

With Wings Like Eagles: A History of the Battle of Britain¹

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In *With Wings Like Eagles: A History of the Battle of Britain*, Michael Korda provides a historical, political, and sociological context for World War II's "Battle of Britain," a term coined by Winston Churchill to describe the impending conflict between Great Britain and Germany after the defeat of France in the early years of World War II ("the War").⁴ The Battle took place in the summer and autumn of 1940 between the German *Luftwaffe* Air Force ("German *Luftwaffe*") and the British Royal Air Force ("RAF").⁵

Korda simultaneously balances the objectivity of academic writing with the warmth of grandfatherly storytelling. He begins by reminding us of the "'dashing' young men on both sides" who participated in the Battle of Britain.⁶ He acknowledges the appeal of the archetypal fighter pilot, but, at the same time, he dispels the mythological underpinnings of the War.⁷ Indeed, by the end of the book, he bluntly laments that "much of the pain and bitterness of the Battle of Britain was eventually suppressed in favor of a more glamorous picture."⁸

¹ MICHAEL KORDA, *WITH WINGS LIKE EAGLES: A HISTORY OF THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN* (2009).

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⁴ KORDA, *supra* note 1, at 1-2 (quoting Winston Churchill's June 18, 1940 speech in the House of Commons: "What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin."); Winston Churchill, *This Was Their Finest Hour*, Address to the House of Commons (June 18, 1940), in *NEVER GIVE IN!: THE BEST OF WINSTON CHURCHILL'S SPEECHES* 219, 229 (Winston S. Churchill selector & ed., Hyperion 2003) (2003).

⁵ KORDA, *supra* note 1, at 275.

⁶ *Id.* at 2.

⁷ *See id.* at 286.

⁸ *Id.*

Many Americans remember Alfred Eisenstaedt's photograph of a sailor kissing a young nurse on Victory over Japan Day ("V-J Day") that appeared in *Life* magazine in 1945.⁹ The nurse is seemingly swept off her feet by the valiant young hero, and, in that moment, victory is pictured as decisive, strong, and sexy. Forgotten as you glance at this image are the less glamorous aspects of war: grief-stricken parents, injured soldiers, heartbroken widows, and bombed-out cities.

Similarly, Korda paints a picture of how the young pilots of the Battle of Britain quickly became regarded as "airborne knights of the Round Table," well before the War's completion, in an effort to create a patriotic myth and a reminder "of the days when the British public had thought of itself as heroic, rather than merely alone and beleaguered."¹⁰ However, Korda does not lose sight of the fact that war is chaotic and complex, and he acknowledges the reality of the unglamorous and heartbreaking sacrifice required by war. He reminds us that there are casualties in war—pilots that fell from the sky to their deaths, were burned alive, or suffered from hypothermia in carrying out their patriotic duties.¹¹

Scholars and historians who study war try to determine the decisive moment of a battle when the winner is decided. Korda somewhat cynically notes, "Nobody in academe gets tenure or a reputation in the media by examining the events of the past with approval, or by praising the decisions of past statesmen and military leaders as wise and sensible."¹² Instead of proposing academic hypothetical situations, Korda addresses the internal conflicts that played out in the months preceding the air battle, and in so doing, pierces the mythological veil that surrounds the Battle of Britain.

⁹ Alfred Eisenstaedt, Photograph, in *LIFE*, Aug. 27, 1945, at 27.

¹⁰ KORDA, *supra* note 1, at 286.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 3.

War begins with the political will to wage war. Resources must be allocated and a plan must be devised, but political leaders rarely agree at first as to how to achieve victory. Indeed, Britain's government during the years between World War I and World War II was certainly not immune to political infighting. As a key example, Winston Churchill observed the events that occurred between World War I and the Battle of Britain to be strong indicators that a future war with Germany was on its way, and that rearmament and a stronger air force—in particular, one that included fighter jets—was necessary to defend Britain.¹³ In contrast, Britain's former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin did not initially share Churchill's sentiment and argued against increased military expenditure, relying instead on the conventional view at the time that the “bomber will always get through.”¹⁴ The tensions between these two outlooks defined the political landscape in the years leading up to the Battle of Britain.¹⁵ Through the contrasting outlooks described by Korda, the book reminds us that even a war as necessary as World War II began as a contentious political issue. Although the events Korda discusses occurred more than sixty-five years ago, the necessity of war and the safety of a nation are topics that are still hotly debated today.

With Wings Like Eagles also describes how political leaders struggled with the underlying question of how to raise capital, secure natural resources, and rapidly produce cutting-edge machinery that would be crucial to the success of the War. Korda explained, “Britain needed not only American destroyers, but rifles, ammunition, steel, oil, aviation gas, aircraft of all kinds, beef from Argentina, wheat from the Midwest, and above all unlimited credit with which to purchase all these things and more.”¹⁶ For the British, “the only way to secure that credit was with a victory.”¹⁷

¹³ *Id.* at 22-23.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 3-4 (explaining the origin of the phrase “the bomber will always get through” in the context of aerial warfare).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 21-24.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 123-24.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 124.

To this end, British leadership turned to the innovation of Air Chief Marshal of RAF Fighter Command, Sir Hugh Dowding. Throughout the book, Korda champions Dowding for his diligence and pragmatic genius. Dowding specifically challenged the conventional wisdom that “the bomber will always get through,” which led to his development of the first integrated radar and fighter jet defense system.¹⁸ These systems, which emphasized the role of the fighter jet rather than the bomber, allowed British air squadrons to “attack the enemy as he drew close to them,” thereby conserving fuel for use in later combat, and to ultimately take control of the air battle.¹⁹ Dowding’s foresight enabled the RAF to look past the paradigm of World War I air battle and to embrace the industrial and technological innovations of the next generation.²⁰

Ironically, Dowding’s strategies consistently met with resistance from the political figures of the day. As an example, Korda describes a meeting between Churchill and Dowding on May 15, 1940.²¹ The French prime minister requested that fighter squadrons—squadrons that Dowding did not want to sacrifice—be sent to France immediately.²² In Dowding’s view, supplying fighters to France was “turning on a tap which the politicians and the Air Council would never have the courage to turn off, and through which Britain’s lifeblood would pour.”²³ Churchill, on the other hand, bound by an emotional attachment to the French and his belief that France could still be saved, wanted to provide France with the requested reinforcements.²⁴

Dowding’s view ultimately did not prevail and numerous fighter squadrons (British Hurricanes) were sacrificed to France.²⁵

¹⁸ *Id.* at 42-43, 48-49.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 46-48.

²⁰ *Id.* at 42-48.

²¹ *Id.* at 107.

²² *Id.* at 94, 110.

²³ *Id.* at 103.

²⁴ *Id.* at 93-94.

²⁵ *Id.* at 113-16.

In essence, the views of the political leadership were achieved at the expense of the military and its leadership. Korda points out that, by openly disagreeing with Churchill, Dowding's RAF contemporaries were "promoted over his head" and his future advancement in the RAF was essentially forfeited.²⁶ In fact, he concludes the book by noting that Dowding was not even mentioned when the official history of the Battle of Britain was initially published, despite his significant contributions.²⁷

In addition to describing the political and military conflicts of the day, Korda also describes the initial disconnect that existed between the British citizenry and the airmen who were waging war directly above their heads.²⁸ Although hardly unaware of the downed planes, the lone parachuters, and the long contrails in the sky, the British "[p]eople went on with their lives, picnicking, playing tennis, having lunch outdoors in the glorious . . . summer weather."²⁹ As Korda puts it, "People grew accustomed to having the war drop in on their lives suddenly and unexpectedly—literally out of the blue . . ."³⁰ Korda paints a picture of this early disconnect between the citizens and the airmen in a humorous, yet telling, anecdote of a RAF pilot who was shot down over a British golf course. The pilot was helped to the golf club bar to wait for an ambulance. Upon seeing the man, wounded and bloodied, one member at the bar simply remarked, "Who's that scruffy chap at the bar? I don't think he's a member."³¹

Ultimately, this disconnect described by Korda appears to fade following Adolf Hitler's bombing of London in September 1940. Indeed, the British citizenry maintained their resolve despite the heavy casualties and, as Korda puts it, were suddenly proving

²⁶ *Id.* at 118.

²⁷ *Id.* at 298.

²⁸ *Id.* at 232.

²⁹ *Id.* at 233.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 233-34.

to the world that they “could take it.”³² The bombings served as a “propaganda victory” for the British, and as a “real victory” for Fighter Command, which never lost control of the air.³³

Korda notes that “[v]ictory against the *Luftwaffe* in 1940 came about neither by luck nor by last-minute improvisation.”³⁴ He boldly states that the reason that the British won the Battle of Britain was because “Fighter Command was prepared for it.”³⁵ Dowding recognized that the German *Luftwaffe* would outnumber his force, so he avoided engaging the *Luftwaffe* in big air battles. This strategy enabled him to obscure the disparity in size between the British forces and the German forces. He executed an “endless series of lethal pinpricks,” designed to diminish the size of the German air fleet and “inflict on the German bomber force a rate of loss it could not afford to sustain in the long run.”³⁶ In effect, he intended to “bleed the *Luftwaffe* to death, not to prevent it from bombing England,” or “encourage fighter-to-fighter combat, which was a waste of men and machines.”³⁷

Hitler did not believe that Germany would ever need to be defended from air attacks, so he was more interested in bombers than fighters.³⁸ The German *Luftwaffe* was headed by Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring, a man Korda depicts as blinded by vanity and having a low opinion of his British counterparts.³⁹ Goring also believed that overwhelming the British with bombers was of primary importance and key to intimidating enemies.⁴⁰ Consequently, the Germans valued quantity over efficiency with respect to their bombers and pilots.⁴¹ As history has revealed, this

³² *Id.* at 264.

³³ *Id.* at 264, 281.

³⁴ *Id.* at 15.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 124.

³⁷ *Id.* at 125.

³⁸ *Id.* at 63.

³⁹ *Id.* at 10-14.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 25-26.

⁴¹ *Id.*

strategy led directly to their defeat. Dowding's "pinprick" strategy eventually prevailed, as the Germans lost huge numbers of pilots and planes.⁴²

Victory, however, did not come without cost. Germany's attack on London resulted in the death of thousands, and Dowding's professional reputation rapidly diminished.⁴³ Still, instead of breaking the will of the British people and prompting surrender, the bombings galvanized the citizens and airmen alike. Fighter Command had indeed won "one of the four most crucial victories in British History—the Armada, Trafalgar, Waterloo, and the Battle of Britain."⁴⁴

With Wings Like Eagles is a compelling read. The struggles that Korda describes are as relevant today as they were in the 1930s and 1940s. Many people today agree that World War II was a just war that absolutely needed to be fought. The contemporaneous uncertainties and debates that eventually led to the British victory are often overlooked, and collectively we look instead to the unwavering resolve and youthful courage mythologized in photographs and stories. This is perhaps the most reassuring aspect of the book. Today, we should not be discouraged when there is disagreement regarding foreign policy and military conflict; these issues are never agreed upon. Rather, like the Battle of Britain, such contentious political issues will eventually be viewed through the 20/20 hindsight that subsequent generations always possess.

⁴² *Id.* at 230-31, 281-82.

⁴³ *Id.* at 295-99.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 281.

