



“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”. (Winston Churchill, 20 August 1940)

The 80th anniversary of the Battle of Britain was officially commemorated on 15 September 2010 in Britain by means of commemoration services which provided an opportune time to reminisce on the most classical air battle in history. It can be argued that poor intelligence and abandoning the Principles of War, constituted the major contribution to the Luftwaffe losing the *Battle of Britain*. The tenets expressed are those of the writer.

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Prelude

For one moment, close your eyes and recall the European Spring of 1940. The Nazis had swept through the Low Countries and into France. The British Expeditionary Force had been defeated and had retreated from Dunkirk with a large proportion of Britain’s fighting equipment left on the other side of the channel.

The last bastion facing the Nazi onslaught lay across the English Channel; Britain stood totally isolated, but at that stage, without anyone realising it, the outcome of World War II, depended on whether or not the Luftwaffe would succeed in destroying the Royal Air Force’s (RAF) Fighter Command. Total air superiority, in more modern parlance, ‘air dominance’, was the minimum operational requirement for Operation *Sea Lion*, the German invasion of Britain, to be attempted.

Hitler was winning and Britain was about to be

This article pays tribute to those that have tasted the fear of mortal combat in fighting for a cause for which they were prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice; for their country or their comrades in arms. In the immortal words of poet Laurence Binyon (1869-1943):

*“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:”
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them.”*

defeated. Theoretically, on paper at least; numerically, there was no way that Britain could survive Hitler's ill conceived plans; 600 RAF fighters overwhelmed by 2800 Luftwaffe fighters and bombers on 15 September 1940 attacks, Germany's proclaimed 'Eagle Day'.

The Battle

This battle has been analysed 'ad nauseum' at the strategic and operational level by strategists, students of air power and by air force staff colleges. Most appreciations of the battle essentially focussed on the different capabilities and resources ranged against each other, but very few dug deeper and attempted to get to grips with the personalities involved in the strategic and operational thinking, both in the RAF and Luftwaffe. The crux is that the Great War of 1915 shaped the strategic thinking and tactical knowledge of most commanders involved in the Battle of Britain; the young fighter pilots of WWI would take centre stage in commanding the air forces of WWII, and in particular, of what was subsequently to be known as the *Battle of Britain*.

Why did the Luftwaffe at the most critical moment of the battle, when the RAF Fighter Command was on its knees, sacrifice the Principles of War; why did they shift their objective of eliminating the RAF Fighter Command to the bombing of London? The answers lie in not so much in strategic thinking, but the personalities and organisational politics that plagued both the RAF and Luftwaffe. History, however, provides clear evidence that failure by strategists and politicians to fully comply with the 'principles of war', proved devastating for Germany.

Heresy, possibly? It would not be wrong to conclude that Britain did not win the *Battle of Britain*, rather, that Germany lost the *Battle of Britain*. After a build up of several months, the decisive day of the Battle was 15 September 1940. The Luftwaffe attacked by day in huge numbers expecting to sweep the RAF from the skies, but the RAF fought them off. At one point, every available fighter was in the sky – when Churchill, monitoring operations from Uxbridge, 11 Group's Operations Rooms asked Air Vice Marshal Park: "what reserves are left"?, the shocking reply was "none sir!"

Like two punch drunk boxers, the Luftwaffe was also approaching the limit of its ability to sustain such attacks and losses for an extended period when in November 1940, Hitler, tiring of Goering's empty promises, postponed the attack on Britain. If only they had had accurate intelligence to realise to what extent they had sapped out the last bit of resistance from the RAF, who knows what the world would look like today.

Under the aggressive leadership and inspirational wisdom of Winston Churchill, the British people stood resolute and defiant that they would fight and the Nazis would be defeated. A robust psychological approach by the population, coupled to leading edge technological innovation, transcended the theoretical 'paper odds' and which resulted in a major victory for the British people.

Personalities of the Battle

Wars are essentially driven by national ego or the fight for resources or territory, which in turn implies personalities at both the political, and military level. At the political level, the battle was between Hitler and Churchill; at the military level, the battle between Reichsmarshal Goering and the RAF's Air Vice Marshal Dowding, Commander-in-Chief Fighter Command. Stuck between these personality groupings, was the innovative technological advancements developed during the pre-war years that would be the determinants of success or failure.

If there was one particular weakness between the two sides, it was the superior strategic thinking of Dowding vs that of Hitler's right hand man, Goering. What was it that made Hitler place so much faith in Goering's decisions? Goering's successes as a fighter pilot in WWI and his employment strategy of the air force in the Blitzkrieg, would surely have convinced Hitler that in Goering, he had a visionary leader, a military commander that could provide a military solution to the goals of Germany in regaining its stature after the humiliation suffered under the harsh conditions of the surrender Treaty of Versailles.

After all, it was Goering that drove the revival of Germany's air power and rebuilding of the Luftwaffe and his support to Hitler in 1935 in renouncing all the restrictions of Versailles. The Luftwaffe's successful tactical involvement



South African born, Battle of Britain ace, Sdn Ldr 'Sailor' Malan, CO 74 Sqn, August 1940; ended the war having scored 27 kills.

in 1936 in Spain in support of Franco and the defeat of Poland in one month brought on by the aerial triumph, led Goering to convince Hitler that every major offensive would in future be spearheaded by the pilots of the Luftwaffe.

One of the lesser known names that featured most prominently in the strategic decision making on the German side, was Colonel 'Beppo' Schmid, an Army officer promoted to Head of Luftwaffe Intelligence. The performance of Luftwaffe air intelligence prior to and during the Battle of Britain was seriously flawed and perhaps doomed it to failure from the outset. Poor organization and staffing and the Nazi "system" itself, a system that resulted in an almost complete absence of coordination amongst the various intelligence agencies, all combined to help ensure defeat.

'Chastise the bearer of unhappy tidings'. If not the motto of the Nazi regime, certainly this was the apparent attitude of many individuals, including Hitler and Goering; they demonstrated a dislike of intelligence reports that did not fit their own personal visions with the result that intelligence analysis was often watered down to reach conclusions more acceptable to the intended reader. Thus the reputation of Col "Beppo" Schmid, evolved as one renown within the Luftwaffe for garnishing his reports to make them more palatable to Goering. During interrogation in 1945, General Adolf Galland was less diplomatic, calling Schmid a "complete wash-out as an intelligence officer, the most important job of all.

German Intelligence Appreciation

For Goering's Luftwaffe, no task was too great during the euphoric state of pre-Dunkirk. Ominous indicators existed however, the loss rates against the British during the air battles above Dunkirk were either ignored or overwhelmed by the positive optimism resulting from earlier military successes, in fact, the "weaknesses in intelligence both mirrored and contributed to a fatal overconfidence throughout the German High Command. Hitler's own conviction that the British were weak and would capitulate and accept overtures for peace, either before or after a short air offensive, definitely affected Luftwaffe thinking.

Assessments of raid results were almost always overstated. For example, following the raids on 17 August, Luftwaffe intelligence claimed 11 airfields permanently destroyed with another 12 severely damaged. All of these airfields were in fact operational. Three times the actual British loss rates were claimed by German intelligence during the crucial August-September time period while German losses, which were also high, were not accurately reported on by Intelligence.

Even within the Luftwaffe, considerable confusion developed between *Luftflotten 2* and 3. "Kesselring claimed that Fighter Command had been destroyed, while Sperrle claimed it had 1,000 aircraft." Based on the 'inaccurate intelligence', the optimistic view once again prevailed, supported by Goering, which contributed to the German decision to shift targeting from Fighter Command airfields, factories and radar stations, to London.

Strategic Errors

Strategic Error 1 – Goering's Perceptions. The first major error Hitler made was to take Goering's advice in May 1940 and order a halt by advancing German forces on Dunkirk; this decision based on a promise by Goering to Hitler that the air force could finish the job through a Blitzkrieg at Dunkirk. Not only a moral victory for Britain, but more than 350,000 soldiers and airmen were available to counter German efforts at defeating Britain.

It is clear that Goering was riding high on the euphoria of the Blitzkrieg but had no real idea of the capabilities and resources of Britain and certainly did not attribute them with any real chance of resisting the rolling advance of the German forces. The timescales allotted for the invasion plans for Britain was for the Luftwaffe to gain air superiority over a period of 4 days for the air battle and 4 weeks to defeat what was left, demonstrated his contempt for the RAF capabilities.

Strategic Error 2 - Spitfire. The Hurricanes were no competition for the Bf-109 and although the technological advances of Britain in post war Europe were well known to the Germans, also that the Spitfire was under development, no real importance was given to the impact of the Spitfire on the ability of the Bf-109s to protect the Luftwaffe bombers. The Spitfire suffered inferior excess power but possessed a better in close-in fighting potential due to its instantaneous turning capability. After Dunkirk, Goering, using attacks on shipping convoys to evaluate RAF Fighter Command's ability to respond, seemed to have learnt nothing from the RAF's response and the Spitfire's combat performance against the Bf-109. The Spitfire posed the greatest threat to the Luftwaffe bombing campaign.

By September 1940, serious conflict existed within the Luftwaffe; bomber losses had mounted which Goering, in his failure to reduce such losses, blamed inadequate fighter cover. To satisfy his frustrations, the fighter escort was ordered by Goering to fly at the same altitude as the bombers thereby removing the Bf-109s flexibility. The fighter escort lost the advantage of height and were

forced to weave and not allowed to leave the bombers even if they had RAF fighters visual. This enraged Galland; squadrons of Luftwaffe bombers with a 'lame' fighter escort a mile behind; amazingly poor tactics of fighter escort providing the Spitfires with a huge tactical advantage which cost lives of German fighter pilots. Add to this the approximately 15 minutes of 'time over target' available to the Bf-109, and it becomes evident that inadequate protection would be available to the bombers, the main strike force with which the Luftwaffe intended to bring the RAF's Fighter Command, and Britain, to its knees.

Strategic Error 3 - Radar. Perhaps the greatest failure was the German conclusions about the effectiveness of the British, Chain Home, radar stations. General Martini's 3d Abteilung signals intelligence, using the airship Graf Zeppelin, had detected British radar before the outbreak of hostilities. Did Colonel Schmid, as a non-pilot, fail to grasp the significance of radar's potential? In any event, little emphasis was placed on sustained attacks against the British early warning system.

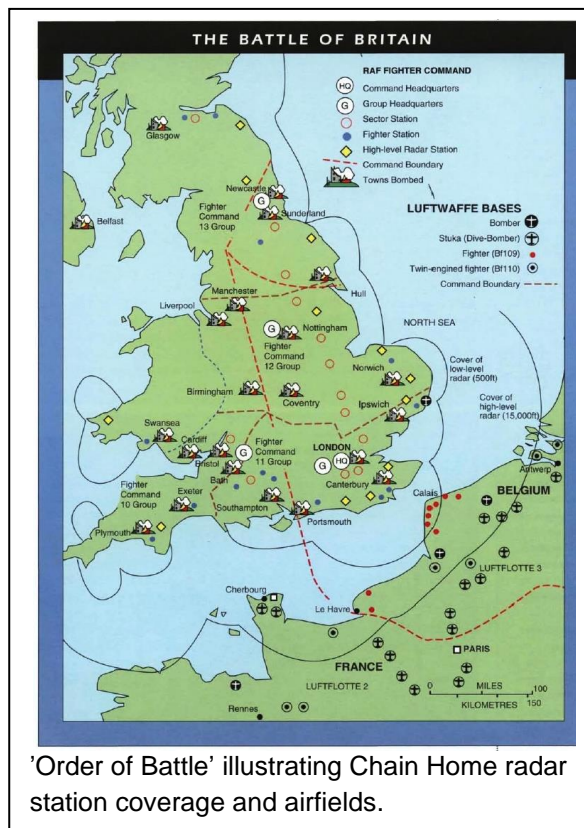
As the battle progressed, however, Schmid became aware that radar information was being passed to RAF fighters by radio which served to confirm his earlier conclusions and in his ignorance of air power, he remained convinced that the mass attacks being conducted by the Luftwaffe would overload what he considered to be an "inflexible" command and control system. In fact, the British Command and Control system, developed during the pre-war years under the astute Dowding, was a 'first generation' netcentric system in which the sensor information provided by radar and visual sightings was fed into a centralized, command and control system which in truth, detected and tracked massed formations of German aircraft. Dowding implicitly understood Rule Number 1 of air defence: early warning was an essential element of any air defence campaign.

Further supporting Schmid's flawed conclusions about radar was the effectiveness of an undetected deception plan derived from a British policy to continue transmitting from damaged radar sites. Thus, radar sites that were incapable of receiving information, continued to transmit signals. The German signals intelligence was deceived into thinking that the bombing of radar stations which was undertaken early in the campaign was ineffective. In concert with pilot reports that "led the Germans to believe that the vitals of the radar stations were located in bombproof bunkers," the decision was finally made to discontinue attacks against the radar sites altogether.

The only conclusion one can reach is that Goering did not understand the advantages of early warning radar with 120 mile range coverage which provided the RAF with an element of surprise the Luftwaffe pilots could not understand. One Luftwaffe pilot, in his mission debriefing reported that: "Spitfires strike with astonishing suddenness". What a mistake!!!

Strategic Error 4 – Target Selection. The analysis of Great Britain as established by *Studie Blau* formed the foundation of the bomber offensive conducted during the Battle of Britain. In addition, an "England Committee" was established to provide specialized guidance on target selection to the Luftwaffe. Although target lists were prepared by the Luftwaffe, the final decisions seem to have been made on the spot by Goering and Jeschonnek. Needless to say, considerable confusion existed within the Intelligence and Leadership communities of the Luftwaffe over the choice of targets for a strategic campaign.

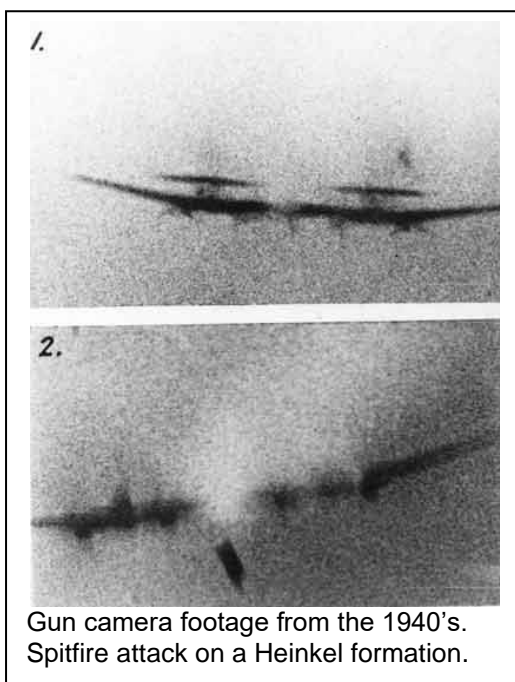
Intelligence weaknesses had earlier been identified when, in 1936, the director of operations of the Luftwaffe General Staff identified the lack of good intelligence as having "very great significance in a bombing war." This director further established that the current knowledge and experience within the military was inadequate to properly identify the relative vulnerability of "technical-industrial" systems. Throughout the Battle of Britain, "a preference for the choice of a large number of targets for simultaneous attack as a precaution, lest one important target be left out, rather than concentrating on the most important targets."



'Order of Battle' illustrating Chain Home radar station coverage and airfields.

One point appears to have received singular agreement within the German High Command. The common belief rose from the experiences of World War One; civilian populations could be driven to panic, even revolution, as the direct result of aerial bombing. Goering and Jeschonnek obviously shared this view, as did the England Committee. Hitler and the England Committee believed that the poorer working classes could "be incited against the rich ruling class to bring about a revolution." This ideological and sociological viewpoint remained ingrained in the Luftwaffe leadership's thinking until the end of the war and had a major influence on the decision to change the original plan to destroy the RAF Fighter Command and rather bomb London .

Apparently no specific priority for the destruction of the identified target types was established. The focus was to be on those targets having the greatest effects upon the population. Again the dominant influence of the German belief in the "fear of aerial bombardment" is evident. Furthermore, by mid-October Goering would personally order "frequent changes of targets in order to achieve the necessary effect on the population of London and to confront the enemy's defenses with a new situation."



Gun camera footage from the 1940's.
Spitfire attack on a Heinkel formation.

Strategic Error 5 – Force Levels. Without actually realising it, the German High Command, based on the expeditionary offensive against the Low Countries, had created a tactical air force; one in which light bombers and light fighters, both with limited range, were used for the Blitzkrieg. Taking on strategic warfare with a tactical air force, prevented the Luftwaffe from optimising it's strike force for maximum effect with the limitations of range and bomb load, significantly reducing the potential to achieve its objectives. It's not for nothing that the Allied Air Force's strategic component developed into 'heavy' four engine bombers with long range escorts; for example B-17s and P-51 Mustangs. One month after the high-point of the bombings, the Chief of the Operational Staff, General Jeschonnek, stated that England's destruction would require an air fleet four times as large as the Third Reich possessed. A statement of that kind revealed once again the sheer foolishness of the German High Command's appreciation and estimations of the extent of conducting such an operation.

Principles of War

In the final analysis, it is clear that inadequate regard was paid by the Luftwaffe to the 'Principles of War', more particularly, Selection and Maintenance of the Aim, the main principle in conducting warfare, which was weakly pursued. No real compliance was evident in the other principles such as Maintenance of Morale, Offensive Action, Security, Surprise, Concentration of Force, Economy of Effort, Flexibility and Sustainability, which clearly reveals the extent to which the RAF, strategically and tactically, were destined not to lose the *Battle of Britain*'.

The performance of the RAF can best be summarized by Churchill's speech to the nation on 18 June 1940 following on from the British Army's miraculous evacuation from Dunkirk, realising the precarious position Britain found itself in:

"The Battle of France is over – I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be upon us... Let us therefore, brace ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say, "This was their finest hour".