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Michael Korda, *With Wings Like Eagles: A History of the Battle of Britain*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Pp. 322. ISBN 978-0-06-112535-5.

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As the historian Barrie Pitt correctly judged, the key to British victory in the Battle of Britain was “the ability to climb high and fast, to shoot straight, and even more important, to be in the right place at the right time.”¹ Many histories of the Battle focus on the last item in Pitt’s list, “to be in the right place at the time,” with good reason. The British air defense system created in the late 1930s was truly revolutionary and gave the Royal Air Force (RAF) an edge in defeating the German Luftwaffe. Michael Korda’s *With Wings Like Eagles* follows this familiar approach by casting the RAF’s Fighter Command’s commanding officer, Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, as the drama’s central figure. Dowding provided the vision and leadership that ensured victory in the air over southern England.

In 1932, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin intoned, “The bomber will always get through,” a common opinion after the experiences of World War I. The author was introduced to the idea of strategic bombing by his uncle, the filmmaker Alexander Korda, who produced the film *Things to Come* (1936; dir. W.C. Menzies) based on a book by H. G. Wells,² who also wrote the screenplay. The movie graphically dramatized the commonly held view that if war broke out both London and Paris would be subjected to immediate air bombardment. Vincent Korda, the author’s father, the film’s set designer, received the Academy Award for Best Art Direction in 1940 for *Thief of Baghdad* (dir. L. Berger et al.).

After serving in the RAF in the 1950s, Michael Korda began his storied career as an editor (eventually Editor-in-Chief) at Simon and Schuster, whose list included such “amateur” historians as William L. Shirer and Will and Ariel Durant. Korda has written well-received biographies of U.S. Grant and Dwight Eisenhower.³ While not an academic historian, he brings extensive knowledge, good judgment, and superlative writing skills to his work. (While the full academic panoply is absent, his book does provide a most useful bibliography.)

In his opening chapter, Korda sets out the fundamental topics of his treatment of the Battle, including the creation of Fighter Command’s air defense system, the big wing and attrition strategies, the leadership qualities of Dowding and Göring, the question of Hitler’s intentions, German capability to invade England regardless of air supremacy, and the narrow margin of victory. Korda eschews both revisionism and counterfactuals that might demote the Battle from its place in history:

Historians—indeed whole schools of history—have made their reputations by casting a jaundiced eye on the victories, heroes, and triumphs of their forefathers. Nobody in academe gets tenure or a reputation in the media by examining the events of the past with approval, or by praising the decisions of past statesmen and military leaders as wise and sensible.... The speculation about the Battle of Britain is of a different kind [from counterfactuals]. Nobody denies that we won it; but we simply do not know how serious Hitler was about invading Britain—or of course, whether such an invasion would have succeeded (3, 5).

Although it is impossible to divine Hitler’s intentions, the threat of invasion was real and dire.⁴ The author notes that his uncle, Alexander Korda, was on the Gestapo’s roundup list. Had the Luftwaffe successfully cleared the Channel and southern England of the RAF, Hitler might very well have invaded, given his aggressive instincts and opportunistic personality.

1. Introduction in Edward Bishop, *Their Finest Hour: The Story of the Battle of Britain 1940* (NY: Ballantine, 1968) 7.

2. *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2005).

3. *Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero* (NY: HarperCollins, 2004), *Ike: An American Hero* (NY: Harper, 2007).

4. The recently published RAF official history of the Battle forthrightly states: “There are many battles that can be seen to have changed the course of history for an individual nation or nations. Few, however, can be said to have influenced the future direction of mankind in so fundamental a manner as the Battle of Britain”—T.C.G. James, *The Battle of Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), Forward by Air Chief Marshall Sir Peter Squire, Chief of the Air Staff.

Korda praises Britain's military leaders and the politicians who had the foresight to fund Dowding's system, which, in the mid-1930s, was still just a theory. He argues that the much maligned "men of Munich" laid the foundation for victory in 1940: "By 1937 the first of these [radar] sites was in operation, and by 1939 there would be fourteen more—an immense job of construction and a huge expense for a scientific will-o'-the-wisp that might not work, all of it initially authorized by the supposedly lethargic Stanley Baldwin, and carried forward by his successor as prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who is better remembered for Munich" (41).

The system the politicians bankrolled was the brainchild of Hugh Dowding, who became commander of Fighter Command on 6 July 1936. He spent the next four years designing and installing a system comprised of three parts charged with acquiring, processing, and distributing information. Radar and the Observers Corps were the two main sources for real time, raw information on German air raids. Each radar station phoned in reports on dedicated land lines to the Filter Room at Fighter Command headquarters at Bentley Priory. After careful sifting, analysis, and interpretation, the information was passed on to the main operations room. The Observer Corp Center performed the same function, forwarding reports to the operations room. After a clear picture of enemy activity was established, the situation report was sent out to the four group headquarters. They, in turn, directed fighters—those already in the air and others ready to scramble into action—to cut off enemy raiders. Beside intercepting German bombers, this system ensured that British fighters would not be destroyed on the ground.

Korda draws a sharp distinction between the drama's hero—Dowding—and its villain—Hermann Göring. Dowding stuck to his strategy from the Battle's inception until he was relieved of command in November 1940. Göring, on the other hand, famously changed strategy every few weeks. Once the Luftwaffe descended upon England in force in July 1940, Dowding determined to wage a battle of attrition that would inflict a prohibitively high loss rate on German bombers while conserving his own forces and playing for time. He knew an invasion attempt would be impossible after September. He reasoned that if the Germans faced unsustainable bomber losses, an undaunted Fighter Command, and bad fall weather, victory would be his. Göring knew time was not on his side and sought a quick, decisive victory over the RAF:

Dowding, therefore, saw his main task as keeping his force in being until the weather and the calendar made the invasion of Britain unlikely or impossible, and by that standard he did not need to win a spectacular victory over the Germans in the air; he merely needed to keep his squadrons flying and attacking the German bombers through the first week of October. He did not anticipate that the German air offensive would end then—it might continue for months, or even years—but there would be no further risk of invasion in 1940 (244).

Dowding deployed his fighters in squadron strength, a tactic opposed by his immediate subordinate, Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the commander of 12 Group. Leigh-Mallory's area of responsibility encompassed the Midlands region north of London. He advocated what became known as the "big-wing" tactics, arguing that larger formations of several squadrons (i.e., over fifty fighters) could smash the German bomber groups and win a decisive victory. Beside Dowding, the commander of 11 Group, Keith Park, favored the use of small, squadron-sized interceptions. Park—whose Group protected frontline southeast England—maintained that his pilots simply did not have the time to assemble in large formations and climb to combat altitude, if they were to intercept fast-moving German formations coming from just across the English Channel.

Korda carefully details the squabbling and rivalries within the RAF during the Battle. In part, this focus illustrates the command differences between the RAF and the Luftwaffe. Within Fighter Command, robust, candid debates sometimes verged on insubordination. By contrast, leading the Luftwaffe was a man of notoriously bad character. Criticizing the creator of the Gestapo was not a good career move for Luftwaffe officers. Korda also discusses at length the rift between Churchill and Dowding, duly noting the now well-known omissions from Churchill's memoirs on this topic. Nevertheless, Dowding maintained firm control over his squadrons throughout the course of the Battle. This was in sharp contrast with German leadership. Korda observes that without a supreme commander—such as Eisenhower in 1944—the German army, navy, air force were uncoordinated. Ultimately, German strategy rested upon the mercurial Göring.

Korda overemphasizes arguments about tactics and strategy within the RAF, giving short shrift to other important factors of the Battle. For example, he spends the better part of a chapter discussing the heated disagreement between Dowding and Churchill on the wisdom of reinforcing France during the continental campaign of May 1940. However, he states that Dowding was dismissed because he could not come up with a night fighter defense during the Blitz in the fall of 1940, not because of the political infighting he recounts in such detail. Also, the air battle of Dunkirk receives no attention in this book. An examination of the air fighting during the Evacuation would have provided helpful information on the effectiveness of the Luftwaffe's anti-ship efforts. In addition, it was over Dunkirk that the Germans first encountered Fighter Command and its system of radar-guided ground control.

One problem American readers may have with this book is the author's assumption of familiarity with the British system of government and military bureaucracy. Korda introduces a key subject by stating that "[a]s Air member for Research and Development on the Air Council, Dowding had laid the groundwork for Fighter Command, often against stiff opposition" (34). Unfortunately, he never explicates the British chain of command or how various agencies related to one another. Despite these shortcomings, Korda has written a clear and straightforward narrative of the epic Battle of Britain that should well serve non-specialist readers.