



Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

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THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

The "Few" Were Actually The Many

The Battle of Britain holds a unique place within the annals of air power. It was, and remains, the only major, self-contained and absolutely decisive air battle in history. The survival of Britain directly influenced the outcome of World War Two - had Britain capitulated the likely outcome would have been a Europe completely dominated for the long term by either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

Popular mythology has it that the Battle of Britain was won by a small band of Royal Air Force fighter pilots who, against the odds, took on and beat the massed aerial armadas of the German Luftwaffe; mythology reinforced by an iconic quote that is often used to epitomise the battle:

"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

The 'few' is commonly taken to mean the 2937 pilots and aircrew members who as part of RAF Fighter Command took part in one or more operational sortie against the enemy during the period of the battle; 127 of whom were New Zealanders. This is to take the quote out of context though and within the speech, made by the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, to the House of Commons on 20 August 1940, the 'few'

actually refers to all British airmen. Churchill spent more time in his address highlighting the actions of bomber squadrons than those of the fighter and specifically stated that *"On no part of the Royal Air Force does the weight of the war fall more heavily than on the daylight bombers..."*



This does not diminish in any way the actions and importance of Fighter Command aircrew toward winning the Battle of Britain; instead it highlights that the battle was fought and won through team effort, not individual prowess.

The fighter pilots received daily attention and recognition in part due to media sensationalism and visual presence but the vital contribution of thousands of others went mostly uncredited.

Bomber Command carried out two main tasks during the Battle of Britain. The first was strategic bombing of military and industrial targets by night while the second was tactical bombing of airfields and invasion barges by day. In all, 36% of Bomber Command sorties during the period were flown against invasion shipping, 17% against airfields and 14% against aircraft industry. They were successful in destroying 12% of the invasion fleet, they forced the Germans to retain valuable

fighters for airfield defence and they disrupted aircraft production, albeit in only a minor way. In effect, two-thirds of Bomber Command effort directly contributed to Battle of Britain success. In return, Bomber Command lost 801 pilots during the period of the battle, nearly 50% more than Fighter Command.

The 'few' extended well beyond just Fighter and Bomber Command. Coastal Command was responsible for reconnaissance, coastal patrols and convoy protection, and also assisted Bomber Command with attacks on airfields and shipping; again tasks that directly contributed to Battle of Britain success. Flying Training Command and Technical Training Command ensured that sufficient air and ground crew were trained and available to make good losses. Without a robust and efficient training system the results of attrition would have critically weakened operational effectiveness.

Maintenance crews were essential to ensuring that sufficient aircraft were able to get airborne. Working from dawn to dusk and often through the night in order to keep their aircraft serviced and serviceable the riggers, fitters, armourers and refuellers were also effectively in the front line, with many killed during enemy raids on their airfields.

Civilian contractors and military personnel, the latter drawn from all trades and roles, were employed to deal with the effects of such raids and repair the resultant damage – identifying unexploded bombs, making them safe, rescuing personnel, filling in bomb holes, moving aircraft to safety, repairing infrastructure etc. This was often dangerous and difficult but necessary in order to make the airfield operational again. While aircraft could move to another location in some instances, the tactical ramifications of doing so could have affected the outcome of the Battle.

Anti-aircraft units, such as airfield defence guns and barrage balloons, influenced the way that enemy aircraft approached and attacked their targets, often making such attacks far less effective than would otherwise be the case. The personnel of these units were exposed throughout operations and suffered casualties.

Radar operators, Observer Corps personnel and operations staff were the network-enablers of their day. Combined, they provided commanders with tactical intelligence that was

able to be exploited to maximum and timely effect. The few times the system failed, limited or no fighter opposition was able to be brought to bear against the Germans.

The contributors to success were almost endless – catering staff who kept personnel fed and therefore fit for operations, the factory workers who produced replacement aircraft and equipment, the research and development staff who created or improved technology, the parachute packers who enabled survivability of air crew

Although the world is now a different place, all of the trades and examples mentioned above have their modern-day equivalent and the fundamentals remain the same. Successful employment of air power is entirely dependent on the sum of all its parts, any one of which is just as important as any other. Battle of Britain success was a prime example of this, so whenever the 'few' are mentioned during Battle of Britain commemoration events this year, reflect on the fact that the 'few' were actually the many.



Further Reading

If you are interested in finding out more about the Battle of Britain, the following books are recommended:

- [The Most Dangerous Enemy](#), by Stephen Bungay.
- [The Battle of Britain: Five Months That Changed History](#), by James Holland.
- [Fighter: The True Story of the Battle of Britain](#), by Len Deighton

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