

LARGE PRINT GUIDE



15 AUGUST 1940

THE
BATTLE
OF **BRITAIN**

‘The Luftwaffe will ... destroy the British Air Force as quickly as possible.’

Adolf Hitler, 1 August 1940

German operations until mid-August were hampered by bad weather. They were able to launch a major attack across Britain on 15 August, two days after Adler Tag (Eagle Day), as they prepared for invasion in Operation SEALION. The Luftwaffe made more sorties than on any other day in the Battle destroying 34 RAF fighter aircraft, cutting off power to radar stations and causing damage at eight airfields. However, the Germans lost 76 aircraft in return, leading Churchill to declare the day to be ‘one of the greatest in history’.

[Discover more about 15 August 1940 on the screen.](#)

Phases of the Battle of Britain 1940

10 May The Battle of France. German forces enter Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Churchill becomes Prime Minister

26 May–4 June Operation DYNAMO, evacuation of Dunkirk

10 June Italy declares war on France and Britain

14 June German troops occupy Paris

15–25 June Operation AERIAL, evacuation of remaining forces from France

22 June France surrenders

Phase one: 10 July

10 July The official start of the Battle of Britain

16 July German Directive No. 16, Operation SEALION

1 August German Directive No. 17, Destroy the British Air Force

16 July German Directive No. 16, Operation SEALION

1 August German Directive No. 17, Destroy the British Air Force

Phase two: 13 August

13 August Adler Tag (Eagle Day)

18 August The so-called Hardest Day

24 August The Luftwaffe bombs London

25–26 August RAF Bomber Command attacks Berlin in retaliation

Phase three: 7 September

7 September The Luftwaffe attacks London

15 September Battle of Britain Day

17 September Operation SEALION postponed indefinitely

Phase four: 1 October–31 October

1 October The Luftwaffe abandons daylight raids on London

24–25 October Corpo Aereo Italiano begins operations over England

The Blitz: 1 November onwards

31 October The official end of the Battle of Britain and start of the Blitz

14–15 November The Coventry Blitz

The graph shows how the widely-held perception by the Luftwaffe – that the RAF did not have enough fighter aircraft to withstand a sustained attack – was incorrect.

Aircraft supply and availability were not the problem. In fact, the supply of pilots lagged behind available aircraft as it takes longer to train a pilot than to produce an aircraft.

During the Battle of Britain, the most inexperienced pilots (from both the RAF and the Luftwaffe) were the most likely to get shot down.

Plotting a Course to Victory

Plotting tables were an important part of the Dowding System, showing the position of allied and enemy aircraft. They were used in Fighter Command, Group and Sector Operations Rooms. Plotters of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) used long rods to place position indicators and information blocks on the map.

Controllers used the information presented on the table to guide RAF pilots to intercept the enemy. Swift and accurate communications between different RAF Commands was vital during the Battle of Britain.

1. Head and Breast Telephone Set

1939–1945

This standard General Post Office equipment was widely used by telephonists, Women's Auxiliary Air Force Plotters and members of the Observer Corps during the Second World War. It enabled the wearer to make and receive calls while freeing their hands for other tasks.

67/R/448

2. Hostile Raid Plotting Block, Friendly Forces Plotting Block

1939–1945

Wooden blocks were used to represent aircraft on the situation map. The top line of blocks relating to enemy aircraft were given an identification number proceeded by the letter H for 'Hostile'. The estimated number of aircraft was displayed below. The top line of friendly plots recorded the height of the aircraft in thousands of feet, so 15 would indicate 15,000 feet. The number of aircraft was recorded below. Symbols indicating which squadrons were in action were attached to the top.

X002-6552, X002-6607

3. Plotting Counters

1939–1945

Counters were used as position indicators. The colour of these changed every five minutes corresponding to coloured segments displayed on the Operations Room clock. Arrows indicated visual or radar sightings, shields were used for reports based on sound and disks showed aircraft which were circling.

X 9 P/O 75/I/536

4. Plotting Rod

1939–1945

Plotting rods were used to place counters and blocks onto the situation map. This pattern of plotting rod, which was introduced just after the Battle of Britain, has a magnetic head to aid the placing of counters. It is rumoured that early versions of these rods were acquired from local casinos and the WAAF Plotters were frequently likened to croupiers.

X008-4521

‘You are supporting the men in the air. I mean you can’t fail, can you?’

Diary extract, Edith Kup, WAAF plotter

Unsung Heroes: The Observer Corps

Chain Home radar could only detect raids over the sea. Once the Luftwaffe was over land, it was up to the volunteers of the Observer Corps, using a Post Instrument, to calculate the position and height of a raid. This information was reported to a Sector Control room, together with the number and types of aircraft.

In recognition of its vital contribution during the Battle, the Corps became the Royal Observer Corps in April 1941.

5. Aircraft Recognition Cards

1941

Aircraft recognition was a vital skill for members of the Observer Corps and for aircrew on both sides of the conflict. Many hours were devoted to studying photographs or drawings of aircraft, with illustrated playing cards adding some fun to the process. Models were particularly useful as these could be viewed from any angle.

69/K/414

6. Messerschmitt Bf 100 Recognition Model

1937–1945

7. Junkers Ju 88 Recognition Model

1940

These recognition models were used to train aircrew, particularly pilots and gunners, in the vital skill of aircraft recognition. Some aircraft were easily confused in the heat of conflict. On 15 August 1940, a Blenheim was attacked by Spitfire pilots when they mistook it for a German Junkers Ju 88. Models were often hand-made by RAF personnel in their spare time. The Messerschmitt is German-made, manufactured by Wiking, a model company still in existence.

75/M/245, 1991/0198/M

8. Post Instrument Mk IIC

Post Instruments were used in the Second World War by members of the Observer Corps as an aide to assess the height, bearing and location of enemy aircraft.

This post instrument is fitted with a Micklethwait Height Correction attachment which, when used in conjunction with information from another observer post monitoring the same aircraft, could refine the estimate of the aircraft's height. Information was passed to Observer Corps plotting centres and then to RAF Fighter Command, so they could plot a real-time picture of German air attacks as they developed.

67/I/698

9. Observer Corps Lapel Badge

10. Observer Corps Armband

In 1940, Observer Corps personnel were ordered to wear lapel badges and armbands at all times while on duty, to provide them with legal protection as legitimate combatants in the event of a German invasion. During the Battle of Britain, information gathered by the Observer Corps was a vital part of the Dowding System, enabling fighter aircraft to be mobilised swiftly against enemy attacks.

78/U/621, 76/U/1371

Images

11 Group Operations Room, Uxbridge.
CH7698, © Crown Copyright, Imperial War
Museum

Airmen with aircraft recognition playing cards.
CH1241, © Crown Copyright, RAF Air Historical
Branch

Mascots and Medals

Campaign medals and gallantry awards were given to show the participation and bravery of individuals during particular battles or actions. The RAF depended on teamwork, but medals represented the effort of the individual.

Aircraft artwork also represented individuals. It was common among German fighter pilots, but unusual in the RAF. Although officially banned, it was tolerated by some commanding officers.

1. Figaro Door

1940–1942

Flight Lieutenant Ian Gleed, born in Finchley, adopted Figaro, a wily cat from the Disney film ‘Pinocchio’, as his mascot, shown here on the door of one of his Hurricanes. On 15 August 1940, Ian led No. 87 Squadron to intercept a large German force approaching the Dorset coast, destroying two Messerschmitt Bf 110s and probably a Bf 109.

71/A/222

2. Medal Bar of Group Captain John Kent

1939–1953

‘Johnny’ Kent was one of the most decorated Spitfire pilots of the Second World War. His tally was 12 enemy aircraft destroyed, three probables, two damaged and one destroyed on the ground.

Born in Canada, Johnny became a commercial pilot at the age of just 17. He joined the RAF in 1935 and, in July 1940, was posted to the very successful No. 303 (Polish Squadron) where he earned the nickname ‘Kentowski’. In October 1940 he was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader of No. 92 Squadron, based at Biggin Hill. He later served in the Middle East, eventually becoming a training inspector, finally retiring as Group Captain in 1956.

Medals, from left to right: Distinguished Flying Cross and bar, Air Force Cross, 1939–1945 Star with clasp Battle of Britain, Air Crew Europe Star, Africa Star with clasp North Africa 1942–43, Italy Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939–45, Coronation Medal 1953, Virtuti Militari, 5th Class (Poland).

1988/0713/D

3. Military Medal of Sergeant Helen Turner

October 1940

Helen Turner was one of three members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) who became the first women to receive the Military Medal for their exemplary conduct during a series of devastating air raids on RAF Biggin Hill in late August 1940.

'During an intensive enemy raid on an aerodrome, Sergeants Mortimer and Turner and Corporal Henderson remained at their posts and calmly carried out their duties. They displayed courage and example of high order.'

Citation, London Gazette, 5 November 1940

76/D/692

4. Medals of Corporal Ernest Reeves

1939–1950s

The details of where Corporal Reeves served and what his role was are not known, other than he worked as groundcrew during the Battle of Britain. He represents 'the Many' who supported 'the Few', without whom the Battle could not have been won.

A Mention in Despatches occurs when a name appears in an official report written by a superior officer, which describes gallant or meritorious conduct or actions in the face of the enemy. The award is recognised by the wearing of an Oak Leaf, usually on the ribbon on the War Medal when awarded in the Second World War.

Medals, from left to right: 1939–1945 Star, Africa Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, War Medal with Mention in Despatches, Long Service and Good Conduct Medal.

X001-2413

Danger, UXB

The RAF was responsible for dealing with unexploded bombs and ordnance on or near crashed aircraft and on RAF stations. Unexploded bombs were a great danger and, in October 1940, 29 specialist Bomb Disposal Flights were formed.

Most of the bomb disposal personnel were non-commissioned officers, trained as armourers. Their equipment ranged from simple flags to mark unexploded bombs to specialist equipment to disable fuzes.

5. Fuze Immuniser Mk 1, Stevens Stopper

Around 1940

Wing Commander James Stevens was responsible for RAF bomb disposal during the Battle of Britain. He developed the 'Stevens Stopper'. This filled the bomb's clockwork fuze with a sticky liquid that prevented it from exploding. The fuze could then be removed and the bomb made safe.

81/T/762

6. Hazard Warning Flag

Around 1940

Warning flags were used to mark the locations of unexploded bombs and other possible hazards.

Sergeant Joan Mortimer was awarded the Military Medal for her bravery in marking unexploded bombs at RAF Biggin Hill on 30 August 1940. During the raid, she stayed at her post operating the switchboard. Once the all clear sounded, she began marking the unexploded bombs with hazard warning flags.

X002-7592

'It's very difficult for people to understand what it's like to be down ... a deep hole with a sinister-looking cold steel bomb ... '

'Danger, UXB', by James Owen, Little Brown, 2010

Images

Ian Gleed with his mascot.
PC71-11-20, © Crown Copyright

A Stevens Stopper in use.
X008-5405-002, © Crown Copyright

