

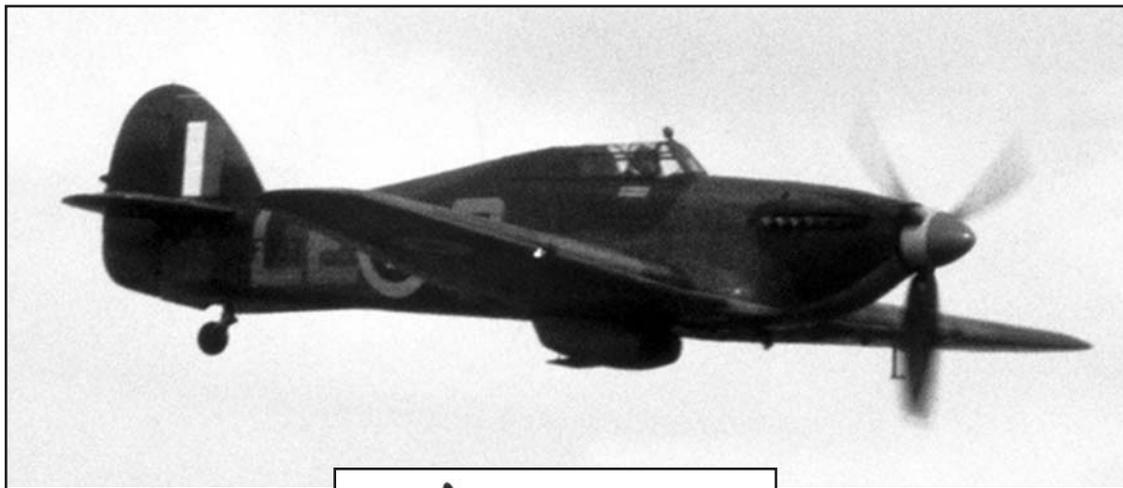
G U R P S[®]

WWII[™] Their Finest Hour

The Battle of Britain

Written by Michele Armellini • Edited by Scott Haring

**AN E23 SOURCEBOOK FOR GURPS[®] THIRD EDITION
FROM STEVE JACKSON GAMES
FOR 3 TO 6 PLAYERS**

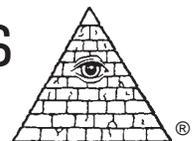


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini makes a living from foreign languages, and he's probably more useful if manning a dictionary than a mortar. Nevertheless, he is fascinated with military history, wargames, and role-playing, in whatever order. He may spend inordinate amounts of time studying the social forces at work behind obscure historical events – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! Michele lives in Udine, Italy, with his understanding wife Silvia, and although a native Italian, he has never eyed any other woman. No, seriously. Apart from things he published in Italian, he has written for **Pyramid**, contributed to many **GURPS WWII** books, and is the author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legions**. He is the author or co-author (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several other products distributed by e23, including **GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle** and **GURPS WWII: Michael's Army**.

1. THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

In 1940, after a dazzling series of victories, the seemingly unstoppable Nazis were soundly defeated over England.

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."

– Winston Churchill

THE STAGE IS SET

On June 21, 1940, the French accepted Adolf Hitler's heavy-handed armistice. In the previous ten months, Germany had also attacked, defeated and occupied Poland, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark and Norway. Most other European countries were either Germany's outright allies, or at least nervously friendly neutrals. The United Kingdom was the only remaining enemy.

Hitler was well aware that in terms of geo-political interests, Germany had no reason to wage war on Great Britain, which was a colonial empire and had no claims on the European continent. Nazi Germany's long-term plan was to secure *Lebensraum* (living space) in the East. This meant war with the Soviet Union, sooner or

later, and the sooner the better because the Red Army was rearming. The British had repeatedly demonstrated they feared the Communists more than the Nazis (see p. W:DWE8), so it all seemed ready to come nicely together: close the meaningless squabble with Great Britain, and turn East against the real enemy. Hitler's admiration for the British Empire and the Royal Navy strengthened his resolve for such a course.

The British, however, had declared war with good reason. Dying for Danzig might have seemed foolish, but preventing any one European country from becoming a lone continental superpower was an established policy for the insular nation. Hitler's behavior before the war (see p. W11) had already shown he was bent on a major shift in the balance of power.

Nevertheless, there were politicians as well as other influential people in London who favored peace. The Führer would have probably managed to strike a deal with them in June, 1940, as they were decent, reasonable and ordinary – and for this very reason, they found it difficult to see that Hitler and his regime were nothing of that. However, it wasn't an ordinary politician the new Prime Minister who had promised the Commons "blood, toil, sweat and tears" on May 13, 1940. In his own party, he had a reputation as a war-mongering maverick: he was Winston Churchill.

Thus the stage was set for the next German offensive. Since the Channel served as a very wide anti-tank moat, and the Royal Navy very much mastered the seas, Germany needed to take control of the air.

DOOMSDAY WEAPONS?

In the 1930s, some believed the bomber aircraft would decide the next war's outcome. Dropping incendiary bombs and possibly poison gases over cities, they would lay waste the industrial districts and break the

enemy country's will to wage war. This was the idea of Giulio Douhet, an Italian general. Others, including British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1932, at least expected the bomber to "always get through," as intercepting it was a daunting task in daylight, an impossible one at night. Billy Mitchell in the USA thought along these lines, too.

Douhet was a theorist, however, and Mitchell something of an outsider. On the other hand, Hermann Göring headed Germany's *Reichsluftministerium* (Air Ministry), and Sir Hugh Trenchard was the British Chief of Air Staff until 1929. They both wanted the air force to be independent from the other arms; the concept of the bombers as key strategic assets, or even war-winning weapons, suited them very well, and they had the power to make policy of this theory. Both Great Britain and Germany embarked in a costly bomber production drive; the Germans were the latecomers, but they spent more. Also, in the 1930s an aircraft would be obsolete in five years, thus having the most recent models carried a disproportionate advantage.

The ideas about the bombers' supremacy did not remain on paper only. In the restless inter-war period, they had been enthusiastically field-tested at the expense of Iraqis, Abyssinians, Chinese and Spaniards (by British, Italian, Japanese and German-Italian aircraft, respectively). It all seemed to work, but the bombers' accuracy, and therefore their effectiveness, remained a function of the quality of the defense.

Even when the latter wasn't totally absent as in the Iraqi or Abyssinian skies, it seemed to be at a distinct disadvantage. Post-WWI fighters still were biplanes, because agility, not speed, was what made them winners in the WWI-style dogfight. On the contrary, bombers did not need to maneuver, so they could be powerful monoplanes; for a few years in the 1930s, it was possible for a new bomber to be faster than the fighters. They were sturdier, too, and the average fighter's firepower was quickly becoming too little. Finally, the sky is a wide place and in order to engage the attackers, the defenders would have needed to find them first.

Thus, in order to beat back these seemingly invincible doomsday weapons, a defender would need recent, fast, well-armed fighters, and a way to locate the bombers.

A Chain to the Door

If we can produce such apparatus it would become the "eyes" of our defense system, and the greatest innovation we could dream of.

– Air Vice Marshal Hugh Dowding in 1935

Just four years before the war, enemy aircraft would mainly be located by sight; bad visibility prevented that. Experiments were being carried out with

unwieldy, highly unreliable sound locators, and even with infrared devices. In 1935, however, an Air Ministry scientific commission explored the possibilities offered by high-frequency radio waves. A Scottish scientist, Robert Watson Watt, came up with a proposed experiment that was carried out in February of that year. A transmitter loaned from the BBC sent out a short-wave signal. The test target reflected it back, and a receiver displayed it on a cathode ray tube screen. Thus Radio Direction Finding, or RDF, was born.

It was indeed good for finding the direction of a target; evaluating the distance on the basis of the signal's delay was difficult. However, using *two* signals, from two different stations, would make a triangulation possible, and a position could be pinpointed. If several airplanes flew in a close formation, counting them was next to impossible, but experienced operators could make fair estimations. Height was the toughest determination to make, and mistakes would later be made throughout the battle; savvy Squadron Leaders would add a couple of *Angels* (see p. 63) to the directions they received, just to err on the safe side.

In those four years leading to 1939, the British set up their Chain Home and Chain Home Low radar stations, effectively putting a chain to their skies' door (see p. 28). The stations' ranges overlapped, making the system less vulnerable as well as allowing triangulations. Even if one station was knocked out by enemy action, a small mobile unit could partially replace it. The radar stations still had weaknesses, and the Germans should have known their purpose; nevertheless, the bombers had lost their first advantage, surprise.

Be Prepared

The Chain Home radars were revolutionary and unique, but they were but one part of the system. Behind this early-warning line, traditional methods were put to good use by the Observer Corps (see pp. 28, 44). Both these elements provided the initial data, but these wouldn't be very useful without a processing system. This was the brainchild of the man who had become the first Commander in Chief of the British fighters in 1936, Hugh Dowding. Coincidentally (or not), before 1936 he had been member of the Air Council and he had pushed hard for both the modern monoplane fighters and for Watson Watt's RDF experiments (see p. 4). Dowding was a difficult man whose nickname was "Stuff," and he had been given Fighter Command because his well-placed rivals in the RAF top ranks thought that it was less important than the bombers; but he really turned out to be the right man in the right place (see p. W:AKM55).

The air defense system he created in 1937 and was still improving in 1940 started with the raw data from the radars and the observers. These forwarded everything to the Filter Room at Fighter Command's

HQ in Bentley Priory. The information was sent both to the Operations Room of the HQ and down along the chain of command, to the Groups and Sectors (see p. 24), who had their own Operations Rooms. Observers Corps stations got feedback from the Sectors. Anti-Aircraft Command was also kept in the loop.

Tactical decisions were taken by the Group Commanders, who decided when and where to commit their forces, and managed by the Sectors, which guided the interceptions and gave orders to the squadrons.

The system provided everybody with all the data they needed (while Dowding was the only one to get the complete picture). It was resilient and redundant, as it worked on telephone lines and teleprinter networks. Its main vulnerability was that most of its command centers were not contained in well-protected, underground shelters. However, those parts that could be damaged by the enemy could be easily replaced by neighboring elements and then quickly repaired.

Apart from dispersing most of the fog of war, the air defense system also dispensed with the need of flying tiresome, wasteful patrol missions, keeping fighters in the air, ready to intercept the enemy. Finally, it was a kind of preparedness the enemy had not the slightest idea of.

Flying Artillery

Born in the shadows of the Versailles prohibition, having grown too fast in the four years before the war, the Luftwaffe was a very different organization from the RAF. If the latter had staff rivalries, the German arm was riven with the typically Nazi feuds, intrigues, personal enmities and resorting to higher patronage. Its commander was Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, a vainglorious man of robust appetites, a morphine addict, a Nazi politician and a decorated WWI fighter pilot (see p. W:IC52); the latter qualification could hardly balance the rest. All of the real work was done by his deputy, General Erhard Milch, a ruthless schemer and sharp administrator who, as the Lufthansa chairman, had supported the Nazis in their campaigns. Göring had to replace three chiefs of staff between 1936 and 1939, two of them because they couldn't work together with Milch. Additionally, *Der Eiserner* (the Iron Man, Göring's WWI nickname) appointed Oberst Ernst Udet as Inspector of Fighters and Dive-Bombers, and Chief of the Technical Department – both tasks for which the popular WWI pilot was unqualified for. Most of the previous war's veterans did not realize how fast the technology was evolving.

Meanwhile, great expectations were being placed on the Luftwaffe. Hitler wanted a big air arm, and he wanted it soon. This automatically ruled out building the kind of heavy, four-engine bombers that could really become the city destroyers of Douhet's theory

(see p. 4); developing them would take time, building them would cost too much. Göring decided he would make do with a larger number of smaller bombers, delivered as soon as possible. Milch could and did prod manufacturers; indeed, he mercilessly persecuted his former employer, Hugo Junkers, who was not pliable enough. Unfortunately, the development of new designs was in the less competent hands of Udet, and this caused delays. Additionally, Hitler did desire to have his cake and eat it; i.e., he needed a strong military but did not want to disappoint his people by putting the German industry on a total-war footing. Thus, by 1940, aircraft production was not what it could have been. The same could be said of pilot training. The Luftwaffe was a sizable standing force, but had not invested enough in long-term planning.

Another peculiar feature of the Luftwaffe in the late 1930s was its fixation on dive-bombing. While Göring wanted to believe an air force could win a war on its own, most of his officers came from the army, and did not buy that. On the contrary, a bomber force that could deliver timely close support to fast-moving armored units tied in well with the German new land warfare theories, making the panzers independent from slow artillery pieces. However, close air support needs to be accurate: it has to be delivered on small targets, and in the proximity of friendly ground troops. The Germans lacked a bomb sighting device, and Udet had fallen in love with a Curtiss Hawk dive bomber in 1933. The end result was the famous Stuka (see p. W114). Ideally suited to serve as the panzer divisions' flying artillery, this dive bomber couldn't be used without air superiority. Additionally, Udet insisted that the Ju 88 should be capable of diving, too. This delayed production, added weight and reduced performance (see p. W:IC87).

Finally, very little effort had been spent on naval and anti-shipping resources. Torpedo bombers were just one step out of the experimental stage, cooperation with the Kriegsmarine was bad, and there were no bombs capable of piercing the top armor of a battleship before exploding.

All of this made the Luftwaffe of 1940 ready for accurate but short-ranged and relatively light bombing, in a violent but brief campaign against tactical land targets.

THE FALL OF FRANCE

After the winter of the "Phony War," the Germans finally moved to settle the score in the West. *GURPS WWII: Blitzkrieg* describes this campaign in detail, and further information can be found in *GURPS WWII: Return to Honor*. The offensive began on May 10, 1940, the same day Winston Churchill accepted the King's appointment to form a new government. The

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