

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 ★ Issue 5

World War II:

Battle of Britain

DATE:

July 10 – October 31, 1940

LOCATION:

The skies above Britain and the English Channel

OPPOSING FORCES

Great Britain: The British Royal Air Force (RAF) with 754 fighters and 560 bombers. Leading the battle was Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, commander of Fighter Command. Out of his five subordinate Groups, the two most heavily involved were Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park's No. 11 Group and Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory's No. 12 Group.

Germany: The German Air Force (Luftwaffe) under the command of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring with nearly 2,700 aircraft. Göring's three subordinate air fleets (Luftflotten) were Luftflotte 2, commanded by Gen. Albert Kesselring; Luftflotte 3, commanded by Gen. Hugo Sperrle; and Luftflotte 5, commanded by Gen. Hans-Jürgen Stumpff.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In early 1940, it seemed that the Nazi juggernaut couldn't be stopped. After the fall of Poland in 1939 and the rapid collapse of the Low Countries and France the following spring, Führer Adolf Hitler looked rapaciously across the English Channel toward his next prize. Despite the complexity of his invasion plan, known as Operation Sea Lion, one thing was clear: It required air superiority to succeed. As Hitler unleashed his air attack in what would become the Battle of Britain, waves of Luftwaffe bombers and fighters poured across the Channel. As the days turned to weeks, the fate of Europe's last defender hung in the balance. In this first-of-its-kind battle – one determined exclusively by airpower – fighters and bombers embraced in deadly clashes over the skies of England and the Channel. In the end, Britain's Fighter Command held, handing Hitler his first major setback of the war.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by Germany – After swift victories in France and the Low Countries in May of 1940, Hitler found himself in control of the Channel ports along Europe's northern coast. When he witnessed

the British Expeditionary Force crumble before their humiliating evacuation from Dunkirk, Hitler saw his opportunity to invade. He put his plan, Operation Sea Lion, into motion. Although he still expected British leaders to sue for peace, Hitler faced a dilemma: either subdue Britain or he would face the hazards of a two-front war.

The Luftwaffe sustained its losses for the

into the airfields surrounding England (Luftflotte 2 in Holland, Belgium, and northern France; Luftflotte 3 in the Normandy region; and Luftflotte 5 in Denmark and Norway). (*Map 1*)

On 2 July, Hitler issued his warning order. "The Fuehrer has decided that under certain conditions – the most important of which is achieving air superiority – a landing in England may take place."¹ Since his move into Austria two years before, he had always been sure of his military objectives. Now, he hesitated, waiting until 16 July – a full month after the fall of France – to issue his follow-on invasion order.

His commanders, meanwhile, disagreed on the risky operation. The army and navy were unenthusiastic. Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, however, was confident, believing his Luftwaffe, alone, could defeat the Royal Air Force and bring Britain to her knees. Yet, they all agreed on one thing – the need for air superiority. While the army marshaled its forces and the navy assembled the shipping and transports, all eyes turned to Göring's Luftwaffe.



German Heinkel He 111 bombers during the battle.

Göring had boasted to Hitler that he could defeat Britain's southern Fighter Command in four days and defeat the rest of the RAF in four weeks. After all, his pilots were combat veterans, and he had a significant numerical advantage. Göring's issue was range. His aircraft were designed to support the army on the ground, not to engage in long-range combat.

