

Did fighter command  
nearly get defeated 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 year of 1940-41 proved a pivotal time during World War 2, not only had France surrendered by June 1940 but both the United States and the Soviet Union remained out of the war. This left Great Britain the only remaining world power in the fight against the Nazi regime[1]. With the fall of France, Germany was now a predominant power across the continent. The Battle of Britain to come was to put Britain under extreme pressure to litigate peace on German terms, or to gain 'air superiority' known as directive 17 for Hitler's planned invasion, Operation Sealion[2]. This essay will examine three main points that ultimately demonstrate that even though Fighter Command became stretched at times and the overall victory was only by a narrow margin, it did not come close to defeat. Firstly, it will discuss, how Britain had effectively used its advancement in technologies such as, the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) to their advantage. Secondly the poor intelligence and leadership of the German high command that led to both strategic and operational level failures, and finally the British war effort production output which all combined support the fact that fighter command did not come close to defeat.

Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding became commander of Fighter command on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1936 and within a week chose Bentley Priory to become the new headquarters (HQ)[3]. It was here at Bentley Priory that would be home to the world's first Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), the

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' Dowding System'. Prior to entering his role as Air Chief Marshall, Dowding had contributed to the decision that led to the funding and research into RDF (Radio Direction Finding)[4]which in turn would become an essential component to the IADS by the end of 1939. The capability of this technology meant that enemy aircraft can be detected with its height and distance approaching the UK mainland from Europe. This provided the British pilots a minimum of a 5-minute warning prior to an attack as the aircraft crossed the channel that the observer corps was not capable of providing. This technology brought a range of advantages to fighter command, one being that little to no standing patrols were required which in turn would diminish manpower and a range of resources. The system would also guide British pilots into effective high advantage positions for engaging the enemy from above. The system was not just comprised of fighter command and its aircraft but, the observer corps and anti-aircraft batteries. All working in unison under the same command from Bentley Priory, allowing flexibility at tactical level[5]. The UK was split into four segments, number 10-13 group, each being informed with critical information from the HQ, allowing each area to conduct its own ' mission command' and tactically apply their assets to intercept the enemy with the sector and station that was best suited and equipped for the task[6]. This statement is supported by a Luftwaffe pilot Adolf Garrand who stated,

*" From the first the British had an extraordinary advantage, never to be balanced out at any time during the whole war, which was their radar and fighter control network and organisation. It was for us a very bitter surprise.*

*We had nothing like it. We could do no other than knock frontally against the outstandingly well-organised and resolute direct defence of the British Isles”*

For a period of the battle the Luftwaffe targeted the RDF sites, although only small effects were felt across the arm due to the effectiveness of the repairs on the equipment, it was only direct hits that caused prolonged damage. To counter the down time for repair after direct damage, fighter command installed dual transmitters so a recognised air picture (RAP) could be maintained throughout the battle, keeping that advantage to British pilots. The Dowding system was crucial in evading defeat by providing fighter command with a vigorous detection, dispatch and control system. Allowing the RAF to put the principles of war into effective use, surprise, concentration of force, flexibility and economy of effort.

June 30<sup>th</sup> 1940, Reichsmarshall Hermann Goering signed the operational directive 17 for the aerial war against the British Isles. The plan incorporating an attack against the RAF itself, its support echelons and the aircraft industry. These attacks would create the necessary conditions for an assault on the UK mainland known as Operation Sealion. The strain of blitzkrieg and the battle for the Fjords of Norway imposed a significant host of economic, tactical and strategic problems before solving the “ British question”. The German intelligence and leadership during these key months proved to be inadequate to achieve success, causing significant changes to operational tasks. All the way up to July 1940, Hitler still believed that the UK would sue for peace which he would happily accept. At this time the mood in Berlin was euphoric, the Germans believed that the war was almost over. Following

Goering's lead the Luftwaffe paid little attention to the future operational problems in securing the UK. A report produced on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1940 by the Luftwaffe significantly underestimated the capabilities of the 'Hurricane' and 'Spitfire' aircraft, along with no mention of the Britain's Integrated Air Defence System[7], finishing with the positive note that "the Luftwaffe, unlike the RAF, will be in the position in every respect to achieve a decisive effect this year". A lack of intelligence in the operational capabilities of the British aircraft against those in the Luftwaffe's arsenal led to an overestimation of theirs. German Bombers, Stukas and the BF 110 fighter proved vulnerable to British fighters, it was only the Bf 109 that proved a compatible match to the Spitfire and superior to the Hurricane. The single engine fighter BF 109 thus had to provide protection to all bomber and BF110 sorties throughout the battle. This overworked the German fighter crews and its equipment, leading to heavier casualties as the battle progressed. Prior to the battle, Britain had 1032 aircraft across its operational bases, 715 being ready for immediate action and a further 424 in storage units. These reserves remained unknown to German intelligence leading to a miscalculation of the number of aircraft required at the front to have superior numbers to overwhelm Fighter Command. It was with these statistics that Goering assigned only 1011 fighters with 805 being immediately ready for combat to the front for operations[8]. The numerous varying intelligence reports from various levels led to the German strategy to change sporadically, even when each phase had not been completed. It was these decisions to change the aim of attack that provided Fighter Command the opportunity to adjust and repair for a prolonged fight. Fighter command

was coping during the operational phase targeting aerodromes and industry infrastructure by 12 group supporting and protecting the airfields while 11 group were up engaging the enemy. Hitler ordered a change in the strategy on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1940 to target London in retaliation to Bomber Commands attack on Berlin. It is clear that this shift in tactics relieved some of the stresses on both the bomber and fighter commands and its resources, providing an invaluable rest period to recover its losses to full capability. Even if there wasn't a shift in the German strategy to target 11 group aerodromes, the introduction of more satellite airfields could have been utilised or a tactical withdrawal to retreat the aircraft inland out of the range of the German fighters meant that fighter command would have remained an effective fighting force and have the ability to project air power on an invasion force.

Prior to the war Dowding in 1937 convinced the Prime Minister of the time, Neville Chamberlain, to increase his force. He achieved this by convincing the Prime Minister and the Minister of Co-ordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip that the manufacture of fighters was the far cheaper option in comparison to a fleet of bombers. Neville chamberlain believed that bombers were immoral and therefore were neglected in the development of the Air Force prior to the Second World War. This decision led to the purchase and manufacture of over 1000 Hurricanes and 310 Spitfires between 1936-1938, beginning the mass production of fighter aircraft. By June 1940, the production output was approximately 500 aircraft a month, this figure was only once succeeded in August 1940 where the fighting was at its height.

The Harrogate Programme set in January 1940, set the target of 3602

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fighters to be manufactured per annum, although this was exceeded by 681, demonstrating the efficiency of the British Industry. During the battle the repairs to damaged aircraft was complemented by the Civilian Repair Organisation (CRO). At its highest point this administration help deliver a further 160 aircraft per week to the front line. It was with the combined effort of the British industry that the German's were being massively out produced for fighter aircraft. By the end of the battle figures showed that between June - November 2091 aircraft were manufactured compared to 1220 lost in combat, alongside this there was a significant increase in the number of available pilots, coming from accelerated training programmes and squadrons being formed of pilots from occupied Europe. In comparison the German's had a different doctrine in its formation of aircraft fleets, a combination of aircraft from bombers to fighters, acting as an Expeditionary Air Wing. There was no organised manufacture and repair unit to repair and return damaged aircraft to the frontline. All of Germany's industry was within its homeland, this caused a huge logistical effort to fix severely damaged aircraft efficiently. Even though the Luftwaffe could inflict heavy losses upon Fighter Command there was always a consistent flow of newly trained pilots and enough fighter aircraft at the front to remain a formidable fighting force. This was achieved as the Luftwaffe failed to continue to target infrastructure and industry due to their strategic change to bomb London. On the other hand, the German's also suffered heavy losses across the year and was not able to maintain its number of pilots or aircraft at the front because of its poor logistic set up and the manufacturing doctrine of the Luftwaffe.

In the inter-war years, the build-up and development of the German Air Force was flawed with its doctrine and the competition between its leadership. The Luftwaffe was predominately equipped with aircraft and technology that was outdated, principally their heavy bombers (Ju87, He111). The maintenance and production of aircraft was flawed with logistical errors and poor aircraft manufacturing doctrine. This led to a significant drop in aircraft numbers which were operationally ready at the front during the battle. Meanwhile the British industry were capable of manufacturing and maintain sufficiently high numbers continuously and therefore maintaining the number of fighter aircraft at the front. In terms of operational capability, the Luftwaffe were well trained and experienced, although organised to support the movement of the army and not to conduct its own independent operations. The leadership had failed to see this structure was not working as it had proved so effective with the Condor legion during the Spanish Civil War and the Blitzkrieg across Europe. The critical fault therefore lies with how the German leadership conducted the campaign and its intelligence gathering. Germany had failed in achieving accurate intelligence prior and during the battle which lead to poor decisions being made. Decisions made by Hitler himself and Goering led to the Luftwaffe's resources being used ineffectively or withdrawn during the latter part of the battle for the planned invasion of Russia (Operation Barbarossa), allowing the Royal Air Force (RAF) the ability to recover, regroup and develop a strategic plan to counter. The effectiveness of Fighter Command in utilising its technological advancements over the enemy and its aircraft was an advantage the German's could never match. The detailed control system based out of Bentley Priory provided the RAF fighter pilots with a significant advantage in battle through its early

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warning and recognised air picture. These factors combined stopped the Luftwaffe gaining a foothold to gain air superiority by defeating Fighter Command to assist the land invasion Operation Sealion or crushing the morale of the British people to surrender.

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[1]Smith, Tyler (2016) p. 4

[2]C. Dildy, Douglas (2018) p. 40

[3]G. Cooksley, Peter (1983) p. 65

[4]C. Dildy, Douglas (2018) p. 26

[5]C. Dildy, Douglas (2018) p. 28

[6]Lt Col Lund, Earl (1996)

[7]Ray, John (1994) p46-47

[8]Overy Richard (2010) p. 32