



# Ministry of Defence

Air Command Secretariat  
Spitfire Block  
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Royal Air Force  
High Wycombe  
Buckinghamshire  
HP14 4UE

Ref: 07-10-2013-154300-025

Mr John Smith

E-mail address: [request-179968-d9479465@whatdotheyknow.com](mailto:request-179968-d9479465@whatdotheyknow.com)

30 October 2013

Dear Mr Smith

Thank you for your email of 7 October 2013 requesting the following information:

How many times, in the last 5 years, have RAF aircraft based in the United Kingdom had to be used, i.e. brought into the air to investigate an aircraft from another country entering United Kingdom air space without permission. Also what country are the aircraft, that enter UK airspace from another country, from. If you have no idea what I am getting at, because I have tried to word this too carefully I'm talking about incidents like the Russian Blackjack bomber entering UK airspace in March 2010 and Tornado Jets being scrambled to investigate. How often are aircraft like that Tornado scrambled to investigate other countries aircraft entering UK airspace without permission.

I am treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

A search for the information has now been completed within the Ministry of Defence, and I can confirm that information in scope of your request is held. The table below contains the number of days within each year that Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) launches of fighter aircraft occurred.

Year	Number of days QRA launched
2012	25
2011	18
2010	14
2009	14
2008	15

You required details of the nationality of aircraft causing QRA to launch. I can confirm that the MOD does hold details of the nationalities for those flights where interception or

investigation occurred. Our policy is to only release information for all QRA launches, and not to break this down further to just those QRA launches triggered by foreign military aircraft. I can therefore confirm that all launches within the period requested were either for Russian military aviation (either Bear or Blackjack aircraft) which approached the NATO Air Policing Area for which the United Kingdom has responsibility or civil aircraft within UK civil airspace that were causing concern to Air Traffic Controllers. Not all launches resulted in an interception, as some incidents were resolved before interception occurred. All Russian military aircraft remained in international airspace and did not enter UK sovereign airspace. The civil aircraft that were causing concern were registered in a range of countries, including those registered in the United Kingdom.

Section 26(1)(a)&(b) has been applied to information on the range of countries civil aircraft were from because it contains details which would prejudice the capability and effectiveness of the defence of the British Islands or any Colony and would prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of relevant forces and for these reasons I have set the level of prejudice against release of the exempted information at the higher level of “would” rather than “would be likely to”. The Act requires that we have to carry out a public interest test (PIT) in this respect to show that the reasons for withholding the information outweigh the reasons for releasing the information.

Public Interest (PI) factors in favour of disclosing the information requested:

- The public interest in ensuring that the UK is protected from airborne threats and that the resources invested in QRA are properly employed.
- To provide a detailed measure of the level of activity in the air policing area for which we have responsibility.
- To promote an understanding of the RAF’s ability to respond efficiently, effectively and appropriately to potential threats in UK airspace.

Public Interest (PI) factors against disclosing the information requested:

- If precise or comprehensive information on the nationality of aircraft that caused a QRA launch were released, any potential aggressor or terrorist organisation wishing to use aircraft as a means to attack the UK could extrapolate this information if they were probing our defences. It would consequently provide details of which probing flights triggered a QRA reaction.
- This in turn could give the criteria that provoke Quick Reaction Alerts and indicate the effectiveness of our QRA capability.

Because deterrence is a principal function of QRA and QRA is in turn an integral part of the air defence of the UK, the disclosure of information that might compromise the QRA deterrent capability, which is an ongoing armed operational capability, would also be a disclosure prejudicial to the defence of the UK. A limited disclosure providing information on the total number of days on which the QRA aircraft were launched within the requested period would provide a reasonable level of overall understanding of the level of QRA activity. As a limited amount of information has been released for some incidents as examples of how the RAF is able to respond to this kind of incident, the public interest in further disclosure of detailed dates and incident details is therefore limited. There remains a very strong public interest in preserving the RAF’s ability to defend the UK through the effectiveness of its air defences and to maintain its full deterrence value. I conclude that the balance of the public interest for providing the exact dates, nationality of aircraft causing a QRA launch and full details of the nature of the missions is firmly in favour of maintaining the exemption under S.26(1)(a)&(b) and thus of withholding the information.

If you are not satisfied with this response or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Deputy Chief Information Officer, 2nd Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail [CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk](mailto:CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk)). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely,

[Original signed]

Secretariat 3a1  
Air Command