

NOTE

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Directorate of History
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Ottawa, Canada
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Conditions in London

Canadian Military Headquarters,
2 Cockspur Street, S.W.1,
London, ENGLAND.

The Director,
Historical Section,
General Staff,
National Defence Headquarters,
Ottawa, CANADA.

Sir,

I have the honour to present a
further report.

2. This report deals with the situation in the city of London as it is to-day after four and a half months of bombing by the enemy. The observations here presented are additional to those made in my first report, dated 31 Dec. 1940, which contained my first impressions of the state of the capital. Since that time I have visited other areas and talked to many people, and am now able to set down, I hope, a more complete picture of existing conditions.

SKETCH OF THE COURSE OF THE BOMBING

3. It will be recalled that the enemy attempted little in the way of bomb attacks upon this country for many months following the outbreak of the present war. He adopted a more active and more ruthless policy beginning 18 June, 1940, when the "Battle of France" was virtually over and the French government had sued for an armistice. A considerable number of casualties were caused among British civilians during the remainder of June and the month of July. About the middle of August the attack was intensified, and it appeared that an attempt was being made by the Germans to obtain air superiority preparatory to invasion. On 15 Aug. CROYDON was raided; and on 24 Aug. bombs were dropped for the first time in central London. The capital's real ordeal may be said to have begun on the afternoon of 7 Sept., when it "was bombed without cessation for many hours", the attack being concentrated especially upon the region around the Docks. From this time onwards, through September, October and November, London was bombed intensively and largely indiscriminately, and great damage was done. In his early daylight raids the enemy's losses were heavy, and as time passed he transferred his operations more and more to the hours of darkness, when his bombers were relatively safe from the fighters of the R.A.F. Later he began to direct his heaviest blows against provincial ports and industrial centres - a much more sensible policy in a military view - and the attacks on London began to slacken, though they have never ceased. Probably the most destructive single attack yet made was a comparatively recent one - the incendiary raid on the City (29 Dec 1940) which is referred to in my Report No. 1.

4. In the foregoing paragraph the dates (and the quotation concerning the raid of 7 Sept.) derive from The Times Review of the Year 1940, published with The Times of 2 Jan 1941. From the same source, and The Times of 21 Jan. 1941, come the following official figures of civilian casualties, which reflect the general course of the raids on the United Kingdom (not on London alone):

| <u>Month of 1940</u> | <u>Killed</u> | <u>Injured seriously</u> |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| June (from 18th) | 336 | 476 |
| July | 258 | 321 |
| August | 1,075 | 1,261 |
| September | 6,954 | 10,615 |
| October | 6,334 | 8,695 |
| November | 4,588 | 6,202 |
| December | 3,793 | 5,044 |

5. The heavy raid on COUNTRY on the night of 14-15 Nov. might perhaps be taken as marking the end of London's worst period; this was the beginning of intensive attacks on provincial objectives, which have been much in evidence since

6. As noted in my first report, the attacks on London appear to have accomplished nothing towards breaking civilian morale. Nevertheless, Mr. L.B. PEARSON of Canada House, in a conversation with me on 6 Jan., expressed the view that the continuous heavy raids were having some effect on the population at the time when they were abandoned. One could feel, he said, a growing strain and tenseness; had the Germans been able to keep up these raids, the result might have been serious. He spoke, I presume, with special reference to the period in September last when heavy raiding was being carried on both by day and night, and perhaps to the period thereafter when night raids were almost continuous.

7. At the present time, though attacks on London continue, they are less frequent, and in general less severe, than formerly. Daylight raiding has almost ceased; though I arrived in London on 26 Dec., I did not hear an alert signal in daylight until 5 Jan., and even then no sound of bombing or gunfire followed. Since my arrival, there has been no interruption of work at C.M.H.Q. by bombing, and no occasion for the staff to take shelter. A recent tendency of enemy policy has been increased reliance on incendiary bombs; but the measures taken since the City raid of 29 Dec. (notably "compulsory fire-watching") have largely reduced the danger from this source. The small German fire-bombs are evidently not dangerous if they are seen to fall and are promptly dealt with.

8. It goes without saying, however, that considerable damage is still being inflicted. I saw an example of this on the morning of Sunday, 12 Jan. Going towards the East End with a view to seeing the damage in that area, I alighted at the BANK tube station. The passengers on my train were conducted to the street by a devious route, and on reaching it we found a huge new crater, caused by a bomb dropped the previous night, squarely in the junction of LOMBARD and THREAD-NEEDLE Streets, within a few feet of the outer wall of the Bank of England. At first I was inclined to think that the location of the burst was a piece of good luck, but a few minutes later a policeman on duty near the Monument told me that the bomb had penetrated part of the tube station and that 150 persons had been taken out dead by 1100 hrs. (it was then about noon).

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DEFENCE, ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

9. Of late, there seems to have been a slight increase in the effectiveness of the defences against night bombers. On the night of Jan. 19-20, for instance, five enemy bombers were reported destroyed, four of them by anti-aircraft fire. There are also occasional reports of bombers being destroyed by our night fighters. Both fighters and A.A. batteries, I understand, are now using new special devices (as they are termed in the newspapers) the effectiveness of which will doubtless increase with the passage of time. On the whole, however, it seems clear that a wholly effective defence against night bombing has yet to be found. I note in the G.H.Q. (Home Forces) Intelligence Summaries that a number of Britain's recent raid-free nights are attributed to bad weather on the Continent.

10. The civil population now appears to be spending less time in shelters than formerly. The London Underground stations are still fairly crowded with night shelterers (mostly people from the less fortunate classes - though some are well dressed - and with a good many foreigners among them) but the congestion is no longer as great as it was. Casual conversation indicates that in present conditions most people prefer to sleep in their beds and take the relatively small chance of bombs striking on or close to their particular dwellings. One family of my acquaintance are using only the ground floor of their house, on which they have one strengthened room for shelter purposes. I gather that the surface shelters which have been constructed in great numbers in streets and other public places are scarcely being used at all.

NATURE AND EXTENT OF DAMAGE

11. As noted in my Report No. 1, the first impression upon the arriving visitor is that the damage to London is rather less in extent than he has been led to anticipate; but longer residence here warns him against underrating it, and as he travels about the city he realizes that the sum total is very large. As before explained, though the damage is not equally distributed no region appears to have escaped. For example, the Bayswater region where I live has got off rather easily; but it contains at least one very bad piece of damage - where BARRIE STREET, a short thoroughfare running between CRAVEN TERRACE and GLOUCESTER TERRACE, forming almost a continuation of LANCASTER GATE, has been wholly destroyed by a land-mine or a very heavy bomb. Every house here was either blown down or so badly damaged as to necessitate demolition. It is conceivable that this was a bad miss intended for PADDINGTON STATION.

12. Having been told that the dock area was particularly badly damaged, I walked about the most accessible part of it - that around ST. KATHERINE'S DOCKS and LONDON DOCKS, immediately east of the Tower, - on 12 Jan. The visible damage to warehouses and other dockside buildings, as well as to commercial premises and dwellings nearby, has been heavy; though the docks are still in use, at least to some extent. Curiously enough, the great brick wall surrounding the LONDON DOCKS did not appear to have been breached at any point. Among the buildings heavily damaged are some new blocks of workers' flats, constructed presumably in connection with slum-clearance schemes. On 12 Jan. some fires were still smouldering in the vicinity of WAPPING HIGH STREET as the result of an incendiary raid the previous night; but the heaviest damage in this region generally was inflicted in September, 1940, at the time when the London raids began. Of course, the docks must be considered a legitimate military objective. This cannot be said of the City, which as a result of the raid on the night of 29-30 Dec. suffered the heaviest damage I have yet seen anywhere.

13. I have visited the City three times since this raid, and only on the third visit did I fully appreciate the extent of the ruin which it occasioned. On the first visit I merely saw the area immediately around St. Paul's, and had occasion to wonder at the cathedral's escape, in view of the fact that buildings all around it were destroyed. The cathedral was, in fact, struck by incendiary bombs, but saved by the vigilance of its staff, as many other buildings could have been saved if properly watched. My second visit took me along the river by UPPER THAMES STREET, and through QUEEN STREET and KING STREET. In this vicinity a great many individual buildings - two or three to a block - have been burned out. The fact that in many cases the damage is confined to the upper floors is presumably a tribute to the efficiency of the fire services. I came back by way of CHEAP-SIDE. Here the damage is worse, large areas, several buildings at a time, being wholly destroyed. It was only when I penetrated into the section behind the Guildhall, on my third visit, however, that I discovered the worst devastation. The region between ALDERSGATE STREET and MOORGATE, in and about LONDON WALL and JEWIN STREET, is virtually a total loss. Here one walks for block after block without seeing a building that can be saved. The police allowed me to pass through some streets still closed to the public as unsafe, and I can testify that no devastation caused by prolonged bombardment in the last war could possibly be much worse. It is remarkable that a four-hour raid did such damage. Incidentally, the sight of a London County Council fire station in RED CROSS STREET standing intact among the ruins is evidence of the truth of the government's assertion that the damage would have been greatly reduced if the commercial premises in this vicinity had been properly watched.

14. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the damage to historic structures - the Guildhall, the numerous churches, etc. - which resulted from this raid. One of the saddest losses is the church of ALL HALLOWS BARKING, close to the Tower, which dates in part from about 1087 and was saved from the Great Fire of 1666; it is a total ruin, with only the walls standing. But to catalogue all the London churches destroyed or damaged within the past few months would be a considerable task.

DEALING WITH THE DAMAGE

15. In the nature of things, not much reconstruction of buildings is being undertaken at present. Structures which have been only slightly damaged are of course being repaired to render them habitable; injuries to essential public services are of course made good as soon as possible; but where a house is really badly damaged it is simply taken down and the materials carted away. (A great dump of such materials has been established in Hyde Park.) This procedure is certainly better for public morale than to leave jagged and unsightly ruins wherever a bomb has struck. The business of demolition and cleaning-up appears to be handled with great efficiency. It is partly in civilian hands, but an increasingly large proportion is being handled through the Army, by the Pioneer Corps; and the Royal Engineers have done much demolition work in the City.

THE WARTIME ATMOSPHERE OF LONDON

16. Turning to a general description of the atmosphere of London to-day, one finds it difficult to summarize it in a few paragraphs; but at least some impressions may be set down.

17. As noted in Report No. 1, the extent to which normal life continues in the present abnormal circumstances, and the determination of the Londoner that it shall continue, are remarkable; but this generalization must be limited in the main to the hours of business, which are also the hours of daylight. The maintenance of normality to this extent is assisted now by the fact that the enemy has lately attempted little daylight bombing. After nightfall the normal activity of peacetime is in great part suspended. This is due in part to the constant possibility of air attack, with its accompaniments not only of danger but of disruption of transport and other services; but it is due also to the precautionary "blackout", which makes movement at night a slow and troublesome business. Under these conditions the line of least resistance is simply to stay at home; and a great many people take it.

18. The blackout is of course not absolute, in the sense of there being no lights at all; but there are so few, and they are so dim, that on a really dark night it is almost impossible to find one's way about without an electric torch. (In these circumstances one becomes more aware than ever before of the moon and stars; but the satisfaction which one feels in a moonlit night which makes it possible to move about freely is naturally somewhat alloyed by the reflection that it is conferring similar advantages upon the German bombers.) The brightest lights in evidence upon the streets are, perhaps, the red and green of the traffic signals, even though these have been reduced to plus-signs in the middle of the lenses. The shuttered headlights of motor-cars and buses, though brighter in some cases than in others, must be looked for with some care in crossing roadways. The "Belisha beacons" are out - like their sponsor - and are merely one more menace to the pedestrian; and the street-lamps, when they are lighted at all, are only glow-worm sparks high up in the gloom.

19. The most distinguished casualty of the "blitz" (the term always applied in conversation to heavy bombing) has been the London theatre. The "legitimate" drama in this city appears to have come to an almost complete standstill when the raids were at their worst. Now, like other aspects of London life, it is reviving, and adapting itself to new and strange conditions. No theatre, however, is now open at night. Those which are not closed altogether are on a matinee basis. Three examples may be taken from among the advertisements in The Times: John Gielgud is producing Dear Brutus daily at 2:15 (Saturdays, 12:30 and 2:45); Jean Forbes-Robertson is appearing in Berkeley Square daily at 2:15, also Thursdays and Saturdays at 11 a.m.; and an enterprising gentleman is staging "Lunch Time Shakespeare" (one-hour performances) daily except Saturdays at 1 p.m. (Saturdays, 2 p.m.) plus a 2:15 performance on Thursdays. Cinema theatres are open, and doing well; but the latest performance which I see advertised begins at 6:35 p.m.

20. The evening dulness of London is accentuated by the fact that practically all shops (and even a good many restaurants) close when "blackout time" arrives. In numerous cases, indeed, they close in time to allow their work-people to reach home before darkness falls. After dusk it is difficult to purchase so much as a bar of chocolate - quite apart from the fact that there are very few bars of chocolate for sale these days. It is possible to walk for a long distance on Oxford Street in the early evening without finding a restaurant open. It will be gathered from these observations that London has lost many of the attractions which it possessed for Canadian troops in the last war, and unless there is a material change it is doubtful whether many soldiers will henceforth be found spending their leave in the capital.

21. There is as yet nothing approaching a shortage of food. It is true that during the four weeks I have spent here there have been two cuts in the meat ration, and the effect is particularly noticeable in the menus of the cheaper restaurants, where vegetables are being substituted for meat whenever possible. No restaurant will serve both meat and fish in the same meal. Broadly speaking, however, there is no difficulty in getting just as good meals as in peacetime. It is chiefly in the items of sugar and butter that stringency is observable; restaurants serve both in very small quantities. No ration cards are necessary when ordering restaurant meals, though this may come.

22. One additional point may be mentioned: the prodigious number of foreigners now to be seen in London. This is particularly noticeable at hotels like the Cumberland. It is natural that this should be the case, with Europe in its present state, and natural also that Jewish refugees especially should be much in evidence. Many of the foreigners are soldiers, sailors or airmen; and of these most wear British uniforms with the special insignia of their own country. One frequently sees men wearing the word "Poland" on their shoulders; but "France", "Netherlands", "Czechoslovakia" are likewise common. French is frequently heard spoken in the streets. A good many of the refugees give the impression, at least, of being in comfortable circumstances financially, but there are doubtless many others who are having difficulties. The presence of these people in England emphasizes the fact that this country is to-day the last stronghold of European freedom. I hope that this is duly appreciated by our own troops; but I note that some Canadian officers view these Continental refugees with a somewhat jaundiced eye.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

(Sgd.) C.P. Stacey.

(C.P. Stacey) Major,
Historical Officer, C.M.H.Q.

(Copied in Historical Section, Jul 43.)