

15 September 1940

This podcast looks at 15 September 1940, a day that represented a turning point in the Battle of Britain.

As dawn broke on, Sunday 15 September, there was nothing to distinguish it from other days experienced during the Summer of 1940. The threat of invasion hung over the country and yet the general population continued to get on with their lives as best they could.

Weather reports indicated that it would be a fine, clear day so enemy action was therefore anticipated.

By the end of the day, the RAF would be left with a sense of having had a good day, the Luftwaffe's morale would be broken and the 15 September 1940 would consequently come to be seen as being a decisive point in the Battle of Britain; itself a turning point in the history of the war

So, where does the 15th lie in the history of the Battle?

Traditionally the Battle is seen as running from 10 July to 31 October and the 15th falls into what is known as the 3rd phase:

July 10 - August 7 - the Luftwaffe focused their attacks on convoys in the channel; radio direction finding stations and coastal towns
August 8-6 September - saw them testing British defences with the aim of destroying FC's aircraft and capability

As a result August was a particularly hard month for Fighter Command and for 11 Group especially, as it was this Group that defended London and the South-East. From 13 August, Adlertag or Eagle Day, heavy raids focused on destroying the RAF in the South East.

Bearing the brunt of these attacks many of the stations in this area were badly damaged.

Three WAAFs, Elspeth Henderson, Helen Turner and Elizabeth Mortimer were awarded the Military Medal for their courage and example of a high order, showing amazing pluck during the intensive bombing of Biggin Hill.

Equipment was destroyed and the men and women of 11 Group were at breaking point.

Respite however came in the early part of September when a shift in German tactics took place. Bombs had accidentally dropped on London during a night raid; Bomber Command raided Berlin in reaction and Hitler took the decision to focus his Luftwaffe's attacks on London.

The week preceding the 15th saw bombs falling on London and its civilian population during the day. This 3rd phase with attacks against cities, aircraft factories and other strategic targets would continue until October 5.

This shift in focus effectively gave FC breathing space to recoup their equipment losses; repair their airfields and it provided personnel day long rest periods and the opportunity for training sorties. A huge psychological impact on those suffering combat fatigue

The 15th September therefore began with FC in better shape than the German High Command realised. The fact that the raids on London had been met with little resistance appeared to support the GHC belief that FC was at a low ebb and influenced the German tactic played out during the day of engaging a large number of the remaining fighters delivering the knock out blow

The morning started quietly with routine patrols being undertaken by coastal and fighter command and enemy patrols being plotted too

At around 10:30 the Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived at RAF Uxbridge at the Operations Room for 11 Group on one of his regular visits.

ACM Sir Keith Park, OC of 11 Group commented that %don't know if anything will happen today. For the moment, everything is quiet+

Vera Shaw, a WAAF on duty in the Plotting Room since 7am was keeping herself occupied, by reading and writing letters. As you can see by this photograph, knitting was also a popular past-time.

The lull would not last. The 15th was the only day in the Battle to see two separate daylight raids on London.

Just before 11am reports from the Chain Home stations and Observer Corp posts began filtering through informing FCHQ that enemy aircraft had been sighted.

The first major attack of the day consisted of two waves the first, formed of 100 aircraft and the second 150 crossed the coast between Dover and Dungeness.

Formations of Dornier 17s and 215s, Heinkel 111 with fighter escort Me109s were met by Spitfire & Hurricane squadrons airborne within half an hour.

Between 11:05-11:20 11 Squadrons (72, 92, 229, 303, 253, 501, 17, 73, 504, 257, 603) of 11 Group were ordered to scramble.

At 11:20 1 Squadron (609) of 10 Group was ordered up.

At 11:25 5 Squadrons (242,19, 302, 310, 611) of 12 Group were airborne.

Between 11:35-11:42 6 further squadrons (249,46,1 RCAF, 605, 41, 66) were ordered up.

A series of engagements took place whilst the ea formations moved towards London.

Sqdn Ldr Eric Seabourne, describes an essential of air to air combat.

You daren't fly more than a few moments looking straight ahead. You were always twisting your neck looking behind you. If the sun was behind you that was the most dangerous time

The fighting was visible to those on the ground. In a letter which we hold in the Archive a school boy recounts to his mother seeing a fighter in the sky..

We heard guns, machine guns and the air was full of sound, We thought we might see the fun so we went to where we could see the sky. We saw little white specks moving about and suddenly my friend said look up there and we did,..we saw a plane..coming down I will never forget it..it caught the sun with a trail of smoke coming from it twisting and turning ...

Have any of you been able to watch my colleagues re-enacting the scramble outside? Well its during this raid that Ray Holmes, based here at Hendon with 504 Squadron gained celebrity when 100s of people watched as he rammed a Dornier 17 over Buckingham Palace which crashed into Victoria station. We have parts of that aircraft here on display in the pen behind you.

Sqdn Ldr Richard Barclay flying with 249 Squadron based at North Weald noted in his diary that :

We scrambled at about 11:30 climbing up above 8/10th cloud over London he recalls grabbing a pair of Irvin trousers before getting in his plane and therefore being able to fly with the cockpit canopy of his Hurricane open he noted that :

one can see much better flying that way.

100 bombers succeeded in reaching central London and dropping their bombs but luckily with no real concentration but the crews found themselves coming under attack on their return flight too.

This encounter is officially recorded as lasting 11:30-12:45. There appears to have been a lull in activity at this point. Pilots were able to return to ground. Barclay recorded that :

We had a rotten lunch in our dispersal hut sitting on our beds

Pilots also had the opportunity to be briefed by intelligence officers generating combat reports

Sgt William Rolls with 72 Squadron relayed his experience over Brenchley.

I took off from Croydon as Green 1 in the second section..climbed to 24,000ft..I saw a me109 coming down it passed well over my head..I climbed up after it and at about 200yards I gave a burst of c2 or 3 secs underneath it. I saw a big black patch appear and several small ones on the fuselage..I saw tracers coming from behind me as well and in my mirror I saw another me109 coming down on me..I evaded it..I did not see what happened to the other except that it was in a dive as I was in a steep turn.

Reports of a second major attack were filtering through shortly after 13:45 Again 12 squadrons of 11 Group were airborne before the wave of 150 enemy aircraft, with a second wave of 100 aircraft behind it crossed the coast near Dover between 14:14-14:20.

Barclay recalls: *We were scrambled again at 2 o' clock...joining 46 sq beneath the cloud layer.*

A further 9 squadrons of 11 group and 5 from 12 Group were airborne by 14:15 and engaged the German force which again was a mix of Dornier 17s and Heinkel 111 bombers with me 109s and 110s fighter escort.

70 of these bombers would reach London but the overall damage caused by these raids was less than on the 7th September. The successful impact of FC attacks on these formations is evident but it must be said the defenders benefited from other factors, such as the fact that it took the fleet an hour and half to fly 60 miles coast to London.

It was to this afternoon attack that Winston Churchill recalled in his memoirs *"Presently the red bulbs showed the majority of the squadrons were engaged..[he refers to the tote board used in the ops room which displayed the current state of play]..a subdued hum arose from the floor where the busy plotters pushed discs..in accordance with the swiftly changing situation"*.

For about an hour during the afternoon, all of 11 group squadrons were committed.

At this point the important role undertaken by the ground crew must be stressed.

Their hard work and commitment enabled every squadron to put he maximum number of aircraft possible in the air.

Peter Brothers, serving with 32 Squadron highlighted the debt owed to the groundcrews :

We wouldn't have got off the ground but for them. They were all super.

I'd also like to highlight the international nature of the Battle of Britain. A 1/5 of the c2937 Few were from overseas - Commonwealth countries such as Canadians and New Zealanders (Keith Park, Al Deere) and airmen in exile including Poles and Czechs. In fact, the top scorer in the BoB for the RAF was Sgt Josef Frantisek, commemorated here on this medallion.

15 September was no exception with the Polish (303, 302) and Czech Squadrons (310) and No. 1 Squadron RCAF in combat during the day.

302 and 310 based at Duxford formed part of the 4 Wing 2 squadrons of Spitfires and 3 of Hurricanes assembled by Douglas Bader. His entry for the flights undertaken on 15th are recorded in his log book, held by the Museum's Archive.

The effectiveness of this tactic has been debated but there is no doubt that the impact on German morale was devastating. Expecting the remnant of the British fighter force they were confronted with a mass of aircraft.

The rest of the day saw several smaller attacks taking place.

At 15:00 24 aircraft targeted RN base at Portland with bombs causing heavy damage to houses and small fires. The dockyard was hit but the damage was not extensive. Later at 17:00 40 me110s attacked Southampton, targeting Supermarine's factory at Woolston

Meanwhile BC raids over France were taking place; CC anti- shipping and recon flights were also being undertaken.

Throughout the evening German night bomber raids focused on London and other cities whilst, BC continued their operations over Europe.

John Hannah a radio operator serving with 83 Squadron won a Victoria Cross for his courage in extinguishing the fire engulfing his Hampden during a raid on barges at Antwerp and helping the pilot to land the aircraft safely home.

Regarding losses or indeed other statistics the Battle of Britain as a whole is associated with conflicting figures. It would appear that both sides over claimed at the time but it is the nature of aerial combat that several pilots can claim the same aircraft.

Contemporary reports recorded 174 enemy aircraft destroyed with 27 British aircraft damaged. 81 Luftwaffe personnel were recorded as killed or missing with 12 RAF personnel killed. 57 civilians were killed during the bombing raids in the London area.

Scores had a huge impact on morale. Barclay recorded the 15th as :

Our best day so far since the squadron was formed in May..I had one bullet hole in the starboard wing but no damage done (British fighters shot down 185 enemy aircraft today). Boozy party this evening.

WAAF, Hazel Gregory remembers cheers at Uxbridge as the figures were announced at the end of the day.

This contrasts with the Luftwaffe pilots experience, Horst Schulz of Bomber Geschwader 3 told the author Arthur Price :

When we got back we all agreed it had been a terrible day but there was not much discussion..we were grateful to have survived.

Roderich Cescottie of Bomber Geschwader 26 commented that :

I regard 15 September as the fiercest battle..other battles did not make such a profound impression..shaken by the number of fighters the RAF was able to put up on that day and by the determination of the pilots..

Subsequently the figures have been adjusted and it is estimated that 60 German aircraft were lost but the decisive aura surrounding the day has been maintained

The day certainly had an impact. Fighter Command had not been vanquished and the Luftwaffe had failed to gain air superiority over the UK. Two days later, Hitler decided to postpone, indefinitely, his plan Operation Sealion, to invade Britain.

The day did not draw the Battle to a close but held consequences for its course. Over the next few weeks, a switch to night bombing raids took place and the Blitz began. As raids petered out at the end of October, due in part to bad weather, the Battle had been won. Britain had withstood the invasion threat; stopped Germany in its tracks, and inflicted its first defeat since the start of the war

Commemoration

As early as 1943 an annual commemoration of the Battle of Britain took place with services of thanksgiving on the nearest Sunday to 15 September.

Since then parades, flypasts and services have taken place each year. Official histories of the Battle and biographies of the fighter pilots have been published. Richard Hillary's 'The Last Enemy' was published in 1942 and the artist Cuthbert Orde was commissioned to draw a series of portraits of Fighter Command in 1943.

Several memorials are in place around the country and a number of veteran organisations honouring and remembering those who took part in the Battle are still active.

In 1947 the Battle of Britain Memorial was unveiled in Westminster Abbey. For many years the focus has been on commemorating the few, 46% of whom lost their lives before the end of the war, e.g. Capel le Ferne near Folkestone, whilst others are keen to honour all of those involved in the Battle. The latest Battle of Britain monument was unveiled on 18 September 2005 on the embankment in London.

In terms of living history of course we find ourselves here this weekend at the RAF Museum in the Battle of Britain Hall beside aircraft which took part in the Battle and I cannot finish without mentioning the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.

A visual, tangible reminder of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, in the Battle of Britain, but also the Second World War.