

Times, 3.12.36.

Letters to the Editor

AIR DEFENCE OF
LONDONSHORTAGE OF MEN
AND MATERIAL

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—Eight months ago you allowed me to direct attention in your columns to the paramount importance of the air defence of London in any estimation of the tasks that then lay before the Government with regard to our defence deficiencies. Recent debates in both Houses of Parliament have hardly touched upon this subject except in so far as the general aspect of Territorial Army recruiting and a larger production of aircraft and engines are concerned. You may therefore think the moment opportune for a brief statement of the elements of a successful air defence showing to what extent they are present in the conditions of to-day.

Successful air defence implies successful air interception. In spite of much that has been said and written by uninformed persons expressing a contrary opinion, it is now beginning to be realized that such interceptions can be made if our organization is complete and efficient. For instance, in the air exercises last summer, although the area of operations was severely limited by the paucity of the available defence forces, conditions approached those of actual war, and the number of interceptions was very large indeed, especially during the periods of darkness, when more than 80 per cent. of the bombers were engaged by the defending fighters.

The defence therefore depends primarily on our fighter or defensive aircraft, the duty of which is to intercept and attack the opposing bombers. But, apart from the progress which has been made in the technique of the anti-aircraft gunner, it also depends, to a degree which apparently is not realized by the general public, on the anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. Although the fighters can be controlled from the ground in accordance with reports received from the Observer Corps, their task is rendered much easier by day if the anti-aircraft guns are firing in the outer defence zones, because the bursting shells enable them to gauge the lines of approach of the attacking formations; while by night, unless the attackers are picked up, and held, by the searchlights, our fighters cannot see to attack them at all, and our elaborate defensive organization might almost as well be non-existent.

In the light of all this one would have imagined that the greatest efforts would have been made by the Government to speed up the measures necessary for the air defence of London during the year which has elapsed since they were returned to power. But what are the facts? The latest returns show that the 1st Anti-Aircraft Division of the Territorial Army, which comprises the anti-aircraft guns and searchlights for the London area, is more than 9,000 men short of the 16,800 which is the minimum number considered necessary to man them. Further, although plans have been made to replace the obsolete guns and lights with which almost all the existing units are equipped, there

is no indication what order of priority, if any, such replacements have been given in the general defence plans.

The nation is entitled to demand much more energetic action to remedy this serious situation than is at present evident. The Royal Air Force is already in possession of an adequate fighter force, highly trained and with a fully tried organization behind it, but it is fatally handicapped by the terrible deficiencies I have described. The Secretary of State for War in a very recent speech referred to recruiting for the Regular Army as being a graver problem than recruiting for the Territorial Army. But would the Air Ministry, responsible as it is for the air defence of London and of the country as a whole, subscribe to this view? Is the Government satisfied that the division of responsibility between the Air Ministry and the War Office for the recruitment and equipment of essential air defence units is in the best interests of the country? There is no such division in Germany. Is the existing Territorial Army system, which aims at producing fully-trained men only after war, has been in progress some time, suitable for air defence units which will be required to function at the highest pitch of efficiency at a few hours' notice? These are important questions which do not appear to have received the consideration they deserve.

Yet it is ignorance rather than apathy which seems to be responsible for the position in which the British people stands to-day in relation to this vital matter. To realize this one has only to imagine the decisive action that would follow a revelation that the Royal Navy was unable to use its weapons effectively owing to a shortage of personnel, and a lack of essential equipment, in its fighting ships. Surely the defence of our capital, exposed to air attack on a scale still unrecognized and in which is centred the life of a great Empire to a degree unexampled in the case of any other capital in Europe, is of comparable importance to the defence of our sea-borne trade. Time will show whether we can continue to neglect it with impunity.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

J. D. BOYLE, Air Commodore,
R.A.F. (Retired).
Brooklands, Dumfries.

UNIVERSITY WOMEN

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—Once again the British Federation of University Women has held its annual sale at Crosby Hall. It is with deep gratitude that we are able to say that her Majesty Queen Mary, who most graciously sent a gift to the sale last year, has helped again in the same manner this year.

Thanks largely to the publication of a similar letter in *The Times*, the funds collected through the sale and appeal last year enabled the federation to endow fellowships which provide living evidence of the value of international cooperation at a time when nationalistic barriers often are raised as if to test its efficacy. Such fellowships were awarded to an English geologist and an English archaeologist, a German zoologist and an English astronomer, and grants were made to six German women no longer able to earn their living in their own country. Through the generosity of a member of the federation it has also been possible to send an English worker to Australia. Space forbids more detail.

The need this year is still greater, but success can be assured if all those who believe in international good will as a solvent of many of the world's ills will send a donation to the British Federation of University Women at Crosby Hall, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, S.W.3.

Yours, &c.,
FRANCES H. MELVILLE, President,
British Federation of University
Women, Limited.