Why historians must now focus on the Battle *for* Britain!

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ABSTRACT
In 2015, the RAF celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain air campaign and the role of their service in frustrating Operation Sea Lion - the German plan to invade the British Isles in 1940. However, a conference held at the RAF Museum, Hendon in 2015 entitled 'A Necessary Victory' reassessed the conflict. The article argues that historians should recognise the Luftwaffe's maritime limitations and redefine the Battle of Britain in a wider context to recognise its many land and sea participants. A Battle for Britain memorial and more integrated air/sea/land power courses from educational institutions would acknowledge the heroic sacrifice made by 'The Many' as well as those made by 'The Few' and encourage a badly needed, more holistic approach.

Introduction

The year 2015 marked the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain air campaign, an event that rightly celebrated the heroic sacrifices and determination of the young pilots of the Royal Air Force's Fighter Command – 'The Few.' Yet, the passing of time has allowed for mature reflection on the nature and significance of the Battle, and has even permitted the occasional reference to 'The Many.' Even the commemorative service at St Pauls Cathedral in 2015 gave credit to 'Everyone - the pilots and air crew, but also radar operators, air raid wardens, fire-fighters, nurses and maintenance teams who played their part in the Battle of Britain.'[1]

In 2010, the author published a book that was highly critical of the traditional version of the Battle of Britain, including many aspects of the wartime RAF – though not of the

[1] Daniela Relph, 'Battle of Britain: Historic flypast for 75th anniversary,' 15 September 2015, BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34250794 (accessed 16 October 2015).

pilots' themselves.[2] Although it argued the centrality of the Royal Navy over RAF Fighter Command in the nation's defence during 1940, the book asked its readers to celebrate the wider Battle *for* Britain rather than just the air campaigns. This was because national survival depended on the determination of politicians; the public; the British Army; the Merchant Navy; the Royal Navy and of course, all *three* RAF commands. As Group Captain Douglas Bader said in a 1960s television interview, 'The Battle of Britain was the lot of us, not just the RAF'.[3]

The media's willingness to sensationalise and distort academic revisionism of the wartime Air Ministry's version of events has probably deterred many historians from setting the record straight. However, as the organisers of a recent conference at the RAF Museum, Hendon have said, despite the Battle's specific place in British collective memory and the part played in RAF history preventing a German invasion in 1940, historians have recently begun to question some of the myths that surround this important event in British history.[4] To the organisers' credit, a whole section of the conference was set aside to argue the importance of the sea over the air. Today, the media seems slightly more sympathetic to revisionism as many points in my paper lauding 'The Many' rather than 'The Few' appeared – perhaps coincidentally - in *The Sunday Telegraph* the next day.[5] Indeed, if historians and serious journalists are to convince the British public, they must courageously present histories independent of myths that may still be distorting a view of our national defence in 1940. As three historians from the Joint Services Staff Command College at Shrivenham pointed out in 2006, historians have long disputed the idea that a handful of young pilots alone prevented invasion in 1940.[6] However, ten years ago few members of the public seemed aware that the idea was ever in dispute.

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[2] Anthony Cumming, *The Royal Navy and the Battle of Britain* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015).

[3] Douglas Bader, Archive footage of Bader speaking on *Heroes of the Skies*, Channel 5, broadcast 25 September 2012.

[4] Anthony Cumming, 'Why Historians Must Focus on the Battle *for* Britain,' A Necessary Victory? The Context and Consequences of the Battle of Britain: A Conference held at the Royal Air Force Museum in conjunction with the University of Exeter and the British Commission for Military History, 26 September 2015.

[5] C. Booker, 'It's not just the Few we must honour but the many,' *The Sunday Telegraph*, 27 September 2015, p.30.

[6] C. Goulter, A. Gordon & G. Sheffield, 'The Royal Navy did not win the Battle of Britain: But we need a holistic view of Britain's defences in 1940.' RUSI Journal, 20

Contrary to perceptions that the fleet was safely away from German airpower, this article will show how maritime forces were taking active and effective measures to both deter Operation Sea Lion (the planned German invasion of Britain) and maintain vital communications links with the outside world. Sea power was vital and battles such as those off Norway, Dunkirk, Calabria, and Mers-el-Kebir all helped to deter Sea Lion. Crucial to understanding this is an appreciation of the limitations of the Axis air forces in the anti-shipping role and a German plan that required the invasion armada to sail at night. It will also show how difficult it was for aircraft to sink warships in 1940. The Mediterranean was particularly important at this early stage of the war, as its loss would have had serious and damaging consequences for the continuation of the war.

The Importance of the Sea over the Air

It is still very important to acknowledge the importance of the Air at this critical time. The Royal Air Force could not simply allow the Luftwaffe the uncontested freedom to roam the skies and destroy targets on British soil. Fighting the air campaigns allowed excellent opportunities to bolster public morale and may have helped convince Hitler and President Roosevelt that the British would continue the fight after their forces had suffered an unexpected and humiliating eviction from the continent. Here, the Foreign Office quickly recognised that RAF heroism and favourable kill/loss ratios were very valuable assets for maintaining American interest in the war – an interest vital for the wider conflict. [7]

As the war progressed, the proponents of airpower could capitalise on Fighter Command's success and demonstrate the RAF's ability to take the fight to the enemy. Consequently, the bulk of national war resources went to the Air in a controversial strategic bombing campaign that helped win the war but denied scarce resources to vital campaigns such as the Battle of the Atlantic.[8]

October 2006, http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/)/ref:4538D604EF124/#.U0J2g_IdWVI

[7] Lord Halifax to Archibald Sinclair, 19 August 1940, The National Archives, Kew. FO 371/24321, A3961/26/45 as quoted by Cull N, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American Neutrality in World War II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.90.

[8] Anthony Cumming, History of Airpower Series – Paper 3 – 'Battle of the Atlantic Versus the Strategic Air Offensive over Germany: was the Second World War

Of course, the key question is whether Fighter Command prevented Operation Sea Lion. Recent Ministry of Defence literature and senior RAF officers rarely make this overt claim, preferring to put the simple question 'where would we have been in 1940 without the RAF?'[9] Nowadays, other writers prefer to paint the RAF's performance during the daylight battles in glowing colours rather than comment on the ability of the combatant air forces to influence the situation at sea. In the wider operational context, it hardly mattered whether the Spitfires and Hurricanes had the edge over the German Messerschmitt BF 109's or which side possessed the best pilots. Neither was it particularly relevant for the Air Ministry to claim that Fighter Command was stronger at the end than it was when the battles started. This was contested by none other than, Lord Hugh Dowding, Fighter Command's former commanding officer, who stated that 'whatever the paper return showed, the situation towards the end was 'extremely critical' and most squadrons were 'fit only for operations against unescorted bombers. The remainder were battling against heavy odds.'[10]

Historically, most writers and media figures have separated the daylight air battles from the later night blitz on British cities and revisionists have been criticised for conflating these.[11] This may be due to a desire by traditionalists to isolate the perceived success in the daylight battles and preventing an invasion, from the RAF's inability to protect civilians during the night blitz. One exception among the mythmakers has been the American film director, Frank Capra, whose propaganda film about the 1940 success in resisting German military power conflated both the daylight fighting and the night blitz in his film entitled – *Battle of Britain* (1943). Furthermore, the official pamphlet entitled *Front Line* issued on 30 November 1942 also treated the daylight battles and the night blitz as the same campaign.[12] It is true that Dowding defined these as two

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Prolonged Unnecessarily?' Phoenix Think Tank, http://www.phoenixthinktank.org/articles/anthony-j-cumming-battle-of-the-atlantic-versus-the-strategic-air-offensive-o 3 March 2014 (accessed 20 October 2014).

[9] R. Freeman and N. Trotter, 'Royal Air Force.' 4 May 1995, Hansard. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1995/may/04/royal-air-force#S6CV0259PO_1995054_HOC_291 (accessed 19 October 2012).

[10] The National Archives (henceforth TNA) TNA PREM 4/3/9 & AIR 20/502 Para 106, 'Dowding's Despatch on the Battle of Britain.'

[11] For example, at the Battle of Britain conference of 26 September 2015, a panel of historians arguing the importance of the sea was criticised for conflating the Battle of Britain and the Night Blitz.

[12] R. North, *The Many Not the Few: The Stolen History of the Battle of Britain* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.356.

campaigns with different objectives but he had presided over Fighter Command's failure during the night blitz and may have wished to put his contribution in the best possible light.[13]

For his part, Hitler had specified air superiority as an essential pre-requisite to offset British naval superiority in his invasion directives and all three German services supported this.[14] When Hitler postponed the invasion after the Luftwaffe incurred heavy losses over London on 15 September, it seemed that the Germans had given up on Sea Lion. Frustrated by their failure to control the air in daylight, the German focus then turned towards night bombing with the objective of making civilian life so unbearable, that the Churchill Coalition would crumble, thus opening the way to a peace deal. However, convincing this version is for traditionalists, closer examination reveals a more complex truth.

All Hitler required was to remove the British from the equation to free the Wehrmacht from the grim prospect of a two-front war. Despite the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 1939, Hitler was wary of potential Russian military action in his rear and planning for the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union commenced while the 1940 daylight air battles were at their height. Prior to this, Admiral Erich Raeder, C-in-C of the Kriegsmarine (German War Navy), feared that some irresponsible person might suggest invading England in the aftermath of the invasion of Norway and claimed to have put the idea to Hitler as a means of deterring him with a list of requirements and difficulties. This included the prerequisite of air superiority over the crossing area.[15] However, the plan backfired as after Dunkirk, Hitler ordered preparations for Operation Sea Lion to begin.

Despite initial enthusiasm, the German Army quickly lost interest when Raeder proved there was insufficient shipping to land them on a wide front between Lyme Regis and Dover. When told the Kriegsmarine could only accommodate landings no further west than Eastbourne, General Franz Halder complained 'I might just as well put the troops

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[13] Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, London. (henceforth LHCMA) LH 11/1943/27, Dowding to Basil Liddell Hart, 9 May 1943.
[14] Hitler A, Directive No.16. 'Preparations for the Invasion of England.' 16 July 1940, Para 2 (a). As quoted by Mallmann Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1990), p.116.
[15] E. Raeder, *My Life* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1960), pp.319-323.

that have been landed straight through the sausage machine!'[16] Least enthusiastic were the German Naval Staff who never believed the plan had much chance of success with or without air superiority. According to Admiral Kurt Assmann, all concerned hoped the Luftwaffe would fail because if Sea Lion went ahead, the invasion was going to be 'smashed!'[17] One reason was the Army's insistence on a dawn attack meaning the improvised armada of towed river barges would have to cross at night (though with some moonlight for navigation) thus relegating the air forces to the side-lines whilst exposing the troop transports to night fighting the Royal Navy's flotillas during this vital first stage. Furthermore, with autumn approaching and the difficulties of weather forecasting in the unpredictable English Channel for the ten days needed between giving the order and sailing it was mainly down to chance whether the Luftwaffe's aircraft could fly when needed.

No military figure could emphatically tell Hitler the operation was impossible but with Raeder dripping problems into the Fuehrer's mind, it would not have seemed necessary. As Raeder kept pointing out, British naval forces in the crossing area were overwhelming.[18] Luckily, for them, the boastful Luftwaffe commander, Herman Goering, came to their rescue. Goering suffered from the same institutional hubris that plagued most senior air force commanders of the day. Having given bombastic assurances that the Luftwaffe would destroy the RAF and its supporting infrastructure, Goering unintentionally lifted the other service chiefs off the hook with the force of his over-developed ego.[19]

Given Hitler's reliance on Raeder for naval advice and the Fuehrer's own long relationship with Goering - the most reasonable conclusion is that that Hitler was using Operation Sea Lion as a threat to make the British 'see sense and negotiate' all along. The real aim was to remove Britain from the war, as the invasion objective was more rhetorical than real. Having wrongly believed the Luftwaffe had nearly annihilated British airpower, but now hearing evidence to the contrary and no sign of the British asking for terms, Hitler's logical next step was to increase pressure on the British by

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[16] Mallmann Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences*, p.125.
[17] Ministry of Defence Naval Historical Branch, London (henceforth MoD), MoD NID 24 GHS/1, February 1947, 'German Plans for the Invasion of England in 1940: Operation "Sea Lion,"'p.51.
[18] Various conference notes and reports as quoted by Mallmann Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences*, pp.110-140.
[19] Hubert Raymond Allen, *Who Won the Battle of Britain?* (St. Albans: Panther, 1976), pp.206-207.

implementing his understanding of Douhet's strategic bombing theory – which to him meant terror bombing.[20] Because of civilian resilience in the face of air attack, this strategy failed though it inflicted considerable damage on British towns and cities in exchange for minimal Luftwaffe casualties. Those who reject these arguments may be relying on an unfounded assumption that the bomber would always defeat the battleship. What really mattered was the ability of the combatant air forces to influence the situation at sea i.e. the ability to sink very large numbers of ships in a short period. This had already been the subject of fierce debate for three decades.

Bombers versus Battleships

Since Louis Bleriot's epic solo flight across the English Channel in 1909, there had been much dispute about whether the aeroplane's debut as a practical machine of war would make the role of the fleet in home defence redundant. Press baron Lord Northcliffe and his brother Harold Rothermere, gave generous prizes for aviation achievements and provided media platforms for air enthusiasts to put their case. These included H. G. Wells and the novelist William Le Queux.[21] This would have been admirable but in making the case for the aeroplane, they denigrated Britain's maritime services.

Soon afterwards, the 1914-18 war showed what aircraft might eventually be capable of though at the time it made little difference to the fighting on the ground. The Royal Air Force came into being on 1 April 1918 as a force independent of the older services with a controversial new bombing philosophy at its core. Rothermere was its first Air

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[20] This faulty appreciation was understandable given that the period 24 August to 6 September was one of Luftwaffe success against 11 Group - a phase that only terminated with the decision to change the focus to an attack on London. As many have pointed out, Dowding always had the option of withdrawing his aircraft further north in order to preserve his forces in anticipation of the invasion. Indeed, throughout the Battle of Britain most of the RAF's aircraft were outside of the Me.109 fighter's range. This suggests that the ostensible objective of German air superiority was always going to be unattainable. However, it seems that for a short while, the Luftwaffe achieved air superiority over the proposed landing areas though not the entire country. Nobody on the German Naval Staff wanted to acknowledge this.

[21] Brett Holman, 'Of a Cross-Channel Passage,' AIRMINDED Airpower and British Society (mostly) 1908-1909, http://airminded.org/2009/07/25/of-a-cross-channel--passage/ (accessed 3 February 2012) and Clarke I F, 'Future War Fiction: The First Main Phase, 1871-1900,' Science Fiction Studies 24, Part 3 (November 1993), http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/clarkeess.htm (accessed 21 August 2012).

Minister but the rest of the war saw little change in the deployment of airpower and the RAF principally continued to support the British Army in reconnaissance and artillery spotting roles. The new RAF also supported the Royal Navy as the Royal Naval Air Service had done before. British Government panic following two German daylight-bombing raids on London and press agitation led to the decision to create an independent Royal Air Force after a government enquiry heard a fallacious report on the ability of the aircraft industry to increase aero engine production and an exaggerated forecast of Germany's ability to expand its bombing fleet.[22]

After this, damaging inter-service rivalries became inevitable because of drastic post-war defence cutbacks, and the fact there were now *three* services competing for limited funds causing each service to adopt attitudes that catered only for their own individual needs without heed of the 'big picture.' For their part, the Air Ministry's obsession with strategic bombing meant it needed to retain the means of production to manufacture bombers rather than the types of aircraft suited to ground support or maritime operations.[23]

Frustration set in at a very early stage and may have provided the motivation for two extraordinary public attacks upon their own service by two senior naval figures. Former First Sea Lord Sir John Fisher thundered in Northcliffe's Times, 'It's as clear as daylight that future war at sea absolutely precludes the use of any vessel that can't go underwater because aircraft will compel it.' He continued, 'So why keep the present lot … put all the admirals into a museum because they won't do for the new job … all you want is the present naval side of the air force, that's the future navy, only costing a few millions!' Admiral Sir Percy Scott, an expert in naval gunnery also claimed 'The battleship is dead. The future is with the aeroplane.'[24]

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[22] Anthony Cumming, *The Royal Navy and the Battle for Britain: Interservice Rivalry between the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy 1909-1940* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), p.24-26. Also, see TNA CAB 24/20. War Cabinet Committee on Air Organisation and Home Defence against Air Raids,' Second Report, August 1917; Editorial/Leader, 'Lessons of the Air Attack,' Times, 28 May 1917, p.7 and Editorial/Leader, 'The Bombing of London,' *Times*, 9 July 1917, p.7.

[23] Churchill Archives (henceforth CA). Papers of Group Capt. H Williamson, WLMN 4/5, 'The Alternative to the Trenchard Policy'. However, War Office and Admiralty disinterest in RAF air support for their services also played a part.

[24] Lord Fisher in the *Times* as quoted in Airism from the Four Winds, *Flight*, https://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1919/1919%20-%201455.html?search=Percy%20Scott (accessed 16 October 2015).

Neither of them took account of the universal truth that holds the arts of the defence will ultimately catch up with or perhaps even exceed those of the attack but one can hardly blame these officers for wanting to give the establishment a good shake.[25] Admiral of the Fleet Sir David Beatty was probably the real target of Fisher's wrath as Beatty was responsible for quelling Admiralty opposition to creating the new RAF and Air Ministry. Furthermore, in December 1919, the Chief of Air Staff had persuaded Beatty to a 12-month moratorium on his criticism of the RAF to give it a chance to prove itself at a time when press and parliamentary criticism of the Air Ministry's alleged misspending was high.[26] Perhaps in part because of this public criticism, Beatty made several determined but unsuccessful attempts later to regain control over naval airpower.[27] Beatty failed because the RAF wanted everything to be under its control to remain at a viable size and was now convincing politicians to use the RAF to police the British Empire on the cheap. Whether this Imperial Air Policing was actually so cheap and effective is another matter entirely.[28] A later debate about the effect aircraft were having on naval power raged at government committee level. Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister for Coordination of Defence, wrote after one 1936 meeting of the Defence Chiefs, that the air force representatives had been careful not to make explicit assertions about navies being doomed by aircraft superseding their roles but this was the logical conclusion of the RAF's arguments. Inskip firmly rejected these opinions after a close examination of the fleet's ability to withstand air attack.[29]

A later First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet 1st Baron Ernle Chatfield became one of the few senior military figures of the inter–war years capable of rising above inter-

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[25] This was essentially the argument of Field Marshall Douglas Haig against the proposed new Air Ministry and RAF in 1917. Hubert Allen, *The Legacy of Lord Trenchard*, (London: Cassel, 1972), p.56.

[26] Sir Hugh Trenchard, CAS, to Beatty, 22 November 1919, TNA, AIR /17/2A in The Beatty Papers, vol 2, 1916-1927, ed. Ranft B (Leicester, UK: Scolar Press, 1993),pp. 82-85.

[27] Allen, *Legacy*, Ibid, pp. 38-40; Boyle A, *Trenchard* (London: Collins, 1962), p.349; Andrew Lambert, *Admirals* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 372, S. Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), pp.70-71.

[28] J. Corum, 'The Myth of Air Control: Reassessing the History.' *Aerospace Power Journal* (Winter 2000).

[29] TNA, CAB 24/264. Committee of Imperial Defence: Report by a Sub-Committee, 1936, 'Vulnerability of Capital Ships to Air Attack,' Para 60 (1).

service rivalries and by February1939 had become Minister for Co-ordination of Defence. Chatfield successfully navigated competing defence claims prior to the outset of war but later complained of Lord Rothermere's 'one sided campaign for the air force' and his press illustrations of bombers blasting warships out of the water. He also complained that Rothermere's editorials blamed naval intransigence for retarding the RAF's development with demands for a larger share of the defence budget; Chatfield explained that it was easier for the Admiralty to make its case in Cabinet as it had approved the Royal Navy's assumption of a Two-Power Standard as the basis for its strategic planning. However, he conceded that Rothermere's actions had helped rouse the government into action on behalf of all three services.[30]

Rothermere's propagandising as a press baron and a member of the House of Lords combined with some imaginative Air Ministry PR all contributed to a popular idea that aeroplanes were achieving a decisive ascendancy over warships.[31] Following the Battle of Britain, Frank Capra's inspiring propaganda film was shown in British cinemas on Churchill's instructions including the Prime Minister's personal introduction in which he assured the audiences that the film represented 'the facts.'[32] *The Battle of Britain* (1943) showed an animated drawing probably prepared in a Walt Disney studio showing bombers swarming across the English Channel with the narrator intoning 'The British knew it would be suicide to use their fleet in the Channel!'[33] One of Capra's influences was the Air Ministry pamphlet *The Battle of Britain – August – October 1940*, claiming the defeat of the Luftwaffe meant 'defeat of … the invasion of this Island.' Although it failed to assert that a Luftwaffe victory meant the automatic destruction of the fleet in the Channel, it is nevertheless hard to imagine how else the reader might have interpreted this claim.[34]

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[30] Ernle Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again, Vol.2, The Navy and Defence: The Autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1947), p.83. The Two-Power Standard was not actually achieved.

[31] TNA, CAB 24/264 'Vulnerability of Capital Ships to Air Attack,' para 57. This report concluded that 'the day of the capital ship is not over … to assume it is, and to cease to build them, would lead to grave risk of disaster.'

[32] Press Release from Ministry of Information Films Division, in Imperial War Museum. As quoted in A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.248.

[33] Imperial War Museum, Film and Video Archive, ADM 10 The Battle of Britain (Dir, Frank Capra, 1943).

[34] H. St. George Saunders, *The Battle of Britain: An Air Ministry Account of the Great Days from 8 August-31 October 1940* (London: HMSO, 1941), p.33.

By contrast, the 'Bombers versus Battleships' experience during the early phase of the war demonstrated there was no evidence to support the idea that British capital ships lacked a significant operational capability in the face of German land-based bombers. Until the loss of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse* to Japanese aircraft at the end of 1941, there was no reason to think this might soon change. Only three of the twelve capital ships sunk by the end of November 1941 was the result of air attack alone. British naval torpedo bombers sank all three in Taranto Harbour but two later returned to service after re-floating.[35] Whilst the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* held clear lessons for the Admiralty in their future operations against the Japanese, there are great dangers in conflating Japanese success with the Luftwaffe's capabilities in British waters or even the Mediterranean Sea. These large ships had succumbed to waves of well-executed torpedo bomber attacks but the Luftwaffe possessed neither the training, nor a decent aerial torpedo and also lacked a significant number of suitable aircraft to launch them.[36] In 1940, the Luftwaffe also lacked a suitable armour-piercing bomb such as the type that heavily damaged the aircraft carrier, *Illustrious* in 1941.[37] With better training and the development of effective armour-piercing and semi-armour piercing bombs, the Luftwaffe's performance against shipping improved – especially in the more favourable conditions of the Mediterranean - but it was never in the same league as the Japanese.

Because of anti-aircraft deficiencies in terms of poor fire control and inadequate weaponry, smaller ships were more vulnerable to air attacks of the type that had eliminated twenty-eight destroyers and five cruisers but these were not devastating losses to a navy the size of Britain's.[38] Furthermore, most captains discovered that the best way to compensate for these problems was to shelter under the barrages of the larger ships or failing that, to dodge – a sharp turn to port or starboard as soon as the bomb left the dive-bomber.[39] Admiralty analysis of shipping losses between September 1939 and February 1941 showed that the Luftwaffe's most effective ship destroyer in 1940 was the Junkers Ju.87 dive-bomber followed by smaller numbers of twin-engine

[35] Martin Middlebrook & Patrick Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), pp.17-20.
[36] Schenk P, Invasion of England, 1940 (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1990), p.246.
[37] TNA 95419 CAB 120/483, L G Hollis to Prime Minister, 9 October 1946, enclosing 'German Preparations for Invasion.'
[38] Middlebrook & Mahoney, *Battleship*, pp.17-20.
[39] CA. Papers of Capt. S Roskill. From Admiral Sir Charles Forbes to Roskill, 22 February 1950.

Junkers Ju.88 bombers in the dive-bombing role. As we shall see, high-level bombing between 6000 and 19000 feet was ineffective and medium-level bombing only slightly better.[40]

If we link these facts to the situation in home waters during September 1940 then some idea of the relative strengths of the Royal Navy versus the Kriegsmarine is necessary to comprehend the situation. On 14 September 1940, Plymouth retained one battleship, two cruisers, and four destroyers. One cruiser and twelve destroyers waited at Portsmouth and Harwich boasted two cruisers, sixteen destroyers, and four corvettes. Three cruisers and four destroyers were also operating from the mouth of the River Humber. To these powerful forces should be added thirty-five submarines in the Channel and a large flotilla of miscellaneous craft acting as a floating trip wire. Furthermore, there were also a large number of small motor torpedo boats (MTBs) operating in the Channel. If these proved inadequate, then the services of the Home Fleet at Rosyth would be required adding three battleships, two cruisers, and twelve destroyers. Guarding against a possible northwards breakout of German heavy ships, one aircraft carrier, six cruisers, and four destroyers remained at Scapa Flow. Against this, the Kriegsmarine's meagre resources included two obsolete battleships, one heavy cruiser (for a diversionary operation), two light cruisers, one training cruiser, eight destroyers, and nine E-boats. Some of these were still undergoing repairs after sustaining heavy damage during the Norway campaign. [41]A few U-boats were theoretically available but there were no plans to use them. The modern battleships *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* were not yet operational in the summer of 1940.

As already mentioned the invasion fleet was to sail at night without air cover and inevitably face powerful British naval forces trained in night fighting techniques. Clearly, the Luftwaffe could not compensate for the enormous inferiority of the Kriegsmarine, especially when the airmen needed to undertake the burden of reducing extensive defence works on the beaches and beyond, try to provide the brunt of the artillery support for their invading troops and while this was all going on sink numerous enemy warships as well. Such was the situation in home waters but to gain a better perspective

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[40] TNA, ADM 199/1189 A/NAD326/41 'Tactical Summary of Bombing by German Aircraft on HM Ships and Shipping from September 1939 to February 1941.'

[41] Norman Longmate, *Island Fortress: The Defence of Great Britain 1603-1945* (London: Pimlico, 2001), pp.502-503. For data on German resources see Geoffrey Hewitt, *Hitler's Armada: The Royal Navy and the Defence of Great Britain April-October 1940* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, Maritime, 2010), pp. 8-11.

of British survival in 1940, it is important to understand the nature and significance of other conflicts further from home.

The Mediterranean Sea

The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini declared war on Britain on 10 June 1940, one week after the successful conclusion of Operation Dynamo (the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk) and one month before the Battle of Britain air campaigns commenced. Given our retrospective knowledge of the Italian armed forces lacklustre wartime performance and his absurd posturing on the balcony of the Piazza Venezia - Mussolini has since invited ridicule. Yet, nobody was laughing at the time! Italy was one of the most air-minded nations between the wars and the Regia Aeronautica was the fourth largest European Air Force and nurtured on the doctrines of the internationally famous airpower theorist Giulio Douhet. Italian bomb aimers were experts in the arts of high-level bombing and their major area of operations allowed far better visibility than their German counterparts could usually expect in the English Channel and North Sea. Furthermore, their main bomber – the tri-motor – SM.79 Sparrowhawk medium bomber was a capable and robust high-level bomber. Operating in support of the Regia Marina (Italian Navy), Mussolini and his air force leaders confidently expected great things.[42]

So dismayed was the Admiralty at this prospect that they closed the Suez Canal to commercial traffic, moved the fleet from Malta to Alexandria and away from Italian bombers based in Italy, Sicily and Sardinia. The British seriously considered quitting the Central and Eastern Mediterranean altogether. This would have left the fleet desperately clinging to the edge of the Western Mediterranean at Gibraltar. Such a retreat would have meant forfeiting an area of vital strategic and economic interest to Britain and the Empire. Traditionally, historians have been hard on Churchill's 'obsession' with the Mediterranean but a newer school of thought typified by Douglas Porch has reassessed this theatre as 'the path to victory.'[43] Whatever one thinks about the nature and significance of the Mediterranean theatre later in the war - there can be little doubt that a withdrawal from the area in 1940 would have had very serious

[42] Peter Smith, *Critical Conflict The Royal Navy's Mediterranean Campaign in 1940* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Maritime, 2011), 41-43 and Jack Greene & Alessandro Massignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean 1940-1943* (Chatham: Greenhill Books, 2011), p.17.

[43] Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. ix-xiv.

consequences for the British war effort.[44] Staying put meant plentiful fuel for British and Commonwealth forces in the Middle East and the continuation of essential supplies for India and the Far East. Here one might note that Italian operations were constrained by severe oil shortages, despite the fact that in 1940 Libya was an Italian colony where petroleum companies discovered large oil deposits in the 1950s.[45]

However, the British oil advantages should not be overstated. Although Britain controlled potentially vast Middle East oil reserves, most oil used on the British mainland came across the Atlantic, as the journey around the Cape of Good Hope was uneconomic at the time. Nevertheless, losing the Suez Canal would also have meant losing a vital communications link to the Far East making the Empire a tempting target for Japanese aggression at an earlier date. Having to fight the Japanese as well as the Germans and Italians in 1940 would have been a most undesirable outcome with British resources so stretched. Finally, there was the ongoing need to convince the Americans that Britain was not about to surrender and hand her large fleet over to the Axis – essential for obtaining logistical support from President Roosevelt. Engaging the Italians at sea and on land represented excellent opportunities to show that the British were determined to fight and that the fight would increasingly take place on the enemy's turf. A long and undefended coastline and her easily isolated colonies made Italy extremely vulnerable to amphibious assault and bombing.

At the urging of Admiral A. B. Cunningham, C-in-C, Mediterranean, Churchill vetoed the proposed withdrawal and allowed Cunningham to go on the offensive. The first major action was not against the Regia Marina but the Mediterranean fleet of Britain's recent ally – the French. This took place at the North African port of Mers-el-Kebir on 3 July 1940 and occurred because Churchill and the Admiralty believed they could not rely on French assurances that they would not surrender their fleet to Germany as part of the armistice then being negotiated with Germany. The action was part of the overarching *Operation Catapult* - the British seizures of French shipping wherever the British could impound them. The French received four options: to join the British, sail their ships to the French West Indies where they would be beyond German reach, demilitarise them in place, or failing these three come under British attack. The French admiral at Alexandria disarmed but negotiations failed at Mers-el-Kebir whereupon

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[44] The Chiefs of Staff asserted the vital importance of the region a few months before the Italian declaration of war. TNA CAB 66/4/48. War Cabinet, 'Military Policy in the Middle East – Report by the Minister for Co-Ordination of Defence,' 13 January 1940, pp. 1-9.

[45] Porch, *Path*, 6-8.

Churchill ordered Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville to launch an attack on the French fleet at its anchorage.

The subsequent one-sided engagement resulted in the sinking of the French battleship *Bretagne*, immobilisation of the battle cruiser *Dunkerque* and heavy damage to the battle cruiser *Strasbourg*. Some units escaped but approximately 1300 French seaman died and many more were injured. This tragic event was controversial, even in 1940, and was a gift to German propagandists. However, Churchill's resolution to act solidified his previously shaky position as Prime Minister and ended the American press criticism of Roosevelt for 'wasting' valuable war resources on the British. The survival of Churchill as premier and the prospect of increased future logistical support from the USA were key factors in keeping Britain in the war making the Battle of Mers-el-Kebir a pivotal moment.[46] This reduction of the French fleet did not however completely negate it as a significant force.[47] But, in conjunction with shipping seizures elsewhere - it removed the prospect of the Kriegsmarine - now severely depleted and mauled after the Scandinavian expeditions - recovering much of its naval strength at the expense of the French with all that meant for fighting the Battle of the Atlantic and resisting invasion. Despite this, the 'victorious' Battle of Mers-el-Kebir cannot easily be celebrated as part of the Battle *for* Britain as its controversial moral aspects make this as awkward for the Royal Navy as the bombing of Dresden would become for the RAF. This may well have led to an under-estimation of its importance in the public mind.

A few days later, Cunningham's fleet went into battle off the coast of Calabria against the Regia Marina and bombers of the Regia Aeronautica. The battle was tactically and strategically inconclusive but it held a clear lesson for those who thought land based airpower had now undermined sea power. On 9 July 1940, waves of Italian bombers dropped countless bombs upon British warships outnumbered by the Italian fleet. Despite accurate aiming and many straddles, only one bomb struck the cruiser

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[46] Portillo M, Keen D, Brothers P, Lambert A, Bailey V, Barnett C, and Fishlock A, 'The Battle of Britain Transcript. 'The Things We Forgot to Remember,' BBC Radio 4, broadcast 2005, The Open University, 17 May 2005. http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/the-battles-britain-transcript, (accessed 15 February 2012). Porch, *Path*, pp. 67-69.

[47] Shortly afterwards a French naval squadron slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar and forced the abandonment of the British expedition to Dakar – a failed attempt to rally the French African Empire to the Free-French cause of General Charles de Gaulle.

Gloucester killing everyone on the bridge. However, an emergency steering position was set up aft and the ship remained in action and on course. When the bombers returned for another attempt, they bombed their own ships instead but again without effect. Well-aimed bombs deserved better luck but the British ships presented far too difficult a target from high altitude. The destruction of the British fleet by bombing and submarine ambush had been the essence of the Italian plan and the action proved that it was still possible for a fleet to operate effectively in the face of enemy land based airpower. After the British battleship *Warspite* had hit the Italian battleship *Giulio Cesare* at very long range the Italians withdrew and Cunningham was able to claim that the fleet had obtained a moral ascendency.[48] For their part, the Italian bomber crews enthusiastically claimed they had destroyed half the British fleet but the Germans remained unconvinced.[49] Shortly afterwards, the Regia Aeronautica largely abandoned high-level bombing against shipping as a waste of munitions, began forming torpedo bombing units and took delivery of Junkers Ju.87 Stukas that might otherwise have been used in Sea Lion.

Hanging onto the Mediterranean in 1940 enabled the British Army to go on the offensive against the Italians later the same year and the three military commanders General Richard O'Connor, Air Commodore Raymond Collishaw and Admiral Cunningham all successfully cooperated in a spectacular campaign. In a matter of weeks, two Commonwealth divisions put five times as many enemy troops to flight, advancing 500 miles, and deep into Cyrenaica. Operation Compass almost drove Mussolini out of North Africa and might have ended the desert war there and then had Churchill not diverted resources to the defence of Greece.[50] The Fleet Air Arm also scored a spectacular and well-publicised attack on the Regia Marina's base at Taranto, successfully sinking three battleships that November. In neither case was the effect permanent but the victories were essential for public morale and meant the British could end the year with far more optimism and satisfaction than would have seemed justifiable in the middle of 1940.

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[48] Cunningham A B, 'Report of an Action with the Italian Fleet off Calabria, 9 July 1940' (Cunningham's Despatch). Supplement to the London Gazette, 28 April 1948, 2643 – 2649, http://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/38273/page2643 (accessed 24 September 2014).

[49] Muggeridge M (ed), *Ciano's Diary 1939-43* (London: Heinemann, 1947), pp.276-277.

[50] Saul David, *Military Blunders: The How and Why of Military Failure* (London: Robinson, 1997), 194-196.

The Battles in Home Waters and the Atlantic

A retired RAF officer claimed on a radio programme in 2005 that the Royal Navy was safely out of harm's way at Scapa Flow during the invasion crisis.[51] If too many units were on anti-invasion duties in 1940, it did not mean they idled in harbour while others did all the fighting. As previously mentioned, a small part of the Royal Navy was at Scapa Flow guarding against a northern breakout of German heavy ships but there were plenty of warships in and around the Channel crossing-area and ready to engage the enemy, and all within the Luftwaffe's range. The Admiralty was not content to operate as a mere passive deterrent and throughout the summer and into the autumn, a great many destroyer raids took place against the invasion harbours. Offensive operations took place at night and in a variety of weather conditions when aircraft could play no significant role. These raids were particularly evident during September 1940; the month an invasion was most likely to occur.

The most spectacular demonstrations of British naval power occurred on the nights of 11-12 September and 12-13 September, covering virtually the entire enemy coast of Holland, Belgium and northern France, with the shelling and torpedoing of shipping and port installations with impunity. In the words of Norman Longmate, 'It was an awesome demonstration that, at night, at least, the Germans did not yet have command of the Channel, for all the attackers got back to England unharmed.'[52] Combined with attacks from Bomber Command, the assaults destroyed the equivalent of the German barge reserves and contributed to Hitler's decision to order a limited dispersal of the barges on 19 September and on 12 October to postpone Sea Lion indefinitely.[53]

During the daytime, destroyers and MTBs supported by the RAF patrolled the Channel to protect merchant shipping from E-boat attacks. The elderly destroyer *Griffin* was undoubtedly typical of many ships that exposed themselves to frequent air attacks from land based German bombers at this time. On one such patrol 36 Dornier Do.17 medium bombers in four formations of nine attacked *Griffin*. The destroyer dodged the bombs from the first three formations but the fourth landed bombs that exploded all around. A few minor leaks occurred but after half an hour in harbour, she was out

[51] Air Commodore Peter Brothers in *'The Things We Forgot to Remember'*.
[52] Longmate, *Island Fortress*, pp.516-517.
[53] Supreme Command Directives, 'Operation Sea Lion," 19 September 1940 and 12 October 1940 as quoted by Mallman Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences*, pp.138-140.

again chasing E-boats.[54] Nevertheless, it was the ships that *Griffin* and her sister ships were trying to protect that suffered the worst casualties because the period of the Battle of Britain was also a part of the U-boats' 'happy time.' It is impossible to calculate the figure definitively but it is estimated that some 1730 merchant seamen were killed during these months.[55] Their heroic efforts to keep the nation fed and the RAF supplied with fuel have not received adequate recognition. Lacking a recognisable uniform, many sailors returned from the perils of air attack, mine, and torpedo only to receive white feathers for 'dodging service' in the armed forces.[56] Outrageously, officials categorised these men as non-combatants despite having to operate anti-aircraft guns. Only in 2000 was the Merchant Navy's contribution officially recognised with a national Merchant Navy Day. However, this receives a fraction of the media coverage given to Battle of Britain Day.

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that Battle of Britain Day was originally Civil Defence Day, and according to the *Express* of 26 August 1943 'Battle of Britain Sunday and Civil Defence Day would be celebrated together on 26 September', 'to commemorate the deeds of RAF, AA gunners, Civil Defence, Observer Corps and aircraft workers.' However, during the course of the war, the press and politicians squeezed out 'The Many' and even Civil Defence Day itself. Assisted by the popular reception of Capra's film that covered the night blitz but still over-emphasised Fighter Command's contribution to preventing invasion - 'The RAF "owned" the battle' by the wars' end. [57] Sadly, this ownership has exaggerated the role of Fighter Command, propagated the false idea that only airpower prevented invasion in 1940 and marginalised the contributions of thousands of others who fought at home and abroad, on land and at sea. Even those

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[54] IWM, 95/5/1. Papers of Lt. Commander J A J Dennis, p.68.

[55] John Ellis, *The World War II Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (London: Aurum Press, 1993), Table 4. This source records 5,553 Merchant Navy crewmen casualties in British registered ships in 1940. I have divided this by 366 days to reach a daily figure of 15.172 and multiplied this by the 114 days of the Battle of Britain to reach 1,730.

[56] A.M. Nell, 'Nursing during the War,'*WW2 People's War: An Archive of World War Two memories-written by the public, gathered by the BBC.*' 16 June2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/04/a2751004.shtml (accessed 20 October 2015). Also, see 'Fact File – Merchant Navy,' BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a6652091.shtml (accessed 20 October 2015).

[57] North R *The Many,* pp.356-.359

who fought in other RAF Commands saw their efforts diminished by this new version of the Battle of Britain. Ironically, nearly twice as many RAF personnel from other commands died in action compared with Fighter Command during this period.[58] Furthermore, the idea that survival depended solely on the outcome of an air battle over southern England has diminished our appreciation of the geo-strategic importance of the wider area of operations such as the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and of those who fought there. Insofar as Sea Lion and our perception of the Battle of Britain is concerned, the most important aspect of the Mediterranean campaign was surely its demonstration to both sides of the difficulties involved in sinking warships from the air. With earlier fears of air-attack assuaged by the Regia Aeronautica's failure to sink Cunningham's fleet, it is perhaps unsurprising that the C-in-C Home Fleet was overruled by the Admiralty's insistence on placing so many warships within the Luftwaffe's range (including his heavy surface warships at Rosyth) to cover any possible landings.

It seems therefore that the RAF's Battle of Britain concept gained public credibility because of the false idea that the Royal Navy was helpless in the face of German air attack. Moreover, it overshadowed the efforts of the British Army, reorganised, and re-equipped before much of it went to the Middle East at a time when the daylight air battles were at their height. Even the derided Dad's Army (Home Guard) represented a significant obstacle to invasion. By the end of July, this 'People's Army' was 1,456,000 strong, roughly half of whom were under 27 years of age.[59]

All this begs important questions about whether a mythical appreciation of the past is having a detrimental effect on our current defence policy.[60] Whatever be the case for revising the role of independent airpower today, surely the time has come to set the record straight with a Battle *for* Britain monument recognising all the participants. Perhaps a greater effort on the part of educational institutions to integrate sea/air/landpower might also help to avoid the sort of historical over-

[58] John Terraine, *The Right of the Line* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), Table I & pp.219-20 where Terraine quotes Fighter Command's Battle of Britain personnel losses as 537. His figures for Bomber and Coastal Commands together for this period are 957 to 998, though he admits this is an approximation.
[59] McKinstry L, 'The Dad's Army Guide to defending Britain', *BBC History Magazine*, February 2016. pp.30-34.
[60] Anthony Cumming, 'The Battle for History Informs Today's Fight,' *Warships International Fleet Review*, October 2015, pp.10-11.

compartmentalisation that helped these myths gain credibility and so bring about the more holistic approaches that military history so desperately requires.