The Battle of Britain: July – October 1940

Background information

*...the Battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin.*
Winston Churchill, 18 June 1940

- With the fall of France in June 1940, Britain was the only major power in Europe still able to oppose Nazi Germany. Hitler could try to force the British to negotiate a peace or prepare his troops to invade. But before an invasion could succeed, he needed to control the skies; so he tasked his air force – the Luftwaffe – to take down the fighters of the Royal Air Force and, with them, Britain’s ability to defend its airspace.

- The attacks were incessant: July saw German planes target shipping in the Channel, drawing the RAF into combat, before radar stations, communications centres and airfields faced continuous bombing in August at the height of the battle. It seemed to the Germans that the RAF was near defeat, but it succeeded in holding out against the odds. By October, it was clear to both sides that the Luftwaffe had not succeeded in its mission.

- The RAF pilots with their skill and courage, the sophisticated command and control system, the use of early-warning radar and the success of Britain’s aircraft designs and production programme won through in the end for a British victory.

Battle of Britain: Key dates and figures

10 July 1940 – The official beginning of the Battle of Britain.

12 August 1940

- On 12 August 1940 the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) began a systematic assault on RAF (Royal Air Force) Fighter Command’s forward airfields and radar stations. This was their first major attack on Fighter Command’s ground organisation.

- The airfields suffered different degrees of damage but were all serviceable by the next morning. Most of the radar stations were also quickly back on air, except Ventnor on the Isle of Wight which was seriously damaged.

- These attacks displayed features which would characterise the fighting in the days ahead. There were several major raids, involving hundreds of aircraft, and attacks were timed to coincide with or closely follow one another, often on widely dispersed targets. Bombers, including the Junkers 87 or ‘Stuka’ dive bomber, were heavily escorted by fighters.

13 August 1940
• For the Germans, 13 August 1940 marked the start of their Battle of Britain. They called it 'Adlertag' (Eagle Day). On 'Eagle Day' the Luftwaffe mounted a total of 1,485 sorties (missions) with Fighter Command flying 727 sorties in response.

• The German intention was to probe British defences to see if they could direct equal resources against widely separated attacks. They saw only moderate success. Southampton experienced some damage and the only airfields to suffer, Eastchurch and Detling, were Coastal Command stations which left British fighter defences unimpaired.

• Three main Luftwaffe objectives - Odiham, Farnborough and Rochford - were completely missed. However, the day's operations also demonstrated the difficulty British defences had in meeting the Germans with forces large enough to inflict significant losses.

15 August 1940

• On 15 August, all three of the Luftwaffe’s air fleets were deployed in a coordinated onslaught for the first time. This day saw the heaviest fighting of the Battle of Britain and both sides were pushed almost to their limits.

• The Luftwaffe flew over 2,000 sorties and lost 75 aircraft, while Fighter Command flew 974 sorties during the daytime and lost 34. Considering the scale of the German attack, the damage caused was slight and no serious gaps had appeared in defences. In contrast one of the German air fleets suffered so severely that it never made another daylight attack during the entire Battle of Britain.

16 August 1940

• The Luftwaffe made a similarly massive effort the following day, 16 August, with three assaults over Kent and the Thames Estuary, Sussex and Hampshire, and at four different points between Harwich and the Isle of Wight.

• The pattern of raids was very similar to 15 August, with the strongest German activity directed against Fighter Command. The Luftwaffe’s intelligence shortcomings meant that only three of the airfields attacked were fighter bases.

18 August 1940

• After their major efforts on 15 and 16 August, the Germans paused to recover before returning to force on 18 August. Flying 750 sorties, the Germans attacked airfields at Biggin Hil, Kenley, Croydon and West Malling. The raid on RAF Kenley caused severe damage. All ten of its hangars and several aircraft – mostly Hurricanes – were destroyed.

• The Germans suffered for their efforts. The losses of Junkers 87 ‘Stuka’ dive bombers were so severe that this aircraft was largely withdrawn from the main battle.

30 August 1940

• On 30 August during a period of direct assaults against RAF sector stations across the south-east, Fighter Command flew 1,054 sorties - its largest daily number yet. Twenty-two fighter squadrons saw action, most at least twice and some up to four times. The Germans flew 1,345 sorties, their biggest daylight effort for a fortnight. The tempo of combat was increasing daily and for the British 30 August was the heaviest day of fighting they had experienced so far.
• The first main raid, flying in across Kent and Sussex, began at 10.30am. At 1.30pm successive waves of German bombers came in over southern Kent and the third and largest raid began around 4.00pm.

• Biggin Hill suffered severe damage – one of the last remaining hangars was destroyed and most telephone lines, gas, electricity and water mains were cut. Attacks on the Vauxhall factory at Luton also caused substantial damage.

31 August 1940

• On 31 August the Germans mounted an evenlargeroperation. It was costly for both sides and Fighter Command's losses were the heaviest of the whole of the Battle of Britain – 39 aircraft shot down and 14 pilots killed.

• Early waves of attack came in over Kent and the Thames Estuary, targeting the airfields at North Weald, Debden, Duxford and Eastchurch. The next attack focused on RAF Croydon, Biggin Hill and Hornchurch, with the latter two attacked again later in the afternoon.

• Both airfields were serviceable the following day, but the cumulative damage at Biggin Hill meant two of the three squadrons based there were put under the control of the nearby sectors.

7 September 1940

• On 7 September, after a fortnight of assaulting vitally important RAF sector stations in the south-east with considerable success, the Germans suddenly changed their tactics and launched an all-out attack on London.

• Germany felt that the sector stations had suffered sufficient damage and that, with time running out in which to launch a successful invasion of Britain, the most rapid conclusion to the Battle of Britain could be reached by focusing effort on the capital. Fighter Command would be certain to defend the capital in the greatest possible strength, so targeting London offered the unique chance for a huge and decisive air battle.

• German fighters provided close escort support for the bombers and the sheer size of the German force meant many of the raids were successful in hitting targets in the capital. The Germans laid waste to large areas of the London docks, Woolwich Arsenal, Beckton gasworks, West Ham power station and the oil storage tanks at Thameshaven. A second wave hit Millwall, the commercial docks at Tilbury and the heavily populated streets of the East End.

• The fires from the burning buildings were perfect markers for the bombers which continued to come throughout the night for the next nine months – what became known as the ‘Blitz’. Despite the damage the raids on London caused, the German decision to shift the focus of attacks away from RAF targets was a tactical error of such importance that it was arguably the turning point of the Battle of Britain.

15 September 1940

• A week after their change of tactics, the Germans launched another massive assault on 15 September, which they believed would shatter Fighter Command’s resistance and open the way for a successful invasion. However, since 7 September Britain’s defences had recovered, fighter production continued and operational pilot strength was the highest it had been since the start of the Battle of Britain.

• The German offensive came in two distinct waves, giving British aircraft time to refuel and rearm. Also, the usual diversionary manoeuvres were not employed so the British were able to deploy as many as 17
squadrons to meet the threat. German bomber formations were smashed, making accurate bombing impossible.

- It was a day of sustained fighting and the Germans suffered their highest losses since 18 August. It was obvious to both sides that German tactics had failed and the Luftwaffe had not gained the air supremacy they needed for an invasion. However, the British claimed that 185 German planes were downed on that day. In fact, only 57 were lost and 3 crash landed in France.

- Fighting continued for another few weeks, but the action on 15 September was seen as an overwhelming and decisive defeat for the Luftwaffe. For this reason, this date is celebrated in the United Kingdom as Battle of Britain Day.

**31 October 1940**

- There was some German fighter and fighter bomber activity on 31 October 1940 but rain ensured that what later became regarded officially as the last day of the Battle of Britain (though nobody knew that at the time) passed without significant aerial conflict.

**The Blitz: 7 September 1940 – 11 May 1941**

Reluctant to launch an invasion and concerned that the time to launch an invasion may have run out, Nazi Germany tried instead to bomb Britain into submission. On 7 September the Luftwaffe began major bombing raids on London. When German bombers started to attack British towns and cities, the civil defence and emergency services moved into the front line.

A nationwide network of men and women was set up to keep the country functioning throughout the bombings. Afraid that the Nazis would target iconic buildings, the St Paul’s Watch was formed to help protect the cathedral.

The ‘Second Great Fire of London’, was the most devastating attack on London on the night of 29 December 1940. Much of London was destroyed but thanks in part to this team of volunteers, St Paul’s survived.

**The Blitz: Key dates and figures**

- The Blitz began on Saturday 7 September when the Germans attacked London with 350 bombers escorted by 600 fighters. The attack lasted from 5pm until 4.30am the following morning. 335 tons of high explosive and 440 incendiary canisters were dropped during that raid.

- On “Black Saturday”, 7 September 1940, 430 Londoners were killed and 1,600 injured. 41 German aircraft were shot down by RAF Fighter Command for a loss of 25. To escape the bombing 5,000 East Enders slept out in Epping Forest.

- London was then bombed for 57 consecutive nights, and often during the daytime too. The most destructive raid was on 10/11 May 1941. That night the chamber of the House of Commons was destroyed and 1,436 civilians killed. Over 155,000 families were without gas, water or electricity and fires burned for ten days. 507 German bombers raided London that night dropping 711 tons of high explosive and 2,393 incendiary canisters.
• Coventry, an important engineering and armaments producing centre, was raided on 14/15 November 1940 when 449 bombers dropped 503 tons of high explosive and 881 incendiary canisters (containing 30,000 bombs) on the city. The Cathedral was destroyed, 554 people were killed and 850 seriously injured. Despite the devastation production was back to normal in 6 weeks.

• Liverpool, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Plymouth were the most heavily bombed cities after London. Glasgow had 5 major raids, the others 8. 23,602 civilians were killed during the Blitz outside London, 1940-1941.

• During heavy bombings over Manchester from 22 - 24 December 1940, over 650 people were killed and 50,000 homes damaged. For the rest of the Second World War, Manchester United had to play at Manchester City’s ground because Old Trafford was damaged by bombs.

• The Second Great Fire of London took place on 29/30 December 1940, and while a relatively small number of civilians were killed -163- much material damage was done especially to historic buildings including 8 churches designed by Sir Christopher Wren. 136 aircraft raided London that night dropping 127 tons of high explosives and 613 incendiary canisters.

• During the Blitz 177,000 Londoners were regularly using Tube stations as shelters. These were not always safe: 64 people were killed at Balham on 15 October 1940 while 111 died at the Bank on 11 January 1941.

• In 85 major raids on London the Luftwaffe dropped 23,949 tons of high explosive. Holborn was the most heavily bombed borough with 39.75 high explosive bombs per 100 acres. 20,083 Londoners were killed during the 1940-1941 Blitz. 60,595 British civilians were killed during the Second World War.

• Among the many historic buildings destroyed or damaged in the London Blitz were: The Guildhall, the House of Commons, the Royal Hospital Chelsea, St Paul’s Cathedral, the British Museum and Buckingham Palace. The Imperial War Museum was also bombed several times, the worst “incident” taking place on the night of 31 January 1941. The BBC was bombed on 15 October 1940.

Images from IWM’s Collections:

Operations: Pattern of condensation trails left by British and German aircraft after a dog fight. © IWM (H 4219)

Operations: Pilots seen running to their aircraft. © IWM (HU 49253)
Items on display in IWM London’s Atrium:

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<th>Image</th>
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| ![Gas mask, Civilian (Child's), ‘Mickey Mouse’](image1.jpg) | **Gas mask, Civilian (Child's), ‘Mickey Mouse’**  
*Object - EQU 3643*  
This type of mask was issued to younger children; manufactured in bright colours, it was intended to be more attractive and less sinister than adult versions. |
| ![Wardens' Look Out Shelter](image2.jpg) | **Wardens' Look Out Shelter**  
*Object - FEQ 485*  
There were three standard sizes of "Shelters for Key Men", of which this is an example of the middle size, and was designed to provide shelter for up to 3 people. |
| ![Heinkel He 111, Instrument panel](image3.jpg) | **Heinkel He 111, Instrument panel**  
*Object - EPH 9655*  
Instrument panel from a Heinkel He 111 bomber. |
| ![Civilian defence armband](image4.jpg) | **Civilian defence armband**  
*Object - INS 7309*  
Second World War British Home Front Special Police Constable's armband. |
Items on display at IWM North:

**Freedom is in Peril - Defend It with All Your Might**
(1939)
This poster was among the first produced by the Ministry of Information in 1939.
[Art.IWM PST 14791]

**A Luftwaffe target map of Manchester showing the Manchester Ship Canal.**
It is dated November 1940, just weeks before the Manchester ‘Christmas’ Blitz.
On display in *Horrible Histories: Blitzed Brits*.

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History articles on IWM website:

**Battle of Britain hub page** [www.iwm.org.uk/history/battle-of-britain](http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/battle-of-britain)
Examples of relevant articles:
- 9 important dates in the Battle of Britain
- How Bomber Command helped win the Battle of Britain

**The Blitz hub page** [www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-blitz](http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-blitz)
Examples of relevant articles:
- 15 powerful photos of the blitz
- Amazing colour footage of life during the Blitz

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For further press information, or to request images or film footage relating to the Blitz or the Battle of Britain please contact:
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