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# An Analysis of Factors Affecting the Royal Air Force Contribution to the Raid on Dieppe, 1942

DAVID STUBBS

*Abstract: This paper seeks to explain the limited options available to Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory when planning the Royal Air Force (RAF) portion of the combined operation raid on Dieppe in 1942. It proposes that a number of constraining influences, some self-imposed, reduced the air support options, so that only an air umbrella over the attacking forces could be provided. It argues that these influences were a consequence of the RAF's cultural and conceptual environment, which perpetuated Trenchardian notions of offensive spirit in RAF doctrine, together with the refusal to consider options to extend the range of its fighter aircraft. The paper rejects claims that the RAF's effort at Dieppe was the natural evolution of combined operations doctrine and demonstrates that pre-emptive bombing of Dieppe was politically unacceptable.*

THE APPALLING LOSSES suffered during the raid on Dieppe on 19 August 1942 sparked a controversy that induced many historians to attempt to untangle the processes that led to its regeneration and approval as Operation Jubilee after Operation Rutter, an earlier incarnation of the same raid, had been cancelled. The egregious political climber Vice-Admiral Louis Mountbatten, second cousin once removed to Princess Elizabeth, commanded the raid after the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, had elevated him three steps in rank in March 1942, against the advice of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound.<sup>1</sup> Churchill had also supported Mountbatten's

<sup>1</sup> David Reynolds, *In Command of History* (New York: Random House, 2005), 341–343, 347.

appointment to the post of Chief of Combined Operations (CCO). Robin Neillands showed that Churchill knew about the plans for the raid on Dieppe because, on 17 August 1942, when in Cairo he had asked for news of Operation Jubilee and was told that it had been delayed by weather and would instead take place at first light on 19 August.<sup>2</sup> Mountbatten probably assumed that he had been given permission for the raid to go ahead on his own authority, as he had for other raids, and that Churchill's knowledge of the raid and his interest in its outcome cemented this belief.<sup>3</sup>

In 1989 Brian Loring Villa claimed that Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of the Air Staff, thought the raid on Dieppe would act as 'bait' to provoke the routinely evasive Luftwaffe into engaging in a large-scale air battle in the hope that the Royal Air Force (RAF) might inflict significant damage on the it.<sup>4</sup> Villa also suggested that Portal had deliberately engineered RAF bomber availability in order to deny the forces attacking Dieppe bomber support, limiting the RAF's air support options to the provision of air cover. Villa argued that effectively synchronised bombing, together with fighter cover, could have decisively affected the German defenders ability to repel the assault. More recently, Timothy Balzer explained how that the combined operations headquarters (COHQ) deliberately concocted the post raid narrative to minimise any negativity about the disastrous outcome, manipulating the facts to promote the raid as positively as possible.<sup>5</sup> In this regard the RAF element of the combined headquarters produced questionable statistics to support its claims that the air battle had been a great success.

Although Norman Franks's seminal description of the RAF's involvement over Dieppe, made reference to available COHQ and AIR files it was written in 1979, ten years before Villa's book was published

<sup>2</sup> Robin Neillands, *The Dieppe Raid: The Story of the Disastrous 1942 expedition* (London: Aurum, 2005), 114.

<sup>3</sup> P.J. Henshaw, "The Dieppe Raid: A Product of Mislplaced Canadian Nationalism?" *Canadian Historical Review* 77, no. 2 (June 1996), 250-266. T. Balzer, "In Case the Raid Is Unsuccessful...: Selling Dieppe to Canadians," *The Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (September 2006), 410-411.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Loring Villa, *Unauthorised Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1989), 158.

<sup>5</sup> Balzer, "In Case the Raid Is Unsuccessful," 411. CAB/65/31/18, *Chief of Combined Operations, 20 August 1942, Air Ministry to C-in-C Middle East, Most Secret Cypher Telegram, TULIP 222 For Prime Minister from C.C.O, 20 August 1942*, The Ministry of Information, *Combined Operations* (London: HMSO, 1943), 135-136.

and was insufficiently detailed to critically analyse whether RAF kill claims were deliberately manipulated to project an unduly positive picture. By 1985 John Terraine had concluded that the post raid declaration “Air Cooperation faultless” really meant little more than that the ships and soldiers had not been molested from the air.<sup>6</sup> John Campbell’s excellent investigation into the documents surrounding the Dieppe raid, published in 1993, neither verified nor refuted the validity of the charges levelled against Portal by Villa, but noted that the RAF’s achievement of local air superiority was gained at considerable cost because of the tactical advantages enjoyed by the Luftwaffe, which had used its knowledge of the short range of RAF fighters to devise appropriate tactics.<sup>7</sup> In 2012 Ross Mahoney countered Villa’s charges by claiming that in pursuing its part in the Dieppe combined operation the RAF had simply endeavoured to achieve the role envisaged for it in combined operations doctrine.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide a fuller examination of the rationale for the limitations of the RAF’s support for Operation Jubilee in order to show that the RAF’s activities over Dieppe were neither the product of a deliberate conspiracy by Portal to deny those attacking Dieppe bomber support, nor the natural corollary of combined operations doctrine but, instead, the consequence of a number of constraining influences under which Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the RAF’s Force Commander for the Operation, was working and the way these factors, many of which were self-imposed, conspired to limit his options for air support.

### **TENCHARD’S DOCTRINE OF AIR SUPERIORITY: WILLPOWER PREEMINENT**

In 1942 most of the RAF’s senior leaders had been conditioned to think of the effectiveness of air power through subjective assessments of its effect on enemy morale and to prefer offensive over defensive activities in the belief that heavy losses were a constituent part of modern air warfare. The RAF taught its senior officers to believe

<sup>6</sup> J. Terraine, *The Right of the Line* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 561.

<sup>7</sup> J.P. Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited: A Documentary Investigation* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 189.

<sup>8</sup> R. Mahoney, ““The support afforded by the air force was faultless” The Royal Air Force and the Raid on Dieppe, 19 August 1942,” *Canadian Military History* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 2012).

that in a battle of willpower between air forces any unwillingness to accept high losses might precipitate a morale collapse that would percolate through its population and, eventually, to the government. The lineage of RAF doctrine to get to this point, as Neville Parton has pointed out, began after 1923, five years after the RAF became an independent service because, until then, it had not committed itself to a doctrine of war-winning independent action. Indeed, the RAF's first two major doctrinal publications, Confidential Document 22 and its War Manual, Air Publication 1300, leaned heavily on Army and Royal Navy doctrine for their content. These documents accepted the Royal Navy's interpretation of the term 'aerial supremacy' and agreed on the importance of winning it over friendly forces while denying it to the enemy.<sup>9</sup> RAF doctrine after 1923, however, contrived a quite different meaning of air superiority that combined the RAF's newfound offensive doctrinal mantra with a belief that enemy morale would be affected if its air forces suffered high loss rates and the vulnerability of its population became abundantly apparent.

Air Chief-Marshal Hugh Trenchard, who began his second spell as Chief of the Air Staff in 1919 and stayed in post until 1930, believed 'moral tenacity' to be more valuable than 'conceptual dynamism.'<sup>10</sup> Understandably, most senior RAF officers who attended staff college became aware of Trenchard's predilection for the moral over the conceptual and in a similar vein and tended to avoid objective examination of the facts. Instead, they were encouraged to make subjective assessments based on their own combat experience, which was easy to do since their thinking was never seriously challenged. For example, many First World War RAF pilots disliked flying close air support missions and believed that they resulted in excessively disproportionate losses.<sup>11</sup> It appears that no comparative analysis of

<sup>9</sup> Neville Parton, "The Development of Early RAF Doctrine," *Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (October 2008), 1155–1169.

<sup>10</sup> P.S. Meilinger, "Trenchard, Slessor and Royal Air Force Doctrine before World War II" in P.S. Meilinger, ed., *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory* (Air University Press, 2004), 47, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Alistair McCluskey, "The Battle of Amiens and the Development of British Air-Land Battle, 1918–1945," in Gary Sheffield and Peter Gray, eds., *Changing War: The British Army, The Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 238, 240, 244. See also B. E. Smythies, *D.F.C. AP965: A selection of lectures and essays from the work of officers attending the first course at the RAF Staff College 1922–1923* (London: Air Ministry, 1923), 80, 86. Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, *Years of Combat* (London: Collins, 1963), 240.

the relative utility of such missions, based on the evidence, was ever undertaken by those who attended RAF staff college. Instead, students were, it appears, minded to agree with Trenchard's view that the achievement of air superiority was a morale equation, influenced by a willingness to maintain the offensive and accept the losses incurred in the air-to-air variant of air combat.

Trenchard saw air warfare as a battle of willpower between different teams, with each side trying to weaken the morale of the other to a point where one side would be forced to cease offensive action and concentrate instead on defence. This, in part, explains his unremitting policy of offence during the First World War and his willingness to accept the loss of large numbers of aircraft, pilots, and observers as a regrettable necessity. In suggesting a way to mitigate the horrendous losses, the more conceptually inclined Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Dowding asked Trenchard to periodically consider relieving squadrons from the front line. While Trenchard reluctantly agreed he sensed in Dowding a lack of the necessary resolve to win the battle of wills and thought him so "obsessed by the fear of further casualties" that, shortly afterwards, he dispatched him back to England.<sup>12</sup> Thereafter, it appears that Trenchard harboured nagging doubts about Dowding's willingness to focus on offensive activities and accept high losses as a matter of necessity.

"The French," Trenchard claimed in 1923, "in a bombing duel would probably squeal before we did ... The nation that would stand being bombed longest would win in the end."<sup>13</sup> Essentially, Trenchard believed willpower, morale and air superiority were inextricably linked and although he was notoriously inarticulate he managed to explain his atypical definition of air superiority in these terms with some clarity when addressing the Imperial Defence College in 1928:

Air superiority is gained in the course of the air attacks which are delivered against the enemy's vital centres [so that] the enemy's population and even their high command ... feel that they must defend themselves against air attacks instead of counter attacking, then there

<sup>12</sup> J. Ray, *The Battle of Britain New Perspectives: Behind the scenes of the Great Air War* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1999), 19. Also in Vincent Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008) 35–36.

<sup>13</sup> The National Archives (TNA), *Minutes of a Conference held in C.A.S.'s Room, Air Ministry, on 19th July, 1923, at 11 a.m.*, 19 July 1923, AIR 5/416, 5.

will begin demands for air protection and aircraft will be detached from the offensive to the defensive. ... When one air force has in this way thrown the other on to the defensive, it has gained air superiority.<sup>14</sup>

However, the same year the RAF's War Manual, when defining air superiority, appeared to place more emphasis on the physical activities necessary to deny the enemy air force the opportunity to interfere with offensive attacks. It described air superiority as:

A state of moral, physical and material superiority which enables its possessor to conduct operations against an enemy, and at the same time deprive the enemy of the ability to interfere effectively by the use of his own air forces.<sup>15</sup>

Trenchard, however, was not convinced that offensive counter air operations to target the enemy's air force would be worthwhile:

It is not the Air Staff policy in a major war to concentrate and confine the air offensive against the enemy air forces. The reason for this is that that is an unprofitable way of using aircraft. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible in a war against an air power to destroy the air organisation of the enemy by air attacks upon his aerodromes.<sup>16</sup>

Only when Trenchard retired did his influence on RAF doctrine began to wane.<sup>17</sup> In 1931 Wing Commander Trafford Leigh-Mallory suggested two scenarios when attacks on enemy aerodromes might be worthwhile. One of these was for a surprise attack to be carried out to disorganise the enemy air force on the eve of some important military operation.<sup>18</sup> By 1940 the RAF War Manual had matured sufficiently to acknowledge the potential benefits of 'destroying aircraft and material on the ground and dislocating ground services'

<sup>14</sup> TNA, Lord Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff, *Air Staff Memorandum, No. 43 S.28279: The War Aim of the Royal Air Force, in an address to the Imperial Defence College, 1928*, AIR 5/169, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Air Ministry, AP1300, Part I (1928), Chapter VII, 10.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, Lord Trenchard, *Air Staff Memorandum, No. 43*, AIR 5/169, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Group Captain Neville Parton, "Historic Book Review, Basic Principles of Air Warfare, by 'Squadron Leader,'" *Air Power Review* 10, no. 2, (2007), 94-98.

<sup>18</sup> Wing Commander T. Leigh-Mallory, "The Maintenance of Air Superiority in a Land Campaign," *Royal Air Force Quarterly* II, no. 2, (April 1931).

though the manual suggested that any advantage gained would likely be short-lived.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the reality of the disasters suffered by the RAF after the Luftwaffe's offensive counter air campaigns against it in Flanders and Norway in 1940, and in Greece in 1941 failed to percolate, as a lesson learned, into the collective consciousness of fighter command's commander-in-chief, Sir William Sholto Douglas or his group commanders. Instead, of recognising the benefits of supplementing any air-to-air fighting by disrupting, bombing, and strafing enemy aircraft on the ground, Sholto Douglas persevered with the notion that the best way to destroy the maximum number of enemy aircraft was to induce the opposing air force into a large attritional air battle.<sup>20</sup>

### ROYAL NAVY DEMANDS FOR AIR COVER

When trying to understand the emphasis placed on protecting the assaulting forces at Dieppe it is necessary to explain Royal Navy's *volte-face* with regard to the need for air support. Before the Second World War the Royal Navy (RN), the British army, and the RAF had interpreted the lessons of the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War along single service lines, to support their preconceived doctrinal views and procurement priorities. The RN had long held the view that aircraft would continue to be unable to sink capital ships and in reviewing the evidence from Spain the deputy director of naval intelligence opined that air attack against ships did not threaten to sweep the RN from the seas and that ships manoeuvring at high speed, concentrating their combined anti-aircraft (AA) fire, would fare well against low-level attack.<sup>21</sup>

However, the Norwegian campaign, in April and May 1940, showed beyond any doubt the vulnerability of capital ships to air attack when, ironically given the RN's perspective on the vulnerability of capital ships, the German navy's light cruiser *Konigsberg* became the first major warship to be sunk by RN dive bombers. Soon after the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS *Curlew* was bombed and sunk by the

<sup>19</sup> AP1300, RAF War Manual, April 1940, Chapter VIII, paras. 23–24.

<sup>20</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command* (London: Collins, 1966), 85–86

<sup>21</sup> Greg Kennedy, "The Royal Navy, Intelligence and the Spanish Civil War: Lessons in Air Power, 1936–39," *Intelligence and National Security* 20, no 2, (2005), 253, 255, 259.

Luftwaffe near Narvik. In less than thirty days the reality of the air threat to warships became clear to everyone, after the Royal Navy lost six destroyers in the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Forces from Dunkirk. Thereafter, Royal Navy sailors feared the sight of aircraft to such an extent that they often ignored the requirement to identify friend from foe before firing.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, instead of acknowledging its conceptual failure in ignoring the threat from the air the RN turned the tables by blaming the RAF for not providing the protection it now acknowledged it needed. During the Dunkirk evacuation Vice-Admiral Dover Bertram Ramsay, the sailor responsible for the evacuation from Dunkirk, had signalled the RAF's fighter, bomber, and coastal commands to say "Your assistance has been invaluable. It alone has given us a chance of success and I trust you will be able to keep it up."<sup>23</sup> However, less than three weeks later, on 18 June, when reporting to his superiors he expressed his "disappointment and surprise at the seemingly puny efforts made to provide air protection during the height of the operation," and that "rightly or wrongly full air protection was expected."<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein Mountbatten's experience as the Captain of HMS *Kelly* influenced his views of the use of air power when planning the Dieppe raid. On 23 May 1941 a Luftwaffe Ju87 'Stuka' dive-bomber sank his ship near Crete. Mountbatten, like Ramsay now believed that full air support was necessary to enable successful maritime operations.<sup>25</sup>

### THE IMPACT OF THE OBSESSION WITH THE BIG WING CONCEPT

Another constraint in deciding the type and level of air support the RAF would provide at Dieppe was can be traced to the legacy of the 'Big Wing' dispute during the Battle of Britain in 1940. The differences between Trenchard's subjective, offense-focused doctrinal

<sup>22</sup> Vincent Orange, *Park: The Biography of Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park, GCB, KBE, MC, DFC, DCL* (London: Grub Street, 2010), 85, 88. H.R. 'Dizzy' Allen, *DFC, Battle for Britain* (London: Arthur Baker, 1973), 61-63, 71. Denis John Vellacot Oral History IWM interview of Vellacott, a wireless operator/air gunner with 30 Sqn, RAF in Middle East, Greece, Crete, 1940-1941. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80023018>

<sup>23</sup> TNA, AIR 16/1170-3

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Air Historical Branch (AHB), RAF Narrative, The Campaign in Crete, May 1941, First Draft, 72.

view of air superiority, and an alternative objective definition which reflected the suggestion made by Leigh-Mallory in his 1931 article: “the attainment of operational freedom by our own aircraft, and denying it to the enemy,” underpinned the arguments over the tactics used by the commander-in-chief fighter command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, and his Air Officer Commanding HQ 11 Group Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park in the Battle of Britain. Dowding’s strategy was to deny the Germans the air superiority necessary for them to conduct Operation Sealion, the invasion of England, whereas his detractors in the Air Ministry, many of whom remained close to Trenchard, thought he should be more offensively focused, and try to inflict the maximum possible attrition on the Luftwaffe.<sup>26</sup> This, they believed, could be achieved by pitting as many RAF fighters as possible against the enemy in a large air-to-air battle.

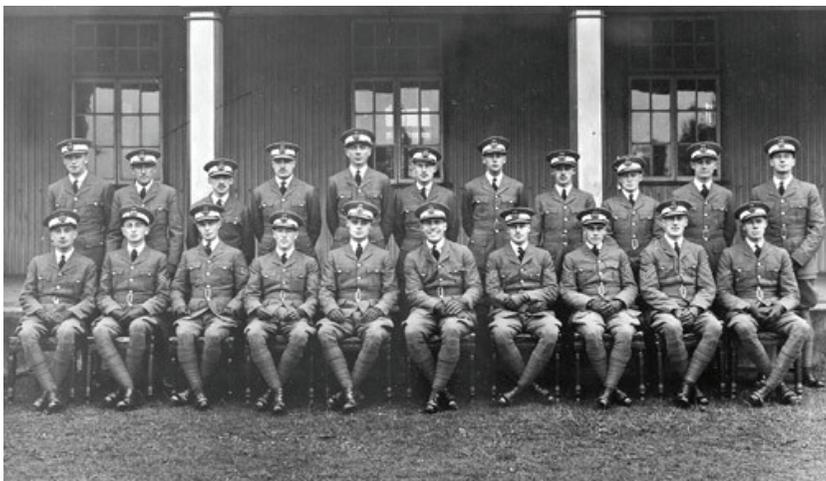
The idea of committing wing-sized formations into an air battle had been considered but rejected in August 1939, after the Air Ministry had asked Dowding to investigate whether fighter formations larger than squadron strength could be mustered to operate effectively as a single formation. His response, drafted after Wing Commander G. Lawson conducted air trials, concluded that large formations would be cumbersome to keep together in formation and would break up when attacked, and were therefore of little tactical value.<sup>27</sup> Park verified this assessment when he flew his Hurricane over Dunkirk during the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force.<sup>28</sup> Park knew that the practical difficulties in getting disparate Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons to work together would be exacerbated by their incompatible high-frequency (HF) and very high frequency (VHF) radio sets which hindered the ability of large formations to communicate effectively. Moreover, to Park’s great irritation, upgrading radio sets in RAF fighters to a single standard proved to be an extraordinarily slow process.

The main proponent of the ‘Big Wing’ concept at the tactical level was Squadron Leader Douglas Bader who had rejoined the RAF in the winter of 1939 after being invalided out of the service in

<sup>26</sup> H.C.T. Dowding, *Twelve Legions of Angels* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1941), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Orange, *Park*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, 15 August 1939, AIR 16/131. David Isby, *Decisive Duel* (London: Little Brown, 2012), 112.



Bader in his Senior Term, 1930. Seated centre left, bottom row. [RAF Museum]

1933. Bader's personality and self-belief was reinforced by the two years he spent as a cadet at Royal Air Force college at Cranwell, an institution that embodied Trenchard's offensive thinking and provided the main route to the higher appointments by means of the permanent commissions granted after the completion of the course.<sup>29</sup> Bader thrived at Cranwell, as it provided an ideal outlet for his natural aggression and sporting talent.

Laddie Lucas, who later became his brother-in-law, believed that Bader's "indoctrination (at Cranwell) was complete, blind and lasting."<sup>30</sup> Yet, in his first period of service, from 1928 to 1933, Bader did not fly in an operational environment and on his return to the RAF in 1939 he knew next to nothing about the development of radar detection or the workings of the air defence system created in his absence. He was also unaware of the lessons learned during the Home Defence Exercises, which sought to integrate the information derived from radar and the observer corps in order to position modern fighter aircraft to meet the threat. Moreover, instead of embracing the opportunities enabled by the new technology, Bader disliked working with the fighter controllers and preferred to ignore them or belittle

<sup>29</sup> Chief of the Air Staff, *An Outline Scheme for the Permanent Organization of the Royal Air Force* (London: HMSO, 1919), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Laddie Lucas, *Flying Colours: The Epic Story of Douglas Bader* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 27.

their input as interference.<sup>31</sup> It is a conundrum, therefore, why after Dunkirk Leigh-Mallory chose to believe Bader over Park in arguments about the value of using fighters in larger formations.<sup>32</sup> The seeds of this *volte-face* were probably sown in October 1938 when Dowding refused an idea by Leigh-Mallory to move the majority of fighter squadrons to 12 Group's area. Dowding thought that in proposing the idea Leigh-Mallory had shown his "misconception of the basic ideas of fighter defence."<sup>33</sup> The break in trust between the two men may have been cemented in the debrief following a 1939 Air Defence exercise when, in front of an assembled audience of officers, Dowding told Leigh-Mallory "The trouble with you, Leigh-Mallory, is that you sometimes cannot see further than the end of your little nose."<sup>34</sup>

In 1940 Leigh-Mallory's antipathy towards Dowding and his exposure to the opinions of Douglas Bader appear to have led him to revise his 1931 opinion on the methodology to achieve air superiority or deny it to an opponent. He became the vociferous advocate of the Big Wing idea, which neatly tallied with Trenchard's offensive thinking and the aspirations of the Air Ministry. Essentially, Leigh-Mallory now agreed with those who believed that the RAF could deny the Luftwaffe air superiority *and* simultaneously inflict significant losses on it. RAF doctrine, as we have seen, maintained that such losses would prove decisive in affecting the morale of the Luftwaffe pilots and, ultimately, their commanders. So, while Park's defensive tactics were effective in frustrating the Luftwaffe fighter pilots who bemoaned the RAF's elusiveness<sup>35</sup> many of the RAF's senior leaders believed they were little short of a reflection of Dowding's preference for the defensive over the offensive.<sup>36</sup> Fighter pilots stationed with Bader at RAF Duxford in 12 Group's area became mesmerised by his ideas and were happy to ignore the orders given by the fighter controllers when following him into 11 Group's area looking for a

<sup>31</sup> Michael G. Burns, *Bader: The Man and his Men* (London: Arms and Armour, 1994), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Newton Dunn, *Big Wing* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 1992), 67.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy* (London: Aurum Press, 2009), 132–133.

<sup>34</sup> John Ray, *The Battle of Britain: New Perspectives* (Leicester: Brockhampton Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>35</sup> John Frayn Turner, *The Bader Tapes* (Bourne End: Kensal Press, 1986), 93

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

fight.<sup>37</sup> The problem with this bravado was that the Home Chain radar system only looked outwards and Bader's decision to go where he wished confused the observer corps into thinking his wing an enemy formation, creating a potential "blue-on-blue" situation in today's language that greatly interfered with Park's management of the air battle. Incredibly, despite his years of experience at 12 Group, Leigh-Mallory could not understand how Bader's unauthorised incursions caused identification problems and responded to Park's complaints by declaring they were "merely trying to get a bag."<sup>38</sup>

Only much later, in their memoirs, did Bader's previously bewitched subordinates reveal their embarrassment at being so naïve.<sup>39</sup> Some, such as Flying Officer F.N. Brindsen, who like Bader was stationed at RAF Duxford, albeit on 19 Squadron, had harboured doubts about Bader's tactical ideas at the time. He would not have seen Lawson's trial report but he came to the same conclusion:

I was never a fan of Bader 'Balbos' considering them time wasting in assembly and cumbersome in operation. In any case the formations fragmented when battle was joined, so why waste precious time assembling them?<sup>40</sup>

It was 1956 before Johnnie Johnson, the RAF's top scoring fighter pilot in the Second World War, another who flew with Bader from RAF Tangmere, described how Big Wings were unwieldy, difficult to control and caused aircraft to get in each other's way in a fight so that only the leaders could bring their guns to bear. Johnson also thought the very size of wing formations reduced the element of surprise, as they could be seen so much earlier.<sup>41</sup> At the time, however, the narrative suggested by Leigh-Mallory incorporated 12 Group's extraordinarily high kill claims and appeared to prove the

<sup>37</sup> Ray, *The Battle of Britain*, 111–112. Sebastian Cox, Sholto Douglas and Leigh Mallory, John Jupp, eds., *Air Force Leadership: Changing Culture* (Sleaford, Royal Air Force Leadership Centre, 2007), 47–48.

<sup>38</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command*, 90. John Ray, *The Battle of Britain*, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Hugh Dundas, *Flying Start* (London: Penguin, 1990), 61–62.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Palmer, *Fighter Squadron* (Torquay: Devonshire Press, 1991), 189.

<sup>41</sup> Johnnie Johnson, *Big Wing*, 60–61.

tactics were more effective than those being used in 11 Group.<sup>42</sup> Although Park suspected that the figures were based on suspiciously gross false accounting, the ‘evidence’ correlated with the perception by many in the Air Ministry, that the strategy defined by Dowding and employed by Park was overly defensive. In contrast Leigh-Mallory’s claims had a magnetic effect on those who wished to remove Dowding and Park and accorded with Trenchard’s opinion that it was essential to have resolve and spirit necessary to accept a high number of casualties in order to destroy enough enemy aircraft to achieve air superiority.

Around this time Sholto Douglas began a daily telephone dialogue with Leigh-Mallory to discuss Park’s tactical conduct of the battle.<sup>43</sup> In the minds of many senior RAF officers at the Air Ministry, including Air Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté, Air Commodore John Slessor, Air Commodore Donald Stevenson and Group Captain Henry Crowe the Big Wing narrative had won the argument: for them Dowding and Park had been mismanaging the battle. In fact, Dowding and Park became so frustrated with the inability of other senior RAF officers to appreciate the validity of their tactics, or to understand the importance of denying the Luftwaffe air superiority, that on 7 September 1940 they decided to lecture Sholto Douglas about the realities of air defence as though he was a rather naïve fool.<sup>44</sup>

Although he had retired ten years earlier Trenchard chose to become involved with those supporting Sholto Douglas and he used his influence over his numerous *protégés* in the military and political spheres to help relieve Dowding and Park of their jobs.<sup>45</sup> Sholto Douglas’s revenge for being patronised was achieved when he was

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Price, *Battle of Britain Day* (Journal 29, RAF Historical Society, 2003) 14–15. James Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five months that changed history May–October 1940* (London: Bantam Press, 2010), 592–593. M.G.Burns, *Bader: The man and his men* (London: Arms and Armour, 1944), 90, 94. Terraine, *Right of the Line*, 200–203. Orange, *Dowding*, 200–201.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Cross, *Straight and Level* (London: Grub Street, 1993), 123.

<sup>44</sup> John Ray, *The Battle of Britain*, 90–92. Bungay, *Most Dangerous Enemy*, 299–300. Jack Dixon, *Dowding and Churchill: The dark side of the Battle of Britain* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2008), 155.

<sup>45</sup> John Ray, *The Battle of Britain*, 136–139, 142, 169. Group Captain Peter Gray, “The Battle of Britain—so we already know the story, RAF,” *Air Power Review* 3, no. 3, (2000), 26–27. Cox, Sholto Douglas, Leigh Mallory, Jupp, eds., *Air Force Leadership*, 45–50. Terraine, *Right of the Line*, 202, 216–217.

given Dowding's job. The longer term consequence of these changes was the conceptual commitment, by Sholto Douglas and Leigh-Mallory, to the idea of using Big Wings of fighters in offensive fighter sweeps of northern France, known as 'Rhubarbs', and in similar 'Circus' missions which combined a mixture of bombers and fighters in an attempt to lure the Luftwaffe fighters into a battle of attrition. The main reason for persevering with these tactics can be explained by the mistaken belief in the RAF's pilots kill claims, which although less impressive in ratio terms than those claimed during Big Wing operations in the Battle of Britain, continued to suggest a good return.

### THE EMPHASIS ON KILL CLAIMS

One of the main difficulties in accurately determining how well the RAF performed at Dieppe is that before the raid the primary aim had been to focus on the relative number of aircraft shot down by either side. Only after the raid did the narrative alter to claim that main focus of the RAF support had been to keep the Luftwaffe away from the battle area so that the troops on the ground were not harassed or molested by enemy air attacks; that the relative number of aircraft lost was not really that important.<sup>46</sup> The change in this narrative, it should be noted, began the day after the raid when the horrendously high Canadian casualties became apparent. Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of the Air Staff, sought to distance himself from the idea that the RAF had used the Dieppe raid to induce a large air-to-air battle with the Luftwaffe.<sup>47</sup> But in 1941 and 1942, the relative number of Luftwaffe aircraft reported destroyed or damaged by the RAF was a fundamental constituent of assessments made about the effectiveness of the air campaign because the responsible RAF senior officers had become conditioned to believe they were important, as had their political masters. Certainly, that is where their attention was focused in the planning for the raid.

Sholto Douglas had a conceptual aversion to the idea that long-range fighters should escort bombers, and had vehemently argued

<sup>46</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command*, 175.

<sup>47</sup> CAB/65/31/18, *W.M. (42) 115TH Conclusions, Minute 1, Confidential Annex, 20th August, 1942 6.0 pm*, 20 August 1942.



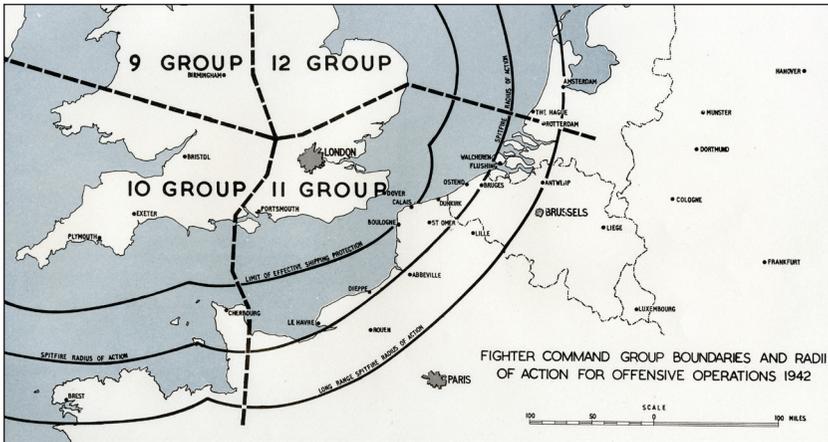
A Spitfire MkIIa with a 40 gallon single port wing fixed fuel tank. [[http://s412.photobucket.com/user/ruspren/media/ruspreno01/IMG\\_0703\\_zpsa8bob786.jpg.html](http://s412.photobucket.com/user/ruspren/media/ruspreno01/IMG_0703_zpsa8bob786.jpg.html)]

against them since 1937.<sup>48</sup> So, in November 1940 when the Air Ministry directed fighter command to conduct offensive missions over France his short-range Spitfire's were unable to penetrate very far into France.

An attempt was made to provide fifty Spitfire Mk IIa squadrons with forty gallons of additional fuel in a single fixed-wing tank but although the flight trials assessed the Mk IIa model "satisfactory as a fighter" the aircraft proved unpopular with pilots who considered it cumbersome and vulnerable because of its reduced maximum speed and climbing performance, which together with worries about belly landings led the pilots to believe that they were at a significant disadvantage to the Luftwaffe fighters.<sup>49</sup> Portal, no doubt heavily influenced by Sholto Douglas's views on long-range fighters, advised Prime Minister Winston Churchill that it was unfair to expect RAF pilots to fight at a disadvantage, that long-range fighters could never hold their own against short-range fighters and were only suitable for employment where short-range fighters would not oppose them. So, until late 1943, Spitfire fighters were constrained to the narrow part

<sup>48</sup> TNA, *Air Fighting Committee Minutes*, 9 June 1937, AIR 20/3605.

<sup>49</sup> Hubert Raymond Allen, *Fighter Squadron* (London: Granada, 1979), 139–140. Alfred Price, *The Spitfire Story* (London: Arms and Armour, 1999), 109, 114.



Source: UK Crown Copyright. Courtesy of AHB(RAF)

of the French coast that they could reach and patrol for relatively short periods of time.<sup>50</sup>

When fighter sweeps over France began in late 1940 the prime minister, Winston Churchill, was keenly interested in the effectiveness of these operations, particularly if anything went wrong. On 9 February 1941, Churchill asked Portal to explain why eight RAF fighters had been lost for claims of only two enemy destroyed and one probably lost on a ‘sweep’ over France four days earlier. Portal explained that “a serious breakdown between the Fighter and Bomber Commands had occurred and that the bombers had arrived at the rendezvous point late causing the various waves of fighters to be thrown out of gear.”<sup>51</sup> Squadron Leader Kenneth Cross noted how the Germans exploited the Spitfire’s lack of range by sequencing their attacks to coincide with the Spitfire’s most vulnerable period of the sortie: at the end of the time provisioned over France when the pilot’s ability to offer air combat was compromised by the limited amount of fuel at his disposal.<sup>52</sup> The apparent futility of these operations was not lost on many of the pilots taking part. Nevertheless, some of the wing leaders, including Wing Commander Douglas Bader, saw these operations as an opportunity to increase their personal ‘score’ of

<sup>50</sup> David Stubbs, “A Blind Spot? The Royal Air Force (RAF) and Long-Range Fighters, 1936–1944,” *The Journal of Military History* 78, no. 2 (April 2014), 673–678.

<sup>51</sup> Bill Newton Dunn, *Big Wing* (Shrewsbury, U.K.: Airlife, 1992), 82–83.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Cross, *Straight and Level*, 123.

enemy aircraft and any questioning as to the military value of Circus operations by rank and file pilots was quickly quelled; a response that typified the perception of Bader as an insensitive bully with a fondness for self-promotion by many of those who worked with him.<sup>53</sup>

At fighter command the utility of continuing fighter sweeps or Circus operations was rarely questioned, but the exceptions to this norm were prescient. On 7 March 1941 none other than Sir Douglas Evill, Sholto Douglas's senior air staff officer, articulated his doubts about their effectiveness.<sup>54</sup> Shortly afterwards, in one of Leigh-Mallory's regular conferences at RAF Northolt through which he gained a more detailed tactical understanding of what was happening, Wing Commander John Kent, RCAF, vociferously explained the impact of the Spitfire's short flying radius had on his pilots' morale and fighting spirit.<sup>55</sup> In June 1941 Kent's interjection may have influenced Leigh-Mallory to tell Sholto Douglas about his high fighter casualty rates and question whether the wing sweep operations were paying off.<sup>56</sup> The problem he had was that in accepting the kill claims made during these operations wa'that the corollary of believing and promoting the kill claims made during these operations was that it persuaded senior RAF officers that wing tactics were working and the RAF was extracting at least an equal toll on Luftwaffe fighters. Gradually, however, even amongst the most blinkered optimists, there was a dawning realisation that something was amiss.<sup>57</sup> Squadron Leader Billy Burton, the officer commanding 616 Squadron, in Bader's wing at Tangmere, sensed this anxiety and claimed that when Bader was shot down in August 1941 the wing was in a state of mutiny brought on by his reckless leading in an effort to increase his own score.<sup>58</sup> Bader, of course, was so admired by Leigh-Mallory and Sholto Douglas that arrangements to send him another prosthetic leg were coordinated with the Germans when reports that one of his prosthetic legs had been lost when he was shot down were received. An angry

<sup>53</sup> Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133–134. Cross, *Straight and Level*, 123.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, *Minute from SASO to AOC-in-C Fighter Command*, 7 March 1941, AIR 16/373.

<sup>55</sup> Brereton Greenhous, Stephen J. Harris, William C. Johnson and William G.P. Rawling, *The Crucible of War, 1939–1945, Volume 3: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Vol III* (Toronto, Toronto University Press/Department of National Defence, 1994), 205.

<sup>56</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command*, 116.

<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey Wellum, *First Light* (London: Viking, 2002), 253, 255–261, 276–281.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Cross, *Straight and Level* (London: Grub Street, 1993), 123.

Churchill accused Sholto Douglas of fraternising with the enemy<sup>59</sup> to which a signal claiming that seven Luftwaffe fighters had been shot down during Circus 81, the spare leg delivery mission, was quickly produced as evidence to suggest otherwise. Clearly, the prime minister and senior RAF officers thought relative number of aircraft shot down or destroyed was the appropriate metric by which to assess the utility of such operations.

Moves to have Circus operations suspended were quashed when Portal reminded Sholto Douglas of the need to maintain pressure on the Germans in the west in order to relieve the pressure on the Russians in the east. So, rather than reducing the sweeps, now understood to cause high losses amongst RAF pilots to questionable effect, Sholto Douglas chose to increase them for reasons of grand strategy. Yet concern over the high casualty rates continued and after nine pilots were lost in Circus 13, on 18 June 1941, Portal, who probably wanted to have answers ready for Churchill, asked for details of what had happened. Leigh-Mallory feared that he might be blamed for the losses but Portal assured Sholto Douglas that he need not have worried and was disturbed that Leigh-Mallory thought that he might be open to criticism.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout these exchanges the fundamental dynamics of these operations had not changed. The Spitfire still lacked the necessary range to conduct effective operations over France, or indeed for that matter Germany, and the pilots disliked operating over sea far away from their airfields. Moreover, the real losses suffered were much worse than feared. Nevertheless, when Leigh-Mallory became aware that Portal and Churchill wanted the Circus operations to continue, his tendency to identify his own interests with those holding power again came to the fore and by September 1941 he had set aside his worries about the losses. Instead, he became enthused with the idea that if only five percent of heavy bombers were employed on regular Circus operations it might be possible to induce a large number of Luftwaffe fighters into a fight and cause a heavy toll of their fighter pilots.<sup>61</sup> Air Vice-Marshal Donald Stevenson, however, derided the idea and thought Leigh-Mallory was trying to fight “the same kind of

<sup>59</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command* (London: Collins, 1966), 138–141.

<sup>60</sup> Bill Newton Dunn, *Big Wing*, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939–1945, Vol. 1* (London: HMSO, 1961), 238–239.

394  
/TWCC/

NR  
NR GPK A NIL  
PADS TO SELF QR NIL  
ADDRESSED TO :- NO 2 GROUP AND ALL STATIONS  
FROM :- HEADQUARTERS NO 11 GROUP  
IXX 19/7 19/8/41

CIRCUS 81.

DURING THIS OPERATION THE LEG FOR MINE COMMANDER BADER BECAME AIR BORNE AT 1054 HOURS AND WAS LAST SEEN ~~FLOATING~~ FLOATING DOWN GRACEFULLY S.W. OF ST. OMER.  
AT 1100 HOURS A MESSAGE WAS BROADCAST TO THE ENEMY INFORMING HIM THAT THE LEG HAD JUST BEEN DROPPED BY PARACHUTE. THE MESSAGE WAS ACKNOWLEDGED.  
PRELIMINARY REPORTS INDICATE THAT 7 HE 109'S - DESTROYED.  
3 HE 109'S - PROBABLY DESTROYED  
AND 5 HE 109'S - DAMAGED.  
FOR THE LOSS OF 2 OF OUR PILOTS.  
NO BOMBS WERE DROPPED DURING THE OPERATION.  
ALL BOMBERS RETURNED SAFELY.  
T O D 1350  
CM VA+  
GPK R.....1353...VHR VA+++

Signal message relating to the parachute dropping of a replacement artificial leg over St. Omer, 19 August 1941. [RAF Museum]

battle as the Luftwaffe fought in 1940 and since he was using similar equipment, must not be surprised if the results are unfavourable.”<sup>62</sup> Eventually, given the effect RAF fighter losses were having on the morale of its pilots, the Air Ministry conveniently chose to conclude that the RAF and Luftwaffe had fought themselves to a stalemate and that the chief aim of the offensive, to destroy a significant number of German fighters, had been realised. By October 1941 it was decided to restrict offensive missions by fighter command aircraft.<sup>63</sup> Only much later did Sholto Douglas lament the loss of 426 pilots killed, missing, or taken prisoner in 1941, a greater number than the RAF lost in the whole of the Battle of Britain.<sup>64</sup>

Given the scale of the RAF losses in the 1941 Circus campaign, the concept of manufacturing air battles to write down the Luftwaffe had become a political/strategic decision rather than an operational/military one. In this context, the British saw the German decision of March 1942 to transfer forty of their fighter aircraft from the Brest and Pas de Calais areas to reinforce fighter strength in Norway

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., *Letters Stevenson to C-in-C Bomber Command—Air Marshal Sir Richard Piersie 10 September 1941 and to Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Slessor*, 14 September 1941.

<sup>63</sup> AHB, *The Struggle for Air Supremacy (January 1942–May 1945)*, 112–113

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 89, 116

and Denmark and protect their bombers attacking British convoys heading north, as an opportunity to resume Circus operations and apply pressure on the Luftwaffe.<sup>65</sup> Yet, in 1942 the Spitfire was still a short-range fighter and Dieppe was very close to the edge of its range envelope, where it was especially vulnerable. After assessing the utility of conducting wing-sized fighter sweeps, Churchill concluded that a renewed campaign would be worthwhile but only if fighter command lost ‘*plane for plane*’ with the Luftwaffe.<sup>66</sup> Fighter Command was instructed to resume its daylight Circus operations “with the object of inducing German fighters to accept combat with our own covering fighter forces” in order to “inflict casualties in the fighting whilst the additional flying which is forced upon the enemy will increase normal wastage.”<sup>67</sup> The requirement was crystal clear: attack targets to destroy as many Luftwaffe fighters as possible while, given Churchill’s concern about relative losses, devise tactics to minimise disproportionate RAF losses.

The importance of the keeping up the offensive in the west was underlined when on 30 April 1942 Air Vice-Marshal Norman Bottomley, the deputy Chief of the Air Staff at the Air Ministry, directed fighter command to intensify day fighter activity as its first priority.<sup>68</sup> Yet, less than seven weeks later the superiority of the new Luftwaffe fighter, the FW 190, over the Spitfire v had become abundantly apparent and Bottomley, now assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations), directed fighter command to restrain its ‘sweeps’ and deeper penetrations into France until the new Spitfire IX or Typhoon fighters came on line in sufficient numbers to tilt the balance back in the RAF’s favour.<sup>69</sup>

Given this background, any offensive counter air campaign to gain air superiority and destroy or reduce the Luftwaffe over Dieppe would require imaginative planning, coordination, and synchronisation. During the planning for the Dieppe raid, Leigh-Mallory received the intelligence assessment on the scale of the threat

<sup>65</sup> Air Historical Branch (AHB), *Struggle for Air Supremacy*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Portal Papers, Christ Church, Oxford, “Churchill to Portal,” 8 March 1942, PREM 3/333/19.

<sup>67</sup> TNA, Confidential supplement to Air Power and War Rights by J.M. Spaight, S.46368/DCAS to Fighter Command, 13 March 1942, described in AIR 41/5, *International Law of the Air, 1939–1945*.

<sup>68</sup> AHB, *The Struggle for Air Supremacy*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited*, 186.

posed by the Luftwaffe and he would have been acutely aware of the likely response to the 'bait' created by the largely Canadian assault on Dieppe. Furthermore, Leigh-Mallory's evolving awareness of the RAF's failure to secure air superiority over northern France influenced his judgement that the very best he could achieve was a temporary degree of air superiority sufficient to enable the raid and protect the ships, and this explains his fears that such an operation would prove expensive in terms of aircraft and pilots. In trying to do all that was expected of him by his combined operations colleagues he would have realised that the majority of his Spitfires would have to operate at a slight tactical disadvantage, something his pilots had always wished to avoid.

It is interesting to speculate whether or not Bottomley's directive of 13 June had reached Leigh-Mallory by 15 June, when he supported the intention to remount Rutter as Jubilee, but it certainly solidified his worries that the RAF might lose a significant number of aircraft and pilots over Dieppe.<sup>70</sup> Two weeks later, after pondering the worst-case consequences, he decided to voice his concerns to Sholto Douglas, effectively admitting that the fighter sweep policy had again failed to achieve the temporary air superiority intended as it had not extracted the toll of the Luftwaffe aircraft desired. In planning for the raid on Dieppe he thought:

the casualties will, I expect, be relatively high and we can, I suggest, be well satisfied if our losses do not exceed, say 60 to 70 pilots, and 120 aircraft in the squadrons providing fighter cover ... because we cannot claim to have attained air superiority in North West France ... once our plan is clear to the enemy, the initiative is his, and he can choose his moment to concentrate his forces.<sup>71</sup>

In answering this perceptive and reasoned analysis Sholto Douglas, no doubt mindful of the political imperative, questioned Leigh-Mallory's determination to see things through and, in a

<sup>70</sup> TNA, *Minutes of Meeting held at COHQ on Monday, 15th June 1942, to discuss certain points concerning Operation "RUTTER."* 15 June 1942, DEFE 2/546.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, *Mallory memorandum, Operations in France 25 May 1942*, 25 May 1942, DEFE 2/306. TNA, *Force Commanders meeting of 15 June 1942*. 29 June 1942, AIR 16/760.

typically Trenchardian retort, showed no intention of doing anything to change the course of events:

I do not know however quite what you expect me to do about it. I certainly do not propose to call the operation off. If I may say so, I think you are worrying too much about these possible casualties. Unfortunately, one cannot often win a battle without considerable casualties, however much one would like to do so.<sup>72</sup>

The problem, of course, was that no one really knew the toll of German aircraft the RAF had really bacheived and in trying to meet Churchill's 'plane for plane' metric, a question mark must be raised over fighter command's lethargy in cross-correlating the pilots kill claim reports with intelligence derived from 'Y' Service intercepts and ULTRA-derived information to better determine the actual losses. Overt scepticism and constructive dissent appear to have been entirely absent; instead blind faith in the numbers claimed prevailed. The evidence now shows that Leigh-Mallory's doubts were fully justified and the campaign before August 1942 had been an operational and tactical disaster. Even if the RAF fighter pilots had shot down the 197 Luftwaffe aircraft they claimed from March to June 1942 they would have failed to meet the 'plane for plane' target set by Churchill because the RAF lost 259 aircraft during the same period. The actual ratio of losses was much worse: the Luftwaffe only lost 58 aircraft.<sup>73</sup>

#### **AN RAF PLAN LIMITED TO WHAT IT COULD DO**

As the date of the Dieppe raid approached it was clear that the majority of the RAF fighters would be at a qualitative disadvantage to the Luftwaffe's FW 190 fighters but they did have the benefit of greater numbers and, as Richard Overy and Paul Kennedy have suggested, given the qualitative advantages of one aircraft over another were quite small the relative numbers of aircraft available to each side often made the difference to the outcome of

<sup>72</sup> TNA. Sholto Douglas to Leigh-Mallory, 30 June 1942. AIR 16/760.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 105; and Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited*, 189.

the air war.<sup>74</sup> In May 1940 the RAF allocated approximately 200 fighters to the Dunkirk operation. Facing them the Luftwaffe had up 550 Luftwaffe fighters and 300 assorted bombers.<sup>75</sup> At Dieppe the balance was reversed, forty-eight of the seventy mainly RAF squadrons involved were fighters, almost 600 aircraft. Of these less than fifty were the Spitfire IX model, which was superior to the FW 190. Arranged against them British Intelligence assessed that the Luftwaffe had only 260 first-line fighters available between Texel and Brest (only 225 were actually serviceable) and that only 120 of these, operating from Abbeville, would be able to provide the initial fighter opposition. British Intelligence also estimated that the Luftwaffe had 220 bombers in the west (the actual figure was 175).<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the attackers would benefit from the advantage of having tactical surprise and be mainly focused on achieving temporary air superiority over the raiding naval and land forces during the short period of the assault and withdrawal.<sup>77</sup> Twenty-four B-17 Flying Fortresses from the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) Eighth Air Force, flying only their second operational mission, were tasked to attack the Luftwaffe airfield at Abbeville, escorted by the four Spitfire IX squadrons.<sup>78</sup> Presumably, the timing of this attack was delayed in order to retain the element of surprise at Dieppe but this meant that the offensive counter air bombing was scheduled to coincide with the withdrawal of the attacking forces. This, of course, was very different to what Leigh-Mallory had proposed in 1931 when he suggested the launching of surprise attacks on the eve of important military operations.

Villa believed that the decision to exclude bombing from the Jubilee raid plan was one of the major reasons for its failure, but in 1942 bombing of French towns to provide fire support to ground troops was rejected by the politicians. French representatives had repeatedly complained to the British about the RAF's bombing of

<sup>74</sup> Richard J. Overy, *The Air War 1939–1945* (London: Europa, 1980), 47–60. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), 353–354.

<sup>75</sup> Terraine, *The Right of the Line*, 154–155.

<sup>76</sup> F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Volume 2, Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 702.

<sup>77</sup> Sholto Douglas, *Years of Command*, 175. See also N. Franks, *The Greatest Air Battle: Dieppe, 19th August 1942* (London: Grub Street, 1997), 18

<sup>78</sup> Franks, *Greatest Air Battle*, 98–100.

coastal towns in 1940 and 1941; these killed 1,650 and injured 2,311 civilians. In May 1941 the mayors of four coastal towns, including Dieppe, protested through the United States Legation at Vichy about heavy bombing of residential areas and the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden asked the Air Ministry to take every care to minimise damage to civilian property and civilian casualties.<sup>79</sup> In April 1942 RAF bombing of the Renault works at Billancourt on the outskirts of Paris killed 367 French civilians, injured another 341 and made 9,250 people homeless. The high casualty toll presented the Germans with a profitable propaganda story and caused the British war Cabinet to worry how killing French civilians might affect the level of support the Allies could expect to receive from the French population they were hoping to liberate. So intense was the nervousness about such attacks that in May 1942 a raid on the Schneider armaments and locomotive works at Le Creusot was cancelled, though this decision was eventually reversed in July 1942. When, in June 1942, Air Chief-Marshal Philip Joubert de la Ferté, air operations commander-in-chief coastal command, proposed the bombing of German submarine pens in French coastal towns, to mitigate the devastating effects of the German submarine attacks on Allied shipping, the secretary of state for air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, thought the idea so odious that he declared that the proposed risks to civilian casualties were politically unacceptable:

“... it would be useless to ask the Cabinet to embark on a policy of ruthless attacks on French towns.” The air staff concluded “that the desired military object could not be achieved by the form of attack.”<sup>80</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that at the time of the planning for the raid on Dieppe there was no political appetite to sanction any bombing that might cause significant French civilian casualties, and even if there had been it would have required a very robust and verifiable audit trail to authorise it; something notably absent from the Dieppe raid's approval process. Villa's idea that an RAF conspiracy sought to deny bombing support to the Dieppe raid ignores the political reluctance

<sup>79</sup> Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 550–551.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French: From occupation to Liberation, 1940–1944* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2012), 96–97.

to employ such methods in mid-1942. Moreover, Air Marshal Arthur Harris's objection to the bombing of Dieppe, on the grounds that his bombers would need the protection of the night, was based on the assumption that RAF fighters would be unable to provide the protection they would need, which was hardly a vote of confidence for the narrative of repeated success over France painted by Fighter Command. Instead, Harris preferred to let the USAAF bombers play a role at Dieppe in accordance with their daylight tactics.

By 9:30 a.m., when the order to evacuate Dieppe had been made, it was obvious that the raid had failed.<sup>81</sup> At that time the Luftwaffe had only managed to get twenty to thirty aircraft on patrol at any one time and despite Luftwaffe attempts to commit all of its bombers against the attackers it was 10:00 a.m., thirty minutes after the decision to evacuate, before the first two of these arrived on the scene. Only another 125 Luftwaffe bomber sorties were launched during the rest of the day. In stark contrast to the 945 sorties flown by the Luftwaffe the RAF flew 2,604 to provide air cover. The relative number of aircraft committed to the air battle and the number of missions flown are significant because RAF offensive doctrine sought to overwhelm the defenders and because of the importance placed by the prime minister on the relative numbers of aircraft lost. Therefore, a better metric of the RAF performance and effectiveness at Dieppe would be to assess how well it performed against the Luftwaffe aircraft ranged against it as well as by its ability to deliver and sustain an air umbrella over the RN and beachhead.

### **SUBOPTIMAL COMMAND AND CONTROL**

With understandable logic, Leigh-Mallory and Mountbatten thought the operations bunker at HQ 11 Group would be the best place to monitor the progress of the Dieppe raid as they would be able to see the air plots on the operations room table and correlate these with the reports from the RN and army commanders aboard HMS *Calpe* with which their headquarter was expected to be in continuous radio

<sup>81</sup> Francis George Gillard - War Correspondent, IWM Oral History interview, Reel 1 22:49 to 28:05, dated 1/10/1989, available at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80010367>

contract.<sup>82</sup> This apparently rational decision naively adjudged the technical and practical difficulties of squeezing the communications required for a major joint force headquarters operation into a single service headquarters relatively easy to manage. Though the post Dieppe pamphlet published by the Ministry of Information claimed that “Leigh-Mallory ... could see with great clarity every move of the battle as it took place before him on a great map” and “knew exactly what was happening and was able to anticipate every move of the enemy in the air” the reality was that the Dieppe raid was much bigger than anything Leigh-Mallory had handled in his time at 11 Group.<sup>83</sup> He struggled to keep abreast of what was happening when communications broke down, the landings went awry the amount of data coming into the headquarters began to overwhelm his staff.

It did not help that Major-General John Roberts, who commanded the landing forces from HMS *Calpe*, was unable to observe what was happening because smoke in the vicinity of the assault and the screen protecting the Royal Navy warships obscured his view. Communications breakdown reduced Roberts’s understanding of what was happening on the beaches, which in turn made it difficult for him to keep Mountbatten informed about what was going on so he, in turn, could direct operations accordingly. Moreover, outgoing messages from Uxbridge to HMS *Calpe* did not always reach the military commander afloat. This made it necessary for Roberts to repeat his requests for close support, which caused excessive delay in matching aircraft to targets. Ultimately, the confusion over which unit had control of the aircraft, at Uxbridge, resulted in missed opportunities to relieve the pressure on those fighting on the ground.<sup>84</sup>

At 11 Group headquarters it proved impossible to cross-correlate Morse code intercepts with the voluminous voice traffic, or to relate intercepted German voice traffic to the operational situation. The tactical intelligence picture became so confused that it failed to detect Luftwaffe fighters coming from neighbouring sectors to reinforce the

<sup>82</sup> Dunn, *Big Wing*, 88. Neillands, *The Dieppe Raid: The story of the disastrous 1942 expedition*, 122.

<sup>83</sup> The Ministry of Information, *Combined Operations* (London: HMSO, 1943), 133.

<sup>84</sup> TNA, *Report by Flight Lieutenant Gerald Le Blount Kidd RAFVR*, 24 August 1942, AIR 16/765. *Report by the Air Force Commander on the combined operation against Dieppe—19 August 1942*, 5 September 1942. “Operation Jubilee, Questionnaire for Air Force Commander,” and “Answers to Questionnaire, 12 Sept. 1942,” AIR 16/765.



Group Captain Harry Broadhurst. [UK Crown Copyright. Courtesy of AHB(RAF)]

Dieppe area.<sup>85</sup> This resulted in Leigh-Mallory's wings being poorly positioned to intercept the incoming attacks. The experienced RAF fighter ace Johnnie Johnson led four sorties over Dieppe but his wing was never able to establish communications with HMS Calpe, to receive direction and guidance from the RAF controllers. Little wonder Johnson found the battle confusing.<sup>86</sup> To gauge what was really happening in the air battle over Dieppe, Leigh-Mallory began to rely on the reports made by Group Captain Harry Broadhurst, his deputy senior air staff officer, who also flew 4 sorties over Dieppe in his Spitfire before landing and calling by telephone to explain what he had seen of the battle. Around 9:00 a.m., at Biggin Hill, Broadhurst, like Lawson and Park earlier, concluded the wing operations were unwieldy. He advised Leigh-Mallory that Spitfire IX's should patrol in pairs between Le Treport in order to intercept Luftwaffe FW 190 fighters that were avoiding the wing-sized patrols. Air battle management, using the integrated air defence system, had broken down: it was as if the development of radar, radiotelephony, and signals intelligence had never happened.

<sup>85</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 703.

<sup>86</sup> Johnnie Johnson, *Wing Leader* (London: David & Charles, 1974), 146. IWM Interview, Johnson, James Edgar 'Johnnie'. Available at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80010127> reel 2, 07:07 to 09:20

Things got so bad that less than half an hour after the order to evacuate had been given Leigh-Mallory was obliged to ask HMS *Calpe* for a situation report. The response was: “Situation too obscure to give useful report. Air co-operation faultless. Enemy air opposition now increasing. Have you any questions?” Although this was a subjective assessment made in the heat of the battle it was widely and frequently reported in its shortened version “Air co-operation faultless” to suggest the RAF’s performance had been nothing less than magnificent. The full report tells an altogether different story: that no clear understanding of what was happening on the beaches existed, the battle was still raging, and the outcome was still far from decided. The RAF had, so far, done what was expected of it in delivering air cover for the assaulting forces. Although Leigh-Mallory’s post-raid report obliquely acknowledged the communication problems described by an air controller on board HMS *Calpe*, the value of having a forward air controller on one of the HQ ships did not subsequently appear in the Jubilee Lessons Learned even though this oversight had been a major cause of the coordination difficulties encountered.<sup>87</sup>

## ANALYSIS

It is clear that whatever the apparent similarities between the RAF’s support to the raid on Dieppe and the natural evolution of combined operations doctrine, there were a number of self-imposed factors that limited the options available to Leigh-Mallory.

Trenchard’s doctrine of offensive action, with its emphasis on attacking enemy morale had never been seriously challenged by any of his subordinates who reached high rank; they believed the validity of the theory. Consequently, in a desire to rid Fighter Command of what was perceived to be overly defensive tactics, the RAF adopted Big Wing tactics in an attempt to inflict high losses on its Luftwaffe opponent. By then, however, with the Battle of Britain won, the dynamics of the ensuing air battle had changed and the Luftwaffe adopted tactics broadly similar to those employed by Fighter Command in order to

<sup>87</sup> Greenhous et al., *The Crucible of War, 1939–1945, Volume 3: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 240–242. Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited*, 217.

remain elusive whilst denying the air superiority the RAF craved over France. Consequently, instead of significantly reducing the Luftwaffe and achieving temporary air superiority over France from late 1940 onwards the RAF's pilots began to suffer from an erosion of confidence and morale when they realised that their activities were failing to yield the results required. The irony, therefore, was that the tactics defined by Dowding and employed by Park were highly effective in achieving the desired Trenchardian outcome on the enemy's fighting morale. Subsequently, RAF freedom of action was constrained by its adherence to Big Wing offensive tactics because of a conspiracy of optimism created by naïve faith in the kill claims made by its pilots.<sup>88</sup> This, in turn, was galvanised by Churchill's interest in the relative losses suffered by the RAF and Luftwaffe.

Fighter command's post-Dieppe raid kill claims passed on to Mountbatten and Churchill maintained that 95 Luftwaffe aircraft had been destroyed, thirty-eight probably destroyed and 140 damaged, for the loss of ninety-eight RAF aircraft.<sup>89</sup> After the raid on Dieppe, Leigh-Mallory was so wedded to belief in his pilots' kill claims that he chose to think the Germans had deliberately concealed their losses to higher authorities. Air Commodore John Whitworth Jones, fighter command's director of fighter operations, was so similarly convinced that the real Luftwaffe losses had been underestimated that he disregarded the objective evidence from pilots' combat reports, gun cameras and Y service intercepts of Luftwaffe bomber call-signs because it suggested the Luftwaffe had only lost ninety-two aircraft. Indeed, Leigh-Mallory chose to latch on to a figure that tallied with his subjective assessment of what had happened and was apt to quote Luftwaffe losses of 170 aircraft, which he gleaned from an obscure Vichy source, as proof of his success to Churchill and to the press.<sup>90</sup>

Over Dieppe on 19 August 1942 the Luftwaffe actually lost forty-eight aircraft,<sup>91</sup> the RAF 106.<sup>92</sup> On first sight these figures

<sup>88</sup> Bungay, *Most Dangerous Enemy* 333.

<sup>89</sup> CAB/65/31/18, *Chief of Combined Operations, 20 August 1942. Air Ministry to C-in-C Middle East, Most Secret Cypher Telegram, TULIP 222 For Prime Minister from C.C.O.*, 20 August 1942.

<sup>90</sup> Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited*, 187. "The Attack on Dieppe," *The Times* 9 September 1942, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited*), 187–188.

<sup>92</sup> AHB *Struggle for Air Supremacy* January 1942 to May 1945, 124–126.

appear to show a very poor return against the claims made at the time but they ought to be viewed in the context of the actual figures for the previous four months of Circus operations. Looked at this way the RAF's performance at Dieppe was actually a marked improvement. Unfortunately, Leigh-Mallory's willingness to accept the kill claims made by RAF fighter pilots at Dieppe made him think he had stumbled on a formula to achieve the air superiority required for the invasion later planned in Normandy and in the interim he attempted to get COHQ to repeat similar raids. The Americans, unbound by dubious doctrine or closed minds with regard to long-range fighters, read events very differently. They concluded that large numbers of fighters fitted with long-range fuel tanks would reduce any tactical advantage provided by Luftwaffe radar and would help the USAAF to overwhelm and defeat the Luftwaffe. Of course, that is what they did.

The final factor influencing Leigh-Mallory in the planning for Dieppe was the Royal Navy's grudging acceptance that ships were vulnerable to air attack, which together with the army's desire for an air umbrella and the RAF's conceptual aversion to ground attack and offensive counter air missions constrained the options for Leigh-Mallory to use his short-range fighters. Consequently, Leigh-Mallory's plan was simple and the tactics used at Dieppe in 1942 were scaled to overwhelm well-organised Luftwaffe defences.

However, the method to achieve Leigh-Mallory's objectives was compromised by the suboptimal command, control and communication arrangements, which struggled to cope with the deluge of information received. Leigh-Mallory lost control of the air battle as Johnson's confused and free ranging wing missions clearly demonstrated. That said, the timely input of Broadhurst assuaged the damage and in relative terms Leigh-Mallory's fighters had done significantly better than during the previous three months of Circus operations. For him, despite the hybrid operational focus and its multifarious aims and objectives, Dieppe was a relative success, albeit an expensive one. Leigh-Mallory had hoped that his plan would draw the Luftwaffe away from its clever defensive strategy into fighting a larger air battle where the odds were evened out, and to a certain degree this is what happened. Had Leigh-Mallory stood by his 1931 interpretation of air superiority, challenged Sholto Douglas's views on long-range fighters and been more skeptical about the kill claims made by his fighter pilots he may have been able to do more than provide an air umbrella

for the assaulting forces at Dieppe even though that might not have earned the accolade of providing ‘faultless support.’



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**David Stubbs** served in the RAF for thirty-one years, accruing over 6,000 flying hours on maritime patrol and airborne early warning aircraft. He saw operational service in the Cold War as well as over the Balkans and Iraq and on the ground as an air advisor in Afghanistan. He also completed a tour as an exchange officer with the United States Air Force in Oklahoma. His staff tours included responsibility for RAF Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) operations, and for a short time RAF Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) availability. Towards the end of his RAF career he taught on the RAF’s Higher Air Warfare and the Air Battle Staff courses. His last post saw him responsible for the air power education of RAF personnel. In 2012 he gained a Master of Arts in Air Power: History, Theory and Practice at the University of Birmingham before embarking on independent study and writing on air power. He has been published in a number of journals, including the *Journal of Military History* and the *Air Power Review*. Now a civilian, he has established his own company to provide project management and air warfare specialist advice.