

The Role and Work of Bomber Command

**A note by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris for the Prime
Minister and War Cabinet, prepared at the request of the
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Editor's Note: Few senior Allied Commanders have been criticized as strongly as Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris. And even those critics who recognize the vital contribution Harris and Bomber Command made to the defeat of Nazi Germany are disturbed by the tone of Harris' letters to Churchill and Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal. Harris never wavered in his conviction that Germany could be defeated by strategic bombing with ground troops assigned to a secondary role. This view underlay his arguments for assigning priority to strategic bombing. In pursuing the case Harris mixed careful argument and clear logic with emotional attacks on those who doubted his doctrines. The following note, written shortly after Harris assumed command, displays Harris at his best, arguing the case for Bomber Command "as the only means of bringing assistance to Russia in time" and the only means "which will make subsequent invasion a possible proposition."

1. Those who advocate the breaking-up of Bomber Command for the purpose of adding strength to Coastal and Army Co-operation Commands and overseas requirements are like the amateur politician who imagines that the millennium will arrive through the simple process of dividing available cash equally between all. Ignorance of what is available for distribution is such that he does not realise that the outcome would be to give every individual £50 once at the cost of wrecking the entire industrial organisation and income of the country. Similarly, if the Medium and Heavy Bomber Operational Squadrons of Bomber Command were distributed between the many claimants for favour on the one hand, none of these claimants would receive anything more than a mere morsel towards the satisfaction of their alleged requirements. On the other hand, our only offensive weapon against Germany would be destroyed. One cannot win wars by defending oneself. The defensive use of offensive weapons must therefore be reduced to the irreducible minimum necessary to survival.

2. There is surprising ignorance about the effective strength of Bomber Command. On an average, it is able to produce about 30 operational medium and heavy night bomber squadrons and six light bomber squadrons, the latter with no

reserves of aircraft behind them. The firstline strength of the operational squadrons of Bomber Command represents no more than 11 per cent of the total operational first-line strength of the Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm, and well over half of the effort of this 11 per cent is directed against Naval and Military targets.

3. People often point to the vast training organisation behind Bomber Command. It is truly and necessarily great. What such people fail to realise, however, is that the Bomber Command training organisation provides the whole requirements for reinforcing all the bomber forces overseas and much else besides. At present, for instance, it provides 148 pilots per month for overseas bomber squadrons, including 95 complete crews. In the past this quota has at times been even higher. In addition to this monthly output for overseas requirements, Bomber Command has trained, equipped, and then given away or lent to Coastal and Overseas Commands and other claimants, 24 squadrons in the last year. It also provides the crews of 2 squadrons employed on special S.O.E. and S.I.S. duties, and crews to man a great number of experimental and special training units, which work for all Commands, at home and overseas. Finally, it is required from time to time to find from 300 to 400 operational aircraft in order to make up the

1,000 or so required to carry out specially heavy attacks against objectives of major importance.

4. Another common error is to suppose that the effort of the Command is devoted to the bombing of targets in Germany remote from and chosen without reference to the general military and naval situation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Approximately 50 per cent of the total operational effort of Bomber Command during the twelve months April 1941-March 1942 was directly employed against the enemy's sea power. During the last three months the proportion has been well over 50 per cent. All the remaining efforts of Bomber Command have great direct effect on the Naval and Land war situations as a whole.

5. For all practical purposes the squadrons of Bomber Command have done almost all the air-sea mining throughout the War. They have laid some 2,000 odd mines from the beginning of the War to December 1941, which accounted for one known enemy ship per 26.2 mines (it can be reasonably assumed that at least one unknown ship was sunk or damaged for every known one). The Command has enormously increased its mining efforts since the beginning of March this year. It is now laying mines at the rate of over a thousand a month, and already the reports on sinkings are greatly increased over anything previously achieved. Amongst particular mining successes can be counted the closing of the Kiel Canal to heavy enemy ships for some four months and the damaging and sinking of several of the highly specialised Baltic train ferries and icebreaker ferries on which the enemy is peculiarly dependent. Also, the sinking by mining and bombing, according to the evidence from German wreck charts, of something over 300 enemy-employed ships, and damage to a large number more. The mining of both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and also other enemy war vessels and troop transports, some of which are known to have resulted in great loss of life, must also be taken into account.

6. The story of the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* is perhaps an outstanding incident of the vast effect of the small Bomber Command force on the Naval war. These two ships, on their one and only raid into the Atlantic, did appalling damage to our shipping, sinking no fewer than 19 vessels, totalling 150,000 tons. They returned to Brest to refuel and turn round prior to repeated

forays, but since that date, over fifteen months ago, and almost entirely due to the efforts of Bomber Command, they have never been able to sink another British or Allied ship. They have only just been able to escape and stagger home, both of them striking air-laid mines on their return journey. Since their arrival in Kiel for repair, *Scharnhorst* is known to have been further hit and heavily damaged. *Gneisenau* has been so heavily hit and damaged by bombs that she has been taken away to Gdynia and largely dismantled. There are circumstantial reports that it has been decided to abandon repair on her. *Prinz Eugen* was also hit at Brest by Bomber Command. The direct result of the damage to these important ships is that *throughout the war the German Fleet has never been able to operate as an entity, with all that that implies*. It was directly due to the immobilisation of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* that *Bismarck* essayed her lone raid in the Atlantic and to that fact can be largely credited her subsequent destruction. To Bomber Command, therefore, can also largely be credited the fact that *Tirpitz* in her turn is now a lone wolf.

7. Additional and direct effects on the war efficiency of the German Fleet arising from the efforts of Bomber Command are as follows:

(i) The main enemy Naval base at Kiel has been repeatedly and very heavily damaged by bomber attacks. A large number of workshops have been destroyed and the dockyard workers' quarters have received vast damage, with all that that implies in regard to delay in Naval supply and repair work.

(ii) Amongst other instances the depot ship *Monte Olivia* was bombed and burnt out, with reported heavy loss of life to submarine ratings and some of *Gneisenau's* crew who were living on board.

(iii) There is no doubt that the morale of enemy Naval personnel, who largely come from the German coastal ports, has been seriously affected by the heavy damage, and the raid-fear inflicted on these ports and their populace.

8. The six light bomber squadrons of Bomber Command are responsible for the close support of the Army in the event of invasion, or in the event of the Army proceeding overseas. They provide the bait for Fighter Command without



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which the fighter sweeps would be ineffective, because the enemy often refuses battle unless bombers are present. They also provided the detachments at Malta which so successfully attacked the enemy's lines of communication. They are known to have sunk some 51,000 tons of enemy shipping on that supply line. By direct bomber attack in European waters, these light bomber squadrons have sunk some 250,000 tons, seriously damaged 287,000 tons and damaged a further 380,000 tons.

9. The effects on the enemy's submarine activities have been equally important. It is known that repeated interference with submarine crew training resulted from our mine laying in the Baltic and the Bight. It is known that, from time to time, considerable damage has been done to submarine building yards at Hamburg, Kiel, Rostock, Emden and other ports. Heavy damage has been done to the three main submarine Diesel engine factories at Augsburg, Deutz, and the Germania yards at Fuel. Damage has also been done to one of the two main submarine accumulator factories. In addition, the widespread damage done to German industry by Bomber Command, perhaps especially in Cologne, must have profoundly affected the submarine campaign. It is known that, at the submarine building yard at Le Trait, three submarines under construction were reported destroyed and between 150 and 200 workmen employed on them were killed.

10. It can also be safely assumed that damage has been inflicted on submarines operating from the French West Coast ports. Although the actual cause of loss of a submarine which does not return can seldom be determined, the known losses inflicted on German shipping remove any shadow of doubt that some losses, possibly considerable losses, have been inflicted on the enemy submarine fleet by Bomber Command's minelaying.

11. By smashing up the invasion ports and the invasion barges and shipping concentrations, there is little doubt that Bomber Command had impressed upon the enemy the difficulties, if not the impossibility, of invasion. Indeed, history may yet show that invasion was prevented by the Command. It certainly can be if it is attempted in future.

12. The known results of the bombing raids on Germany show that they cause vast destruction and vast embarrassment to the enemy. It would not be possible in a note to detail a tithe of the known immense damage occasioned in Germany. Whilst it takes approximately some 7,000 hours of flying to destroy one submarine at sea, that was approximately the amount of flying necessary to destroy one-third of Cologne, the third largest city in Germany, in one night, a town of vast industrial import. 250 of its factories were damaged or destroyed. This must have gravely embarrassed the enemy war effort in every direction. The towns of Rostock, Lubeck, Emden and Cologne have all been destroyed to or beyond the point where they can be counted as a liability rather than an asset to the enemy. The very heavy damage to the Heinkel Aircraft Factory at Rostock is known to have gravely affected the Heinkel output, and is reported to have had the most serious effect on the enemy's air war on all fronts, and also at sea. The Focke Wulf works at Bremen have also been very seriously damaged.

13. The destruction of the Renault Factory might be counted as an astounding achievement of Bomber Command. Achieved in a few hours with practically no loss it is clearly a major victory against the enemy's land forces such as no other of our forces has yet achieved. Through the loss of this factory and the Matford works at Poissy, the enemy is known, according to the Ministry of Economic Warfare, to have been permanently deprived of the armoured fighting vehicles and transport equipment sufficient for the formation and maintenance of 10/11 motorised divisions. The important enemy aircraft factories at Gennevilliers and Salmsons have been destroyed. The Goodrich rubber factory, and the Thomson Houston and Ericsson Electrical gear factory have also been destroyed, and 16 neighbouring factories damaged, some "on a tremendous scale." (Interpretation Report.)

14. One of Germany's most pressing problems is to maintain her system of internal transport. The German Transport Minister recently stated that, unless the problem of improving the transport facilities inside Germany were solved, Germany's victory would be imperilled. He said that in the western and north-western regions of Germany, where frequent bombing raids had taken place, the transport service was carried out under extremely difficult conditions. An

additional strain is thrown upon the railways by the diversion of traffic caused by sea-mining, while the bombing of ports and industrial towns has been shown to do much incidental damage to the transport services. It is known that the internal transport system has recently been put under the control of the German Minister responsible for armaments production and that very high priorities, which must interfere with other production, have been given to locomotive and wagon construction, and repair. Concomitant with this declaration by the Reich Minister, Bomber Command virtually destroyed the important rolling-stock works at Cologne and severely damaged another such works at Bremen.

15. To the negative, but very worthwhile, credit of Bomber Command can be counted the strain upon the enemy of maintaining an enormous and ever-increasing mine-sweeping effort, and also the establishment and maintenance of the largest anti-aircraft and A.R.P. organisation in the world. Some three-quarters of a million personnel are employed on anti-aircraft duties in Germany. If one adds to that the A.R.P. services, the damage and repair organisation and the manufacture of guns and their anti-aircraft ammunition, and also the mine-sweeping and mined ship repairing organisation, there is little doubt that the very existence of Bomber Command costs the enemy the whole-time services of at least three million able-bodied personnel. In addition, Bomber Command forces the enemy to maintain a large and rapidly increasing force of night fighters, which now amounts to some 300 aircraft. Many of these are Ju.88's, a type which, if released, could be used effectively for the attack of our shipping. There is no doubt that, if the Bomber policy was to be abandoned, the release of this vast manpower for other essential work would be of the greatest value to Germany. The release of the twin-engine fighter bombers and the anti-aircraft guns for service on the eastern front and in the Mediterranean would have a powerful and perhaps even a decisive effect on those campaigns.

16. The purely defensive use of air power is grossly wasteful. The Naval employment of aircraft consists of picking at the fringes of enemy power, of waiting for opportunities that may never occur, and indeed probably never will occur, of looking for needles in a haystack. They attempt to sever each capillary vein, one by one, when they could, with much less effort, cut the artery.

Bomber Command attacks the sources of all Naval power, rather than the fringes of the one type of enemy Naval operation which obviously menaces us - the submarine. An outstanding example of waste of air effort is the taking away from Bomber Command of all the Hampden aircraft for conversion to torpedo bombers for the defence of this country. These squadrons have, for more than two years, exercised continuous and direct pressure on Germany. Since allocation to Coastal Command they have done practically nothing. It is within the bounds of possibility that they will never get an opportunity to achieve anything. The enemy is not such a fool as to flaunt valuable ships within reach of shore-based aircraft otherwise than when compelled by circumstances to do so, and then only on his own terms as to weather and fighter cover.

17. To sum up, Bomber Command provides our only offensive action yet pressed home directly against Germany. All our other efforts are defensive in their nature, and are not intended to do more, and can never do more, than enable us to exist in the face of the enemy. Bomber Command provides the only means of bringing assistance to Russia in time. The only means of physically weakening and nervously exhausting Germany to an extent which will make subsequent invasion a possible proposition, and is therefore the only force which can, in fact, hurt our enemy in the present or in the future secure our victory. It is the only type of force which we shall ever be able to bring directly against Japan.

18. Finally, it is apparent that an extraordinary lack of sense of proportion affects outside appreciation of the meaning, extent and results of Bomber Command's operations. What shouts of victory would arise if a Commando wrecked the entire Renault factory in a night, with a loss of seven men! What credible assumptions of an early end to the war would follow upon the destruction of a third of Cologne in an hour and a half by some swift moving mechanised force which, with but 200 casualties, withdrew and was ready to repeat the operation 24 hours later! What acclaim would greet the virtual destruction of Rostock and the Heinkel main and subsidiary factories by a Naval bombardment! All this, and far more, has been achieved by Bomber Command; yet there are many who still avert their gaze, pass by on the other side, and question whether the 30 Squadrons of night bombers make any worth-while contribution to the war.