

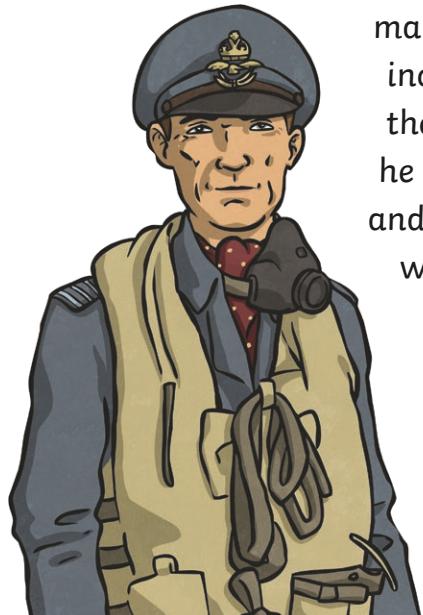
Battling for the Skies: Key Facts

The Beginning

As is the case during any war, many battles took place during the six years of the Second World War. Without a doubt, one of the most significant and momentous of these was the Battle of Britain. This was a fierce and strategic battle fought above the skies of England whereby the Royal Air Force (RAF) heroically and skilfully held off the German air force (the Luftwaffe) who were attempting to defeat and then invade Great Britain. After first conquering most of Europe, Hitler (Germany's Chancellor and military leader) turned his attentions to attacking Great Britain. His plan, which was given the code name Operation Sea Lion, was to bombard the UK from the skies and then raid it from the sea. German fighter planes (Messerschmitts) had already begun bombing British ships in the English Channel as an attempt to infiltrate and attack. However, he greatly underestimated the bravery and the power of the British pilots, planes and people.



On paper, German invasion looked highly probable. In July 1940, when German planes began bombing British airfields, harbours, factories and radar stations, the Luftwaffe had 2000 more planes than the RAF. They therefore had greater fire power and numbers of pilots. However, by the end of the battle, 1800 of these were shot down by allied aircraft compared to the British loss of around 1000. The bombing went on for



many months. As the battle continued, Hitler grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress that the Luftwaffe were making and so in September, he commanded them to begin bombing British towns and cities instead. Although many cities across Britain were attacked, London was the most heavily afflicted in a period of history famously known as The Blitz. During this time, thousands of Londoners lost their homes and lives due to nightly German bombing assaults. Despite this, the British people never gave up and instead united together demonstrating what is referred to as the 'Blitz Spirit'.



Did You Know...?

From 7th September 1940, London was bombed for 57 consecutive nights. In an attempt to stay alive, 180 000 people would regularly shelter in the London underground, emerging only once the siren signalled that it was safe to.

The Final Days

Britain's eventual success in the Battle of Britain was a collaborative effort between the RAF pilots and the 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.



Although the bombing went on for many more months in 1940, the 15th September is officially regarded as the end of the Battle of Britain and is referred to as the Battle of Britain Day. It was on this day that the Luftwaffe began an all-day attack on London. However, it soon became clear to German fighters that the RAF had gained control of the skies and that they could and would not be defeated. After this raid, Hitler stopped Operation Sea Lion and when the bombing finally ceased in May 1941, he ordered the Luftwaffe to attack Russia in the East instead.

Interesting Fact

The Spitfire was mainly used in dog fights. This is a term used to describe the intense, close-range battle between small groups of planes in which pilots had to move and turn their plane quickly to avoid being shot down.

Due to their small numbers, the RAF pilots who flew in the Battle of Britain came to be known 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.'

Plane Facts

British success during the Battle of Britain is partly due to the planes that the RAF flew. Two of the most popular British planes used were the Supermarine Spitfire Mark 1 (more commonly known as the Spitfire) and the Hawker Hurricane. The Spitfire was such a good fighter plane that it was used for several decades after the war ended. It was fast and agile and pilots could manoeuvre it easily when fighting in the sky. The Spitfires fought the German fighter planes while the Hawker Hurricanes targeted the German bombers.

