

The Battle of Britain

The threat

In early June 1940, Britain was in peril. The Germans, who had fallen under the spell of a cruel and thoroughly dangerous leader, had successfully overrun most of the countries in western Europe. Now, they were facing Britain across the narrow English Channel with a vast, aggressive army. Following their desperate evacuation from the beaches of Dunkirk in northern France, the British Army was in ruin and the population was in fear.

In such a weakened and demoralised state, Britain was ripe for the taking, or so the Germans thought, and they began planning an invasion. First, however, they had to clear the skies of the RAF, the Royal Air Force. The Battle of Britain was about to begin.

The air forces

The pilots of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, were brimming with confidence. Yes, they recognised that the RAF had two very good fighter planes, the Hurricane and the Spitfire, but they had already battled with these over France and felt sure they could deal with them. More importantly, they believed that they had numbers on their side. Their intelligence suggested that the RAF had only half as many battle-ready aircraft as they did. In that sense, it really did not appear to be a fair fight. The question is, was it really such a case of a weak underdog overcoming the odds to defeat a mighty giant?

Despite the one-sided appearance of the conflict, the RAF had some crucial advantages. As they were battling in the skies above their own country, any RAF pilot who had to bail out of a damaged aircraft would land on friendly soil and be able to fly again; German pilots were usually captured. Also, the German planes had to come further and their fighters often ran low on fuel.

The plan

The German plan was to use their mass formations of bombers to pulverise RAF airfields. Any British planes that came up to defend could then be picked off by the Luftwaffe's excellent fighters. It very nearly worked too, despite the valiant efforts of the RAF's young pilots.

Fortunately for Britain, the Germans also made a number of critical mistakes. One of them was to underestimate the value of radar. This new invention gave the British early warnings of Luftwaffe attacks which meant the RAF's leaders could be more precise about how many defenders to send up and when they should take off. The Luftwaffe did launch early bombing raids on the radar masts but lost interest in them disastrously quickly from the German perspective. Another big mistake was to

stop attacking airfields and turn their attentions on London. Although terrible for the civilians who lived there, it gave the RAF a much-needed opportunity to recover, just as they were on their last legs.

Conclusion

No matter how heavily their cities were bombed, the British people did not give in. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe's losses kept growing. Eventually, the Germans shelved their invasion plans. Britain was saved. The head of the British government, Winston Churchill, famously remarked, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." That is how the brave RAF pilots from Britain and her allies became known as *The Few* by a nation, eternally grateful for their sacrifice. It was a major turning point in the war. Whether it was a victory completely against the odds or a fairly even contest in which the RAF simply managed their resources better and capitalised on German mistakes is a little less clear.

Questions

Vocabulary:

1. *In early June 1940, Britain was in peril.* What does *peril* mean?
2. ... *a weak underdog* ... What does the word *underdog* mean in this sentence?
3. ... *on their last legs* ... This means they were ... Circle **one**.

nearly defeated **badly injured** **stuck on the ground** **on their way home**

Retrieval:

4. From where had the British Army evacuated?
5. What are the names of the two British fighter planes mentioned in the text?
6. Look at the paragraph beginning: '*Fortunately for Britain...*'
Give **one** of the mistakes made by the Germans.

Inference:

7. Why was Britain *in peril* in early June 1940?
8. Why were German pilots confident they could beat the British fighter planes?