Battling for the Skies: Key Facts

Read the following facts about the Battle of Britain

The Battle of Britain was the attempt of the German Luftwaffe to destroy the RAF of the United Kingdom, so that German soldiers could then invade by sea in Hitler's secret mission, code named 'Operation Sea Lion'.

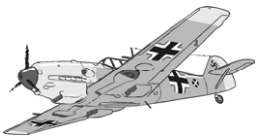
The Battle of Britain began on 10th July 1940 when British ships in the English Channel were bombed by the German Luftwaffe.



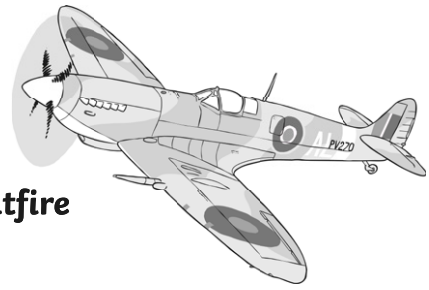
In July 1940, the Luftwaffe had a distinct advantage over the RAF. They had 2600 aircraft against Britain's 640.

Mass bombing of airfields, harbours, radar stations and aircraft factories began in August 1940.

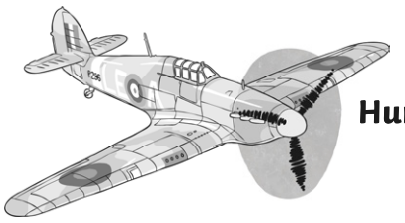
The most popular German planes were the Messerschmitt fighter planes.



The most popular British aeroplanes to fight in the Battle of Britain were the Supermarine Spitfire Mark 1 and the Hawker Hurricane. The Spitfires battled with the German fighter planes while the Hurricanes targeted the bombers.



Spitfire



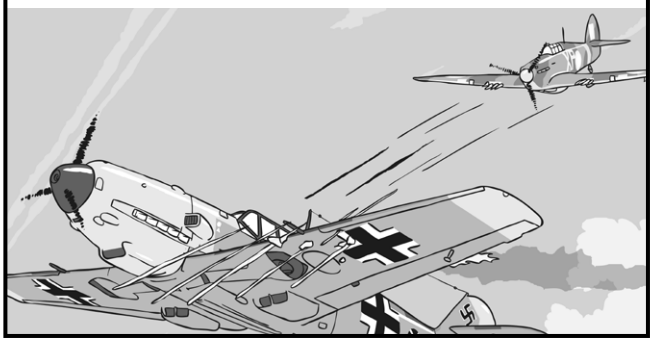
Hurricane

The RAF defences were incredibly well-organised and efficient. Britain was split into groups and sectors with a main fighter airfield in each, which organised and deployed the fighter planes in response to the intelligence they received from radar operatives.

A pilot that destroyed five enemy aircraft was known as a fighter ace.



The term 'dogfight' describes the intense in-air battle between small groups of aircraft that fought at close range. Strategic manoeuvring was key to winning a dogfight battle.



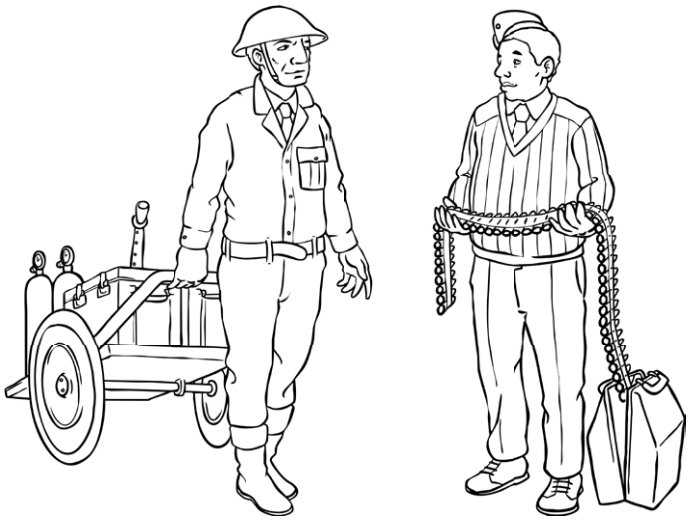
Due to their small numbers (in comparison with the enemy), the RAF pilots who flew in the Battle of Britain came to be regarded as 'The Few'. This name came from Winston Churchill's speech to parliament on 20th August 1940:

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

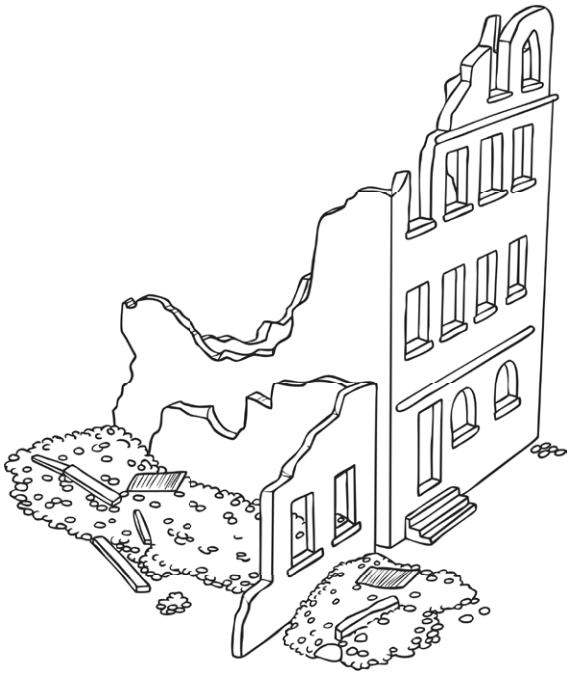


Britain's eventual success in the Battle of Britain was a collaborative effort between the RAF pilots and a wide range of ground workers that supported them:

- factory men and women worked tirelessly building new aircraft and weapons;
- radar operatives scanned the skies and gave advance warning of incoming enemy planes;
- anti-aircraft command helped shoot down enemy planes from the ground.



On the 7th September 1940, the Germans suddenly moved on to bombing London as they believed enough damage had been caused to the RAF stations. Despite causing considerable damage in the capital, this actually gave the RAF time to recover their defences.



On 15th September 1940, the Germans launched another massive attack but the British fighters hit back hard and gained the advantage. The tide had turned in Britain's favour and it became clear that the Germans could not achieve their goal of controlling British airspace.

Although for the next nine months German bombers continued to bomb large cities in the period of war known as The Blitz, the 15th September 1940 is officially regarded as the end of the Battle of Britain and this day is commemorated each year.