Dowding: Architect of Victory

This podcast is about a remarkable man. At the pinnacle of his career he was responsible for the defence of this country in its darkest hour. Yet soon afterwards he was dismissed from his post without ceremony or ample recognition. Initially, he wasn't even consigned to the history books – a seemingly dishonourable end to a 43-year Service career that spanned two World Wars.

This man is, of course, Air Chief Marshal Hugh Caswall Tremenheere Dowding; later Lord Dowding of Bentley Priory. Best known as the commander who steered Fighter Command to victory during the Battle of Britain, Dowding's highly varied career began decades earlier as a young soldier in the Royal Garrison Artillery. His journey to the military was a little unorthodox, particularly as he was a former pupil of Winchester – one of Britain's most esteemed public schools. Dowding joined the Army Class simply to avoid Greek and Latin – two subjects that he viewed as useless, uninteresting and annoying. From Winchester he progressed to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. Here, a dislike for mathematical formulae saw him fail to become an Engineer and he was instead gazetted into the Artillery, serving in Gibraltar, Ceylon and Hong Kong. It was whilst serving in the Artillery that Dowding got the nickname 'Stuffy', although no-one is quite sure why. In later life, this nickname would prove to be something of an accurate, though affectionate, character assessment.

Whilst Dowding was abroad, aviation technology had advanced rapidly and, on his return to England, Dowding was immediately attracted to this new pursuit. He also believed that the ability to fly would further his military career; but flying lessons were prohibitively expensive. Undeterred and displaying something of the keen mind that would serve him well later on, Dowding foresaw a solution. The Royal Flying Corps had been formed in 1912 and, still in its infancy, desperately required pilots. Anybody who paid for lessons would get the cost refunded if they were accepted into the new Service. Dowding managed to persuade the Royal Aero Club at Brooklands to give him flying lessons on credit, promising to repay them once he got his refund. So in 1913, on the same day that he passed out of the Army Staff College as an officer, Hugh Dowding earned his pilot's wings.

As soon as Dowding's father learned of his son's position in the RFC, he ordered him to: "Stop this ridiculous flying" because it was far too dangerous. Ever the dutiful son, Dowding was ready to comply with his father's wishes but the RFC had other ideas. They refused to accept his resignation on the grounds that war had just broken out. Instead, Dowding was sent to command the camp at Dover from which the first RFC Squadrons left for France. A few months later, he was sent to No. 9 (Wireless) Squadron where his interest in new technology was stimulated. He soon specialised in the use of wireless communication from the air and often claimed to be the person in England to hear a wireless message from an aircraft.

As a pilot, Dowding was not exceptional but he was brave. On one occasion he elected to fly as an Observer on a dangerous mission during the Battle of Loos. His aircraft was hit and he narrowly escaped a forced landing behind enemy lines. On another occasion his aircraft was badly damaged and Dowding kept the steering column as a souvenir of his lucky escape. He later told a journalist that [3:17:05] "another quarter of an inch and the shrapnel would have blown it out of my hand and I should not be sitting here."

In 1916, Dowding was given the task of putting through training the first squadron of Sopwith aircraft with forward-firing guns – another posting that put him in contact with new technology. However, it was his next appointment that would impact upon his career profoundly, and not for the right reasons. Dowding was given command of the 9th Wing at The Somme and it was here he first came into contact with Hugh Trenchard, then commander of the RFC in France. Dowding disagreed with Trenchard over several matters and did little to hide his views. He did not support the frequent patrols over enemy lines as he felt they were too costly in lives, and also argued for proper rest periods for his pilots. His request for relief of his squadron was granted but Dowding was deprived of his command and received no further appointment in France. He had shown some of the compassion for his pilots that would be characteristic of his later command, but he had also challenged one of the most powerful men in the air force. Dowding served the rest of the war in Britain and rose to the rank of Brigadier-General.

On the 1st April 1918, the RFC merged with RNAS to form the new Royal Air Force. It might be assumed that a man with Dowding's experience would be assured of a senior post in this new force. Yet Dowding was not selected for a Permanent Commission. He was eventually granted a temporary attachment, but only after repeated representations from his Commanding Officer. A Permanent Commission finally followed and Dowding joined a select band of senior officers who would shape the RAF.

From this point, Dowding occupied a variety of posts; first at Group Command, Kenley, then as Chief of Staff at HQ Iraq and finally back to England as Director of Training at the Air Ministry, where he was able to influence policy for the first time. During this time he also suffered a personal tragedy that saw him withdraw from social life almost completely. In 1918 Dowding had married Clarice Maud Vancourt, the daughter of an Army captain. She gave birth to a son, Derek, in 1919 but died suddenly the following year, leaving Hugh to bring up the boy on his own.

In 1929, Dowding was appointed AOC Transjordan and Palestine, and saw a small reversal in fortunes. He was tasked with reporting on the Service requirements arising from the growing hostilities between the Arab and Jewish communities. His observations confirmed what Trenchard – now Chief of the Air Staff – already thought and Dowding's report found favour. This went some way to easing the strained relations between the two men.

In 1930, fresh from his success in the Holy Land, Dowding was appointed Air Member for Supply and Research and then for Research and Development. This would prove to be an inspired appointment, for Dowding had a good grasp of the practical side of airmanship and a rare understanding of the limitations of air power. Combined with his new position, these qualities enabled him to begin preparations for the Battle of Britain a whole decade before it even began.

Dowding's primary concern was the complex technology associated with the building of a modern air force. Though not a scientist, Dowding showed a remarkable capacity for understanding emerging technology and, more importantly, recognising its significance. At this time, concentration was on the further development of super manoeuvrable biplane fighters. Dowding, however, saw potential in the racing aircraft that had been produced for the Schneider Trophy races. He recognised the advantages of these sleek, streamlined aircraft, capable of high speeds, and called instead for a low-wing monoplane fighter with a retractable undercarriage, enclosed cockpit and guns mounted in the wings. Thus it was largely on Dowding's initiative that prototypes for the Hurricane and Spitfire were ordered in 1934.

It was around this time that the young Scottish inventor Robert Watson-Watt first approached the Air Ministry with his invention of a device for locating distant aircraft by the transmission of short-wave radio impulses. Dowding grasped the significance of Watson-Watt's invention, but prudently requested realistic field trials before financing development. The trials were successful and more than justified Watson-Watt's claims so Dowding secured funding and pushed forward at high speed with the construction of the world's first radar chain.

In 1936, the RAF decided to reorganise into Commands and Dowding, with his wide-ranging experience, was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the new Fighter Command. His knowledge of air warfare, his experience in administration and his qualities of leadership made him particularly suited to the task of preparing his Command for the coming war. On taking on the job of managing Britain's fighter defences, Dowding inherited an earlier system of control created in 1917 by Major General Ashmore, commander of London's air defence in the First World War. Ashmore's system comprised a central control with observation stations, a large map table with plotters, direct lines to squadrons from command, and a transmitter capable of reaching pilots in the air. Dowding built upon, modernised and refined the features pioneered by Ashmore, moulding them into a network of communications linking the Fighter Force, radar units and control organisations into a structure that became justifiably known as the Dowding System.

This system was well ahead of anything else in the world at this time but Dowding had fought hard for it in a political climate that favoured a bombing doctrine with a perceived deterrent effect. He had to keep constant pressure on the Air Ministry for the improvements he wanted, including bullet proof windscreens for fighters, construction of hard runways, the building of proper

operations rooms and the introduction of an air raid warning system. From the moment of his appointment in 1936, Dowding never relaxed from his efforts to prepare Fighter Command for war. Yet, for all that he had achieved, he had deep anxieties as war approached. Despite the greater priority afforded to fighter production from 1938 onwards, Dowding still felt that his fighter strength was less than adequate for the proper defence of Great Britain. He felt that the best defence of the country was fear of the fighter, saying [9:20] "If we are strong in fighters we should probably never be attacked in force".

The prospect of having his fighters drained away in France was intolerable and in May 1940, he once again took a stand against his superiors, urging them to stop the wastage. This was, in Dowding's own eyes, the turning point of the Battle of Britain and the letter he wrote is one of the great documents of history. It spelt out in no uncertain terms the likely outcome for Britain if more fighters were squandered in France, concluding that: [9:50] "if the Home Defence Force is drained away in desperate attempts to remedy the situation in France, defeat in France will involve the final, complete and irremediable defeat of this country." Dowding's emphatic letter was, ultimately, successful but it would be over a month before the last squadrons left France. During that time Britain lost 20% of its more experienced pilots and almost 50% of its original aircraft strength.

In addition to his worries about fighter strength, Dowding was facing opposition to his leadership on a personal front and there was talk of replacing him even before the Battle of Britain began. He was 58 in 1940 and, in some eyes, embarrassingly senior to his peers and those he commanded. He had also been in post for 4 years – far longer than the usual tenure. He was tired and some felt that change was needed. Added to this was Dowding's sometimes stormy relationship with other senior officers and the Air Ministry. He was not an easy man in his official capacity and remained something of an enigma to many. His high standards often made him impatient with colleagues and subordinate, and he could seem cold and aloof to those who did not know him well. Retirement seemed to be the best way to deal with this difficult man and a date was set for June 1940.

However, far from removing Dowding from his post, he was invited to extend his service by short periods, which he accepted in order to improve his pension. On the 12th August 1940 he was asked to remain in the post indefinitely and thus fought the Battle of Britain under the shadow of retirement. To add to the strain, Dowding's son Derek was now himself a fighter pilot and Dowding knew that he would soon be sending him into Battle.

In complete contrast to the attitudes of some of his peers, the pilots that Dowding commanded viewed him as a father figure, albeit a distant one. As one pilots said: [11:40] "we admired him more than we loved him, for none of us knew him intimately". They did know that he had their best interest at heart and a close bond of mutual respect developed between Stuffy and his pilots. Dowding would fight any opposition, risking the displeasure of higher authorities, to get his Fighter Boys what they needed. Nevertheless, Dowding

did not socialise with the pilots and seldom paid personal visits to the squadrons he commanded; although he later said [12:05] "that is the one thing I regret. I knew so few of them personally".

On one of the rare occasions he did pay a visit, the personnel glimpsed his gentler side, as explained by Air Commodore Donaldson, commander of 151 Squadron at North Weald during the Battle. [12:19] "He caught me at the petrol bowser slipping a couple of gallons into my private car…there was no public transport and little private petrol to be had. All the squadron were watching and though 'That's the end of our CO'…To everyone's surprise, all Stuffy said was 'You deserve it, but do not make a habit of it'."

Those that did know Dowding well were struck by his sense of humour, gift of charm and kindness towards those in trouble. It is not too fanciful to say that his real personality perhaps lay hidden beneath the strain of leadership and the great responsibility placed upon him at a time of great peril.

The course of the Battle of Britain is well documented and there is not time to detail it here. Suffice it to say that under Dowding's command, the men and women of Fighter Command brought about the first defeat for Germany since the war began. But far from receiving the accolades worthy of a victorious commander, Dowding's leadership was again challenged. In October 1940 the Air Ministry convened a meeting to discuss his handling of the Battle of Britain. By this time Dowding was being widely criticised for not using the more aggressive 'Big Wing' tactics, where large formations of fighter aircraft were gathered *en masse* before confronting the enemy. In addition, he was not seen to be doing enough to counter the Luftwaffe's night bomber offensive. In truth, the issue was never far from his mind but he realised that his day fighter aircraft were thoroughly unsuited for night flying. He fought hard to obtain radar-equipped Beaufighters but they arrived too late for him to be given credit. The final factor in his downfall may well have been his failure to resolve the volatile relationship between two of his commanders: Keith Park and Trafford Leigh-Mallory. The deterioration between the two was jeopardising operational efficiency and it is fair to say that Dowding, as their commander, should have sorted the issue out.

Dowding was finally relieved of his post in November 1940; just two months after the Battle of Britain had been won. In his final days at Bentley Priory, the strain of his recent problems began to show and a staff member remarked that [14:17] "there were times when I saw him almost blind with fatigue; he obviously needed a long rest, he was becoming burnt out". Even Winston Churchill, one of Dowding's greatest supporters, recognised that it was time for him to go, although it 'broke his heart' to say it. Ever mindful of his Fighter Boys, Dowding sent a goodbye letter to all operational fighter stations and units that read:

Dowding was placed on the retired list in 1941 and, after serving in several roles to which he was ill-suited, he finally retired in 1942. He was denied the

highest rank of the Service – Marshal of the Royal Air Force – because it was exclusively reserved for former Chiefs of the Air Staff. Not even the support of the King could make the RAF break precedent. This was seen as a great slur by many. Nevertheless, Dowding was given a peerage – the first airman to receive such an honour since Trenchard himself.

Lord Dowding spent the rest of his life largely away from the Royal Air Force Scene, pursuing instead his keen interest in Spiritualism. He did much selfless work for the organisation and wrote many books and articles on the subject. He also became interested in animal welfare and after his death an animal sanctuary was set up in his honour. Dowding did not turn his back on the Air Force completely. He was a regular in debates in the House of Lords, especially on RAF matters, and was President of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association. He regularly attended reunions and was always surrounded by his surviving Fighter Boys, though, in his own words, he would be thinking of all the others who couldn't be there.

In 1951, Dowding married his second wife Muriel, the widow of Pilot Officer Maxwell Whiting, and they shared many interests including Spiritualism. The marriage brought him great happiness – indeed Dowding even gave up field sports to become a vegetarian for her. In his later years, Dowding was confined to a wheelchair with arthritis but he bore the disease with characteristic dignity. He finally passed away on the 5th February 1970 at his home in Tunbridge Wells, aged 88. He lived long enough to see historians reassess the Battle of Britain and thus received some of the acclaim he deserved for his tireless work at Fighter Command. However, as is so often the case, proper recognition came after death.

His ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey beneath the Battle of Britain memorial window in a ceremony attended by no fewer than 46 Air Marshals and many of his dear Fighter Boys. Delivering the address, Denis Healey, then Secretary of State for Defence, summed Dowding up as "one of those great men whom this country miraculously produces in times of peril". In 1988, HM Queen Mother unveiled a statue in Dowding's honour that stands proudly outside the RAF Church, St. Clement Danes, in central London.

Whatever criticisms may be levelled at Dowding, it was under his leadership that Fighter Command won the Fighter Command won the Battle of Britain. His remarkable foresight and planning ensured the squadrons were ready when war came. He had secured the best equipment, created an unparalleled reporting and control system, and marshalled resources in the face of fierce political opposition. As the memorial plaque below his statue states:

[17:51]"To him, the people of Britain and of the free world owe largely the way of life and the liberties they enjoy today."

