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The Battle of Britain (1940) Date: _____

With the outbreak of World War II, Britain faced the very real risk of a vast air assault by Germany's *Luftwaffe*. But throughout the autumn and winter of 1939 and the spring and summer of 1940 the British Isles experienced an uneasy peace, broken dramatically by the Germans entering the smouldering ruins of Dunkirk in France. Within 48 hours, on the night of 5/6 June, thirty German bombers crossed the east coast of England, homing in on airfields. Contrasted with later armadas, it was a light incursion, followed by a further misleading lull as the *Luftwaffe* changed priorities, supporting German armies advancing into France.

Once the French sought an armistice, the situation changed. On 18 June 1940, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) pronounced: '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 turned on us.' By way of preface to a full daylight air offensive in August, the Germans repeatedly dispatched bombers against a wide variety of targets in England.

At first the Royal Air Force (RAF) was faced with a superior *Luftwaffe*, many of whose pilots had gained valuable combat experience from campaigns in Spain, Poland and France. In the sky, the Messerschmitt (Me) Bf 109 became the pacesetter for all new fighters, being a slender 550 km/h (342 mph) single-seat monoplane with two machine guns and two cannon. It was a rival to the Hurricane and the Spitfire. During August 1940, Sir Hugh Dowding's RAF Fighter Command could call on 749 Hurricanes and Spitfires to take on the *Luftwaffe's* 702 Me 109s, which were backed-up by long-range Me 110s.

The day of Tuesday 13 August had been designated by [Supreme Commander of the *Luftwaffe* Hermann] Göring as *Adlertag* (Eagle Day), the start of the *Adlerangriff* (Eagle Attack)—a series of *Luftwaffe* attacks aginst the RAF as part of preparations for a seborne invasion of Britain. His main objectives were the forward airfields near the Kent coast, chains of radar stations as well as docks and shipping. Göring was also faced with changeable weather and *Adlertag* dawned over southeast Egnaldn in a thick cloud. Amid considerable confusion – some pilots had already taken off while others received no instructions at all – a postponement was ordered until the afternoon. British airfields then experiend the full fury of the German attack.

Thursday 15 August saw some of the fiercest fighting conducted over a wide area, ranging from Tyneside in northeast England, down the east coast and along the south coast to Devon. German resources were heavily stretched and losses were high – 75 *Luftwaffe* aircrafts destroyed compared to 34 British fighters. The next day, the *Luftwaffe* lost another 45 aircraft during further attacks on airfields. However, not all ripostes by the RAF were successes. Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, commander of No 12 Group in the Midlands, pitched a squadron of Spitfires against 50 unescorted Junkers Ju 88 bombers incoming from Denmark. Seven bombers were shot down, but the rest although unescorted, went on to bomb a Yorkshire aerodrome. In the south, bombers, heavily escorted by ME 109s, attacked airfields and aircraft factories.

From 8 Aug to 18 Aug, the RAF destroyed 363 *Luftwaffe* aircraft. But during the same ten days, the RAF lost 211 spitfires and Hurricanes, along with 154 experienced fighter pilots. In such circumstances, it was possible that Göring could gain the upper hand, a grim truth of which Dowding was well aware. Pilots as young as 18, their training times slashed, were thrust into combat with just ten hours' experience of flying single-seat fighters. Dowding's role was that of a juggler, shifting men from one squadron to another while desperately scouring for new talent. But both sides shared a shortage of aircraft, creeping exhaustion and low morale.

Main Idea:

However, Fighter Command numbers were boosted by input of Polish, Czech , French and a few American air crew, flying alongside Commonwealth, Fleet Air Arm and bomber pilots. And there emerged fighter pilots who became legends as Allied aces, often fueled by a deep hatred of the Nazis. Outstanding among these was the South African Adolph Gysbert Malan (nicknamed 'Sailor' because he had originally trained for the merchant navy). He never attempted to conceal his intentions and believed that it was better to send a German aircraft home crippled rather than shoot it down, graphically saying: '…with a dead rear gunner, a dead navigator and the pilot coughing up his lungs as he lands … I think if you do that it has better effect on their morale'. He was given command of 74 (Tiger) Squadron, with the rank of

Acting Squadron Leader, on 8 August. By this time, he was already the holder of the Distinguished Flying Cross. Three days later, starting at 07:20, he was tasked to intercept a hostile raid rapidly approaching Dover, which called for four separate air battles. By the time the weary Squadron finally returned to base, it had downed 38 enemy aircraft. Malan's subsequent comment was characteristic understatement: 'Thus ened a very successful morning of combat'.

By the end of 1941, Malan was the unrivaled top scorer with 32 kills, plus two unconfirmed, a record he held for three years. He drew up 'Ten of My Rules for Air Fighting', and had them pinned up in many crew rooms. They included: 'Never fly straight and level for more than 30 seconds in the combat area; When diving to attack, always leave a proportion of your formation above to act as a top guard; Go in quickly, punch hard and get out!'

Instances of individual heroism served as vital propaganda for the relentless battle against the *Luftwaffe.* But they could not conceal the unpalatable truth that for scores of combatants there was to be appalling physical suffering as a result of enemy fire. Pilot Office Geoffrey Page of 56 Squadron underwent 15 major surgical operations for horrific burns to face and hands, as well as gunshot wounds to both legs after parachuting from his Hurricane, following an attack by German Dornier Do 17s. While laying in a hospital bed unable to move or speak but determined to fight his way back to operational flying, he made a vow to take one German life for each of the operations.

Main Idea:

For all the Achievements of the legendary RAF fighter pilots, there remained the threat of seaborne invasion via the English Channel. Although Hitler feared that ht ecost to his naval fleet would be considerable, the buccaneering Göring, oozing self-confidence, assured the *Führer* that such an invasion, to be codenamed Operation Sea Lion, would be possible in mid- to late September, given favorable tides.

By way of preparation, Göring ordered his bombers to step up their attacks around Britain, but here caution also ruled. Londeon was the one forbidden target because it was thought likely that any major raids there would lead to retaliation against German cities on a similar or greater scale. As it happened, London was attacked – by accident. On the ghihg of 24-25 August, during the course of night operations, a flight of Heinkels He 111s lost their way to their intended targets and in the confusion dropped their bombs over the city. The need to retaliate quickly faste was clear. The next night, 81 british bombers flew to Berlin and carried out four successful raids on the capital. The effect on morale throughout Germany was devastating, particularly among ordinary citizens who had considered their capital inviolate. In response, Hitler threatened that if British attacks went on 'we will raze their cities to the ground'. By early September, the situation had escalated and the Blitz on London raged, first against the industrial and port areas of the East End, then spreading to other areas of the capital and finally to towns and cities beyond.

On Saturday 7 September, Göring stood on the cliffs at Cap Blanc Nex, southwest of Calais, watching the German formations sweeping overhead and announced over the radio: 'I myself have taken command of the *Luftwaffe's* battle of Britain'. With him stood ia staunch colleage, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander of *Luftflotten 2* (Air Fleet 2) and one of the most charismatic senior *Luftwaffe* figures, warmly nicknamed 'Smiling Albert' by his crews. Kesselring was a supporter of the move to shift bombing from airfields to cities. Althought it was little conslation to the civilian victims of such bombing, the shift away from targeting airfields was actually a strong contributor to Britihs success because it meant that its aircraft were able to enjoy a greater freedom of the skies. And relishing that freedom in particular was Leigh-Mallory, dispatching five squadrons – part of a so-called 'big wing' – to take on two of Kesselring's attacks on London. In command was squadron leade Doughlas Bader, who had lost both legs in an air crash in 1931 while doing low-level acrobatics and had been rtired as a consequence. Possessed of a giant ego and determination that recognized no obstacles, Bader had achieved entry to Bomber Command and 242 Squadron of Leigh-Mallory's No 12 group. Fights over London, though, were costly affairs. In the first weeks of September, Fighter Command lost 185 aircraft and the *Luftwaffe* 225.

Main Idea: