

The Battle of Britain



After the fall of France to Germany on June 22, 1940, Hitler set his sights on Great Britain. He planned a massive invasion by land and sea, code named Operation Sea Lion. Before the invasion could take place, however, Hitler and the German High Command were well aware that before they could successfully bring their armies to the shores of Britain, they needed to gain air superiority over the English Channel. Britain's Royal Air Force had to be defeated first.

Hitler hoped his Luftwaffe and its fierce reputation would intimidate Britain enough that they would surrender peacefully, and even dangled the prospect of a peace treaty. However, he underestimated the resolve of Britain's people, its military, and its combative new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who rejected the offer outright. Days before France's final surrender, Churchill gave his famous "Finest Hour" speech to the House of Commons, making it clear he had no intention of capitulating to Hitler.

In his speech, Churchill said, "the Battle of France is over...the Battle of Britain is about to begin." He spoke of his certainty that the Luftwaffe would attack Britain hard, but also his confidence that the RAF, commanded by Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, would hold their own and be victorious. Churchill knew failure was not an option. He proclaimed,

"We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

Churchill's powerful speech boosted the morale and patriotism of the British people, its military, and Parliament. Hitler scoffed at Churchill's defiance and gave Britain little chance in the coming onslaught. Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, the commander of the Luftwaffe, however, was confident his planes would quickly decimate the RAF and prevent, or at least postpone, the need for a full-scale invasion.

So, as it happened, on July 10, 1940, the Luftwaffe began attacking Britain, targeting coastal defenses, ports, and radar stations. They also performed reconnaissance missions to prepare for Operation Sea Lion. Their efforts, however, did little damage to Britain's will to fight.

By mid-August, combat planes and medium-range bombers of the Luftwaffe began attacking Britain's airfields and aircraft production sites. German Messerschmitt BF-109s fought RAF Supermarine Spitfires and Hawker Hurricanes in the air over England's southern coast and the English Channel. The RAF planes proved to be a formidable foe to the Luftwaffe. Losses mounted on both sides. German attacks were relentless and began to take a toll on Britain. The exhausted RAF pilots valiantly fought on.

Early German attacks failed to disable Britain's radar stations in southern England and Hermann Goering never sent German planes back to finish the job. It was a serious blunder. Despite being heavily outnumbered, radar gave the RAF a competitive advantage. They knew when the Luftwaffe attacks were coming and could scramble enough planes into the air when and where they were needed most.

By September, Hitler was frustrated and perplexed. To break the resolve of Britain once and for all, Hitler ordered German bombings against England be carried out at night as well. England was being attacked day and night. The RAF could not keep up with mounting losses. In a bold and desperate move, the RAF retaliated by bombing Berlin. The attack enraged Hitler and just as the RAF was on the verge of breaking, he demanded that Goering change tactics. Instead of bombing military targets and airfields in the south of England, the Germans began to bomb London and other cities. Hoping to decimate the morale of the British people, the "Blitz" against Britain had begun.