

BRITAIN AT WAR 1940-1941

The Blitz

The initial phase of the Blitz began late in the afternoon of September 7th 1940 when the Germans began Operation London. This was the air offensive against London and other industrial cities. It continued in London for 57 nights. Initially the change in strategy from attacks on the airfields and radar installations caught the RAF off guard and caused extensive damage and civilian casualties. Over 100,000 tons of shipping was lost in the Thames estuary and 1,600 civilians were killed or injured. By September 9th it became clear that round the clock bombing was an attempt to force the British Government to capitulate and to besiege the country through disruption of its vital sea communications.

Poor weather thereafter until September 15th prevented any major activity, but on this day the Luftwaffe mounted two substantial attacks along the Thames estuary targeting the docks and rail communications in the city. Its hope was also that the bombers would draw in large numbers of RAF aircraft that could be destroyed and thereby gain air superiority. The air battle that day was later celebrated as *Battle of Britain Day*. Overall the Luftwaffe lost 18% of its bomber force during this attack and failed to gain the sought after air superiority. Despite this Goering was optimistic that the Luftwaffe could prevail although Hitler and his army

chiefs were not convinced. So much so that on September 17th Hitler postponed *Operation Sea Lion* – the planned invasion of Britain. Worsening weather caused the Germans to switch to night attacks from October 7th. On October 14th the heaviest attacks yet saw 380 bombers attack London resulting in over 2,000 casualties, 200 of these were killed. Anti-aircraft defences were completely non-effective; only two aircraft were actually shot down. Ferocious attacks continued right through October with Liverpool, Manchester Hull and Glasgow all being heavily bombed.

Luftwaffe policy at this point was primarily focussed on London although there were attempts to interfere with the vast industrial factories of the west midlands. There were also strong diversionary attacks on Coventry, Birmingham and Liverpool. For all the destruction of life and property, observers for the Ministry of Home Security failed to detect the slightest sign of a break in morale. The death toll was also much lower than expected, something which Winston Churchill later attributed to the air-raid shelter programme. Wartime observers, particularly from America perceived the bombing as indiscriminate, also pointing out that for the most part the raids had failed to have any significant military impact.

From November through to February 1941 the Luftwaffe shifted its strategy and began more sustained attacks on other industrial cities, with Birmingham and Coventry

suffering the most damage. Around 21 factories were badly damaged in Coventry alone and the loss of public utilities stopped effective work for nine days at one stage. However no follow up raids were made as the Germans underestimated the British power of recovery. By the end of November over 1,100 bombers were available for night raids and this level of attack continued for nearly two months. Probably the most devastating attack occurred on December 29th when German aircraft attacked the city of London itself with incendiary and high explosive bombs causing a firestorm that has been called the second Great Fire of London. Altogether over 130 aircraft destroyed the historical centre of London. Civilian casualties in London throughout the Blitz were in excess of 50,000 with 28,500 killed. Not all the Luftwaffe effort was against inland targets, port cities were also attacked in an attempt to disrupt trade and sea communications. In January Swansea was bombed heavily; Portsmouth, Southsea, Gosport, Plymouth and Cardiff were also targeted.

Eventually the Luftwaffe strategy shifted again; under pressure from Grand Admiral Raeder Hitler began to appreciate that the most effective use of the Airforce should be in support of the Battle of the Atlantic against British shipping and by continuing the attacks against the port facilities. From March onwards the emphasis was on the ports, specifically Glasgow, Liverpool, Plymouth, Newcastle, Hull and Cardiff. The last major attack on London was on May

10/11th when the Luftwaffe flew 571 sorties and dropped 800 tons of bombs. This resulted in over 2,000 fires and 1,500 deaths; for the first time public morale suffered badly. Smaller raids occurred on May 11/12th with damage to the House of Commons, the Law Courts and Westminster Abbey. Although it was not realised at the time, this was effectively the end of the Blitz. By now Hitler was turning his attention to the east and Operation Barbarossa.