



To Defeat the Few: The Luftwaffe's Campaign to Destroy RAF Fighter Command, August–September 1940 by Douglas C. Dildy and Paul F. Crickmore.

Oxford: Osprey, 2020. Pp. 384. ISBN 978-1-4728-3918-3.

Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

English-language books on the Battle of Britain, ranging from memoirs of Royal Air Force pilots to studies of the campaign's place in World War II, have come mostly from the British side. This makes *To Defeat the Few* a welcome addition to the literature. Its creators, Douglas Dildy and Paul Crickmore, are veteran Osprey authors, with dozens of titles to their credit. They say their intent was to produce an operational history of the campaign, told from the German point of view. But their book is both much more and somewhat less than that. For one thing, they provide far more background than existing studies: they devote chaps. 1–3 to the rise of the Nazis, the clandestine beginnings of the Luftwaffe, and its stunning support for blitzkrieg attacks against Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and, finally, its battle with British fighters over the Dunkirk evacuation.

The authors' judgment on Dunkirk punctures some of the myths surrounding the Battle of Britain. As air combat raged over the French port, RAF fighters shot down forty-five German bombers and thirty-six fighter planes, but "Park's No. 11 Group lost 84 fighters (of 106 overall) to Messerschmitts and bombers' defensive fire, thus losing more than one fighter for every enemy aircraft downed" (80). The Hurricanes and Spitfires were inferior to their Luftwaffe opponents, for several reasons. Many German pilots had fought in the Spanish Civil War and by 27 May 1940 all of them had more combat experience than their British counterparts. RAF fighter tactics unwisely called for rigid formations, a problem not rectified until long after the Battle of Britain. The men in the Bf-109 Messerschmitts also had better armaments. However, as the authors stress, German leadership was inferior, especially at the top. Dunkirk was a defeat for the Luftwaffe: even though its bombers sank over two hundred ships, including six British and three French destroyers, every British soldier—and tens of thousands of Frenchmen—escaped. The authors maintain that Operation Dynamo (the evacuation) succeeded because the Luftwaffe attacked the beaches and ships for only three of its nine days. Mistakes by both Hitler and Göring, combined with an over-extended Luftwaffe, yielded a strategic failure.

After Dunkirk, Hitler enjoyed an advantage neither he nor his generals had ever seriously imagined: a free hand on the continent, with its ports and airfields stretching from the Arctic Circle to Spain. But the United Kingdom, under Churchill, refused to consider negotiations. The German navy offered a plan for *Handelskrieg* (trade war) to be carried out primarily by U-boats, since its surface fleet had been decimated during the invasion of Norway. The Luftwaffe, though merely a tactical air force, had vague plans for bombing England into submission. But Hitler, more concerned about Stalin and eager to turn his forces east, demanded a solution to the British problem in 1940.

Chapters 4–6 discuss Hitler's options in June 1940 and the capabilities of the Luftwaffe and Fighter Command. The authors make it clear that the Germans' plan of battle was fatally unrealistic. They possessed not a single landing craft and expected to use Rhine river barges, towed by

tugboats, to ferry thousands of men, tanks and, yes, horses across the Channel. Such a venture would demand good weather and moonlight, meaning that only a few days in August and September would be possible D-Days. Even with air superiority, as Adm. Erich Raeder explained, his depleted force could not hope to prevent the Royal Navy from steaming into the Channel to destroy the hapless barges.

Chapters 7–13, the bulk of the book, offer a good operational overview of the various stages of the Battle of Britain—attacks on shipping, bombing of radar sites, attempts to destroy RAF airfields near the proposed landing beaches, etc. But they never match the immediacy of British accounts that put their readers in the meetings with Air Chief Marshal Dowding or the cockpit of a Spitfire, day after day. The authors carefully detail which units flew which missions and the names of German aircrew members shot down, but much of this information comes from existing British sources.

On the plus side, Dildy and Crickmore emphasize the crucial role played by Hermann Göring in August 1940, when he convened a top-level conference to assess the situation after what the Germans considered successful attacks on Fighter Command:

the perceived success in “rolling back” Fighter Command from its forward bases near the coast and the Jagdwaffe’s very favorable perceived exchange rate had been achieved at unacceptably high, and disturbing, costs. During the nearly week-long offensive so far, the Luftwaffe had lost 297 aircraft on combat operations, up drastically from the 204 losses sustained during the preceding six weeks (2 July through 11 August, a weekly average of 34). The Luftwaffe was Göring’s primary power base and the source of his prestige and position within the leadership of the Third Reich; ever the politician, win or lose, he could not afford to see it heavily eroded in accomplishing its mission, so the theme of the *Besprechung* [conference] was to reduce the unacceptably high loss rates as much as possible. (247)

The book recounts the action on 15 Sept. 1940, celebrated in the United Kingdom as “Battle of Britain Day,” when a massive series of German bomber units and their fighter escorts attacked targets in London. Fighter Command’s improvements in its control capabilities enabled squadrons of Hurricanes and Spitfires to destroy over 17 percent of the engaged Luftwaffe bombers. Such casualties were unsustainable and the appearance of hundreds of British fighters made it apparent that Fighter Command was growing stronger, not fading. On 16 September, Hitler suspended Operation Sealion indefinitely. Though bombing continued, the original goal—preparing for the invasion—was abandoned. The Luftwaffe carried out several more successful raids in fall 1940, but increasingly attacked by night. Thousands of British civilians died in the following months, but the battle for air superiority was over.

The traditional history—some might say legend—of the Battle of Britain presents the campaign from the defensive perspective as an epic, titanic struggle for air superiority over Southern England that climaxed in the defeat of the Luftwaffe’s second major attack on London, on 13 September 1940. The cause for the Luftwaffe’s defeat is typically ascribed to the “efficacy of the Dowding system,” and the courage, determination and sacrifice of “The Few,” with comic relief provided by liberally seasoning the account with perceived German blunders. The German historical accounts attribute the Luftwaffe’s defeat to the progressively increasing adverse weather and the unwillingness of RAF interceptor squadrons to engage in fighter-versus-fighter combat, effectively neutralizing the advantage in combat capability enjoyed by the well-trained and highly-experienced Jagdwaffe pilots flying (they believed) the superior Messerschmitt Bf 109E and the exceedingly favorable exchange rate they claimed to have whenever British defenders accepted battle. (348)

To Defeat the Few meets Osprey Publishing's high standards of visual appeal, featuring hundreds of photographs of leaders on both sides, bomb damage in England, aerial reconnaissance mosaics, and, especially, aircraft. There are, for example, seventeen photos of the Dornier Do-17Z, six taken after they crashed in England—a Battle of Britain specialty. Superb full-color maps show British airfields and radar stations, as well as the sites of planned Operation Sealion landings. The authors intersperse detailed explainers for each type of aircraft and short biographies of German and British leaders. While the two-page entries for Hitler and Churchill are unnecessary, those of German officers provide unusual depth for Battle of Britain books. Other welcome ancillaries include three appendices, a good bibliography, an index, a glossary of technical terms and acronyms, and adequate endnotes.