

## Air War over Britain in August 1939 – David Gray

On August 8<sup>th</sup> 1939 Britain staged a 'Great Air Battle' over the country to test the black-out and also the response of Britain's defences. Some might say this was a bit late considering the war would start less than a month later but no one knew exactly when (or if) the war would begin, and this was such a large exercise, 1,300 planes, that it was not something that could be done often or at short notice.

It was announced in the press on Tuesday August 8<sup>th</sup> that 1,300 planes would stage a '**Week of War**'. The greatest air 'battles' ever staged in Britain would begin that night at 7pm, when England would be invaded from France by 500 RAF bombers. These would be met and engaged by an equal number of RAF planes. Further raids would take place the next night's 'great black-out', and at intervals until the night of Friday 11<sup>th</sup> August. During the black-out French bombers were expected to make a surprise attack.

**IN 26 COUNTIES**

It is hoped that hardly a glimmer of light will be seen throughout 26 counties affected.

Areas affected are:

Bedfordshire	City of London
Berkshire	Middlesex
Buckinghamshire	Norfolk
Cambridgeshire	Northamptonshire
Derbyshire	Nottinghamshire
Isle of Ely	Oxfordshire
Essex	Soke of
Hampshire	Peterborough
Hertfordshire	Rutland
Huntingdonshire	Staffordshire
Kent	Suffolk
Leicestershire	Surrey
Lincolnshire—	Sussex
Holland	Warwickshire
Kesteven	Isle of Wight.
Lindsey	
County of London	

Above, a list of the 26 counties involved in the exercise.

Householders in the 26 counties affected were asked, where possible, to stay up late and test their personal arrangements for concealing lights. Two-thirds of England would be engaged in the war rehearsal.

The public were warned:

**"Planes will fly low.** All the air raids will take place exactly as they would in time of war – that is, the bombers will in some cases fly only a few hundred feet above ground.

Recently this form of flying has been practiced by the RAF and many people have been alarmed. At Amersham in Bucks, during the [previous] weekend, the noise of low-flying bombers caused people to run from their homes and, according to residents, children 'screamed from terror.' A petition against low-flying was prepared.

But the RAF must be ready for war conditions. An Air Ministry official stated that during raids some of the bombers may cross the coast close to the ground and fly on to their objectives just above the trees. 'This form of attack has been rehearsed lately,' he added, 'and that is why there has been such low flying.'

A total of 1,300 RAF machines will be taking part in the tests. Tonight, when the first raid is launched, some of the bombers will fly over France as far south as Beauvais before turning for the attack. It will be the first time RAF machines have flown over France at night in such exercises. Five hundred high-speed fighters will try to intercept the bombers while the whole of the ground defences, anti-aircraft guns, searchlights and listening posts will be operating.

The most elaborate air-raid test on record will reach its peak at midnight tomorrow [9<sup>th</sup>], when a vast area of southern and eastern England will be plunged into darkness. For three hours fighters and bombers will thunder amid a forest of searchlights waving to and fro above a completely darkened world, normally twinkling with the lights of towns and villages."

Later, on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> August, the evening newspapers updated the public with what they should expect from the 'Attack on England.'

"When the roar of the final salute from the guns of 133 ships of the Reserve Fleet echoes over Portland Harbour tomorrow evening it will herald the climax of the great try-out of Britain's defence machine, including land, sea and air forces. As the King's train leaves Weymouth, after his inspection of the ships, they will turn their bows towards the North Sea for combined exercises with the Home Fleet on an unprecedented scale."

*Let's stop here for a moment and put this into proportion regarding the modern day. In 1939 the Royal Navy had 133 ships in the Reserve Fleet. In addition there were 330 major, frontline warships, including for instance, 184 destroyers. Let's not forget, just like now, Britain was not at war at this time and had not been since 1918.*

*Today, Britain's navy has a total of 62 commissioned and active ships, and that includes Nelson's HMS Victory! Outside these there is no reserve. Major Surface Combatants consist of 2 Aircraft Carriers, 6 Type 45 Destroyers and 8 Type 23 Frigates. There are nine submarines and 37 other vessels including patrol and survey vessels and an icebreaker. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary has 11 support ships.*



This map shows the area involved in the big air exercises and the districts affected in the night's black-out.

"A few hours later the half-England black-out will begin and the RAF will already be engaged on the biggest air exercises in their history, including 1,300 planes and 20,000 men. Thousands of miles of kerbing have been painted white, traffic signals reduced to tiny crosses, and other lights shielded as part of the preparations for tomorrow night's black-out. If there is any light showing in private houses after midnight (12.30 in London) police will knock up the people concerned and request them to provide shielding. People are particularly requested to test out the efficiency of emergency shielding arrangements. Lorry and car drivers will be required to switch off headlamps and rely entirely on side lamps. It is hoped that hardly a glimmer of light will be seen throughout the 26 counties affected.

Final preparations were being made at RAF aerodromes for the air exercises starting tonight. London is in the area of the WESTLAND v EASTLAND war. Wave after wave of bombers operating from their 'base' will attack the South-Eastern counties. The odds are almost two to one against a successful series of raids during the 72 hours of the exercise – for from aerodromes of the

Fighter Command, Britain's fastest interceptors will fly to the rescue of WESTLAND, fortunate possessors of many defensive secrets.

EASTLAND has 500 bombers of such recent types as Wellingtons, Hampdens, Whitleys, Blenheims and Battles, all of which took part in the flights over France. WESTLAND has 800 machines, which include the world's fastest fighters, the Spitfires, Hurricanes, reconnaissance machines and bombers which will try to destroy enemy bases. Though zero hour is 8pm, secrecy surrounds the time of the first raid. All the hits of the fighters will be recorded by photographic 'guns,' and 'bombs' dropped by the raiders will also be recorded by camera. Afterwards the full records of the bomber and fighter squadrons will be examined and the RAF will know the extent of its effective defence."

"What is the precise object of tomorrow's great black-out?" Asked one newspaper. "It was stressed in Whitehall today that it was not, firstly, an ARP exercise in the sense that it would be for the



One of the EASTLAND bombers heading for its target. Note the white identification crosses.

personnel concerned with ground defences. The plan is really to give the RAF their first chance of seeing from aloft what a partially blackened London really looks like.

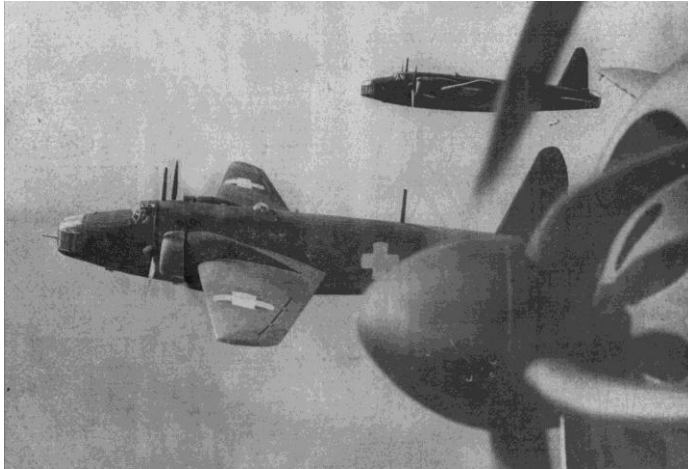
Why a partial black-out? One reason is that the railways are running as usual. It is true that the companies have arranged to dim and shade lighting as far as possible but, as an airman pointed out today, signal lights seen face-on and despite their hoods can give an airman a good line of country. Lighthouses will function as usual and the BBC, while stating today that all lights on top of aerial masts will be extinguished, admitted that the masts at the receiving station at Tatsfield, Kent, will continue to be illuminated.

But, all such things notwithstanding, the blackout will be extremely valuable as a first experiment, and will doubtless lead to more stringent screening regulations. As in all ARP matters, the preparations by local authorities in London have been very uneven. Some boroughs have plastered their streets with

bills telling people what to do and have even sent letters to ratepayers. Others have done nothing in the matter. Again, some of the keen boroughs are taking the opportunity of having their own ARP programmes to test out means of local communications. Most Special Constables will be on duty from 11pm to 5am to note who are careless about screened windows and to get their hands in at handling traffic without headlights."

The following day news reports told of the progress of the raids. "Raiding aircraft in the big 'Air War' have been converging on London since 9am today, but they met a sturdy defence. Though some raiders circled round to the west, says an Air Ministry communiqué, they had a 'hot reception' near

Uxbridge and Surbiton. Action over the East Coast near The Wash also began again between 10am and 11am.



More 'enemy' Wellington Bombers. Again, showing white crosses.

himself in the darkness of a dugout, where he was joined by the crew of an aeroplane petrol supply lorry, who also had been ordered to take cover. Elsewhere in the aerodrome fire-fighting crews, ambulance workers, mechanics in the hangars, all donned their masks, and in most cases took shelter. Control officers wearing respirators and gas-proof mackintoshes and hats, were busy seeing that all orders were carried out. For over an hour the station was under cover, and then sirens shrieked the 'All Clear.' Shortly afterwards the fighters returned to their base, having flown high across the barrage balloons of London towards the East Coast and back. This station had been



Above, Even though this was an exercise, there were still some lives lost. This appears to be a Blenheim bomber.

Sirens gave warning that an air raid was imminent at one of the WESTLAND'S RAF stations on the Western outskirts of London at mid-day. Within a few minutes a flight of fighters had taken off to intercept the 'enemy,' while the ground staff were ordered to take cover. One or more of the 'enemy' bombers were presumed to have got through, and the order was given to don respirators to meet a gas attack.

The exercise was carried out with realism. A reporter, who arrived just as the warning was given, soon found himself in the darkness of a dugout, where he was joined by the crew of an aeroplane petrol supply lorry, who also had been ordered to take cover. Elsewhere in the aerodrome fire-fighting crews, ambulance workers, mechanics in the hangars, all donned their masks, and in most cases took shelter. Control officers wearing respirators and gas-proof mackintoshes and hats, were busy seeing that all orders were carried out. For over an hour the station was under cover, and then sirens shrieked the 'All Clear.' Shortly afterwards the fighters returned to their base, having flown high across the barrage balloons of London towards the East Coast and back. This station had been standing by since 4.45am. At that hour 'fighters' were scattered round the edges of the aerodrome with the crews ready to take off at a minute's notice.

It was dark last night before they returned after the first day of the aerial 'war' between WESTLAND and EASTLAND, and they were not sure what to-day would bring. Luckily their breakfast was undisturbed, for it was not until an hour or so later that the first flight had to take the air. By lunchtime all the machines had returned to the base, and luncheon was served with the crews standing by.

The activities of this fighter squadron were directed by a control officer and his assistants in the control room. They were in constant touch with the headquarters

of the defending air force, whose task it was to locate the approaching 'enemy,' to estimate their probable course, and to arrange for them to be intercepted. It is believed that about 50 bombers were engaged in the 'attack' on South London, but they were forced by the balloon barrage to go to great heights, this minimising the effectiveness of the raid. Many of them also faced anti-aircraft guns. Aircraft flying from France were expected to take part in later daylight raids.

An Air Ministry communiqué on the operations up to 3.30am showed that during the night EASTLAND raiders had broken through the defence with a number of raids, but had been intercepted elsewhere. The full communiqué which applies to operations after 9.30pm indicates that



Above, Another Blenheim Casualty.

nearly 160 raids were made by 'enemy' aircraft, and that targets round the Thames Estuary and Home Counties were heavily attacked at one time. Nearly 100 raids were made by EASTLAND in the southern area. More than 60 defending fighter patrols were despatched to attack them, and a number of interceptions were made.

On August 18<sup>th</sup> reports appeared in the press regarding another exercise in which aircraft from the French Air Force carried out mock raids on Britain. The headline read, "**400 mph Dives above the City: Third Raid is due Tonight.**" The story

went on, "Over the rooftops of London there raged in brilliant sunshine this afternoon the greatest air battle the city has ever seen. Wave after wave of grey French bombers, flying in arrowhead formations of nine, roared slowly over at a height of 1,500ft, 'bombing' vital targets.

Thousands in Central London streets watched British Spitfires, diving at 400mph, sweep down on the raiders, their engines screaming. On swept the bombers, they had a rendezvous 'somewhere over London,' where at 3,000ft, fifty French fighters met them to beat off the bullet-like Spitfires and escort them back, chased right across the Channel to their bases. Those bombers, 150 of them, had bombed the main cities of southern England in the second raid in 12 hours by the greatest fleets of warplanes France has ever sent into the air.

The first attack – Britain slept through it, although warplanes raced across country at 5,000ft and bombed Liverpool – last night was secret. There will be a third raid after midnight tonight. But this afternoon's raid was the most spectacular. Two British fighters over Central London did not recover as soon as the others from their diving, and flattened out within a few hundred feet of the tops of the buildings. One passed within 100 ft of the statue of Justice on the Old Bailey. Again and again the Spitfires attacked, and were still fighting the bombers when the raiders vanished into the haze over East London. So low flew the French warplanes that their markings and registration numbers were clearly seen.



How the French Came Across

Twenty-four bombers suddenly appeared over Clapton, flying so low that they only just cleared the roofs of houses. They split up into two formations. One made straight for the city. Fifteen raiders attacked Hornchurch RAF Station; pilots of Spitfire fighters were refuelling their machines on the tarmac when in the cloudless sky immediately over the station 15 Potez 63 bombers appeared, flying from the north-west at an altitude of about 5,000ft. Within less than five minutes 30

Spitfires had taken off from the airfield and were engaging the enemy. The small eight-gun Spitfires – fastest warplanes in the world –

darted in and out of the bomber formations; which appeared helpless to ward off the attack.

The bombers in this afternoon's attack crossed the English coast between Selsey Bill and Beachy Head. A thick Channel haze helped them. Over Newhaven Harbour three Spitfire fighters went after one flight, chasing them to the west. Having crossed the coast, the warplanes split up into separate 'raids' and proceeded on different courses and at different heights with the main cities of the southern half of Britain as their targets – Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Oxford and other main towns. They were flying at 5,000ft except over the targets, when they came down to 3,000ft.

French reconnaissance aeroplanes had already crossed the British coast to plot the targets and signal by radio the courses the bombers were to follow on their 'attacks.' Today's exercise brought the British anti-aircraft and fighter defences into full play. The attack last night was so secret that only the searchlight, anti-aircraft and fighter defences knew of it."

After the French raids, the press reported, "**RAF Declare Raiders were Defeated.** Two hundred French bombers 'raided' England yesterday to test our air defences following British raids over France. The French official verdict was: 'Defences active and efficient.'" Journalist Hubert Nicholson reported, "In the cockpit of a twin-engined Blenheim battle-plane yesterday I sat beside a cool 20-year-old British pilot, and took part in a mock battle with a dozen of the heavy French bombers over Hornchurch Aerodrome, and in the words of one of our flying men, 'We annihilated them.' The raid on the airport flashed on us unexpectedly out of the brilliant blue at 3pm, when the 200 'invaders' had done their worst over Western, Midland and Northern cities of Britain and were heading back in the direction of Folkestone. Observers to the North-West of London flashed the message of their approach to the ground staff at Hornchurch, and within a few minutes more than 40 Spitfires and five Blenheim battle planes were climbing up to intercept them.

We soared up in a wide spiral to 8,000ft almost the level of the first range of clouds. Then 2,000ft below us appeared 12 slim, black, French machines. We swooped down upon them with a rush that made the eardrums tingle, but before we reached them the quick moving Spitfires had engaged them. Overtaking was easy. The Frenchmen were flying slowly. Each, I learned, carried a load equivalent to its full burden of bombs. It was only a matter of moments before there was a second

flight to tackle, again close on a dozen planes. And again our planes appeared to make rings round them. Then as we swung down over the Thames, moving east, we were surprised by a French bomber which zipped up in the opposite direction and skimmed right over our heads. We saw the tricolour markings. We could almost have exchanged a hand-shake. We wheeled and gave chase, but lost our prey.



French 'invaders' over Tilbury.

Over Tower Bridge we met ten of our fighter planes and they gave us a triumphant greeting. Back at the Hornchurch Station we found the RAF boys jubilant. 'We had no idea we were in the direct line of the French 'invaders' flight,' an official said to me. 'That is why we are proud in the way we reacted to the situation when we got wind of their approach. It was a test of our vigilance.' The Frenchmen came over in four waves of 25 to 30 each.

They caught Liverpool napping at 6.12am, and got away just over two hours later after a successful 'raid.' They were observed from the ground but were not intercepted by planes. About noon the other flights crossed the English coast at Brighton and Bognor Regis, and they made for the main centres of population including Bristol, Cardiff, Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham. They then converged on London, coming in from many directions and wheeling south towards the Channel ports. Weather conditions favoured them, the haze and the sun dazzle making things difficult for the British pilots. But had the warfare been real, the bombers might well have been decimated, experts believe."