

War in the Air

The Gates of Janus Open : A Year of Air Warfare : Contrasted Policies

IN ancient Rome, when war was declared the Romans opened the doors of the temple of Janus, which at other times were kept closed. If there were a temple of Janus in Great Britain its doors would have been open now for more than a year. There was another characteristic about the god Janus, after whom the month of January is named. He had, as readers of the *Nineteenth Century and After* are aware, two faces, one the face of an old man looking back on the year which had just finished, and the other a youthful face looking forward to the New Year. In this month of Janus, 1941, we cannot, without supernatural powers, look forward and see what the new year holds in store for us, but it may none the less be of some profit to follow the eyes of the god's ancient face, and recall what the year 1940 has brought to us in matters aeronautical.

The past year will stand out in the history of the air, and will be much quoted by future historians. For twenty years air forces had been discussed by staff officers and other theorists, and in many cases the discussion had to end with the words that only actual war could give a clear answer to the question. Now the actual war has come, but still we are not certain that all the questions have been finally answered. To some of them answers have been given which appear to be conclusive so far as the present war is concerned; but the conclusions have sometimes been due to temporary circumstances which may not persist in future wars. Our summing up can at best be tentative.

Two Conceptions of Air Power

IN the first place the past sixteen months have seen the contrast of the two conceptions of air power, the British idea of a Royal Air Force which can act in support of the Navy or Army and can also take independent action, and the German theory of a *Luftwaffe* trained as an arm of the Army. We have seen standardisation carried to an extreme by the Germans and producing chiefly numbers with out-of-date performance, and the British way of concentrating on quality with embarrassing effects on quantity. We have seen proved the fallacy of the German idea that the bomber needs speed rather than armament as its protection, and the success of the British devotion to heavy armament in both bombers and fighters. We have seen in the circumstances which prevailed that air defence by day can master air attack, and likewise in the given circumstances, that by night attack has the best of it. We have noticed with delight that it pays handsomely to give all airmen the very best training, and in doing so to be lavish in the expenditure of fuel. Above all, we have found, and we owe our continued existence as a free nation to the fact, that (again in the prevailing circumstances), a fleet at sea can carry out its work despite attacks from the air. The fortunes of a fleet in harbour remain in doubt, for the British fleet at Rosyth and Scapa Flow has been practically undamaged by enemy air attacks, while the Italian fleet at Taranto suffered a crippling blow. In both those cases the result has depended much on the circum-



BATTERY AND ASSAULT: The starter battery ready plugged into a Hampden to start up for a raid.

stances. The cases teach no certain lessons for the future.

The German campaigns in Poland, Norway, the Low Countries and France were notable triumphs for the bomber working with the Army. It would be a mistake of capital importance to draw the conclusion from the tactics of those campaigns that the air has become the decisive arm in war. This argument has been put forward, backed by the remark that an army which is short of air support is likely to be defeated. That, of course, is true, but it is also true that an army short of guns or tanks is similarly likely to suffer defeat. In those campaigns of the Germans the bomber was just one of the army's weapons, and it, too, might have been ineffective if it had not been backed up with great skill by the other weapons.

The campaign in Norway provided examples of two points. One was that if a belligerent could not establish air bases in a country it would have to evacuate that country. The German bombers certainly drove the British out of Norway, and did it almost on their own. It is doubtful whether the same thing would have happened in other circumstances. The gallant episode of the *Gladiators* on the ice gave reason to suppose that in somewhat easier conditions British fighters might have been able to establish themselves, and once established they might well have beaten off the bombers and made it possible for the British Army to fulfil its object. But, with no air defence at all, the ground troops were pretty well as helpless as they would have been without any machine guns. The other point exemplified was the difficulty of putting an aerodrome out of action. Stavanger, the best aerodrome in Norway, was ceaselessly bombed by British machines and was once shelled by the Fleet, but this seemed to have no effect on the German ability to bomb the British forces in the north of the country.

The rapid collapse of Holland before the invader was largely due to air-borne soldiers. There again the circumstances were peculiar, and the chief credit due to the Germans was on account of the way in which they adapted their methods to the circumstances. Such circumstances may never occur again to make easy the path of an invader. The conquest of France was largely a repetition of the conquest of Poland. It was a case of clever exploitation of the possibilities of fast mechanised forces on the ground and in the air. The French shortage of aircraft, together