



2009 Battle of Britain Anniversary - Chief of Air Force: Air Marshal Mark Binskin AO -

Sunday 20 September 2009

(Check with delivery)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we gather to commemorate the 69th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. We pause to reflect on the unerring commitment and the outstanding courage of the men and women serving in and with the Royal Air Force, who in 1940 won a victory few thought possible. Most importantly, we are here to remember and give thanks to the air and ground crew, including 24 Australians, who so unselfishly paid the supreme price for that victory during the darkest days of World War II.

When war broke out 70 years ago in September 1939 it would have been difficult to imagine that by June 1940 the nations of Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France would have fallen to the Nazi onslaught. It would have been even more difficult to imagine that Britain herself would be threatened with invasion. Yet by the summer of 1940 this was, in fact, the situation. With Western Europe in flames and the British Army still reeling from the disaster of the Battle of France, it seemed that it was just a matter of time before the German war machine would be turned loose on the shores of England.

In response to this threat, the Royal Air Force fought an air campaign the like of which had never before been seen or experienced. During the summer and autumn months of 1940, for the first time in world history, air power was central in determining the tide of battle and the fate of a nation.

This air campaign took many forms. There was of course the epic fight for air superiority over south east England. Fighter Command fought this air battle with limited resources, always seeking more aircraft and the pilots to fly them. Had Dowding or Park over-committed during the large scale raids on the English airfields, the Luftwaffe could have dealt a significant blow to Fighter Command's resources. If, at a critical moment, the RAF had lost control of the air over south east England, the consequences can only be guessed at.

Australia was part of this battle. At least 22 Australians flew with Fighter Command during this time and 14 of these brave young men lost their lives in action. For some, like Pilot Officer Clarrie Bennett there is no known grave—just a resting place beneath the cold waters of the North Sea.

Fighter Command was not the only element of the RAF that fought to save Britain. Two other RAF Commands fought throughout the period of the Battle of Britain, going on to conduct operations with increasing intensity and danger throughout the war.

Coastal Command fought a long and often lonely campaign over the Atlantic Ocean and the maritime approaches to Britain, to keep the vulnerable sea lanes open to help safeguard the precious convoys carrying commodities vital to Britain's war effort. Coastal Command also flew aggressive anti-submarine patrols over the Bay of Biscay and conducted daring strikes on shipping along the European coast. As part of Coastal Command was Australia's No 10 Squadron, plus a further 26 Australians serving in RAF squadrons across Coastal Command during the Battle of Britain. Sadly, eight of these men lost their lives.

Australians were also well represented within RAF Bomber Command, flying the increasingly dangerous bomber missions into Germany's industrial heartland and the harbours in which the invasion fleet was gathering. The role of Bomber Command was to take the offensive to the enemy. In order to do this, the crews had to fly through appalling weather conditions, face determined fighter resistance and deadly anti-aircraft barrages. During the Battle of Britain, 47 Australian airmen flew with Bomber Command—of whom five were killed in action and a further six became prisoners of war. By war's end 20 per cent of the war dead—not just from Australia, but from Britain and America as well—were lost in the skies over Europe as part of the bomber offensive; over 110 000 young men who never returned.

In closing I would like to raise two final points. First, the battle has significance beyond the United Kingdom and Australia, extending to other Commonwealth countries, such as Canada, South Africa and New Zealand—all of whom contributed airmen to the defence of Britain. Additionally airmen from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Belgium served throughout the battle with distinction, carrying the fight to a common enemy while their own countries were occupied. My second point is that victory in the Battle of Britain was achieved not just by aircrew. It was the result of the dedicated work of radar operators and air defence plotters, intelligence, maintenance and support staff. The list of personnel necessary to make an air campaign successful is exhaustive, and no matter how insignificant someone's role may seem, the contribution of every single member was critical. In many cases these unsung heroes endured bombing, strafing and fire as they worked tirelessly to keep the aircraft flying and the aircrew on mission. When we speak of the 'Few', we speak not just of the pilots of the United Kingdom, but of aircrew from around the globe. We need to remember the men and women who worked on the ground, each one contributing to the final victory.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as we commemorate this 69th Battle of Britain day, we pause to reflect that the achievements of the RAF in 1940 did not come easily. They had to be worked for and fought for. It took foresight and leadership, intelligence and innovation. Most importantly, victory came about through a communion of courage, tenacity, professionalism and sad bloody sacrifice.

Lest We Forget.

EVENING BATTLE OF BRITAIN SPEECH

(Check with delivery)

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to express my thanks for the kind invitation to speak at this 69th commemoration of the Battle of Britain. I feel particularly privileged to be able to join with you in acknowledging the achievements of the men and women who served through the campaign and in paying respect to the 1503 Allied airmen who died in the service of their respective countries.

The Battle of Britain was the first major military action in world history to be fought predominantly by air forces. As the fate of Britain and the future course of the war were determined by air power it comes as no surprise that the battle has become one of the better-known air campaigns conducted during the 20th century. Due to the influence of numerous documentaries, films, books and articles, mention of the Battle of Britain can evoke iconic images of brave young men rising up in their Spitfires and Hurricanes to engage in an unequal contest against the might of Goering's Luftwaffe. I say iconic, for the highly visible fight for air superiority over south-east England was the core element of a military campaign aimed at securing Britain from invasion, and in the years since 1940 this has captured our attention and fired our imagination.

This evening I would like to present some further perspectives of the Battle of Britain. Not to challenge our image of the battle, but to add dimensions to the generally known aspects of the air campaign.

Before warming to my topic, it is in order that I first set the scene.

When the Germans invaded Poland at the beginning of September 1939, their first actions involved attacking the airfields and aircraft of the Polish Air Force. For the remainder of the campaign the Luftwaffe immediately attacked any signs of organised air defence over the Polish ground forces and city centres. This doctrine of aggressively gaining, and then maintaining, air control was the precursor to the lightning ground offensives that the world came to know as 'Blitzkrieg'. The same doctrine was applied in Belgium and in France, with devastating effectiveness. Gone were the static defensive tactics of World War I, the age of mechanised mobile warfare had dawned.

So effective was the German combined arms doctrine, that by the end of June 1940 Hitler controlled most of Europe along with parts of Scandinavia. The last kernel of resistance that remained was Britain, and it seemed that this final bastion of defiance would also soon fall to invasion. With the British Army still reeling from the disastrous Battle for France and with most of its heavy equipment still smouldering on the beaches of Dunkirk, there were only limited ground forces available to repel a German landing on English soil.

The only recourse open to Britain was to prevent such a landing from occurring. The task of achieving this goal fell to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. In those two forces, Britain was well served. The Navy had been protecting England from invasion since the

Spanish Armada in 1588. It was replete with battleships, cruisers, destroyers, minesweepers and motor torpedo boats. It far and away outgunned, and outnumbered, the badly depleted Kriegsmarine—the German Navy—which had suffered serious losses during the Battle of Norway. In short, the Royal Navy was the ideal force with which to decimate any invasion fleet that may attempt a crossing of the English Channel. There was however, one problem. Along with nearly every navy in the world, the design of British warships had not kept pace with the development of aircraft and air power capability. Most ships were frightfully vulnerable to air attack; and the Luftwaffe was one of the most modern, well equipped and, after conducting operations in Spain, Poland and France, one of the most experienced air forces in the world.

Enter the Royal Air Force.

The challenge of defending the Royal Navy and Britain from air attack was a battle the RAF had, in fact, been preparing to fight since its formation in April 1918. During the rearmament of the 1930s, the RAF had been able to take advantage of technological advances in radar, radios, stressed-skin monoplane fighters and in aero-engine design. In combining these technologies the RAF had improved on what had become the most advanced air defence network seen up to that point in history. In one of those fortuitous quirks of fate, the man who had led the technical branch responsible for the development of such innovations before the war, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, was now in charge of RAF Fighter Command. A leader of rare experience, Dowding brought to his position both the technical and professional mastery demanded by the intensity of the conflict to come.

So what were Germany's intentions and what were the RAF's challenges?

Once his less than sincere peace overtures to Britain had been rebuffed, Hitler's intention to invade became quite clear. The concentration of ground forces, along with the build up of an invasion fleet in the ports and harbours of France and Belgium, was confirmation enough. We now know that the intention was for an invasion of south-east England during September 1940, and—in line with prevailing doctrine—the first phase of the invasion was to gain and then maintain control of the air over the intended areas of operation.

The Battle of Britain, as we know it, now erupted over Britain. From July 1940, formations of Luftwaffe bombers commenced attacks on airfields, aircraft factories, radar stations, ports and on London itself. Maintained into October, these raids resulted in the large scale aerial engagements that have come to so typify our image of the battle. It is also in these raids that we see the courage, devotion to duty and the sacrifice of the Allied airmen that we have come together tonight to pay tribute to.

RAF Fighter Command sent into this cauldron its aircrew—young men, not just from Britain but from around the globe. At least 22 Australians flew with Fighter Command, 14 of whom died as a result of their selfless actions. Canada, South Africa and New Zealand also had their sons fighting and dying in the skies over England. They were joined by pilots from European countries that were under the oppression of occupation. Pilots from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Belgium fought with rare distinction and relentless aggression. The stress on these pilots, in particular, must have been enormous. Not only did they have to deal with the dangers of combat, but they fought with the uncertainty of not knowing the

fate of their families back home. In total, 449 aircrew of Fighter Command were killed in action.

Careful husbandry and proportioning of the precious pilots and fighter aircraft was required to ensure that Britain was never left vulnerable to the Luftwaffe's onslaught. Miscalculating the commitment or the concentration of aircraft against the continuous German raids could have resulted in grievous loss of life, or of aircraft that were already in short supply. This balance of commitment was one of the great challenges faced by the RAF. Not only were there enormous tactical risks in the response to each raid, but there was even more difficult operational-level decisions to be made on the allocation of scarce resources across all the commands of the RAF.

For the RAF was not just fighting for air superiority—but conducting an air campaign that such control of the air enables. Like other air forces, the RAF had a job to do that extended beyond air superiority. The concurrent operations of Coastal and Bomber Command typified the nature of this broader air campaign.

Coastal Command kept the sea lanes open over the summer of 1940. The vital convoys that were bringing in essential materials to maintain the war effort had to be protected. In addition, the sea routes to the likely invasion areas had to be kept clear of U-boats and other threats such as mines. It fell to Coastal Command to contribute to the security of the sea routes. That contribution was magnificent, as a newspaper report of the time stated: "The part which the whole command is playing in guarding the vital sea routes is spectacular—14 million miles flown, 179 submarines attacked and 50 000 ships convoyed!" These achievements did not come without cost—268 members of Coastal Command were killed while flying on operations, eight of these men were Australians.

For its part, Bomber Command was taking the fight to the enemy, and not just striking at targets in Germany. We tend to think of the work of Bomber Command in terms of the strategic bomber offensive, yet there was an offensive being conducted directly against the German invasion fleet. By late September 1940, combined attacks had resulted in the destruction of 241 troop transports, barges and tugs. We know of at least 47 Australians who were flying with Bomber Command during this time, of whom five were killed.

History tells us that the air campaign conducted by the RAF was ultimately successful. That first prerequisite for invasion—air superiority — was never achieved by the Luftwaffe. By battle's end, RAF Fighter Command could concentrate massive force over any area of Britain. Britain's aircraft factories were getting the resources to produce better fighters in greater and greater quantities. The Royal Navy had been kept safe behind a screen of air power, and could be escorted by aircraft into any area under threat of invasion. That threat of invasion finally abated when—in mid October 1940—Hitler postponed the invasion indefinitely. The British air campaign had proved to be too much for the Luftwaffe to defeat.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would close by remarking, not on doctrine or air campaigns, but on the human side of the conflict. The Battle of Britain was won by people. By pilots, by technicians and air defence plotters, by the Observation Corps, by intelligence and support staff —by 1503 aircrew who died in the air or of the wounds they received. Sons, fathers and husbands, who died fighting in a cause they thought important and honourable.

Tonight we give thanks for their service, for their unstinting dedication, unfailing courage and for their ultimate sacrifice.

Lest we forget.

Thank You.