



# The Royal Navy did not win the 'Battle of Britain'

## But we need a holistic view of Britain's defences in 1940

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In August 2006, the British media seized on an article published in *History Today* that argued that 'it was the navy, not the RAF, that prevented a German invasion [of the UK] in 1940.'<sup>1</sup> On the front cover of the magazine this was simplified to 'Who Won the Battle of Britain'? This proved to be a silly season story *par excellence*. Articles and leader columns appeared in the national press; letters to editors hotly debated the merits of the case; and there were items on television and radio. The original *History Today* article, by a journalist, Brian James, had leaned very heavily on verbatim quotations from interviews with the three of us, and we were duly denounced as the villains of the piece, as stirring up controversy for its own sake, to gain publicity, or to sell books.

In fact, none of us argued that the Royal Navy and not Fighter Command 'won the Battle of Britain'. All three of us recognize that defeat of the Luftwaffe by the Royal Air Force's Fighter Command was a critical factor in preventing the German armed forces from attempting an invasion. Moreover, this victory was of enormous strategic, political, and psychological importance, for which Fighter Command deserves full credit. However, this was not the subject of our interviews. We understood that we were being interviewed about the prospects of Operation Sealion, the putative German invasion of England in 1940; in other words, the Battle of Britain in the sense it was first used by Winston Churchill on 4 June 1940, when he was referring to the coming

struggle for Britain's survival, before it came to be associated solely with the air battle. We are three independent scholars and do not have a 'party line' on the subject, but we all believe, as did Churchill, in the necessity of adopting a holistic view of Britain's defences in 1940. This must include consideration of the role of the RAF's Bomber and Coastal Commands, the Royal Navy, and land forces, as well as Fighter Command. This is a rather different, and certainly more subtle argument from the self-evidently ridiculous notion that a fleet 'won' an air battle.

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Andrew Gordon received a couple of days' warning of the appearance of the article, but Christina Goulter and Gary Sheffield (on holiday in Greece and the UK respectively) only found out about the story through the national press. Sheffield had spoken to Brian James some years previously, possibly in 2001. Subsequently, James had interviewed Andrew Gordon.

Goulter had never spoken to James but had been interviewed by a female research assistant. The article is entirely Brian James's. The three of us had no part in writing it and we were not given, ahead of publication, the opportunity to comment on the use that was made of the interviews with us. None of us have a book on the subject to plug. Suffice it to say that if we had been consulted about the article we would have asked for numerous changes. These would have included: altering the catchpenny title, 'Pie in the Sky?'; contextualizing the quotations from the interviews; exercising some basic editorial work on the quotations, one of which is so garbled as to appear nonsensical; and, above all, refocusing the article so as to remove the false dichotomy implied in the statement that the RN not the RAF 'saved Britain in 1940', for we believe that the contribution of both the services were vital. For this, some discussion of the full significance of the Battle of Britain would have been necessary. Read carefully, James's article gave some indication of the subtleties of the arguments, but they were largely lost in the furore that occurred once the national press picked up on the story. We were reminded of the truth of the saying that one should not believe everything one reads in the press.

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In truth, the notion that in John Keegan's words 'some 2,500 young pilots had *alone* [emphasis added] been responsible for preserving Britain from invasion'<sup>2</sup> has long been disputed by historians. As far back as 1958 Duncan Grinnell-Milne made the case for the principal role of the RN in preventing invasion, and two years later Captain Stephen Roskill, the British Official Historian, argued for the primacy of 'lack of adequate

[German] instruments of sea power' and the knowledge of their use in the thwarting of Operation Sealion.<sup>3</sup> A few years later Telford Taylor produced what is still probably the most thorough study of the question, in which he integrated the air and maritime dimensions. Wing Commander H.R. Allen, himself a Spitfire pilot, published in 1974 a controversial book on the subject.<sup>4</sup>



The September issue of *History Today*.

Allen defined the Battle of Britain widely, to encompass more than just the air battle, and concluded that the importance of the air and maritime dimensions had been respectively exaggerated and underestimated.

A particularly interesting take on the topic was a 1974 *Kriegsspiel* held at the Staff College, Camberley. With British and German officers as participants, and an impressive panel of umpires including 1940 veterans Adolf Galland, and Friedrich Ruge, the game supposes that the invasion is launched before the Luftwaffe gain air supremacy. The umpires' unanimous decision was that the Germans would get some troops ashore, but a combination of RAF attacks and stubborn defensive actions and local counterattacks by ground forces delay their advance. Eventually, the Royal Navy destroys the German second echelon in the

Channel, condemning the invasion to failure.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, a scholarly work on the Royal Navy contended that 'from June 1940 to June 1941, the Home Fleet was the last line of defence in British strategy'.<sup>6</sup> As recently as 2005, the novelist Derek Robinson published a popular history, complete with an endorsement from Andrew Lambert, Laughton Professor of Naval History at King's College London, that argued that in the context of Operation Sealion, 'the only relevant force was the Royal Navy'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, far from being a novel idea, the defence of Britain in 1940 has been a live topic of debate for at least fifty years. ■

***In response to the History Today controversy, the three authors of this short article have each written separate papers – from the Land, Air and Maritime perspectives – on the Battle of Britain, which are published for the first time on RUSI's website. To read please visit [www.rusi.org/journal/history](http://www.rusi.org/journal/history)***

#### NOTES

- 1 Brian James, 'Pie in the Sky?' *History Today*, September 2006, p. 38.
- 2 John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London, Arrow Books, 1990) p. 102.
- 3 Duncan Grinnell-Milne, *The Silent Victory* (London, Bodley Head, 1958); S.W. Roskill, *The Navy at War 1939-1945* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1998, first published in 1960), p. 88.
- 4 Hubert Raymond Allen, *Who Won the Battle of Britain?* (London, Arthur Barker, 1974).
- 5 See Richard Cox, *Sea Lion* (London, Futura, 1974). This is a novelization of the wargame, with some interesting factual background articles reprinted from the *Daily Telegraph* magazine.
- 6 James Levy, *The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003) p. 68.
- 7 Derek Robinson, *Invasion, 1940* (London: Constable, 2005).