have the right delicacy of touch, the keenness and application which is necessary to the somewhat tiresome arts of knob twiddling which are the lot of the instrument numbers. In principle, also, women will take on all the duties of searchlight detachments. Here again experience has shown that they can be first class on the job.

Balloons in Battle

The Germans gave early evidence that they respected and feared our balloon barrage for they came over and shot down every one of the 23 flying over Dover. They were replaced and still fly in the full sight of the enemy across the Channel. The Germans have found attacks on them too costly. The aims of the barrage are to keep the enemy up to a height from which dive bombing or accurate bombing are impossible or to deflect him from his course or keep him where the fighters can deal with him. They are a definite contribution to the safety of our cities and our good production in industry can be partly ascribed to the safety which the balloon barrage helps to provide.

Skilful Work

The barrage is now so familiar that it is taken for granted but its maintenance calls for much individual skill and much organisation behind the scenes. To all the intricacies of this work "Roof Over Britain" introduces us. Here again, women were called in and readily adapted themselves to the work. Every week more and more sites were taken over by the W.A.A.F. It must not be overlooked that the comparatively easy task in balloon manipulation now, is due to the work of the early pioneers of the R.A.F.

Weather is still one of the greatest enemies of the balloon barrage but women have shown they can endure all that is required to perform one of the hardest jobs undertaken by women in war.

Balloons at Sea

One aspect of balloon work with which the general public will not be so familiar is their operations on vessels sailing around the coasts of Britain. They have their peculiar problems, including the maintenance of a balloon which is always in the air and dodging shore batteries as well as enemy aircraft.

There is little doubt that the balloon barrage has been a great comfort to the public. The balloons are not only scarecrows in this war: they have been scientifically distributed and devised as part of the defensive roof over the country. While they fly the enemy is not only denied the possibility of aiming but is also placed in the position of the greatest vulnerability to attack by anti-aircraft and fighter defences.

Ready for Next Time

There has been no lull in the effort devoted to the improvement of our defences.

If the Luftwaffe, baffled in the East, turns again to the West, it will find the opposition even stronger than that which baffled it here before. Meanwhile, every part of the air defence of Great Britain can fairly claim what history will undoubtedly pronounce to have been a victory. They baulked the German attempt to clear the way for

invasion in the autumn of 1940. They frustrated the German attempt to break civilian morale. In this battle Victory could not appear suddenly and dramatically. She edged her way on to the stage but she was there when the curtain fell. If and when it rises for a second time, she will be back in the wings and will have to be cajoled into appearing again. Many actors in this drama have not been mentioned by name. It must be enough to record that the performance of all brought a world wide audience to its feet.

The booklet contains some twenty odd photographs and a diagram. How one of the pictures came to be taken is quite a story in itself; drama mixed with a little humour and much patience. Captain Anthony Cotterell was kindly lent by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs to write the Army part of the story of "Roof Over Britain" and the Air Ministry compiled the story of the balloons.



A LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS FOR "ROOF OVER BRITAIN" IS ATTACHED