

Teachers' guide 3: the Battle of Britain



War Memorials Trust

Background: This teachers' guide is designed to provide information about and ideas for teaching the about the Battle of Britain. It provides information about the battle at its significance in the context of World War II. It also provides information about how the battle and those that fought it are remembered now. These notes are intended to be suggestions and teachers will need to adapt the teaching ideas to suit the needs of their class. You may want to spread the suggested activities over more than one lesson.

Suitable for: Key Stage 3

Learning objective: Pupils will learn:

- The main events, reasons for and outcomes of the Battle of Britain
- How the battle is remembered now

Key information

- The Battle of Britain was fought between July and October 1940 and was one of the key events of World War II. It was a significant victory for Britain and success in the battle prevented Hitler's forces invading Britain.
- Following the defeat of France, Hitler also wanted Britain to surrender and seek a peace settlement. In the wake of Dunkirk, Hitler ordered preparations to be made for an invasion of Britain (this plan became known as Operation Sealion). In order to achieve this, Germany's Luftwaffe would need to control the air above the English Channel otherwise they risked invading forces being destroyed on the way over. Therefore, the RAF had to be defeated for invasion to have a chance at success.
- The official start of the battle was 10th July 1940. To begin with, the Luftwaffe attacked on coastal targets in the south of England and ships in the Channel. While this inflicted some damage, the losses to the Luftwaffe outweighed that to aircraft and ships.
- The main launch of the battle was 13th August. Having started on the south coast, the attacks now moved inland and targeted Britain's airfields and communication systems, including radar systems.
- While the earlier attacks in July had not succeeded in destroying the RAF, those in the last week of August and first week of September intensified and Germany's tactics meant that Britain came very close to defeat. In that fortnight over 100 pilots were killed. New pilots coming through to replace them were less well trained and less experienced, and air crews became exhausted. Production of aircraft couldn't keep up with losses.
- Night attacks had also started and during one of these the Luftwaffe bombed London by mistake, specifically against Hitler's orders. When this happened Churchill ordered reprisal attacks and Berlin was bombed. Further reprisal attacks were ordered by Hitler and ultimately this led to a change in Germany's tactics and the Blitz. Having failed to destroy the RAF by attacks on airfields, Hitler now aimed to destroy Britain's industrial areas and damage morale. This involved night time raids as well as daylight attacks, eventually the

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focus turned more to night raids as daylight raids led to higher losses. The Blitz is covered in more detail in War Memorials Trust's teachers' guide on the subject.

- This shift in focus to London did give the RAF and the airfields time to recover from the severe damage inflicted at the end of August and this meant that they could continue the fight.
- When Luftwaffe losses became unsustainable for Germany the invasion plan was postponed, permanently as it turned out. The Battle of Britain had been a decisive victory for the RAF. The damage inflicted had not been serious enough to enable the Luftwaffe to defeat them and levels of production in Britain meant losses could be sustained.

Suggested teaching and activities

1. Using the information above, teach pupils about the events of the Battle of Britain. This could include why it was necessary, the facts of what actually happened and the impact it had on the war. Pupils could consider what the impact might have been if the outcome of the battle had been different.
2. The Battle of Britain was a key battle for the RAF, and a study of the battle could be a useful way of approaching learning about the RAF. The RAF developed from the Royal Flying Corps and was the youngest of the services. In 1940, following Dunkirk and the belief by some that the RAF had done little to help the army, the reputation of the RAF wasn't very good at home. Pupils could learn about the role of the RAF in the war and how it had developed since World War I. Churchill's famous speech praising 'The Few' could also be examined as evidence of opinion on the RAF following the Battle of Britain.
3. Following on from this, pupils could also find out about the other people who enabled the Battle of Britain to be won. While the bravery and efforts of 'The Few' (the pilots who flew in the battle) cannot be disputed, there were many other roles that made success possible. This includes mechanics and engineers who worked on aircraft production and the Royal Observer Corps who did a dangerous job watching for German planes. Various other volunteers including the Home Guard and the WVS also played a key part and pupils could take a wider view of those involved in the battle.
4. There are a number of war memorials to the Battle of Britain and those that fought it, and it is remembered now as a significant, pivotal moment of the war. 75 years after it took place commemorations were held but, like the rest of the war, it is moving beyond living memory. Pupils could consider why it is still remembered with such significance, and assess the battle's importance, and look at how people in the next generations remember it. There is more information about memorials to the battle on the accompanying information sheet and PowerPoint.

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