

ROYAL
AIR FORCE
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VOLUME I
The Fight at Odds

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homeless and nearly 1,000 of the inhabitants killed. The following morning, except in the Zeeland province, the Dutch forces were ordered to lay down their arms.

The destruction of Rotterdam settled not only the question of further resistance in Holland, but also the question of how far the German Air Force was respecting civilian life and property. When on 15th May the War Cabinet once more considered the propriety of attacking the Ruhr, its remaining doubts had vanished, and the Air Staff was at last given the signal to go ahead. Of the many benefits that this decision was expected to bring, the greatest would be the anticipated effect on the German Air Force; for German air superiority had so paralysed the French ground forces that some diversion of the enemy's bombers from their present objectives was imperative. If the Royal Air Force raided the Ruhr, destroying oil plants with its more accurately placed bombs and urban property with those that went astray, the outcry for retaliation against Britain might prove too strong for the German generals to resist. Indeed, Hitler himself would probably head the clamour. The attack on the Ruhr, in other words, was an informal invitation to the *Luftwaffe* to bomb London.

The decision to bombard objectives in the Ruhr brought in its train a further ruling of great importance. This concerned the despatch of British fighter squadrons to France—a matter on which so many inaccurate statements have since been made, on both sides of the Channel, that it is as well to set out the facts in detail. Before the war we had agreed to base four of our fighter squadrons in France. These had duly flown out in September 1939. Then, in the quiet months before the German attack, we had sent two more; and at the same time, in response to pressure from the French, we had undertaken to bring the total up to ten when the enemy offensive was launched—for until the Germans were inextricably committed against France their opening move might well have been the dreaded 'knock-out blow' against England. This promise had been fulfilled on 10th and 11th May, and ten squadrons of Hurricanes were now fighting desperately in France against great odds. Their performance was magnificent, and the enemy was suffering heavy losses, but they were obviously far too few. The campaign was not many hours old when Barratt, Blount and Gort accordingly with one voice besought more fighters, and on 13th May thirty-two Hurricanes and pilots—the equivalent of two squadrons—flew out to join the Component. The next day the full extent of the disaster on the Meuse became clear, and French demands took on a new note of urgency. 'You were kind enough,' telephoned M. Reynaud, 'to send four squadrons [i.e. the

four reinforcing squadrons than you promised; it is decisive for the whole of today, ten more squadrons would be of course impracticable. Pending a final decision, I am instructed to make up the deficit with four squadrons.

This at once brought about a change in the need on the Continent to send our fighters where they were most needed. Bombers to be shot down effectively as Hurricanes, radar stations in the North, French observer posts, 'ground screen'.² If the day could only visualize his country as soon as our fighters, all that he has to do is to send our fighters to the front. The military struggle which would be fought in the air. For the Allied cause was not lost. Britain might be able to stand up to the strength.

In response to his own Cabinet on 15th May. Hitler, originally hostile to him, and to his 'inexpressible' and to more fighter squadrons. The decision was a good sense at once invite them to direct ourselves of course between the two recommendations to the Air Force. The offensive against Germany was determined to fight a battle—over England, to

² Forward On