

ULSTER as an AIR BASE

Two Arguments in Favour of Northern Ireland: The Position of Eire

By J. M. SPAIGHT

THE Battle of France has been lost. The Battle of Britain is to come. It may be a battle on land; it will certainly be one in the air. The raids so far conducted against this country are only preliminary bouts. The great assault is still impending. It will be a massed attack. The Germans, we may be sure, are organising with all their diabolical thoroughness a network of air bases in Northern France, Belgium, Holland and Norway for the purpose of launching a vast onslaught upon this island.

We shall be hard put to it to stem the overflowing waves of assault. Our interceptors are splendid. Our anti-aircraft guns and searchlights are efficient in the extreme. Still, some raiders must come through, and if huge masses start, flying very high, then large numbers will evade our defence, simply because the sky is wide and high. There may be daylight raids. The bombers may be screened by fighters and then, though our Spitfires, Hurricanes, Defiants and Blenheim fighters (and soon, we may hope, the Curtiss, Brewster and Bell fighters from America) will take a very heavy toll of escort and convoy alike, there will be a residue of bombers to penetrate the defence.

The raiders will range far inland. Our centres of aircraft production may be bombed. Our aerodromes and aircraft storage depots may suffer. Substantial damage may be done both to machines in the making and to those already made. Output may be slowed-up through interruption of work in the factories. There is no part of this island which would not be within the range of Heinkel III or Junkers 88 bombers, starting from the bases now available to them.

What then? I suggest that, to meet this danger, we need something more than the air defence in depth, consisting of the various zones of guns and interceptors and the balloon barrages, upon which we rely at present. We want a line behind those lines, and a line which the raiders are unlikely to reach.

Reserves for Counter-attack

In principle, the system of defence against ground attack adopted in the light of the experiences of 1914-18 rested upon the creation of a powerful force reserved for the counter-attack. The most formidable defences, it was recognised, might be breached if a sufficient mass of attack was hurled against them and thrust forward with sufficient determination. There might be at least a partial break-through. To overwhelm the invaders pouring through the breach was the purpose of the counter-offensive force maintained in readiness in the rear of the zone of concrete and steel.

We know that the German mechanised forces succeeded in smashing a way through the French position in the Sedan area, and that it was that break-through which led eventually to the loss, in turn, of the Battles of Flanders and of France and the ignoble capitulation of the Pétain Government. (What the *ultimate* result of France's defection may be cannot yet be foreseen; there are ugly possibilities at Gibraltar, in Egypt, and elsewhere, but I am concerned only with air defence at home.) At first sight it might be thought that the principle of defence referred to had been tried and found wanting in this crucial instance. Actually, it was not really tested at all. There was a failure to organise the system as those who conceived it had advocated. The defence in depth was woefully inadequate, and no sufficient counter-offensive force was available to flatten out the "bulge" which the German inroad formed.

The position is different in the air, but the principle is really the same. Here, as in ground defence, it is a ques-

tion of having a disposable force to throw into the battle or behind it at need. That force should be beyond the reach of the enemy's first assaults and should be ready for use when the waves of attack have begun to slacken, which they are bound to do before long. So placed and so held it can be decisive. In its absence, given raiding by the enemy on a really massive and widespread scale, the power of our Air Force to meet the attacks and to carry the counter-offensive into the enemy's territories might be seriously weakened; our ability both to defend ourselves and to strike back might be impaired to such an extent that the war in the air would be practically lost.

That could not happen if we held in reserve a great mass of aerial manoeuvre outside the range of the German onslaught. Where should it be? I suggest—Ulster. There, twice separated by the sea from the nests of the German hornets, it would be safe from their unwelcome attentions. One or two might come buzzing so far afield but they would probably be "swotted" if they did. Of course, Ulster would not be a suitable starting point either for our fighters on their patrols or for our bombers in their raids, but that objection could easily be met by arranging for refuelling in this island. The great merit of the scheme is that it would give us a secure base for our operations in the air.

A Powerful Deterrent

It would cease to be a secure base if the Nazis could effect a landing in Eire and overrun that country; and this brings me to the second and hardly less important argument in favour of the proposal. It is that such a great force, concentrated in Northern Ireland, would make any German descent upon Eire a far more dangerous adventure than it would otherwise be. The suggestion has been put forward (in a leading newspaper) that we should maintain in Ulster a force of mechanised troops and tanks ready to be sent racing southwards if a German landing in Cork, Waterford or Wexford were to be threatened. A powerful air force would be an even better instrument for the same purpose. It could be on the scene of the invasion in an hour or less, and it should be able to deal faithfully both with whatever air elements the invaders could assemble so far from their base and with any ground forces which were landed. It could strike more swiftly and not less effectively than mechanised columns moving down through roads impeded by old women driving recalcitrant donkeys, and, perhaps, by I.R.A. obstructions, from the north.

The effect might thus be to stifle at the outset an attempt that, allowed to develop, might become a grave danger to this country. The other result, already referred to, would be to leave available a great and untouched reserve force of the air which could be launched with telling effect against the air invaders of Britain itself and against their bases on the Continent. It would be a heartening thought in times when our own air bases were being sorely beset that we had behind them that further base which lay safely beyond the Irish Sea and from which our strength in the air could renew itself without hindrance.

It would be, finally, a shorter "hop" to Ulster than to Britain, for the Hampdens which are being built in Canada and for any large bombers which are obtained in the United States and could be delivered by air. Aircraft sent as ship's cargo could be landed there, one imagines, as readily as in Great Britain, and this would relieve congestion at our west-coast ports. Altogether, there is a strong case to be made for establishing in Ulster a great inter-depot-reserve for our air establishments in this country. It is worth while to do so still, for this is likely to be a long war.