
The Battle of Britain

❶ Group captain Peter Townsend was an RAF ace fighter pilot, one of the most capable squadron leaders during the Battle of Britain. Here is an excerpt from his memoirs.

Our turn came soon after Goering, on 13 August, launched his *Adlerangriff*, Eagles' Attack, which, he promised Hitler, would wipe out the R.A.F.'s fighter defences within a week. [...] were attacking in mass.

My frightening childhood impressions of Germans were as vivid as ever; there still echoed in my ears nanny's terrifying threat. I was still frightened of Germans. The fierce individual combats I had so far fought with them had not made me feel any braver. Quite recently, I had dived slap into a formation of thirty Messerschmitts, hoping to pick one off. The storm of lead which followed my hasty withdrawal into a nearby cloud confirmed my fears that the Germans, en masse, were redoubtable. And now I had to lead my squadron of twelve against hundreds of German bombers and fighters. I dreaded the idea and tossed sleeplessly in my bed thinking about it – luckily for no more than a few nights, for the test came on 18 August [...] When I received the order: 'Patrol Canterbury, two hundred plus approaching', I felt not the slightest qualm, even less when I sighted the massed enemy formations, stepped up over thousands of feet like a giant moving staircase, as one fighter-pilot put it.

By the end of the day, the Luftwaffe had suffered a shattering defeat. Goering's boast of victory within a week evaporated in the English air, and it was Churchill, two days later, who had the next word to say, when he paid his immortal tribute to the British fighters: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed..."

15 The enemy's initial onslaught had been repulsed, but the hardest fighting was yet to come.

Peter TOWNSEND, *Time and chance, an autobiography*, London, Methuen, 1978.

❷ A member of staff at a technical college prepares to remove the 'Mickey Mouse' emblem from the rear fuselage of a shot-down German Messerschmitt Bf 109, 2 October 1940. On the fuselage, an Englishman wrote: "All good Jerries [a nickname for the Germans] are dead".



➤ Using the documents and your knowledge, describe the circumstances and explain the importance of the Battle of Britain.