

COMMAND OR CONTROL?

LEADERSHIP IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

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In many ways, the protagonists in what we know as the Battle of Britain were quite alike. The two sides had similar numbers of single-engined fighters of comparable performance. There was not a lot to choose between the pilots, who were of the same age and background with similar training. On both sides, about 5% got about 40% of the kills. To explain the outcome, we must look elsewhere. The difference that made the difference was the leadership.

Hugh Caswall Tremeneere Dowding was not what one usually thinks of as a great leader. He was remote, ascetic and severe. Not for nothing was he called 'Stuffy'. Whilst his pre-war achievements as a skiing champion fitted the RAF mould, his interests in spiritualism did not, and he mystified his colleagues. Intensely private, he formalised most of his contacts with other people and had no close friends. One of those closest to him was the head of A.A. Command, General Sir Frederick Pile. Pile spent about an hour with him every day, and called him 'the outstanding airman' he met during the war. Pile also said that he was 'a difficult man, a self-opinionated man'.¹ He was an odd fish, stubborn and eccentric.

When he took on the new job of Commander-in-Chief (CinC) Fighter Command in 1936, Dowding spent four years creating the most formidable air defence system in the world. At its heart was a unique C3 system which featured the world's first large-scale intranet – using analogue technology – as well as radar. The system acted as a force-multiplier, enabling Dowding to deploy his 6-700 fighters with the effectiveness of many more. Built as a front-line position, the system had a lot of in-built redundancy and was hard to disrupt, let alone destroy. Hard core rubble for filling in bomb craters was stockpiled at each airfield, and stand-by Operations Rooms were made ready a few miles away from key Sector Stations.² The Germans never even understood which bits of it mattered and which did not. Even if they had, hitting the vital bits often enough to cripple rather than just impair the system would have taken more time than they had and a lot of luck.

Dowding's most important operational commander was a New Zealander, Keith Park, who as his SASO from 1938-1940 helped him to work up the

system and then took over 11 Group covering the south east, which deployed about half of Fighter Command's strength. He performed with such brilliance that the Germans christened him 'the defender of London'. The Battle of Britain and the Battle of Malta are the only major air campaigns ever won by the defence. Both were won by Park.

In these two rather unlikely companions we have the builder of the defence system and its principle operator. What did they actually do to bring about the most important victory in RAF history?

The CinC: Gathering and Allocating Resources

All commanders want resources. They rarely believe that they have enough. However, by 1940, Dowding had been provided with the resources to construct the Chain Home and Chain Home Low networks, expand the Observer Corps, put in dedicated telephone lines, build operations rooms, construct metalled runways, E-pens and ground defences at his Sector Stations, and develop a large body of trained operators for his force.

All this had been done because there was a broad consensus about the importance of air defence, not just within the RAF but in the political and civilian establishments. Resourcing the system was a vast and complex undertaking in which many played a part. The introduction of Scheme K for aircraft production in 1937, which put greater emphasis on fighters, was a political decision backed by the Minister for the Coordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip. The Air Ministry asked Lord Nuffield to set up the Civilian Repair Organisation (CRO) after the Munich crisis of 1938.³ In August 1940, 35% of all Hurricanes and Spitfires reaching squadrons were from the CRO, and in September and October the proportion rose to over 40%.⁴ Munich also prompted the Post Office to create the Defence Telecommunications Control organisation to deal with the plethora of urgent requests for dedicated lines and emergency circuits, and on its own initiative the Post Office suggested the construction of a new military network. This was discussed by the Chiefs of Staff and civilian engineers and became the DTN.⁵ It was Wilfred Freeman, the Air Member for Development and Production, who drove the enormous increase in production volume which allowed Britain to out-produce Germany by two to one in fighters throughout the summer of 1940, though the spin-master Beaverbrook managed to take credit for it. It was Freeman too who understood the importance of 100 octane fuel and persuaded the Treasury in 1939 to construct two new refineries to supply it.⁶ Dowding may have seen himself as a lone voice fighting a stupid and intransigent Air Ministry, but he had many allies working to the same ends he was pursuing. In 1940 his main resource concerns were pilots and aircraft.

In 1929, Major General E. B. Ashmore, the commander of London's air defences from 1917-18, published a book in which he stated that the adequate

number of squadrons necessary to defend British air space was 52.⁷ In 1938, Dowding said he would be satisfied with 41 squadrons on whose presence he could rely. By the time the war broke out, the Air Ministry returned to Ashmore's figure of 52. In May 1940, when discussing the question of whether to send more fighters to France, Sir Archibald Sinclair told the War Cabinet in May that Home Defence needed 60 squadrons, a figure confirmed by the CAS, Sir Cyril Newall. In June he said it needed 57. Dowding stuck to 52.²³

He had started sticking to it thirteen days after war broke out, when the Air Ministry decided to send four of the 34 squadrons then in existence to France, and talked about sending four more. They had thereby turned on what Dowding dubbed 'the Hurricane tap' and turning it off again was to consume much energy.⁸

At a meeting of the War Cabinet on 13th May 1940, Sinclair and Newall warned against sending any more squadrons to France in addition to the six which by then were already there. Churchill agreed. That night, a telegram arrived from the B.E.F.'s Commander in France, Lord Gort, asking for more fighters. It was followed the next morning by a telegram from the French Prime Minister, Reynaud, asking for ten squadrons. Churchill was reluctant to respond, Newall warned that once they had left Britain the squadrons would never return, and so Churchill put Reynaud off with a vague message of support. Reynaud was not put off, and called Churchill at 7 o'clock on the morning of the 15th, excitedly begging for assistance. Churchill reported this to the Chiefs of Staff meeting at 10:30, and summoned Dowding to hear his views. Dowding stressed the dangers if things were to go badly and urged that no more fighters be sent.

At the Chiefs of Staff meeting the next day, 16th May, Newall read out a message from Gamelin pleading for the ten squadrons again and saying that without them, all was lost. This time, in view of the 'new and critical situation', he agreed to send some and the other Chiefs of Staff agreed. Churchill thought it 'a very grave risk', but necessary in order to bolster the French. Four were sent, with two further squadrons held in readiness. That afternoon, Churchill left for France, where he was subjected to even more intense pleas. In the end, he wrote in his evening telegram to the War Cabinet that six extra squadrons should be sent to France in addition to the four agreed that morning. Clearly unhappy, Newall decided to fulfill the request by having three squadrons fly out to French airfields in the morning, return to England, and be relieved by another three in the afternoon.

²³ See Peter Flint, *Dowding and Headquarters Fighter Command*, Airlife 1996 pp. 7-11, 17, 47-8, 73, 84-5 & 89, John Ray, *The Battle of Britain – New Perspectives*, Arms & Armour Press 1994, pp. 22-4 & 52 and Vincent Orange, *Sir Keith Park*, Methuen 1984, p. 70. As a rule of thumb, most calculations were based on a fighter strength of 30% of an opponent's total air strength. Dowding was shocked after the war when Churchill wrote in *Their Finest Hour* that Dowding had told him he needed 25 squadrons. Well he might have been. Given the plethora of numbers to choose from, it is odd that Churchill picked one which was never mentioned. Unless somebody got the 52 the wrong way round...

In the meantime, Dowding had been at his desk hard at work. Deeply disturbed, he composed a ten point memorandum for the Air Ministry, and sent it to the Air Council on the 16th. Addressed to the Under Secretary of State for Air, Harold Balfour, it has become one of the most celebrated documents in RAF history.

He pointedly demanded a statement 'as to the limit on which the Air Council and the Cabinet are prepared to stake the existence of the country' and that this limit then be rigorously adhered to. He famously concluded that 'if the Home Defence force is drained away in desperate attempts to remedy the situation in France, defeat in France will involve the final, complete and irremediable defeat of this country.'

Newall wrote a note about the subject, appended Dowding's document to it and circulated it to his fellow Chiefs of Staff. They discussed it and converted it into a report of their own. It was the back-up Newall needed. The Hurricane tap was turned off. By July, Dowding had his 52 squadrons in Britain.

It is fairly clear that the fighters would have made no difference in France. The French did not need them anyway, because they had plenty of their own. After the war, the French Government looked into the question and found that large numbers of French fighters had been held in storage units. The French Air Force Commander, General Vuillemin, testified that at the end of hostilities he had more aircraft available than at the beginning.⁹

Dowding had in effect identified the main effort as the UK. There he had a prepared position and was confident that if the Luftwaffe were to attack it, he would break them, as he told his Group commanders on 3rd July.¹⁰ He had no illusions about the capabilities of the French air defences. Nor did Newall. Once again, Dowding was giving point to a general consensus. As long as the Wehrmacht was in the West, the threat to Britain from the air was seen as paramount. It had been widely believed that the war would begin with devastating air raids which might even decide the issue. There was some surprise as well as relief when they failed to materialise. It was felt to be only a matter of time. Maintaining a strong metropolitan fighter force was a priority for the War Cabinet as well as for Dowding.

During the battle, Dowding continued to build and maintain resources. His main role as a battlefield commander was to manage their deployment between Groups, using 12 and 13 Groups as a reserve from which to reinforce 10 and 11 Groups. In August, no fewer than thirteen squadrons were moved into 11 Group, most of them in exchange for exhausted units which were transferred north. In making these deployment decisions, Dowding was pursuing a very distinct strategy.

The CinC and the AOC: Developing Strategy

In planning how to meet their enemy, Fighter Command had to choose between two basic strategic alternatives, each one of which had advocates. The first was founded on the belief that the Luftwaffe would give up if their attacks proved to be very costly, regardless of what damage they inflicted. This view was held by several officers at the Air Ministry, notably Sholto-Douglas and Stevenson, and also, with provisos, by Leigh-Mallory. Sholto-Douglas gave a very clear statement of his case in the discussions of defence strategy which took place before the war, writing in 1938:

*“It is immaterial in the long view whether the enemy bomber is shot down before or after he has dropped his bombs on his objective. Our object is not to prevent bombers reaching their objectives, though it would be nice if we could, but to cause a high casualty rate among enemy bombers, with the result that the scale of attack will dwindle rapidly to bearable proportions.”*¹¹

His view did not change during the course of the battle. In a Minute written on 17th December 1940, after it was over, he states:

*“The best, if not the only way of achieving air superiority is to shoot down a large proportion of enemy bombers every time they come over. It would be better to do this before they reach their objective if possible, but I would rather shoot down 50 of the enemy bombers after they have reached their objective than shoot down only 10 before they do so.”*²⁴

One might summarise this view of strategic intent as: ‘Engage in large air battles in order to inflict heavy casualties.’

The other alternative was that the Germans would give up if they were convinced that they were not achieving their aim. The prime goal of the defence was therefore to remain in being and offer undiminished and constant opposition. As long as a cost was imposed for entering British airspace, how high it was mattered less than keeping one’s own force in being, and being able to impose the cost again the next day. The objective would be to both minimise one’s own losses in the air and damage to the defence system on the ground. It followed that it was better to break up a raid and prevent it from damaging its target by shooting down 10 raiders in the process than allowing it to bomb an airfield or radar installation, which would impair the defence’s ability to meet the next raid, and shoot down 50.

²⁴ AIR 16/367. Sholto-Douglas sought to have these principles recognised and applied operationally after he took over from Dowding in November 1940. See Flint, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-182.

The assumption behind this is that an enemy will give up if he becomes convinced that he is getting nowhere, for it is senseless to accept even moderate losses for no return.

This view was espoused by Dowding and Park. The strategic intent might be formulated as: 'Oppose all serious raids in order to deny the enemy air superiority.'

Prima facie, Sholto-Douglas had a reasonable case. However, neither he nor anybody else was able to specify how high the German losses had to be in order to be unacceptable to them. Neither side of the argument had any evidence to go on at the time because no-one had ever tried to defend a country against large-scale air attacks. Ironically, the Luftwaffe also believed it could win by engaging Fighter Command in large air battles and inflicting heavy casualties. It was a schematic rather than a strategy.

Dowding's strategy was based on more subtle insight. Bomber Command tolerated losses of 80% on raids in the first months of the war until they realised that they were doing no damage. It is the realisation that the aim is not being achieved that makes an opponent, however determined, give up. Had the Luftwaffe Commanders had good evidence that their attacks were weakening the defences and that their bombing was rendering airfields inoperable, they would have been willing to sacrifice a lot of crews and aircraft to finish the job. If they had good evidence to the contrary then any further losses incurred in trying to do so would have been a useless sacrifice.

Dowding's intent exploited the capabilities he had spent four years creating. The system, if properly resourced, was designed to stalemate any possible move an opponent could make. But only if it were run by someone who understood it and was able to translate its potential into actual operations. Having worked as Dowding's SASO for two years, Park was just such a man.

The AOC: Translating Strategy into Operations

Park translated the strategic intent into an interception policy embodied in his Instructions to Controllers. Between June and November 1940 he issued over forty of them. He modified and adapted the policy to the changing situation, constantly reviewing results and passing on lessons. However, the principles behind them remained constant and were completely aligned with Dowding's intent.

Park had to ascertain which raids were serious and guard against being caught by surprise by possible further raids designed to catch fighters re-fuelling on the ground. He had to engage the most dangerous raids early on in order to protect the ground targets. It was important to engage when in as advantageous a tactical position as possible. Speed of reaction was critical. Achieving all this would be demanding, but it was what the system was designed to do. As bombers were the only aircraft which could cause damage on the ground, they

were the main target. If the Germans sent over fighter sweeps, they should be left alone. Bombers should be attacked before they bombed and if possible formations broken up by using head-on attacks. Once a raid had been repulsed, the need for force-preservation dictated that stragglers should not be pursued over the Channel. Turning a 'probable' into a 'confirmed' was not worth the added risk to his pilots.

The basic tactical unit was the squadron.²⁵ Park decided how many to deploy against each threat and when to send them into action. In attacking any one raid, he could either use his squadrons together at the same time or individually over a period of time. Until he faced very large single raids he chose deliberately to do the latter, for several reasons.

Firstly, it was fast and simple. Each squadron detailed to attack just carried out its orders without waiting for any others. The pilots could scramble, head straight for the enemy, attack and get down again.

Secondly, it reduced the risk of suffering a major defeat. If the intercepting force were to be bounced on the climb by a gaggle of 109s, only one squadron would be lost.

Thirdly, each small formation would be harder for the escorts to detect than one large one, and would tend to confuse them, as British units would often be coming from different directions. If the escorts made the mistake of diving as a body on the first British fighters to appear, the coast would be clear for the next ones.

Fourthly, Park's fighters would be able to enter a target-rich environment, shoot at anything and get out fast, rather than exposing themselves as they queued up to attack or spending half their time avoiding collisions and shooting at each other.

Finally, raids could be subjected to almost continuous attack. German crews would learn that they could expect no let up, that the whole of the sky over southern England was a potential death-trap. This continuous pressure increased their stress and made it harder for bomber Commanders to restore order if formations got disrupted.

It may seem intuitively wrong to commit forces piecemeal. It certainly seemed wrong to Leigh-Mallory, who, espousing as he did Douglas's view of strategy, insisted on using his squadrons in a single 'Big Wing'. To many at the time, the image of a bomber fleet as a column of Redcoats and a fighter squadron as a band of Indians would have appeared aberrant.²⁶ However,

²⁵ The best size of tactical formation had been a matter of some debate before the war. The air exercises conducted in 1939 suggested that the squadron was the largest formation which could be effectively controlled in the air. Large raids could simply be met by several squadrons acting in concert, but without wasting time forming up together into a single large formation. See Dilip Sarkar, *Bader's Duxford Fighters*, Ramrod Publications 1997, pp. 14ff.

²⁶ Except in the Luftwaffe. Their jargon for 'enemy aircraft', the equivalent of the R.A.F.'s 'bandit', was 'Indianer'. Whether the choice is to be ascribed to a deep understanding of air fighting or a predilection for the cowboy stories of Karl May, still a favourite with German children today, is a mystery shrouded in the mists of time.

Park's principles had nothing to do with the number of aircraft used to intercept raids, but simply the operating unit employed. If the raid were very large, two squadrons could engage it at one time. Park wanted complete flexibility, and that was very important, for he had to react to any number, sequence or size of raids. Park could say to his Squadron Leaders, as Nelson had said to his Captains at Trafalgar, that he wanted a 'pell-mell' battle and that no-one could go very far wrong if they simply closed with the enemy.

The clarity and simplicity of Park's policy aligned the organisation and freed him up from taking every decision. On most of the 'big days' he was in Uxbridge where he took personal control. On others – including September 7th – he could confidently leave things to his Chief Controller, Lord Willoughby de Broke. He could and did expect his junior commanders to use their initiative. The dangerous low-level raid on Kenley of August 18th was defeated by the Station Commander and his controller – a Wing Commander and a Squadron Leader – who took all the relevant decisions within the 18 minutes between the first detection of the raiders by the Observer Corps and their appearance over the airfield. In doing so, they ignored the normal rule that only Group could deploy squadrons, and scrambled 111 Squadron on their own initiative. Park subsequently congratulated them. Two weeks later, the Station Commander at Biggin Hill, Group Captain Grice, decided that he could put an end to raids on his airfield by blowing up the last remaining hangar himself, and did so on the evening of September 4th. He was censured but let off, for he had been proved right.

The CinC: Working on Constraints

Given that he had in Park – and in Brand, the AOC 10 Group covering Park's flank – men who understood him and whom he trusted completely, Dowding exercised very little control over them during the battle itself. He spent his time on one main thing: on removing the constraints under which his organisation had to operate, so broadening its capabilities and his commanders' freedom of action.

One of Fighter Command's constraints was pilot availability. In early 1940 Fighter Command's expansion had been limited by the supply of aircraft. By July the limiting factor was pilots. Dowding lobbied for, and got, pilots from the Fleet Air Arm, and concerned himself with training refugee pilots from central Europe, notably the Czechs and Poles to whom Dowding later paid fulsome tribute. He had more limited success with other RAF Commands. His SASO, Evill, managed to squeeze out a few Battle and Lysander pilots in August, but when he demanded thirty more in early September, Douglas at the Air Ministry told him the idea was 'very unpalatable' as the lumbering Battles would be 'extremely useful if and when an invasion occurs'.¹² The tussle culminated on September 7th when Dowding confronted Douglas directly to

demand that OTU output be increased and Battle pilots re-trained. He got his way then.

A second constraint was pilot losses. Without interfering with interception policy, Dowding worked in the background to protect them. He had already insisted on his fighters being equipped with armoured windscreens and seat armour. During the Battle itself, it became apparent that Hurricanes were catching fire easily, so that even pilots who baled out quickly and survived were incapacitated by terrible burns. Dowding saw to it that Hurricanes' fuselage tanks were covered with self-sealing fabric called 'Linatex' and also had a metal bulkhead fitted in front of the pilot.²⁷

The most serious constraint, however, on which Dowding spent most time, was the lack of night-fighting capability. The only existing method was to use Hurricanes and Spitfires on lone patrols. The aircraft were unsuitable for night flying and training was dangerous. In the first month of the Battle of Britain, 8% of Fighter Command's aircraft losses were due to night-flying accidents. Six of the pilots died. The return was meagre. A few experienced pilots like Malan and Sanders managed to catch bombers held in searchlights, but these were isolated cases. Dowding worked through many nights. He ran an experiment in the Kenley Sector using radio location apparatus known as G.L. at searchlight posts. In his view, the real answer was to fit Beaufighters with A.I. radar, a solution he presented in a paper on 21st September which Churchill described as 'masterly'. Others differed. Lindemann was unimpressed. Douglas wanted rapid results and thought Dowding was 'a little blinded' to the 'more simple hit or miss, trial and error use of single-engined fighters'.¹³ A committee was formed under former CAS Sir John Salmond to examine the matter of night defence. It completed an eighteen point report in three days and Salmond sent a copy to Beaverbrook, appending a private note recommending that 'Dowding should go'.¹⁴ Dowding marked his own copy of the report with his usual blue crayon, ticking three of the eighteen points, putting a question mark against five and a cross of disagreement against nine. Salmond meanwhile wrote to Churchill stating that his report showed that a change in leadership at Fighter Command was 'imperative'.¹⁵ On 25th November, Salmond got his way.

The first kill made by an A.I. equipped Beaufighter was on 19th November. Fighter Command made only five other claims at night during the whole of November and December. The same pilot, John Cunningham, got another on 12th January 1941 and a third on 15th February.¹⁶ Night fighter claims rose from 22 in March to 96 in May.¹⁷ Dowding's solution did work in the end, but it was under the leadership of Douglas that the concept became an operational reality.

²⁷ Dowding *Despatch* Appendix F, §§ 6-7. In fact it seems more likely that the main cause of Hurricane fires were the tanks in the wing roots. See E.R. Mayhew, *The Reconstruction of Warriors*, Greenhill 2004, pp. 49-53.

The AOC: Visible Leadership

Whilst Dowding concentrated on sustaining and enhancing the capabilities of his organisation, Park concentrated on enhancing its performance, maintaining morale and defeating the enemy.

Like Dowding, Park made his intentions very clear. He communicated extensively with his controllers, Station Commanders and Squadron Leaders. He talked to all of them directly, gave them advice and encouraged debate about tactics. For example, on 20th August he issued a note to all Station Commanders about successful tactics employed by various squadrons during the heavy action of two days before, asking them to issue it to squadrons, with his own 'message of appreciation for their magnificent fighting during the past week'.¹⁸ On 13th and 20th September, he issued sets of notes drawing lessons from the study of recent combat reports.¹⁹ In October, he instigated a debate about fighter formations, circulating ideas from 504, 92, 66, 605 and 501 Squadrons.²⁰ The debate was open and challenging. Park censored nothing. He encouraged the junior officers with the most relevant recent combat experience to work out the best approach between themselves. As we might say today, he turned 11 Group into a learning organisation.

But he also knew what he wanted in terms of performance and drove the organisation by using metrics, many of them time-based. At the beginning of July he demanded an elapsed time between the order to scramble and the last plane leaving the ground of two minutes. By the end of the Battle, some squadrons were managing it in 90 seconds. He measured the interception rate, and worked constantly to ensure that a higher proportion of the units scrambled actually made contact with the enemy.

He knew that Fighter Command's greatest vulnerability was pilot exhaustion. He demanded and got more comfortable accommodation and better meals. He insisted on organising PT games at stations and even went as far as providing string bands and reintroducing guest nights for entertainment.²¹ After heavy raids he visited the worst hit stations himself, taking off on most evenings in his personal Hurricane, OK 1. He went to see for himself and learn, to gather the informal information without which a commander can become blinded. He went to congratulate and encourage. He found time for individuals. He approved decorations, including Nicolson's VC. Pilot George Westlake recalls being sent to see Park when he crashed a Hurricane while attempting a dead-engine landing. Park gave him a hard time, enumerating his mistakes, then told him to go the mess and read the papers. Park turned up later, took him to lunch and told Westlake he could buy him a beer. He bought Westlake a few as well. 'From that day on,' Westlake recalls, 'I worshipped him.'²²

The Impact of Leadership: Fighter Command 1941-42

To understand the importance of leadership and command in the context of air power, it is instructive to follow the outlines of Fighter Command's story after the Battle of Britain.

On 29th January 1941, Leigh-Mallory, now AOC 11 Group, ran an exercise reproducing the airfield raids Fighter Command had experienced in early September. His airfields were bombed while the planes were still on the ground. He remarked that he would do better next time.²³ He and Sholto-Douglas were busy with other things. Wanting to take the battle to the enemy, they adopted a policy they called 'leaning towards France'. In leaning in this direction during the summer of 1941, Fighter Command lost 194 pilots. The Luftwaffe lost 128 aircraft and recovered most of their pilots. The Germans wanted to get on with the real war in Russia, so left only about 160-200 fighters from JG2 and JG26 in France, who proceeded to do to Leigh-Mallory what Park had done to them. They did not overly care if France were bombed, so they were particularly choosy about when and how they engaged, and ambushed the huge wings of British fighters in Staffel or Schwarm strength. The confused mêlées in the air led to the sort of overclaiming characteristic of the Big Wing in 1940, so Leigh-Mallory thought he was doing rather well, and carried on. In the second half of the year, Fighter Command claimed 731 German aircraft for the loss of 411. The actual German losses were 154, only 92 of which were incurred in opposing Leigh-Mallory's 'circuses' and 'rhubarbs' over France. The Luftwaffe's kill ratio of over 4:1 was about what they would have needed to have won the Battle of Britain. Fighter Command was fortunate that the whole campaign was of little strategic significance, conducted mainly to show Stalin that Britain was trying to do something in Europe.²⁴ In fact, the only Luftwaffe units ever actually withdrawn from Russia were sent to the Middle East because of the RAF's activities in Malta and the Western Desert. Strengthening the RAF's fighter presence in that theatre would not only have made a major local difference but might have had an even greater impact on the Luftwaffe's strength in Russia. However, that was not on Fighter Command's agenda. As Park has acidly observed:

*"Early in 1942 Sholto Douglas and Leigh-Mallory had 75 fighter squadrons in England, carrying out massive sweeps over France, as compared with only 52 Squadrons when the Luftwaffe was at its full strength during the Battle of Britain. When the C. in C. Middle East asked for Spitfires for Malta, Fighter Command refused...when as few as five Spitfire Squadrons could have saved Malta from the terrible blitz of spring 1942. This all arose from the mania of Sholto Douglas and Leigh Mallory for Big Fighter Wings."*²⁵

Park's view, though expressed with excusable intemperance, is substantially correct. Sholto-Douglas wrote to Portal, then CAS, on 1st October 1941 agreeing to send six squadrons of fighters to the Middle East as long as they were replaced by the spring. However, he added, he did 'feel very anxious about the rumour which reaches me that you are proposing to send Spitfires to the Middle East.' Spitfire production, Douglas wrote, was barely enough to keep up the flow of replacements needed by the 69 squadrons he would have left out of the current 75. (Leigh-Mallory was indeed losing large numbers of Spitfires – and their pilots – over France.) In any case, Spitfires might not be able to stand up to the rigours of the desert as well as Hurricanes. Above all, Douglas feared that Portal would turn on a 'tap' which would put Fighter Command into 'a parlous condition'. If Russia, already in receipt of Hurricanes, and still reeling from the first blows of the German invasion, were to go under during the winter, Britain could be open to 'a mortal blow next spring'. Four days later, Portal sent Douglas a soothing reply, suggesting that he was being 'unduly pessimistic', that plenty of Spitfires were rolling off the production lines and that the Germans could not invade Britain against as few as sixty squadrons of them even if Russia did surrender. He added some diplomatic advice about reducing Spitfire wastage in France. There was a further exchange, but in the end, Douglas wrote to Tedder in the Middle East at the beginning of November, telling him that he was to get seven fighter squadrons – though he did not say what type of aircraft they would have. None arrived during the winter, but the cogs in the Air Ministry ground away to the extent that a worried Douglas was moved to write to Portal's deputy, Freeman, on 7th February 1942 asking that the number of Spitfires sent to the Middle East be restricted to 20 a month.²⁶

The first few Spitfires got to Malta in March 1942, where they finally blunted the Luftwaffe's offensive. In July, Park arrived and with Spitfires at his disposal and a new interception policy stopped the bombing of the island within three weeks. But the Desert Air Force had to wait till late May, when 145 Squadron got Spitfire Vs. In September the Luftwaffe's fighter force in the desert, JG 27, lost 16 pilots, including three of its top scorers, Steinhausen, Stahlschmidt and Marseille, and were withdrawn to re-fit, totally demoralised. By then the Desert Air Force had just three squadrons of Spitfires but between them they certainly accounted for a third, and maybe as many as half of JG 27's losses. They established air superiority in the desert just in time for Alamein and never lost it.

In 1940 the main effort was the defence of the home base. Dowding understood that. In 1941-2 the main effort should have been establishing air superiority where the British Army was fighting – in the Mediterranean and the Far East. Douglas did not understand that. It is ironic that in writing to Portal Douglas actually used Dowding's image of a tap. His failure to shift main effort delayed the attainment of Allied air superiority in the key theatres and cost an

unknown number of lives both in the air and on the ground. Such is the sobering responsibility of command.

Perspectives: Command or Control?

In his seminal work *Command in War*, Martin van Creveld suggests that outstanding command systems have five characteristics. They set decision thresholds as low as possible and have self-contained units at low-level to enable this. They complement formal information-transmission systems which work top-down and bottom-up with an active search for information by headquarters and have an informal as well as formal network of communications inside the organisation.²⁷ The Dowding–Park system exhibited all of those characteristics.

Dowding exercised command in three main ways; by building and maintaining organisational capability, developing a strategy and allocating resources. He was effective as long as his approach was aligned with political intent. As long as he was able to exercise command effectively, he did not need to exercise much control. However, there lay his weakness. If we follow John Adair in seeing leadership in terms of the three circles of task, team and individual, Dowding was outstanding at the task, but had a flawed team because he failed to control one individual – Leigh-Mallory. He has admitted the mistake.²⁸ That failure led to a lack of alignment at the top. As a result, interceptions failed and raids got through. It was a failure of leadership which comes down not just to disagreements about substance, but to bad personal relationships and a consequent failure of trust. The quality of personal relationships between its top leaders has an impact on the effectiveness of a whole organisation.

The trust Dowding displayed towards Park was not misplaced. Park passed the trust on to his organisation. The resulting performance was outstanding, for in 11 Group too, effective command obviated the need for close control. Park controlled performance through metrics analysed by his staff. He exercised command personally through active, visible leadership. He won hearts and minds. That got him commitment. As a result he did not need to force compliance. Commitment beats compliance every time. In warfare it may be the only way. Achieving it is a subtle and very human thing. It is the oldest, most enduring and most difficult challenge of leadership.

Stephen Bungay's book, *The Most Dangerous Enemy – A History of the Battle of Britain* is published by Aurum Press

Endnotes

1. *Ack-Ack*, Pile. Harrap 1949.
2. *Battle of Britain Despatch*, Dowding, in AIR 8/863.