

# Fight command's near defeat in the battle of britain



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Fighter Command came close to defeat during the Battle of Britain. How accurate is this statement?

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The Battle of Britain was an aerial campaign launched by the German Luftwaffe in summer 1940 to achieve air supremacy over Britain and potentially pave the way for a German invasion of the British Isles, 'Operation Sealion'.<sup>[1]</sup> This essay will analyse how close Fighter Command came to defeat during the Battle of Britain. In order to answer this question, this essay will examine the following key points. Firstly, the effect the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) had on the battle will be explored. Secondly, failures in German intelligence will be evaluated, focusing on the accuracy of the intelligence obtained and its subsequent utilisation by the Luftwaffe. German High Command's inability to deliver an effective and consistent strategy will also be analysed. Lastly, a comparison of attrition will be drawn, in order to assess the number of pilot losses, recoveries and aircraft production from both sides. Losing air superiority would have meant defeat for Fighter Command, as they would have been incapable of effectively defending Britain from the air. This essay will explain that Fighter Command did not come close to defeat during the Battle of Britain.

Fighter Command had an advanced early warning system in the form of the IADS, developed under the leadership of Air Chief-Marshal Hugh Dowding (Commander of Fighter Command), who foresaw the importance of an integrated defensive network.<sup>[2]</sup> This air defence network connected the Royal Observer Corps (ROC) and Radio Direction Finding (RDF) assets to

ground operations and onward to air assets at sector level.[3]Fighter Command was divided up geographically into groups, in order to cover specified areas within Britain.[4]These sectors had an Air Officer Commanding appointed so that 'mission command' could be utilised to allow sectors to decide how best to deploy specified aircraft closest to, or more suitable for the battle, economising their resources.[5]This had a force multiplying effect and also meant no time would be wasted in making decisions from the top. RDF provided Fighter Command with the ability to determine the direction and strength of a raid before it arrived. This gave them vital time to react, allowing Fighter aircraft time to climb to a tactical height and minimise the disadvantage of their defensive position.[6]As a result, Britain did not have to waste valuable resources on unnecessary standing patrols and could appropriately portion its time and assets.[7]This also meant British pilots could rest but Luftwaffe pilots were expected to fly continuously, which would not have been sustainable for an extended battle. [8]However, RDF was not without its faults. There was no capability for a 'inward' looking air picture which meant that when the Germans flew inland, they had to be monitored by other resources such as the ROC.[9]To counter this, IADS employed redundancy, utilising the other systems in its network to overcome these deficiencies. Initially Luftwaffe strategy was to destroy the fighter control system, including radar stations.[10]After targeting RDF early on, the Luftwaffe discovered the towers were hard to hit and damage long-term. In these cases, stations could be rapidly repaired, meaning it had little overall effect on Fighter Command's capability. For heavily hit RDF stations that would take time to repair, the Royal Air Force (RAF) deployed mobile reserve equipment that could be moved into any area of the Chain Home

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system.[11]Had German Commanders realised how much of a role RDF would play in Fighter Command's operations, stations may have been attacked more determinedly and this strategy would not have been abandoned.[12]The German failure to recognise the importance and accept the revolutionary technology of RDF was a significant strategic oversight, which would be a great influence on the outcome of the battle.[13]

Failing to realise the importance of IADS was one of several shortcomings in German intelligence which undermined the Luftwaffe's plan to defeat Fighter Command. German intelligence was described as inefficient and disorganised, primarily because the intelligence agencies never collaborated. [14]Analysing German intelligence from the battle, it is clear to see that because of British defence preparations, the Luftwaffe's morale began to suffer and impact negatively on their operations. The RAF was constantly misrepresented as a technologically and tactically incompetent force. This included poor estimates of serviceable aircraft, pilots and functioning airfields. This misinformation meant that Luftwaffe pilots were met with more fierce resistance than expected.[15]The cycle of misinformation continued as Luftwaffe pilots inflated their reports of successes against the RAF. Estimates of losses of up to 50 percent of its fighters since August 1940, against a loss of 12 percent of German fighters, did not reflect the reality.[16]Some departments would only tell German commanders what they thought the Air Staff and the Luftwaffe's Reich Marshal Herman Goering, would want to hear. [17]This led to German commanders making strategic decisions based on inaccurate information.

Luftwaffe strategy during the Battle would be directly affected by the consistent poor intelligence. Goering and Fuhrer Adolf Hitler had a divided aim and Hitler was beginning to grow impatient, conscious that winter was approaching, and the invasion would not be viable in adverse conditions. [18]Goering, while ignorant of his forces' position, promised Hitler that the Luftwaffe could destroy Fighter Command within four weeks.[19]Phase 2 of the Luftwaffe strategy was to destroy airfields and fighters on the ground. [20]Field Marshal Hugo Sperrle advocated the continued attacks on RAF airfields.[21]But this was at odds with Hilter and Goering, who ordered the shift in strategy to focus on British Cities,[22]which is believed to be in response to the bombings of Berlin and the misinformation that Britain was 'on its knees'. This, along with the inaccurate intelligence that the 'last' of Fighter Command's aircraft would get sucked in to attacks over London aided the decision to be made hastily.[23]This added to tensions and frustration in the Luftwaffe's leadership and allowed Fighter Command time to repair damaged airfields and fighters. This shift was described by Luftwaffe pilot Adolf Galland as 'perhaps the greatest mistake Goering would make during the war'.[24]Goering's inability to deliver an effective and consistent strategy in combat, left his subordinates frustrated and confused, while senior Luftwaffe Commanders Albert Kesselring and Sperrle 'literally did not know what they were doing' when attempting to interpret the strategic objectives of their High Command.[25]It is debated that, had the attacks on airfields continued, this could have led to the defeat of Fighter Command as at this point the RAF was under severe pressure. Nonetheless, essential Fighter Command sector stations remained at, or swiftly returned to operational status.[26]Also, sectors that were being attacked heavily had

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the option to order the retreat of resources in land, where range would severely limit the Luftwaffe.[27]Extra protection from other groups could be requested had they needed more coping strategies. In these cases, any serious damage was largely attributed to attacks by the Ju-87 Stuka, or low-level raids. However, such tactical operations and specialist aircraft were withdrawn from the campaign due to their high attrition rate.[28]Therefore, it is unlikely that the Luftwaffe would have been able to carry out and sustain attacks on such a large scale if they had continued. The leadership's continuing shift in strategy, meant that they were not able to fully complete a strategic phase and therefore were never in a position to decisively defeat Fighter Command.

On examining both the Luftwaffe and Fighter Command's abilities to wage campaigns of attrition, it is evident that the Luftwaffe remained deficient in both the material and personnel needed to sustain an extended campaign. The Luftwaffe had enjoyed substantial success in the Polish and French campaigns, building an air of complacency throughout the ranks. In the months preceding the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe was largely inactive. There was an inadequate effort to replace the 1, 667 aircraft lost in the French Campaign, as its bomber force fell to just 841 aircraft by late June 1940, far below what would be considered an effective force.[29]In 1940, Britain was outproducing Germany by 40 percent, which continued to rise over the following years.[30]During the campaign, the Luftwaffe lost almost twice as many aircraft as the RAF.[31]Crucially, Britain's supply chain simply outclassed Germany's by producing two aircraft for every one manufactured by German industry. This was due to the Shadow Factories and Civilian

Repair Organisations (CRO) employed to counteract the military shortcomings in manpower and help spread out industry, making it harder to target.[32]Despite the persistent campaign waged, there was never a shortage of aircraft,[33]however, Fighter Command suffered from a shortage of man-power in the early stages of the Campaign. Through necessity and adaptation, Fighter Command turned to aircrew from overseas, including the experienced pilots of Poland and Czechoslovakia, who relieved the burden long enough for training to adequately meet frontline demands.[34]The Luftwaffe did not duplicate such a solution which is significant because they needed to replace lost or captured crews over enemy territory. However, RAF crews, if uninjured, could return to their squadron as they were fighting over Britain.[35]Throughout the conflict, the Luftwaffe lacked foresight in planning to resolve these deficits. They entered the campaign to deliver a short, sharp and fatal blow to Fighter Command and break British resistance, but Fighter Command developed a sustainable long-term plan capable of enduring an extended campaign of attrition.[36]Fighter Command never came close to defeat with respect to attrition, as the RAF ended the battle with more operational pilots and aircraft than the Luftwaffe.[37]

In conclusion, these main arguments reveal that the Luftwaffe failed to comprehend the revolutionary IADS technology, and its importance to Fighter Command. It allowed Fighter Command to deploy its resources economically, therefore was 'force multiplying' and removed the Luftwaffe's element of surprise. Further to this, the Luftwaffe was continually fed inaccurate and exaggerated intelligence to such an extent that its aircrews had become a victim of German propaganda. This inevitably shattered

German morale when a lack of progress was evident and inaccurate intelligence fuelled questionable decisions made by the German High Command. As the campaign progressed, the initiative slipped from the Luftwaffe's grasp as it grew desperate, stumbling from one strategic objective to another, hoping to find the knockout blow in the process. The crucial switch from bombing airfields to cities was another mistake in Luftwaffe strategy. Nevertheless, even if they had continued bombing, Fighter Command relied on many redundancies and would have survived through their proven innovation. The Luftwaffe had not come decisively close to achieving destruction of its adversary, and with every passing week, Fighter Command remained able to function. It grew stronger in resources towards the Battle's closure, no doubt due to its ability to absorb a campaign of attrition better than the Luftwaffe. Britain outproduced Germany with the support of CRO, Shadow Factories and drafted in pilots from the Commonwealth to counter the loss of experience. At best, the Luftwaffe had tested Fighter Command, but at a strategic level, it had only maintained the status quo prior to the start of hostilities. The Luftwaffe was by no means any closer to destroying Fighter Command. Instead, it had left them battle hardened, confident and more resource-rich than it had begun. Ultimately, these key points show that Fighter Command did not come close to defeat during the Battle of Britain.

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[1]Overy (2004), p. 27.

[2]Shields (2015), p. 85.

[3]Dildy (2018), pp. 24-25.

[4]Clayton & Craig (2001), p. 197.

[5]Bungay (2001), pp. 62-63.

[6]Clayton & Craig (2001), pp. 198-199.

[7]Shields (2015), p. 185.

[8]Holland (2010), p. 74.

[9]Ibid., p. 186.

[10]Price (1990), p. 93.

[11]Ibid., p. 94.

[12]Overy (2004), p. 72.

[13]Shields, (2015), P. 185.

[14]Wood & Dempster (2010), p. 41.

[15]Overy (2004), p. 116.

[16]Ibid., p. 72.

[17]Wood & Dempster (2010), p. 43.

[18] 'THE AIR WAR: 1', *The Sunday Times magazine*, 30 May 1965 .

[19] Terraine (2010), pp. 172-173.

[20] Price (1990), p. 93.

[21] Williamson (2006), p. 45.

[22] Olsen (2009), p. 32.

[23] Overy (2004), p. 78.

[24] Ledwidge (2018), p. 71.

[25] Bungay (2001), p. 236.

[26] Price (1990), p. 93.

[27] Shields (2015), p. 191.

[28] Bungay (2001), p. 236.

[29] Terraine (2010), p. 171.

[30] Bungay (2001), p. 94.

[31] Overy (2004), p. 116.

[32] Bungay (2001), p. 95. Wood & Dempster (2010), p. 103.

[33] Ledwidge (2018), p. 69.

[34] *Id.*

[35]Bungay (2001), p. 201.

[36]Ledwidge (2018), p. 70.

[37]Overy (2004), p. 148.