

The Battle of Britain

In May 1940, Germany invaded France. The French and British armies were overpowered by the German blitzkrieg. Toward the end of May, in a daring rescue attempt, ships from England picked up 300,000 British and French soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk. Britain stood alone against the might of the German war machine. Hitler was surprised that Britain did not surrender like France. He ordered his generals to invade Britain. Their invasion plan was code named Operation Sealion.

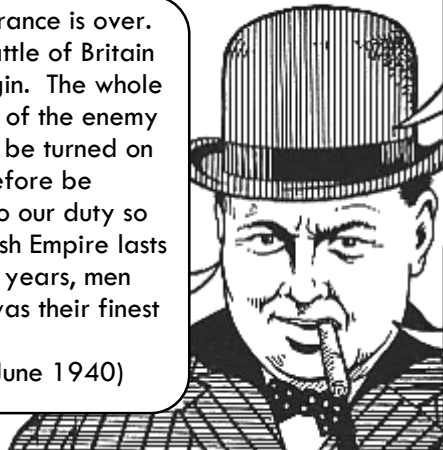
In order for the German blitzkrieg to work the Luftwaffe had to first destroy the RAF, to prevent it posing a threat to German troops as they landed in Britain. The battle of Britain was the first major battle fought entirely in the air. Hermann Goring's air force began its assault on England in July 1940 with more than twice the 600 aircraft available to the RAF.

The desperate situation that Britain was in can be summarised by the words used by Winston Churchill:

Source A: British Prime minister, Winston Churchill

The Battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Let us therefore be prepared to do our duty so that, if the British Empire lasts for a thousand years, men will say, 'This was their finest hour'.

(18th June 1940)



Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

(20th August 1940)

We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight them on the landing grounds, we shall fight them in the field and in the street, we shall fight them in the hills. We shall never surrender.

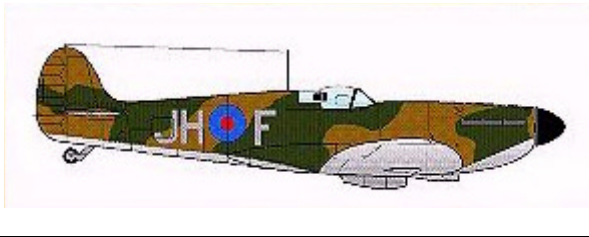
(3rd June 1940)

Historians are interested in the battle of Britain as it can be seen as a turning point in World History. After his failed attempt to invade Britain, Hitler would attempt to fight a war on two fronts by invading Russia. This would ultimately lead to the defeat of Germany.

Why did the RAF win the battle of Britain?

Every day between June and October 1940 the RAF and the Luftwaffe clashed over Britain. Both sides were equipped with the latest aircraft technology. However, the RAF had the edge over the Luftwaffe with its new faster fighters the Spitfire and Hurricane. The Luftwaffe were equipped with Stuka dive bombers, Messerschmitt ME109 fighter and the Heinkel bomber.

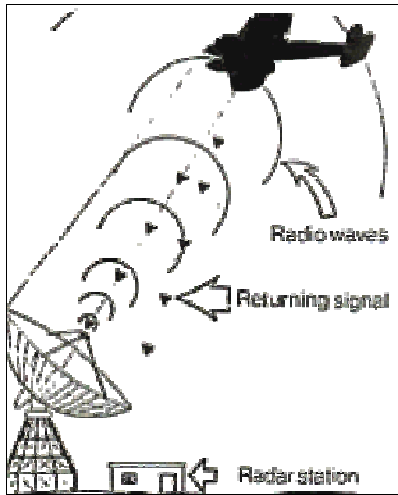
Source B: A Spitfire Mk 1.



The design and speed of the Spitfire and Hurricane meant that they could out manoeuvre the German fighters.

Another advantage that the RAF had over the Luftwaffe was radar technology which enabled it to see when the German aircraft were about to cross the English Channel. The RAF used this information to concentrate its fighters in the areas where they expected the Luftwaffe were about to attack. This clever piece of cutting edge technology helped the RAF overcome the fact that it was outnumbered.

Source C: How Radar works.



Source D: School Textbook, 1985.

Britain won because it had the first modern air-defence network based on new technology - radar. So Hitler turned to bombing Britain's cities, hoping for a British surrender by reducing industry to rubble and weakening the will of the British people. Although many were killed, the factories kept working while the relentless terror bombing only united the British people in their determination to beat the Nazi foe.

The Luftwaffe's final effort to destroy the RAF began on Eagle Day, August 13, 1940. Göring thought that his aircraft could sweep the Royal Air Force from the sky in just four weeks, but poor weather and the skill of the RAF pilots hampered the Luftwaffe's raids. Eagle Day ended with 46 German aircraft destroyed, compared with only 14 RAF fighters.

The Battle of Britain was one of the greatest moments in British history: although short of planes and pilots, the RAF had held off the Luftwaffe and prevented a German invasion. Churchill called it Britain's "finest hour". The skill and determination of the RAF's pilots, backed up by the latest in technology helped them win the battle of Britain. Germany had been defeated for the first time in the war. The bravery of the British people and their pilots impressed many Americans who began to urge their leaders to help Britain.

Activity 1: Copy and complete the paragraph below by filling in the missing words

In 1940 _____, who was the leader of Nazi Germany, tried to invade Britain. He sent his airforce which was called _____ to destroy the RAF. He had to do this before his armies could cross the English C_____. One of the British fighter planes was the S_____. The Germans had M_____ fighters and H_____ bombers. By the end of August 1940 the _____ had won and _____ gave up trying to invade Britain.

Activity 2: Answer the questions carefully in full sentences

1. Why was Britain in such a desperate situation after May 1940?
2. What was the name of Hitler's plan to invade Britain?
3. Why was it so important that the Luftwaffe destroy the RAF before the German Army invaded Britain?
4. How would you describe Churchill's attitudes towards the Germans in Source A?
5. How important was technology in helping the RAF win the Battle of Britain?
6. Draw Source C into your exercise book and explain how RADAR works in your own words.
7. After failing to destroy the RAF how did Hitler change his tactics?
8. The Battle of Britain was a turning point in the war. Why do you think that it was so important?
9. Copy or trace the picture of the Spitfire in Source B. Colour it green and brown and label the following: Fuselage, cockpit, aerial, flaps, rudder.

EXTENSION TASK:

Research and write a project on the Spitfire or Hurricane fighter aircraft. Find out who designed them and how successful they were in a dogfight.

Looking at the statistics

Source E: RAF aircraft losses.

| | |
|------------|-----|
| Spitfires | 357 |
| Hurricanes | 601 |
| Blenheims | 53 |
| Other | 74 |

Source F: Luftwaffe aircraft losses.

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Messerschmitt Bf 109 | 533 |
| Messerschmitt Bf 110 | 229 |
| Heinkel He 111 | 246 |
| Junkers Ju 88 | 281 |
| Dornier Do 17 | 171 |
| Junkers Ju 87 | 74 |
| Dornier Do 215 | 6 |
| Heinkel He 115 | 28 |
| Henschel Hs 126 | 7 |
| Heinkel He 59 | 31 |
| Other | 46 |

Source G: RAF casualties in 1940.

| Total | Origin | Killed |
|-------|--------------------|--------|
| 1822 | RAF | 339 |
| 56 | Fleet AIR ARM | 9 |
| 21 | Australian | 14 |
| 73 | New Zealander | 11 |
| 88 | Canadian | 20 |
| 21 | South African | 9 |
| 2 | Southern Rhodesian | 0 |
| 8 | Irish | 0 |
| 7 | American | 1 |
| 141 | Polish | 29 |
| 86 | Czech | 8 |
| 26 | Belgian | 6 |
| 13 | Free French | 0 |
| 1 | Israeli | 0 |

Source H:**German Aircraft Pilots
Killed in action.**

| | |
|----------------------|------|
| Bomber Crews | 1176 |
| Stuka Crews | 85 |
| Fighter bomber crews | 212 |
| Fighter pilots | 171 |

Activity 3

1. Draw a table to show the total number of pilot and aircraft losses for both the RAF and the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain.
2. According to your table which country won the Battle of Britain?
3. Look at Source G. Should all the credit go to British fighter pilots for winning the battle of Britain?