The Battle of Britain – Britpolitics Fact Sheet

During the Second World War what became known as the Battle of Britain took place from July to October 1940.

This phase of the war was the German air force's attempt to gain air superiority over the Royal Air Force in Britain. It was the first major battle to take place entirely in the air.

The Germans failure to win the battle was one of the major turning points of the War and ultimately prevented Germany from invading Britain.

## Summer 1940

On 18 June 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the British people, “... the Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin." It was just four days later that France surrendered to Germany and Adolf Hitler started to look to an invasion of Britain.

Due to Britain being an island they could not just roll the tanks across a land-locked border, they needed to gain control of the skies to avoid bombings from above. It was Hermann Goering, the head of the Luftwaffe, who was instructed to make sure the RAF was "beaten down to such an extent that it can no longer muster any power of attack worth mentioning against the German crossing." The invasion of Britain by Germany was called “Operation Sealion.”

## The planes

The Royal Air Force was formed in April 1918 and had been scaling up its capabilities since the 1930s when Germany started to look like a threat. Britain had watched as Germany, under Hitler, had resurrected their air force despite a ban on having one following the First World War. Despite heavy loses during The Battle of France, Germany had the best air force in the world.

There was some serious airpower on both sides, which were pretty evenly matched. The Luftwaffe's (German Air Force) principal fighter planes were the Messerschmitt Bf109 and the Messerschmitt Bf110. There were also a number of bombers: the Dornier 17, the Junkers Ju88, the Heinkel 111, and the Junkers Ju87.

The Royal Air Force had the high-performance Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire fighters as well as the added enhancement of radar.

## The phases of the Battle

The battle began in mid-July 1940. The first phase was for the Luftwaffe to attack shipping in the English Channel and coastal towns and defences.

From mid-August they moved inland. Goering started to attack the Air Force itself bombing airfields and radar bases but whilst many were badly damaged they did stay operational.

The fighter pilots and planes remained resilient. In September Germany made a mistake. It thought the RAF was nearing defeat and set about destroying London and other cities. This was devastating to residents but it did give the air force time to regroup itself out in each sector. When Hitler tried once again to take down the RAF he suffered huge and unexpected loses to the Luftwaffe.

All RAF commands were involved in the Battle of Britain. Fighter Command took on the Luftwaffe in the air bur RAF Bomber Command flew into Germany to destroy airfield and factories whilst RAF Coastal Command gave vital early intelligence and took out ships.

## The Dowding System

Named after Fighter Command’s Commander-in-Chief Sir Hugh Dowding Britain had a well-organized defence system and air defence network. The country was split into groups and then divided down into sectors. Each sector had an airfield. They used radar from the ground to detect early incoming planes then passed information to the relevant sector best placed to scramble their planes and intercept. This great efficiency gave Britain an edge.

This efficiency was created by support from ground operations and the wider public. Men and women were in factories making aircraft at a rate that out-produced the enemy, manning radar stations and anti-aircraft guns. They were putting fuel into planes and carrying out essential maintenance.

## Hitler turns his attention to the Soviet Union

On 17 September, Hitler postponed his plans to invade Britain against this resilience from both pilots and people. Although the German Air Force continued to bomb Britain until war was over the focus of his invasion plans shifted to the Soviet Union.

## Why is the Battle of Britain so important?

The collective efforts of The Battle of Britain made it a defensive victory. It stopped the invasion of Britain and turned Hitler’s attention to the Soviet Union, a costly mistake. Had Hitler succeeded in wiping out the air force he would undoubtedly have taken Operation Sealion to its next level – ground invasion. By keeping Hitler out of Britain in 1944 Operation Overlord could be launched from England into Normandy, Northern France. This operation was successful. Allied troops pushed through mainland Europe, defeated Hitler and ended the war.

## Recognition

Prime Minister Winston Churchill praised the actions of the fighters during the Battle of Britain in a famous wartime speech to the House of Commons on 20th August 1940.

“The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and b~ their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few. All hearts go out to the fighter pilots, whose brilliant actions we see with our own eyes day after day; but we must never forget that all the time, night after night, month after month, our bomber squadrons travel far into Germany, find their targets in the darkness by the highest navigational skill, aim their attacks, often under the heaviest fire, often with serious loss, with deliberate careful discrimination, and inflict shattering blows upon the whole of the technical and war-making structure of the Nazi power. On no part of the Royal Air Force does the weight of the war fall more heavily than on the daylight bombers, who will play an invaluable part in the case of invasion and whose unflinching zeal it has been necessary in the meanwhile on numerous occasions to restrain.”

## A pilot’s account

"At 17.30 hours I was ordered up with my squadron to intercept bogeys. Enemy were spotted at 15,000 east of Thames estuary. The squadron was given tally-ho. I picked out a Me110. After about one and a half minutes of steep turning I delivered a frontal attack on it from a height of 2,000 above it, opening fire at 100-150 yards above it.

"It was a burst of about four seconds. I saw smoke coming from both its engines as it glided down from 8,000ft to strike the sea about 40 miles out. After giving various other EA short bursts I delivered another frontal attack on another ME 110, which broke up at about 3,000ft. The rear gunner or pilot baled out. This attack took place at 5,000ft, about 60 miles due east of Margate. Only one person baled out. The aircraft broke up making a series of splashes in the sea. Enemy casualties: two ME 110s destroyed."

Combat Report by Francis (Frank) Walker – member of 85 Squadron on 18th August 1940.

## A civilian account

“I can remember the Battle of Britain being fought over our house. Even though we had far fewer planes than Hitler we managed to overcome the Germans. London was very badly bombed and I can remember seeing what I thought was a wonderful sunset but was in fact London burning. Our Alsatian dog was a very good air raid warden as she could tell the difference between the German planes and the British ones. She could also hear the enemy planes coming from a long distance before the warning sirens.

My mother loved flowers and made a brilliant garden over the shelter. In our local park there was a gun emplacement that fired all the time. There were also two barrage balloons there to distract the enemy planes.”

Beryl Worrall – Biggin Hill Kent, England

## Core Statistics

• 1,023 aircraft were lost by the RAF

• 1,887aircraft were lost by Luftwaffe

• 3,000 aircrew served with RAF Fighter Command

• 20% were from the British Dominions and occupied European or neutral countries

• 544 RAF Fighter Command pilots were killed

• 2,500 Luftwaffe aircrew were killed.

(Figures provided by the RAF)