

Bomber turned Fighter

Graham Warner explains how the Blenheim was turned into a 'bolt-on' fighter that rose to the challenge



IF ASKED to name the most unlikely RAF aircraft to see extensive service as a fighter during World War Two, few would mention the Bristol Blenheim. Yet this bomber was deployed in considerable numbers as a pure fighter by both Fighter and Coastal Commands during the first two years of the war.

At that time the RAF did not have a long-range fighter, nor a type suitable as a dedicated night-fighter. So not only was the Blenheim used to fill these gaps in the RAF's armoury but also it had to occupy them for far longer than expected, until more suitable types, such as the Beaufighter and DH Mosquito, became available.

The Blenheim originated in 1935 as a private venture product by the Bristol Aeroplane Company at Filton for a one-off civil executive aircraft, the Type 142. This all metal design, very advanced for the time, had been commissioned by Lord Rothermere, proprietor of the *Daily Mail*. He christened it *Britain First* and this machine soon became famous.

When tested at Martlesham Heath it achieved the then sensational speed of 307mph (494km/h) – faster than

the Gloster Gladiator just ordered as a front-line fighter. In the mid-1930s, nobody could possibly foresee that the military version, the Type 142M Blenheim, and its progeny the Type 149 Blenheim IV and Type 160 the Blenheim V, would serve in so many roles or for so.

BOLT-ON FIGHTER

Air Marshal Hugh Dowding was appointed AOC-in-C of the newly-created Fighter Command in 1936 and he set about creating the system of monitoring incoming raiders that was to serve so well in 1940. He pressed the Air Staff for more modern fighters and greater numbers of them. And he husbanded those he did have with dogged determination.

Production for the pre-war RAF Expansion Schemes concentrated on bombers, but after the Munich Crisis of September 1938 the desperate need for more fighters became all too clear. As the Blenheim, then being produced in large numbers, had proved faster than the RAF's elderly biplane fighters, a fighter version seemed a logical step for the Air Staff to take.



A line-up of 604 Squadron Mk.IFs at Northolt in April 1940 during a VIP visit. Fg Off John Cunningham, later a top-scoring night-fighter pilot, is shaking hands with the Air Minister.
ALL VIA AUTHOR

ABOVE, LEFT: L1440, a 25 Squadron Mk.IF, still without its gun-pack, landing at Hawkinge in 1938.

This Mk.IF 'fighter' was created simply by bolting under the bomb-bay a pack of four Brownings with 2,000 rounds of 0.303in ammunition. These gun-packs were made at the Southern Railways workshop at Ashford and they went on to make 1,375.

Dowding wanted to remove the heavy hydraulic dorsal turret removing from the fighter Blenheims, as tests had shown that this reduced weight and increased performance, but he was overruled. The standard Mk.IF had a top speed of only 265mph, and by 1940 the Messerschmitt Bf 109E was not



“Dowding did not want Blenheims in Fighter Command at all, for he understood its shortcomings as a fighter...”

only over 50mph faster but also cannon-armed.

Given a free hand, Dowding did not want Blenheims in Fighter Command at all, for he understood its shortcomings as a fighter – far too slow, insufficiently manoeuvrable, under-armed and poorly-armoured. But Blenheims he had to have and in December 1938 four regular Fighter Command squadrons were re-equipped

with Mk.IFs: 23, 29 and 64 (from Hawker Demons) and 25 (from Gladiators). In January 1939 three Auxiliary units 600, 601 and 604, all based at Hendon, followed suit.

These Mk.IFs had camouflaged upper surfaces with black lower surfaces initially. In September 1938 the starboard half was painted white, in common with the Command's single-seaters.

EXTRA UNITS

At the start of the war, the RAF had more Blenheims on charge than any other type, so it is no surprise that Mk.IVs of Bomber Command carried out the first operation, and the first bombing raid, or that Fighter Command's first offensive operation was undertaken by Blenheims.

Nine Mk.IFs of 25 Squadron were despatched on November 26, 1939, but in poor visibility they failed to find their target, the base of German mine-laying seaplanes at Borkum. So 12 Mk.IFs, six each from 25 and 601 Squadrons, were sent on the 28th. Using Coastal Command

navigators they did find the target and made several low-level strafing passes without loss. Amazingly for such a lengthy trip over the sea they carried neither dinghies nor 'Mae West' life-jackets.

Fighter Blenheim squadrons were mainly used for convoy protection and coastal patrols during the so-called 'Phoney War' from September 1939 to the German 'Blitzkrieg' in May 1940. Dowding constantly pressed hard for additional fighter units and, as the Hurricanes and Spitfires were not being produced quickly enough, six further Blenheim squadrons were formed as an interim measure: 92, 145, 219, 222, 229 and 234.

Of these 92 and 145 were lucky enough to change their Blenheims for Spitfire Is in May 1940 before becoming operational, but 222, 229 and 234 flew Blenheims before converting to single-seaters. Poor 219 Squadron had to continue

resist invasion. Dowding was ordered to send three squadrons of fighters: 263 with Gladiators plus 23 and 604 with Mk.IFs to give close support to the Allied Expeditionary Force. He resisted this dispersal of his forces, and argued that:

"The Blenheim... is an altogether unsuitable type to pit against the Messerschmitt. It has unprotected tanks and no armour and its speed and manoeuvrability are quite inadequate to enable it even to bring its main armament into action against German fighters. It must rely on the single back gun. We have already learnt from Bomber Command that it falls easy victim in these circumstances."

His protest was ignored and

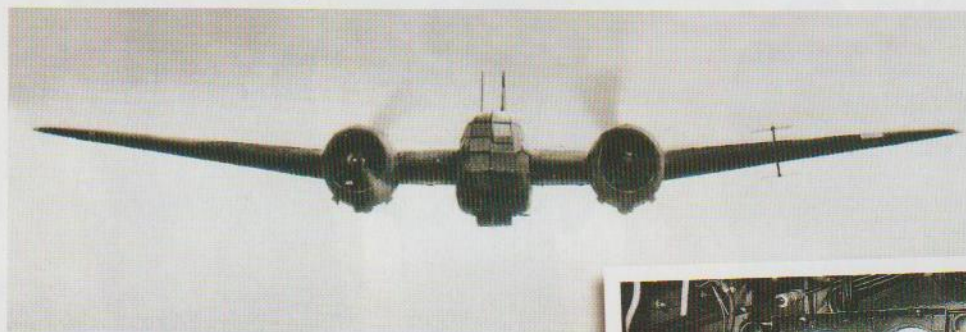
Dowding: "The Blenheim... is an altogether unsuitable type to pit against the Messerschmitt."

BLITZKREIG ONSLAUGHT

Blenheim Fighters were involved from the very start of the German onslaught on May 10, 1940. At 03:40 hours Plt Off Anderson in a 600 Squadron Mk.IF was vectored towards some radar 'blips' off the Belgian coast, he found six Heinkel He 111s which he promptly attacked, damaging two, but was hit by return fire and had to return to Manston, Kent.

Later that morning Sqn Ldr Wells, 600's CO, led six Blenheim fighters to strafe German transport aircraft at Waalhaven. In their first pass they shot down a Junkers Ju 52 and damaged several more on the ground.

On their second pass they were jumped by Bf 110s and five of the six Mk.IFs were shot down, including



Head-on view of a Blenheim Mk.IF, showing the AI receiver aerials on the port wing - they were also in the leading edge either side of the port engine.

RIGHT: An AI Mk.III set mounted in the fuselage 'well' of a Blenheim behind the observer. The 'black box' on the right is the power pack.

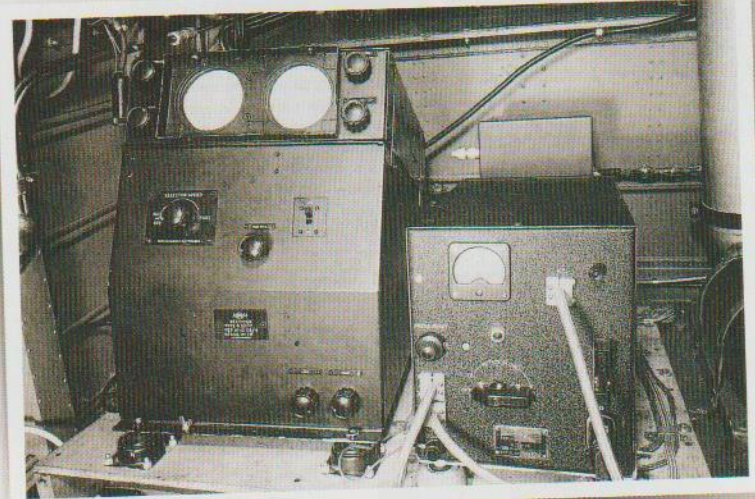
with its Blenheims, not converting to Beaufighters until the winter of 1940.

Three more of these 'transitional' squadrons were formed, 141, 245 and 242 (with Canadian pilots), to work up on Blenheims before converting to Hurricanes or Boulton Paul Defiants. Some 62 Mk.IFs were lost in flying accidents during this period.

Early in 1940, heavy losses to British shipping in the North Sea caused four new Mk.IF 'Trade Protection' squadrons to be formed - 235, 236, 254 and 248. So at that time no less than 21 Fighter Command squadrons were equipped with Blenheims; some long-term, some short-term. In view of their duties, the last four units were transferred to Coastal Command and issued with brand new Mk.IVFs, though 236 and 248 operated a mix till July 1940.

NORWEGIAN CAMPAIGN

Prior to the German attack in the west, there had been a forlorn attempt to help the Norwegians



the order stood, but Dowding circumvented it by withdrawing 23 and 604 from the front-line for their Blenheims to be fitted with self-sealing tanks and armour protection for the crew, undertaking to send them to Norway when this work was carried out. He sent 263's Gladiators, adding 46 Squadron's Hurricanes soon after, but was proved right when the Allied Force had to evacuate Norway, and all of the aircraft and almost all of their pilots were lost.

Later on that fateful day, 604 sent six Mk.IFs from Northolt to Wattisham to escort 12 Mk.IV bombers of 110 Squadron to attack Ju 52s on a Dutch beach. After the ineffective bombing, the fighter Blenheims carried out a low-level strafing attack, claiming seven Ju 52s destroyed, but losing one aircraft which force-landed in the sand dunes. Plt Off Ian Joll, the pilot, removed his tie and used it as a wick into an opened fuel tank and set the Blenheim on fire before escaping.



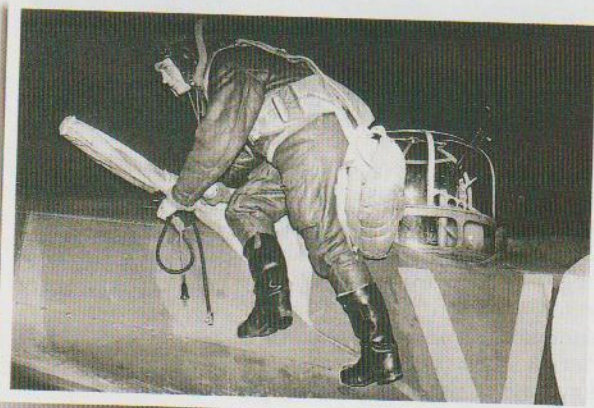
INTO THE NIGHT

Unnoticed during the great 'flap' caused by the Allies' futile attempts to stem the rapid German advance, an event of historical importance took place on May 12, 1940. It was the first ever radar-guided airborne interception, directed initially by a ground-based radar station, and completed by a then-secret air-to-air radar set.

Flt Lt Chris Smith in his Mk.IVF of the Special Duties Flight at Martlesham Heath, Suffolk, was guided by Wg Cdr Farnes at nearby

No.25 Squadron Mk.IF L1426 from Hawkinge over Tilbury during the August 1939 exercises.

Pit Off Don Anderson boards his 29 Squadron Mk.IF.



Bawdsey Manor until the two 'blips' on his screen converged, but Smith could see no other aircraft in the haze, then AC1 Newton made contact on his primitive AI (airborne interception) set and guided his pilot towards the contact until Smith saw a He 111 ahead and shot it down.

But Smith was wounded and the Blenheim damaged by return fire. He crash-landed at the base and the Blenheim was burnt out, although the crew escaped. Smith recovered to return to duty in July as CO of the Flight.

Much experimental and development work on both ground-to-air and air-to-air radar, had been underway since pre-war days. The boffins at Bawdsey worked closely with the Blenheims of the Special Duty Flight, plus the dedicated Blenheim Radar Calibration Flights, and with Flights detached to Martlesham from the regular Blenheim fighter units.

By the outbreak of war some 15 Mk.IFs (of the 111 then in squadron service) had been fitted with AI Mk.I, the world's first air-to-air radar. All this work led to AI Mk.II

and III and to the Blenheim Mk.IF becoming the primary night-fighter until the far more powerful and better armed Beaufighter, with the much-improved AI Mk.IV, came – but only very slowly – into front-line use.

The Mk.IFs, plus a few Mk.IVFs, of 23, 25, 29, 219, 600, and 604 Squadrons bore the brunt of the night fighting during the 'Blitz', each receiving one or two Beaufighters from September onwards, but their Mk.IFs continued nocturnal operations well into 1941. A rare success came when Plt Off Herrick of 25 Squadron shot down a Dornier Do 17 and an He 111 on one night and another He 111 the next.

There were few Blenheim night interceptions, but most resulted from the 'Human Eyeball Mk.I' not the new, often unreliable 'black boxes' of AI. But a world first was achieved on the night of July 22 when a Mk.IF of the Fighter Interception Unit at Tangmere, Sussex, using its AI Mk.IV radar, shot down a Dornier 17Z off Brighton.

The FIU had grown from a flight of six AI-equipped Mk.IFs from both

25 and 600 Squadrons specifically to develop the improved radar sets. However, only about a dozen of the hundreds of enemy bombers roaming British skies were brought down by the night-fighters, but 14 Mk.IFs were lost, half of them through accidents.

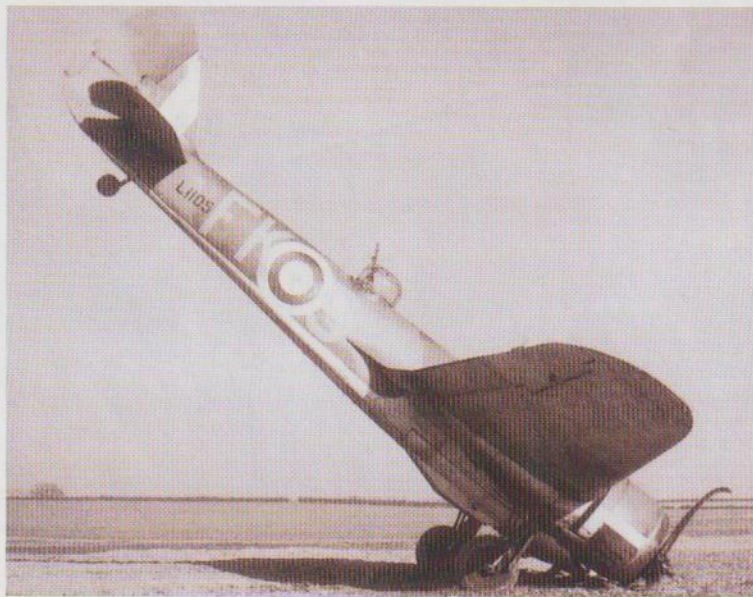
Three new Coastal Command squadrons, 86, 252 and 272, were formed in the winter of 1940 with Mk.IVFs, followed by 143, and 404 (RCAF) a little later – some of these units had a mix of Mk.IFs too. No.86 converting to Beauforts, the others to Beaufighters, within a few months.

That winter 23 Squadron initiated the new tactic of night intruder

On a wing and a prayer



Short flight - V5803 a 254 Squadron Mk.IVF taking off from Dyce on January 30, 1942, only to crash moments later. The elevator trim tab control cables had been reversed and the pilot, Flt Lt Hal Randall was unable to prevent the nose rising the instant it became airborne. Moments later it stalled into the ground, fortunately neither he nor his passenger (the Station Padre!) were injured but a few hasty prayers were uttered.



operations over enemy airfields in France and the Netherlands using their Mk.IFs with the AI sets and aerials removed. They converted to Douglas Havocs from March 1941 to continue this effective activity.

No.25 was the first Fighter Command unit to receive some Mk.IVFs soon after the outbreak of war, while 600 Squadron was re-equipped with the Mk.IVF before changing to Beaufighters in September 1940. It still had some Mk.IFs as late as October 1941.

No.68 Squadron, officially a Beaufighter unit by May 1941, still had six Blenheim Mk.IFs, and at least one Mk.IVF (Z5722 'WM-Z'). This was the favoured mount of the CO Wg Cdr Max Aitken DFC as, being a former FIU aircraft, it had a fully 'sorted' AI set that actually worked. (This was one of the paint schemes adopted by Blenheim G-BPIV, and it graces our front cover - ED.)

During the Luftwaffe's night 'Blitz' of the winter of 1940 Dowding was

sets and the ground-controlled radar, together with the Beaufighters to make full use of them.

This criticism, on top of the 'Big Wing' controversy, and his reluctance to use single-seaters at night, led to his dismissal. In my view this was a shameful way to treat the commander of the force that had just won a vital victory against the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain.

L1105, a Mk.IF with 219 Squadron at Redhill in May 1940, in a neat three-point attitude - but not the right one!

COASTAL BLENHEIMS

Coastal Command's 235 Squadron lost one of its new Mk.IVFs on May 10 when it was damaged by a Bf 109 off Holland, belly-landed back at Bircham Newton, Norfolk, and caught fire. Two days later three more of 235's Mk.IVFs tangled with

"...this was a shameful way to treat the commander of the force that had just won a vital victory against the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain."



criticised by a cabal of senior Air Staff officers for the poor performance of the night defences. Although he had pointed out the inadequacies of the Blenheim as a fighter, it remained the principal night defence aircraft that he was able to deploy. He was frustrated by the delays in getting into service both the improved AI

Bf 110s over the Hook of Holland and were holding their own well, bringing one down, when eight Bf 109s joined in, altering the odds.

Fg Off Peacock claimed a '109, seen to crash on the shore, but he alone escaped. The other two IVFs; Plt Offs Savill's and Smith's were shot down and the crews perished. LAC

P4834 of the Special Duties Flight, the crew used AI to intercept and fire on a He 111 on the night of May 12, 1940

Tom Lowry, the wireless operator/air gunner in the latter aircraft was a 17-year-old trainee.

No.235 were to lose another seven Blenheims on operations by the end of May, plus three more in flying accidents. They had only a couple of accidents in June, but the 27th was a black day for 235 when four of its Mk.IVFs were shot down by '109s near IJsselmeer, Netherlands, with but one survivor from the 12 crewmen.

The unit lost another 15 Blenheims by the end of the year, making a total of 34 in 1940, plus 20 more in 1941 – they converted to Beaufighters in December 1941. No.248 Squadron lost 13 in 1940 but only six in 1941 as the unit had changed to 'Beaus' by July 1941. While 236 Squadron lost 15 in 1940 and another 16 by the winter of 1941, it did not change to the new type until February 1942.

No.254 Squadron had been active over the North Sea both during and long after the Norwegian campaign. In April a patrol of three of its new Mk.IVFs caught a He 111J and all three made classic 'No.1 Attacks' on it, then fired at it individually until all the ammunition in their

gun-packs was exhausted. Then they drew alongside one-by-one so that their single-gun turrets could bring fire to bear. After enduring these attacks by the three Blenheim fighters for 20 minutes, the lone bomber escaped into mist and landed safely at Sola.

The Blenheim crews claimed one He 111 'probably destroyed' but it was found that only 20 strikes from the *thousands* of rounds fired at it had scored hits. The first two Blenheims to attack had been struck more times by the Heinkel's gunners.

Sgt Rose was a better shot, for he destroyed two Ju 52s and a He 59D floatplane in a strafing run over Sola/Stavanger airfield and then attacked a He 111 he met on his way back over the North Sea, claiming it 'probably destroyed'. He was correct for although it staggered back to base it was written off.

Another pair of 254's Blenheims shot-down a Ju 88; but later another was hit by return fire from another '88, crash-landed and was written off. Sgt Mitchell shot-down a Do 18 flying-boat, but another 254 Mk.IVF was hit by flak over Bergen



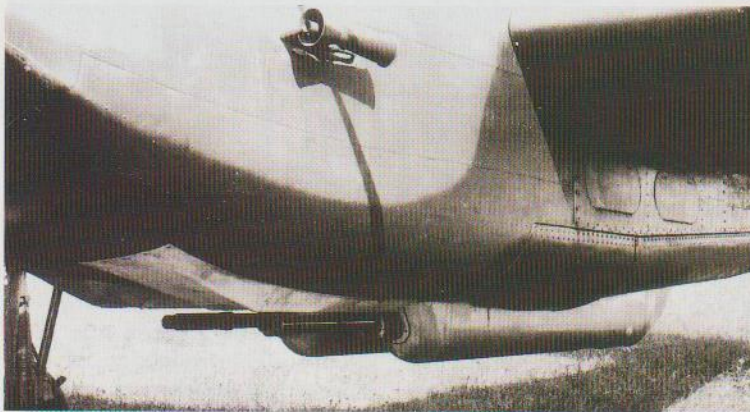
Sgt Harry Stewart in the turret of his 236 Squadron Mk.IVF at Aldergrove, September 1940, still with the single pan-fed Vickers 0.303.

Harbour and spun into it, killing Flt Lt Heath and his crew. Plt Off Alexander and crew died when their Blenheim was felled by a Bf 109 off Stavanger on May 27.

Apart from this costly activity off the coast of Norway, a section of 254 made a foray over the Channel on June 1 to intercept some Ju 87s but were 'bounced' by '109s and two of the three were shot-down. There was one survivor from the six-strong crew.

June 1940 was a grim month for 254 as six of its Mk.IVFs were shot down off Norway and 17 of the 18 crewmen were killed, only Plt Off Joe Hill survived. He was rescued by a trawler and became a PoW. Joe lived until June 2006, being an active member of the Blenheim Society until his death.

No.254 Squadron lost another ten Blenheims by the end of 1940, a total of 23 in the year, plus 20 more in 1941, and eight in 1942 up to July when the unit converted to Beaufighters. This was the last of the Blenheim fighter squadrons to change over.



Twin 20mm cannons mounted on L6787 at A&AEE Boscombe Down in an attempt to increase the fire-power, but the conversion was not proceeded with.

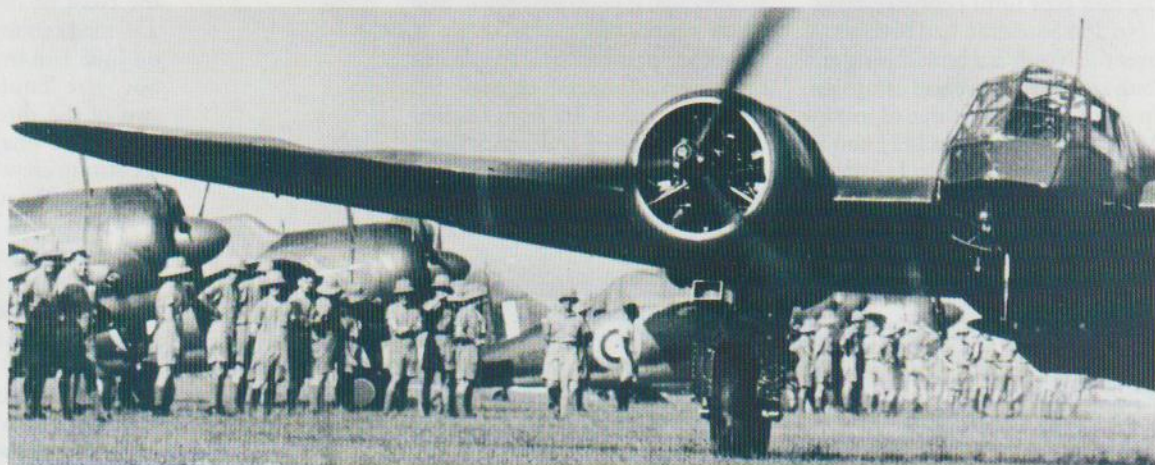
Crews of 236 Squadron scramble for their Mk.IVFs at Saint Eval in November 1940.





Coastal Command crews in front of their Mk.IVFs. Note the gun pack on the nearest one, which is having its oil replenished.

A Mk.IF of 62 Squadron taxiing past Buffaloes when leaving Tengah, Singapore, for Alor Star, Northern Malaya, in February 1941.



MIDDLE AND FAR EAST

Blenheim fighters were also active in both the Middle East and the Far East. In Iraq, 30 Squadron was the first overseas unit to receive Blenheims. In January 1938 it converted two flights to Mk.IFs serving in defence of the Suez area, then in the desperate campaigns in Greece and Crete.

Nine Mk.IVFs of 203 Squadron flew up from Aden to Maleme in Crete to help the eight remaining Mk.IFs of 30 Squadron defend the island. This small force was soon reduced even further by Luftwaffe attacks and unfortunate 'friendly fire' incidents. The pitifully few remnants were evacuated to Egypt.

Blenheim fighters also operated in Iraq, Iran, the Gulf, Palestine, and Syria plus the fluctuating campaigns in the Western Desert. No.30 Squadron finally converted to Hurricanes in June 1941, but 6 Squadron changed its Hurricanes for Blenheim Mk.IVFs in November, only to change back again in April 1942. No.203 Squadron remained at Aden with its Mk.IVFs and operated in East Africa and the

Red Sea area until late 1942.

The Blenheim Mk.IVs of 'B' Flight of both 45 and 14 Squadrons were converted to Mk.IVFs, as were some of 113 Squadron's. In the ground-strafting role they carried light bombs on the external rack behind the gun-pack, and some were modified with a 20mm cannon mounted in the nose on the floor of the observer's position. In addition, several Mk.IVFs of 15 Squadron South African Air Force

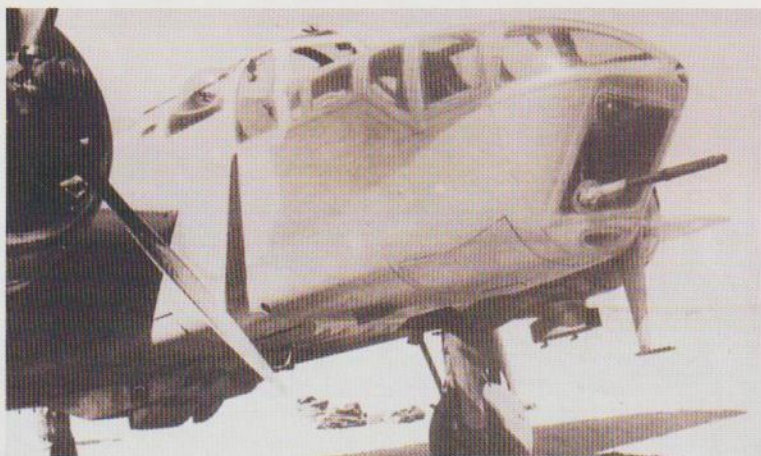
in the Western Desert were similarly modified.

In the Far East, 27 Squadron was the only night-fighter unit available, but was pressed into daytime fighting with its Mk.IFs in a futile attempt to halt the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore, then of Sumatra and Java. It lost all of its aircraft in the process, as did the Blenheim bomber units. No.27 re-formed at Amarda Road, India, in September 1942 with Mk.IVFs but within a couple of months it had converted to Beaufighters.

However unlikely as it may seem, Blenheims really acquitted themselves quite well in the straight fighter role, especially compared with the Bf 110 which was designed specifically as a long-range 'destroyer' fighter. After all, the Blenheim fighters were only converted from a light bomber, which

in turn was but a modified version of a civil executive aircraft.

The main contribution of the Blenheim fighters was their pioneering introduction of new operational techniques, such as radar-guided interceptions and night intruder missions to enemy airfields. Development of these techniques during the second half of the war proved to be of great importance to the operational effectiveness of the RAF.



The 'lash up' mounting of 20mm cannon on the floor of the observer's position, where it blocked his escape hatch.