

Book Review

The Battle of Britain: Five Months that Changed History, May - October 1940

By James Holland

Reviewed by Dr David Jordan

James Holland's contribution to the historiography of the Battle of Britain differs from many previous works in that it is not simply an account of the air fighting over Britain during the summer months of 1940, bounded by the somewhat arbitrary official dates laid down for the battle, largely in order to set a defined period of time to allow the award of the Battle of Britain clasp for campaign medals.

Holland instead presents an account which, perhaps more than any other to date, seeks to place the battle in the wider context of events in 1940, and without the near-exclusive concentration upon the enormous efforts of Fighter Command in countering the German attack on the United Kingdom. The work of RAF Bomber and Coastal Commands, all too-often ignored by historians, are considered as is the part played by the Royal Navy. Holland gives short shrift to some of the more egregious attempts at revisionism of recent years (usually carried out through the vehicle of the internet, but with the occasional unfortunate escape into print) which seek to claim that the Battle was won by the existence of the Royal Navy. Although some of Britain's most capable maritime historians – most obviously Andrew Gordon – dismiss such a black and white approach and have brought more nuanced consideration to the part played by the naval and air forces, it may well be that the publicity for Holland's book, aided by a BBC television programme, will be the source of a more reasoned consideration of the role of maritime power without the crass attempts by some historians to denigrate the importance of the air force contribution to the Battle.

James Holland places the role of the other components into a reasoned context, pointing out the significance of the naval contribution to the defence of the United Kingdom in a joint context – one which was, in fact, recognised by the Chiefs of Staff in May 1940, in a document *'British Strategy in the Case of a Certain Eventuality'*, in which the importance of the RAF and RN standing firm against German efforts was held to be essential to Britain's ability to continue the war. Holland also gives due consideration of the British Army, which would, of course, have had to have faced any German landing which managed to get ashore, and manages to highlight the important point that despite the disaster of the French campaign, Britain was not quite in the state where the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard platoon of 'Dad's Army' fame would have been the first line of defence against an attempt at establishing a lodgement.

As such, Holland offers one of the few attempts to take a more holistic view of the Battle of Britain. Readers expecting an overview of the Battle which concentrates upon air fighting and accounts of derring-do on both sides are likely to be a little disappointed, not least since the first 250 or so pages deal with events prior to what is commonly accepted as being the period of the Battle of Britain, and, indeed, preceding the speech by Winston Churchill on 18 June 1940 in which he gave popular currency to the term 'the Battle of Britain' by stating that '...the Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin'. This contextualisation is important to both the narrative and the analysis, however, and is thus far from misplaced.

Following the successful approach of his previous works on military history, Holland draws upon the personal recollections of a number of participants in the Battle to add colour to his tale, and does so to good effect, never allowing individual recollection of events to dominate. The overall effect, therefore is to prevent a fully rounded account of the events which led to the Battle of Britain and the successful efforts of the nation as a whole, with the Royal Air Force in the vanguard, to thwart the German effort to force Britain to seek peace. Holland provides a welcome addition to the historiography, perhaps opening a new 'front' in the consideration of the Battle in which the role of Fighter Command is given the credit which is rightly its due, but as part of a broader joint national effort to ensure that Britain was not defeated in 1940, thus leaving the consequences of such a defeat for the future direction of British, European and World history to entertaining counter-factual historical works.

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