The Command and Leadership Competence of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding

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'A difficult man, a self-opinionated man, a most determined man, and a man who knew more than anybody about all aspects of aerial warfare'.

Sir Fredrick Pile[1]

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's place in history is secured by what, in his own eyes, was a failure. Dowding intended, and expected, to become Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) and, for justifiable reasons, he never made it. Instead, he became the man who led 'The Few' in the Battle of Britain. The manner and timing of Dowding's dismissal from his post as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOCinC) Fighter Command in the immediate aftermath of his great victory in the Battle of Britain remains controversial, and clearly reflects upon his command and leadership competence. As Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris reflected: 'He is the only commander who won one of the decisive battles of history, and got sacked for his pains.'[2]

This year marks the 65th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, the first military campaign fought entirely in the air, and without doubt one of the most crucial contests in history. In 1940, Hitler's armies conquered and occupied Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark, and France. The only nation still opposing Nazi Germany was

Britain. Retreating from the continent, the British army managed to save almost all personnel in the evacuation from Dunkirk. However, every piece of armour and heavy equipment was left behind. Consequently, it would be a long time before the army would be re-equipped and organised sufficiently to mount an adequate defence of the British Isles. As Winston Churchill stated at the time:

'What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free . . . Let us, therefore, brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour.'

This paper analyses a man who was singularly responsible for Fighter Command's ability to meet the threat of the Luftwaffe, and defeat it in the vital Battle of Britain — Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding.

This paper critically examines Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's command and leadership competence. The first step in the examination involves insight regarding why Dowding proves to be a most deserving subject. To facilitate the examination, the following terms are defined, before addressing Dowding's command competence: leadership, effective, competent, and command. Dowding's command competence is critically examined in two areas - his career prior to 1940, the foundation for his command style, and critical incidents throughout the Battle of Britain where Dowding's command competence was tested. The next logical step is to examine Dowding's leadership using four leadership models: Kouzes-Posner Trait (Great Man) Leadership Model, Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, Fiedler's Contingency Leadership Model, and Bass and Avolio's Full Range Leadership Model. Finally, this paper concludes with an assessment of Dowding's command and leadership competence.

Hugh Dowding, the son of a schoolmaster, was born in Moffatt, Scotland, on 24 April 1882. He was educated at Winchester School and the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. He joined the Royal Artillery Garrison, and served as a subaltern[3] in Gibraltar, Ceylon, and Hong Kong before spending six years in India with the Mountain Artillery Troops. Returning to Britain, he learned to fly, and obtained his pilot's licence in December 1913. Following this, he joined the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and fought in France during World War One (WW I). In 1915 he was promoted to major, and assumed command of Number (No) 16 Squadron, before taking command of the Ninth (Headquarters) Wing during the Battle of the Somme. During the Battle of the Somme, Dowding clashed with Hugh Trenchard,[4] the RFC commander, over the need to rest pilots exhausted by constant flying duty. As a result, Dowding saw no further operational service during the war itself. He was promoted to brigadier-general and sent back to Britain to run the Southern Training Brigade. After the war, Dowding joined the newly formed RAF.

Dowding made his real mark during the 1930s. In 1933, he was promoted to air marshal, and received a knighthood the following year. As the member of the Air Council for Supply and Research, he believed in research and development was essential, and campaigned hard for adequate funding. He knew the days of the biplane were numbered, and pushed for a faster fighter. He encouraged the development of advanced fighter aircraft, and it was largely due to his initiative the legendary Hurricane and Spitfire aircraft were ordered into production in 1934. Dowding was also responsible for early work on the Stirling and other heavy bombers, and the development of eight-gun armament. He also showed tremendous interest in the detection of enemy aircraft, and provided his full support to the new Radio Direction Finding (RDF) equipment.

Dowding's interest in defence made him the natural choice to lead the new Fighter Command when it was established in July 1936. Despite Dowding's disappointment of being overlooked for the CAS position in 1937, he continued to

prepare his command for war. He oversaw the introduction of new aircraft, the development of the Royal Observer Corps, and the integration of RDF units with communications and control organisations. The resulting system was far more advanced than anything else in the world at the time.

In 1940, Dowding worked closely with Air Vice-Marshal (AVM) Keith Park,[5] the commander of No 11 Group, to cover the evacuation at Dunkirk. Although Dowding only had 200 aircraft at his disposal, he managed to gain air superiority over the Luftwaffe. However, he was unwilling to sacrifice his pilots in what he considered a futile attempt to help Allied troops during the Western Offensive. Dowding made a personal appeal to the War Cabinet in May 1940, and effectively ceased further aircraft detachments to France. This showed Dowding's significant foresight, preparing the defences of Britain for the Battle of Britain.

During the Battle of Britain, Dowding's defined tactical role was limited, with day-to-day control of the fighters resting with the Group Commanders. AVM Park commanded No 11 Group, and AVM Leigh-Mallory[6] commanded No 12 Group, with 11 Group taking the brunt of the enemy attacks. Park's views of getting aircraft to intercept the Luftwaffe as far forward as possible, closely matched those of Dowding's, while Leigh-Mallory favoured large formations of defending aircraft in 'Big Wings', and Dowding's inability to settle the squabble between the two led to serious criticism of him. The Air Ministry favoured Leigh-Mallory's policies, and Dowding was increasingly seen as uncooperative and difficult. Within weeks of the end of the Battle of Britain, and with a new CAS, Air Chief Marshal Portal, in post, Dowding was removed from his position as AOCinC Fighter Command.

Subsequently, Dowding was persuaded by Churchill to visit the United States on behalf of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. The trip was not successful. Dowding was inclined to put forward his own views, which were not always in accord with those of Britain's permanent representatives.

Returning in June 1941, he was asked to prepare a dispatch concerning the Battle of Britain. This was ready before October, the month of his retirement as indicated to him by the Air Ministry. Churchill expressed 'indignation' when he learned of this, and virtually commanded Dowding to accept an appointment in the Air Ministry. The new appointment was not to Dowding's taste and, before long, the old arguments with the Air Ministry reappeared. At his own request, he eventually retired in July 1942.

An unwillingness to break with Service precedents meant Dowding was not promoted to the rank of Marshal of the Royal Air Force, even when the King recommended it, and he spent the rest of his life largely away from the RAF and became a writer of mystic works.[7] After the war, Dowding became a legendary figure to the Battle of Britain pilots, and one of his proudest moments was to receive a standing ovation from his so-called 'chicks' at the première of the film Battle of Britain in 1969. In later years, he became President of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association. After his death in 1970, his remains were interred in Westminster Abbey, a fitting tribute to Dowding's remarkable achievements.

Why analyse Dowding?

Few people can be said to alter the course of history, but Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, later Lord Dowding of Bentley Priory, is undoubtedly one of them. As AOCinC Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain, he was the architect of one of the most significant military victories of modern times. Yet, no sooner was the battle won, his superiors removed him as AOCinC Fighter Command.

The Battle of Britain remains not only one of the most significant battles of the World War Two (WW II), it is, arguably, one of the most decisive battles of the twentieth century. But, what other British battles and military actions compete with it for historical importance? If Julius Caesar's conquest of 44-45 AD is disregarded: the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 are the immortalised military actions.

A common characteristic of all these battles is they are all invasions, or attempted invasions, of the British Isles. The first two, Julius Caesar's and William of Normandy's, were successful invasions. Conversely, the Armada and Trafalgar, like the action of 1940, were botched invasion attempts. These battles are famous in themselves as examples of brilliant naval actions, and for the greater strategic reason of ending Spanish and French aggression against England. It is for these reasons, the names of the commanders and their exploits are world-famous; they are Sir Francis Drake and Lord Horatio Nelson. However, unlike the previous momentous victorious commanders, the name of the victor of the Battle of Britain remains virtually unknown.

Considering the Battle of Britain, a recap of the political situation is beneficial:

The Nazi war machine, under bold and brilliant leadership had, by the summer of 1940, defeated and occupied all of Europe, from the Russian border to the Atlantic, and from the Swedish border to the Mediterranean. The British Army, thoroughly defeated, was evacuated at Dunkirk, and France capitulated at the end of June. Hitler's generals had promised him the RAF could be destroyed in two to four weeks[8], and he prepared for the invasion of England.

The only thing standing between a German invasion was RAF Fighter Command. However, the inconceivable calamity did not take place due to Fighter Command; and only Fighter Command, for the Battle of Britain was an exclusively aerial engagement. Somehow, the Battle of Britain became associated with the name of Winston Churchill, perhaps because of his leadership and oratory — this is a common misconception, and Dowding was never suitably recognised for his significant role.[9] Moreover, Dowding's treatment immediately following the Battle of Britain was abhorrent.

Much of the history of the Battle of Britain we learn about is inaccurate. Was the Battle worth fighting at all? The best evidence that we have on this came from Field Marshal Von Rundstedt.[10] After the end

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of the war he was interrogated and one of the most important questions asked of him was when he felt that the tide was beginning to turn and when the uninterrupted catalogue of German victories became more and more doubtful. Was it Stalingrad or Leningrad or El Alamein? 'Oh no,' replied the Field Marshal, 'it was the Battle of Britain.' This answer certainly surprised the interrogators and they questioned him further. 'Well you see, that was the fist time I realized that we were not invincible.'[11]

However, it is clear there was one man without whom the Battle of Britain could not have been won — Sir Hugh Dowding.

Definitions

Leadership has been a topic of interest to historians and philosophers since ancient times, but scientific

studies only commenced around the turn of the twentieth century. There is a vast array of leadership literature available, but much of it converges when defining leadership. Definitions involve the leader, the followers and the ability to influence others to achieve results. However, this paper focuses on a single definition to delineate the essential elements of the leadership process: 'Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences two or more individuals to achieve a common goal.'[12]

The Macquarie Concise Dictionary Second Edition defines effective as 'producing the intended or expected result', and competent is defined as 'properly qualified, capable'. Van Crevald, an authority concerning Military leadership, suggests a commander must, firstly, be able to arrange and coordinate those functions an army needs to exist. Secondly, commanders must enable the army to carry out its proper mission — to inflict the maximum amount of death and destruction on the enemy within the shortest possible time and at minimum loss to itself.[13]

Conversely, command is a uniquely military concept. Commanders usually exercise command when they head military organisations, or produce military outcomes. British Army Doctrine defines command as:

'. . . the authority vested in an individual for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces. The need for command arises from, and varies with, the size and complexity of the force. The larger and more sophisticated a force becomes, the greater the difficulties in preserving its cohesion and fighting power. Thus, the importance of the function 'Command' is related to the level of responsibility of an individual commander.'[14]

Competence in command requires the commander to master management and leadership simultaneously and, thus, provide the most effective fighting force to achieve military objectives with minimum losses. A competent commander will use the formal power of command as an effective platform to project personal power and affect subordinates.

Dowding's command competence

Prior to 1940. Dowding entered Woolwich at seventeen and a half with aspirations to become a Royal Engineer. However, he failed, due to a lack of diligence, to attain the required standard to uphold his chance of a commission in the Royal Engineers. Consequently, he had perforce to view life from the standpoint of an officer in the Royal Artillery. Dowding vowed never to fail again. As yet, his ambition was limited, but he had the natural desire of an able man to increase his knowledge, and advance in his profession.[15]

In 1907, Dowding had his first encounter with another officer who would play a significant part in his future. During an exercise, Dowding's troop was to provide support for a rifle battalion retreat, the enemy being played by two companies of the 2nd Gurkhas. Dowding's advance guard reported there were Gurkhas ahead of them on both sides of the road. As a result of a spectacular night march, the Gurkhas were in an ideal position to cut off the retreat of the British battalion. Dowding silently deployed his small force along the ridge, before informing the Gurkhas of their annihilation. The subaltern commanding the Gurkhas was Cyril Newall. He and Dowding disagreed on this occasion over the claimed victory. This episode created the milieu for their future differing views.

Dowding spent six years in India as a subaltern, and he relished the strenuous, solitary, and often dangerous life on manoeuvres in the Himalayan foothills. He left India determined to rise in his profession, and was destined for astonishingly swift promotion.[16] The War with Germany created the opportunity, and as Dowding later himself reflected:

'I served for 13 years as a subaltern and then, in less than four years, I became a brigadier-general. Thereafter, with the exception of a few months, I remained a General or Air Officer for 26 years. It was a strange, lopsided record.'[17]

If not an infallible passport to promotion, the letters p.s.c. (passed staff college) after his name in the Army List would enhance his career. Dowding's path to Camberley was anything but

easy, but he eventually secured a place at Staff College. On the whole he enjoyed his two years at Staff College. He was, however, irked by the contrast between the respect paid in theory to freedom of thought and the tendency to repress all but conventional ideas. Non-conformists who challenged the accepted notions were labelled 'bad boys' by the staff astounded at student's temerity. Dowding became distrustful of accepted notions, and it was not long before he became one of the 'bad boys'. It was at Staff College where Dowding earned the nickname 'Stuffy'. Although he observed the rules, his fellow students found he had a strong inclination to stand apart from the usual boisterous antics. Subsequently, he became known as 'Stuffy'. Dowding accepted the nickname in the spirit it was given, and it amused him as he considered it to be original. Later, 'Stuffy' was used with increasing affection, and the nickname would remain with him for the remainder of his Service career.

Dowding found the instructors at the Staff College to be hardworking and conscientious men, well-read, intelligent, and generally open-minded. In only two respects did they fall short of his expectations. One of these was their subservience to doctrine; the other was their reluctance to face the dawning problem of air power. During one exercise, Dowding had six aircraft at his disposal, and he decided to use all of them. His actions met with ridicule from his instructor. Dowding was no expert in air matters, but he could not understand the instructor's illogical attitude. He concluded the Army may as well have some staff officers who knew something about aviation, and he was going to be one of them.[18]

He decided the only way to achieve this objective was to learn to fly.

In 1913, the RFC was in its infancy, and would only train candidates who already held a civilian licence. Dowding learned to fly at the Royal Aero Club at Brooklands. Flying lessons took place in the early morning, and Dowding was able to juggle his time to undertake both his flying lessons and his Staff College curriculum. He obtained his pilot's certificate (No. 711) early in the morning on the same day as he passed out from Camberley, 20 December 1913. He obtained his licence after a total time in the air, passenger, dual, and solo, of one hour and 40 minutes.

Some men learn to fly because the conquest of the air appeals to their sense of the romantic; others because they mean to make flying their profession or source of livelihood. Dowding belonged to none of these classes; his interest in flying was prompted by his desire to gain knowledge likely to be useful to him as a soldier. As a graduate from Staff College, he was readily acceptable as a candidate for the RFC. His plan was to obtain his wings at the Central Flying School (CFS), and then return to regimental duty.[19]

It was at CFS, in 1914, where Dowding first met Trenchard, who was the Assistant Commandant, and whose subsequent career would impinge upon Dowding's. On more than one occasion, Trenchard's determination played a part of an immovable object to the irresistible force of Dowding's tenacity. Despite their different military careers to date, both men were similar in many respects. Both were remarkable for integrity, high-mindedness, contempt for meanness and pretence, a rare capacity for self-sacrifice in the interests of others or for an abstract cause, and a fundamental kindness concealed by an outward severity born from their determination nothing should deflect them from their path of duty.[20] Once posted from CFS, Dowding was serving under Trenchard, and was desperate to join the fighting in France. Twice weekly he tackled Trenchard over the issue, and eventually succeeded. Trenchard dispatched him to France as an observer — at the time this was considered a snub within RFC circles. However, Dowding was content, and, after a few weeks in France, one of his squadron's aircraft descended behind enemy lines and the crew were taken prisoner. Dowding became a front-line pilot, and was thrown into the thick of battle over the Western Front.

Dowding was promoted to major in the summer of 1915 and was posted to command No 16 Squadron at La Gorgue. The Squadron was part of the First Wing under Trenchard, who was soon to become

the RFC commander in France. Dowding viewed this new job as less satisfying than his old one, where he specialised in early experiments in wireless telegraphy. Temperamentally, Dowding was well fitted to exercise authority, yet command of a squadron was not the employment where one would expect him to be happiest. To most of his subordinates he was seen as a tall, softly spoken man with a quiet manner. He had an air of abstracted concern with things outside their ken, was curiously withdrawn, and had a disconcerting habit of mingling praise with blame. To them, he personified aloofness.

While Dowding was commanding No 16 Squadron, it brought down only one German aircraft, whose destruction was attested by its descent behind British lines. The pilot and observer landed safely, only to be shot, in a flagrant disregard of the established custom, while emerging from their aircraft. In an uncommon chivalrous act, Dowding collected their belongings and had them dropped behind German lines with a message stating the men were buried with full military honours. Many years later, Dowding was informed the incident made him a legend in the German Air Force. Amongst German units on the Western Front, it was widely held a commanding officer who thought prisoners from his unit were not being properly treated had only to drop a message for Major Dowding to secure prompt attention to their grievance.[21]

Although this is likely to be an exaggeration, it is a sound assessment of Dowding's character.

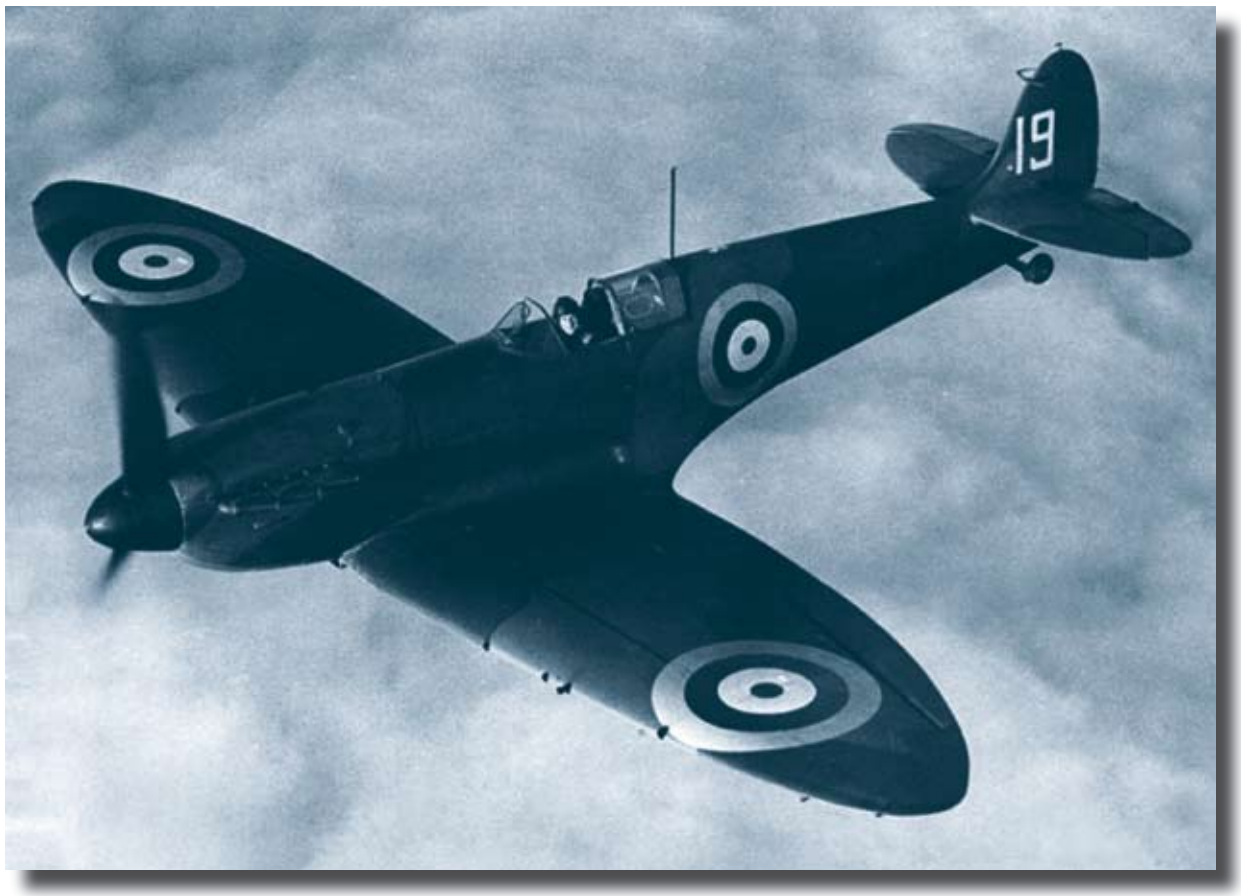
Dowding had his first major disagreement with Trenchard in July 1915. Dowding's Squadron received new propellers to fit to their aircraft; however, the propellers were designed for the smaller-engined aircraft, and would not fit. Dowding, received no satisfaction from Wing Headquarters, and asked Trenchard to look into the matter. The complaint caught Trenchard at a bad moment, and Dowding's air of superior wisdom displeased him. While Trenchard admired Dowding's technical efficiency, he was also aware of the situation concerning 16 Squadron's aircrew; the flight commanders resented Dowding's 'pernickety primness', and several of the pilots and observers were almost in open revolt. Trenchard was not predisposed to treat the complaint reasonably, and ordered Dowding to fit the propellers; Dowding compromised, and fitted one propeller with extreme difficulty. His doubts as to the final airworthiness of the machine led him to personally test fly it. Telephoning Trenchard to report on the successful, but dangerous, test flight, Dowding was informed by Trenchard he (Dowding) was quite right:

. . . they were sent the wrong propellers, and the representative in Paris let them down. Dowding seized upon the incident as an indication of the technical stupidity of Trenchard who, by contrast, dismissed it as a manifestation of Dowding's self-righteous stubbornness.[22]

The second incident occurred towards the end of the Somme offensive. Dowding was appointed to the Ninth (Headquarters) Wing, and was at odds with Trenchard over tactics. Within a month of the start of the offensive, losses were extremely severe and Dowding felt justified seeking respite for his aircrew. Trenchard agreed, but the incident left him uneasy about Dowding's apparent lack of self-confidence and concerns over his obsession with casualties. Subsequently, Trenchard referred to Dowding as a 'Dismal Jimmy who could hardly be relied upon to restore squadrons' morale'[23] because of his manner and modus operandi. Dismal is perhaps not a good portrayal, but Dowding certainly was serious and austere to the point of appearing pessimistic. To contemplate and prepare for the worst is a function of command, but to show it, as Dowding did, was a mistake. As a result, in 1916, Dowding was sent back to Britain to run the Southern Training Brigade. Trenchard appointed Dowding's old adversary, Cyril Newall, as the new commander of No 16 Squadron. Dowding was promoted to brigadier-general, but saw no further operational service during the war itself. After the war, Dowding joined the newly formed RAF.

In 1930, Dowding was invited to join the Air Council as the Air Member for Supply and Research. In this position, Dowding had greater

A Supermarine Spitfire I of No 19 Squadron, 1938. This squadron was the first in Fighter Command to be equipped with the Spitfire



Perceiving the need for faster fighters, he took the lead insisting on metal monoplanes instead of wooden biplanes, and wholeheartedly supported the development of the Hurricane and Spitfire

responsibility than any other individual for fostering technical progress within the RAF. Not all of Dowding's decisions as Air Member for Supply and Research turned out well. Within a few weeks of his appointment, trusting the experts, he cleared the airship R101 for her maiden flight to India. The disaster befalling R101 at Beauvais made him wary of trusting experts without strong proof of their correctness. Perhaps his worst mistake was in connection with aircraft petrol tanks.

Trying to develop tanks to be crash-proof, he overlooked the much greater need to produce self-sealing tanks damaged by bullet penetration. However, he also made some decisions of supreme importance to help win his Battle a few years later. Perceiving the need for faster fighters, he took the lead insisting on metal monoplanes instead of wooden biplanes, and wholeheartedly supported the development of the Hurricane and Spitfire. He also backed the development of early warning radar from the initial experiments, to operational readiness.[24]

His considerable technical background was invaluable to his support for the development of

radar command and control, and modern all metal fighter aircraft made him well qualified, perhaps the most qualified in the RAF, to become AOCinC Fighter Command.

As he strived to create Fighter Command, his relationship with the Air Ministry was difficult, and became further soured in 1937 when, his old rival, Sir Cyril Newall, 11 years Dowding's junior, was appointed as CAS. Dowding was convinced the Air Ministry promised him the post of CAS, and he naturally felt surprised when the decision was made in favour of someone else, but he controlled any great expression of disappointment.[25] However, his reserved and difficult character made him less suited than Newall for the senior post. Dowding's disappointment, and poor working relationship with the new CAS, was exacerbated by the confusion created over the frequent deferment of his own retirement. Between 1937 and his final retirement, Dowding's service was extended for short terms no less than four times, and the requests conveyed in cold, discourteous terms.[26] This situation continued unabated throughout the whole of the subsequent critical period of the Battle of Britain. While this was intolerable to Dowding, the account reflects the immense pressures of the time as much as it does to any insensitivity or malice within the Air Ministry. The relationship between Dowding and the Air Staff before the outbreak of war, with its own ensuing pressures, was both uneasy and resentful.

It is right and completely understandable for the performance of a Commander-in-Chief (CinC) to be under the spotlight in preparing for war and conducting operations. The more at stake, the closer the interest. Many commanders would prefer to be given their task and then be allowed to pursue it to its logical conclusion, without what is seen as political meddling.[27] The end of the 'Phoney War' and the rapidly degrading situation in France in May-June 1940 created immense problems for Fighter Command, and brought these perspectives to a head. The alarming attrition rate of the fighter force supporting the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), drawn from squadrons necessary for the air defence of Britain, led Dowding to directly request he be allowed to brief the War Cabinet -— effectively cutting across the chain of command. On 15 May 1940, Dowding logically and starkly presented to the Cabinet the facts and consequences to home defence should further squadrons be dispatched to France, and concluded this was unacceptable. The Cabinet was swayed by his arguments, and agreed not to send any further squadrons. However, Churchill, Prime Minister of only five days, reversed the decision the same day, and dispatched four additional squadrons. Although six squadrons less than requested by France, the BEF evacuation and subsequent fall of France led to premature losses of Fighter Command assets, causing Dowding great angst. Dowding's eloquent plea and his subsequent famous letter,[28] reiterating the perilous state of the fighter defences, led to Churchill declaring, on 19 May, 'henceforth, no more fighter squadrons should leave the country, irrespective of events in France.'[29]

While Dowding's appearance at the Cabinet meeting was a defining strategic moment, it allegedly created a personal aversion by Churchill towards him. However, this does not accord with the facts. Churchill subsequently intervened on Dowding's behalf in the long-running dispute concerning his retirement date. This was evident from the tone of Churchill's note to the Secretary of State for Air: 'Personally, I think he is one of the best men you have . . . in fact, he has my full confidence.'[30] This clearly indicates what Churchill thought of him. Dowding's strategic views may well have had a decisive impact on War Cabinet decision-making. It can be argued he filled a conspicuous gap at the strategic level of war, as well as his duty at the operational level. Conversely, many of Dowding's superiors were found wanting in this area; for example, Newall, who approved his appearance at the War Cabinet and the Air Ministry. Dowding also cultivated very close personal relationships with critical decision-makers and resource-providers, like Lord Beaverbrook, aircraft production and War Cabinet, and General Pile, CinC Anti-Aircraft Command. The catalyst for his close relationship with Beaverbrook was undoubtedly their mutual dislike of the Air Ministry. Beaverbrook called them 'the

bloody Air Marshals,' and with whom Dowding already fought running battles. In addition, Dowding had a sound political patron in Churchill, who harboured doubts over the running of the Air Ministry. Churchill approved of Dowding's organisation of Home Defence, and as the spotlight turned on Fighter Command after Dunkirk, Churchill warmed to both its young pilots and, pari passu, their CinC.[31] Dowding's apparent focus on the strategic level of war and his ability to influence strategic and production decisions, underlines his command competence. Thus, it is contended Dowding's opponent's underhand manoeuvring led to his ultimate replacement, and they persuaded Churchill, against his judgement, to accept Dowding's removal as necessary.

Despite Dowding's eventual removal from post, his tenure as AOCinC Fighter Command was extended numerous times at a time when others found wanting in command competence were ruthlessly culled by Churchill, eg Wavell and Auchinleck. It could be argued no one else was capable of assuming the position at Fighter Command during a critical time in British history. However, to gain a balanced view, it is necessary to appreciate what the Air Staff thought of Dowding. In their minds, by July 1940, there were three valid reasons why he should be replaced.

Firstly, his age; Dowding was 58 years old, and the senior RAF officer holding an active Command, while several staff 10 years his junior were ready for advancement. Additionally, Dowding's command style was considered inflexible and 'old school' by many of his juniors, and was not perceived as dynamic enough to lead Fighter Command through the Battle of Britain.

Secondly, Dowding's tenure at Fighter Command commenced with its formation in July 1936. The Service custom was for an officer to hold a post for two or three years before going on to gain further experience, so Dowding's tenure of four years was exceptionally long. This manifested itself in a significant lack of direction by Dowding over the tactics employed by Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain.

Thirdly, and the main reason why the Air Council wanted Dowding ousted, was concerned more with his personality than his age. Notably, since 1937, when he failed to become CAS, Dowding developed an increasing disrespect for the chain of command and, in particular, the Air Staff. He claimed they failed to share his enthusiasm for the importance of fighter defence, and regarded them as indecisive regarding policy-making and incompetent in its execution. While his outlook was clear, it was extremely narrow, at times becoming blinkered, whereas the Air Staff's was necessarily panoramic, and had a tendency to blur when options overlapped.[32]

Prosecution of the Battle of Britain

Dowding's organisation and subsequent running of Fighter Command provided an almost classic example of how a CinC should work. Over a protracted period of time, he evolved a method of formulating his plans in a strategic sense and for giving orders. He had a complete grasp of the necessity to keep his eye on the long-term view, planning ahead for what he believed would be the most likely course of future action.[33] However, if there was a potential flaw in Dowding's intellect, it was he became too involved at the tactical level. However, despite being a natural a sceptic, Dowding possessed very good technical knowledge, and he did his own investigating when he considered the operational or technical advice suspect, a lesson he learned from his time in the Air Ministry. To his credit he was aware his own understanding of what was happening could well be inferior to the most junior of front-line pilots.[34] At this point in the paper, it is fair to assess Dowding's preoccupation with tactics undoubtedly caused him first to miss, and then mishandle, the biggest operational problem occurring during the Battle of Britain — the disagreement between his two senior commanders — AVM Trafford Leigh-Mallory, commanding No 12 Group in the north and east, and AVM Keith Park, commanding No 11 Group in the most vulnerable and active area south of the Thames. Park was appointed to command No 11 Group by Dowding ahead of the extremely ambitious Leigh-Mallory. These two very different characters had individual views

regarding air fighting strategy and tactics. Park used disruptive tactics, and scrambled squadrons as fast as he could, allowing them to intercept as far forward as they could. This was as directed by Dowding, but carried the risk of squadrons being outnumbered. Leigh-Mallory preferred to build up his intercepting force into a 'Big Wing' of four or five squadrons, taking valuable time to assemble in the air, and then try for a knockout blow on a raid.[35]

In addition to tactical differences, Park and Leigh-Mallory disliked each other to the point of strong personal antipathy, and took no trouble to hide the fact from their staffs.[36]

Whatever the relative merits over subsequent tactics, Leigh-Mallory's thwarted ambition was at the heart of the problem.

The 'Big Wing' tactic was created by Squadron Leader Douglas Bader, the highly aggressive Commanding Officer of the Duxford-based No 242 Squadron of 12 Group.[37] Although Bader was an extremely courageous fighter pilot and leader, he is not acknowledged as a strategist. However, he believed interception by a mass of fighters was the best method of destroying large numbers of enemy aircraft. Unfortunately, Bader's determined drive to prove this theory led him to ignore fighter controller's directions, in contravention of the system created by Dowding, and led to 11 Group's airfields not receiving the necessary fighter cover from 12 Group. Leigh-Mallory unreservedly backed the 'Big Wing' theory. However, Dowding was not in favour of this, believing the formation of five squadrons' aircraft would take too long to disperse, and large formations of fighters would get in each other's way.

Following the Battle of Britain, historical data was used to recreate one of the big air battles of September 1940 in Fighter Command. Umpires were appointed to watch the way the battle went. Leigh-Mallory, now in charge of No 11 Group, reacted to the German threat with big-wing formations that he and Bader argued were best. The exercise was a fiasco, and the umpires decreed the vital Fighter Command airfields of Biggin Hill and Kenley were bombed before the 'Big Wings' were airborne.[38] This recreation proved Dowding correct in his tactics.

The Adjutant of 242 Squadron was Flight Lieutenant Peter MacDonald, who was also a Member of Parliament (MP). MacDonald was in an ideal position to hear Bader's complaints concerning the squadron's involvement, or lack of it, in the battle. During the controversy, MacDonald tackled the Under-Secretary of State for Air, Harold Balfour, concerning the situation. Balfour refused to discuss the matter with MacDonald, who then asked Balfour to arrange a meeting with Churchill. Balfour refused, but as an MP, MacDonald had a right to an interview with the Prime Minister. A meeting between MacDonald and Churchill certainly took place, but no date is recorded. Subsequent to the meeting, inquiries from Churchill were forthcoming concerning the controversy, followed by visits to Duxford by senior government officials, including Churchill, to review the situation. MacDonald's intervention was largely heralded as part of an alleged conspiracy led by Leigh-Mallory to discredit Dowding.[39] The conspiracy theory is supported by the reported discussion between Park and Leigh-Mallory after a meeting with Dowding in March 1940; Leigh-Mallory said he would: 'move heaven and earth to get Dowding sacked.'[40]

However, the 'Big Wing' lobby appealed to the Deputy CAS, Sholto Douglas, who chaired a, now infamous, meeting in the Air Ministry on 17 October 1940 to discuss fighter tactics. This meeting was identified as an ambush by the 'Big Wing' lobby against Dowding. Certainly, the presence of Bader, an unlikely and extremely junior attendee, lent weight to their argument, as did the failure to include Park's prepared statement in the minutes.[41]

There is little doubt Douglas' sympathies lay with the 'Big Wing' theorists, and little substance arose from the meeting, but it should have focused Dowding's attention as a commander to the critical disagreement between his two group commanders, and for him to resolve it.

A Messerschmitt Bf-109E-1 of Stab III/Jagdgeschwader 26 which force landed in a cornfield at Northdown in Kent on the afternoon of 24 July 1940 after its pilot had been severely wounded in an engagement with RAF fighters

The key to victory was inflicting unacceptable attrition of the Luftwaffe in the battle for air superiority during daylight

The use of contrary tactics by the AOCs of 11 and 12 Groups in the middle of a battle was inappropriate. Moreover, their commander, Dowding, did not even notice and, when he did, was unwilling to make a command decision. Dowding should have intervened, and it is evident he was gravely at fault, even incompetent, for not doing so. Indeed, it was his responsibility as AOCinC to do so. While he could see the tactical arguments were not mutually exclusive, he failed to appreciate the extent to which the poor co-operation between the two groups, generated by the tactical differences, was jeopardising the whole conduct of the battle. Thus, Dowding lacked competence as a commander relating to this significant issue.

An alternative view indicates Dowding chose not to interfere; if this is the case, why not? Firstly, the desired results were being achieved. Secondly, the locations of the respective groups had an effect on tactics. Thirdly, what is the harm of having two very capable, but egotistical subordinate commanders 'having a go' at each other so long as they fought against the common enemy successfully — as both did. Fourthly, replacing either key subordinate group commander in the middle of the Battle of Britain could have disastrous consequences on morale and combat effectiveness. Consequently, an alternative analysis of Dowding's decision not to intervene required confidence in the validity of his own strategic appreciation of the air defence of the British Isles, faith in his subordinates, and extreme moral courage given the consequences at stake.

As early as August 1940, the Luftwaffe began to mount concentrated night bombing attacks.

Dowding, at this critical stage of the battle, strongly resisted diverting any of his scarce single-engined fighters to meet this new threat, against which they were largely ineffective; he was looking to the development of airborne radar. His obstinate resolve preserving the fighter force in a condition to prosecute the main effort was maintained for too long in the face of the enemy's changing tactics and the political need to be seen to react to it. This need was demonstrated by the appointment of a high level committee chaired by ex-CAS, Sir John Salmond, who did not admire Dowding. Salmond's committee's conclusions were swiftly formulated and endorsed by the end of September, and presented Dowding as 'the obstacle to new thinking and progress at Fighter Command.'[42] Despite coming under considerable political pressure because of the night Blitz, Dowding was perhaps astute enough to realise it could be endured, despite the pain, while the central aim was achieved. Thus, he correctly identified, the key to victory was inflicting unacceptable attrition of the Luftwaffe in the battle for air superiority during daylight. Dowding claimed the diversion of assets away from the main effort was self-defeating, and night engagements were not a decisive factor. However, he did divert some valuable resources to help develop a modest night fighter capability. Overall, Dowding continued to be steadfast in his reluctance to change tactics, showing a degree of inflexibility required of a senior commander. Arguably, Dowding's command competence could be characterised by identifying he was following the first Principle of War by careful selection and maintenance of the strategic aim. Thus, in this aspect of his tenure as AOCinC Fighter Command, Dowding is assessed as competent in command. As the eminent military historian Sir Basil Liddell-Hart wrote after the battle:

'The Germans' bid to gain command of the air was frustrated by the superb efforts of 50 odd squadrons of Fighter Command under the mastery direction of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding.'[43]

The considerable angst over night defences, coupled with the political fallout of this and the 'Big Wing' saga, provided the 'evidence' needed for Dowding's critics to persuade Churchill he should be removed. The pressure group to dismiss Dowding was led by Salmond, whose influence behind the scenes was considerable, with the strong backing of Lord Trenchard who: 'entertained qualms about Dowding's leadership, and considered he had lost his grip.'[44] As 'the Father of the Royal Air Force', Trenchard retained significant influence. Considering such a powerful lobby was needed to achieve the aim is significant, and lends credence to Dowding's backing by Churchill. It is surmised Churchill was under considerable political and military pressure, and reluctantly gave way, resulting in Dowding's removal from post on 13 November 1940.

Command competence summary

As a young officer, Dowding seemed set for an honourable but conventional soldier's life. Aviation opened new possibilities for his devoted spirit and inquiring mind. His stern sense of duty, added to his well-founded competence in practical flying matters, made Dowding a formidable advocate for views strongly held. Later, Dowding felt aggrieved by what he considered to be years of shabby treatment suffered at the hands of the Air Ministry. This discontent was compounded by the lack of camaraderie displayed with Newall, who was promoted over Dowding in 1937. Clearly, Dowding possessed strong moral character and integrity and, while not adverse to patronage, he did court it. Dowding's practical bent, his insistence for experimentation and trials to take place, and his imaginative grasp of aircrew requirements often led him into conflict with colleagues constrained by orthodox opinions. Assessing Dowding's command effectiveness and competence, it is noted he had neither the time nor inclination to be diplomatic regarding his dealings with his superiors, and being right was not necessarily an endearing quality. Reviewing Dowding's command competence, it is assessed he undoubtedly produced the intended results throughout his career and was thus, competent in command.

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Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris GCB DSO OBE RAF

Air Commodore James Coward RAF (Retired)

Group Captain Dennis Stubbs RAAF (Retired)

Wing Commander Roald Dahl RAF (Retired)

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[2] Probert, H, 2001, Bomber Harris, p 98.

[3] A British military term for an officer below the rank of captain, generally a second lieutenant.

[4] Hugh Trenchard (1873-1956) helped to lay the foundations of the Royal Air Force (RAF) during World War One. While commanding the RFC, Trenchard established a policy of claiming air superiority by launching successive waves of attacks to gain air control - the approach became standard RFC (and later RAF) policy, although Trenchard attracted much contemporary, and subsequent, criticism for despatching obsolete aircraft on fighting missions with significant loss of life. Trenchard also focussed the RFC efforts upon ensuring his aircrews provided adequate support for forces on the ground. Trenchard was appointed Chief of Air Staff in January 1918, but resigned his position three months later following a quarrel with Lord Rothermere, the Air Secretary. Later the same year, Trenchard was given responsibility for the organisation of the Inter-allied Independent Bomber Force, consisting of a collection of heavy RAF bombers intended to raid rail and industrial targets in Germany. Re-appointed Chief of Air Staff, by War and Air Minister Winston Churchill in 1919, Trenchard founded training colleges for air cadets and staff officers, and introduced a system of short-service commissions so as to provide a reservoir of trained personnel should the need arise. Remaining Chief of Staff until 1927, Trenchard was made the first marshal of the RAF in that year, retiring two years later. Regarded by many as 'the father of the RAF'.

[5] AVM Keith Park, a New Zealander, came to Britain to serve in the WWI as a gunner before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps during 1917 and receiving a permanent commission in the Royal Air Force. He was given command of his first squadron, 48 Squadron, on 10 April 1918. It was the first to be equipped with the Bristol Fighter, and later passed through the RAF Staff College before being appointed air attaché to Argentina. By 1938 he was Dowding's right-hand man as senior Staff Officer in Fighter Command, and was subsequently appointed as Air Officer Commanding No 11 Group. Like his commander, Park was relieved of his post almost immediately after the Battle of Britain, and given command of a Flying Training Group. In 1942 he became Air Officer Commanding Malta. This was during the anxious period when the defence of the island rested with a few Hurricanes which fought with great determination and courage until the arrival of additional aircraft and aid saved the garrison and the Mediterranean cleared. In January 1944, he was appointed Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East and, a year later, Allied Air Commander-in-Chief of South-East Asia Command. He died in New Zealand in 1975. It was said of him by Air Vice-Marshal 'Johnnie' Johnson,: a great fighter leader of the Second World War: 'he was the only man who could have lost the war in a day or even an afternoon.'

[6] AVM Trafford Leigh-Mallory was born on 07 November 1892, at Mobberley, Cheshire. He joined the Territorial battalion of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment on the outbreak of WW I and, shortly afterwards, received a commission in the Lancashire Fusiliers. Seconded to the RFC in July 1916, he was graded as major in the RAF following its formation in April 1918. For services in France, he was mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Granted a commission in the RAF with the rank of squadron leader, in 1921 he joined the School of Army Co-operation, which he later command for three years. Further experience of air-land co-operation, and, after service at the Air Ministry and overseas, he commanded No 12 Group in 1937. Five years later, he moved across to No 11 Group and, on promotion to Air Marshal, was appointed AOCinC Fighter Command. Leigh-Mallory was killed in November 1944 when the plane taking himself and his wife to his next appointment as Air Commander-in-Chief, South-East Asia Command crashed en-route.

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[9] Dixon, J., 2004, The Battle of Britain: Victory & Defeat / Jack Dixon, viewed 07 September 2004,

[10]<http://www.woodfieldpublishing.com/index.html?target=p_115.html&lang=en-gb>

[11] German Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt was known as "a high priest of strategy" and was one of Hitler's ablest leaders during WWII. He held commands on both the Eastern and Western fronts, played a major role in defeating France in 1940, and led much of the opposition to the Allied offence in the West in 1944-45.

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[33] Ray, J. op cit, p 183.
[34] Wright, R. op cit, p 146 .

[35] Bishop, P. 2003, Fighter Boys – Saving Britain 1940, Harper Collins Publishers, London, p187.

[36] Carver, op cit, p 221.

[37] Balfour, H. op cit, p 133.

[38] 242 Squadron were badly mauled in France, and its morale was low. When 'Tin Legs' Bader first arrived at the 242 squadron's headquarters at Coltishall airfield in June 1940, most of the squadron's pilots were sceptical of their new squadron leader. They thought he would lead them from his desk on account of having both legs amputated as a result of a flying accident in 1931. Bader quickly dispelled the idea by taking one of 242's Hurricane fighters and performing acrobatics over Coltishall for 30 minutes, deeply impressing 242's pilots. He quickly transformed 242 into a tight, tough squadron through his courage, leadership, and uncompromising attitude toward his pilots, ground crews, and the RAF high command, with whom he had a major brush. After taking command, Bader discovered the unit had insufficient spare parts and tools to keep its 18 Hurricane fighters operational. Unsuccessful in resolving the problem through official channels, Bader signaled 12 Group Headquarters: '242 Squadron operational as regards pilots but non-operational as regards equipment.' He refused to announce his squadron as operational until its lack of tools and spares was rectified. Within 24 hours, 242 Squadron had all the tools and spares it needed, and Bader signaled 12 Group: '242 Squadron now fully operational.' Bader became commander of the Duxford Wing, and was credited with destroying 152 German aircraft with the loss of 30 pilots. When the Battle of Britain ended, Bader was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for gallantry and leadership of the highest order.

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