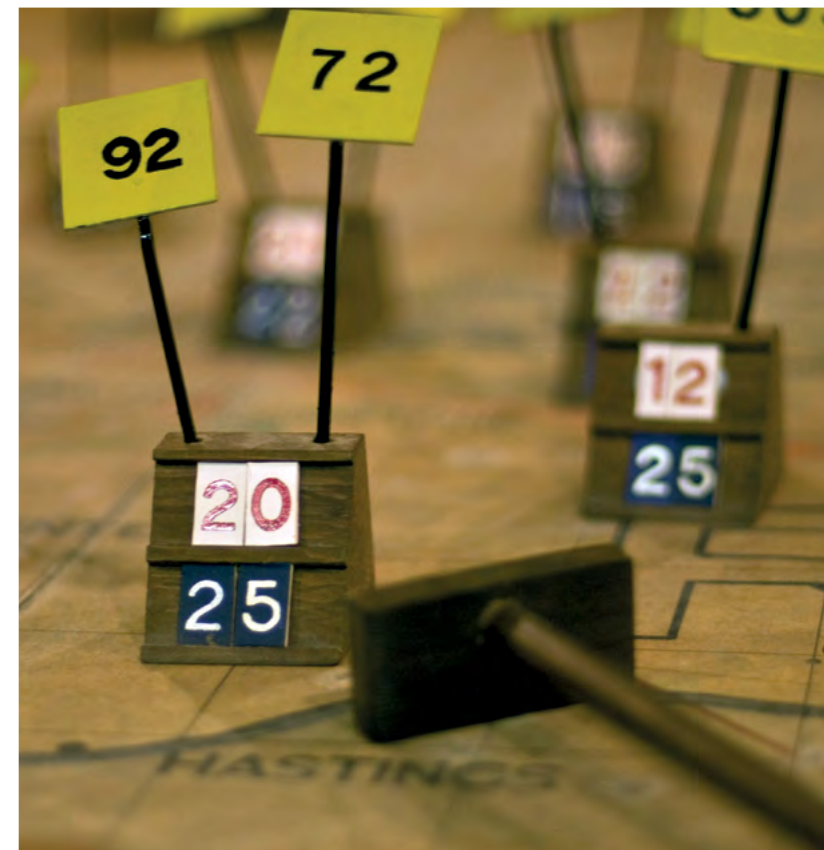




© MARK POSTLETHWAITE 2025



ANDY SAUNDERS

SPITFIRE SUMMER...?

(AND OTHER BATTLE OF BRITAIN MYTHS)

Everyone knows the Battle of Britain was fought out in the gin-clear skies of the glorious summer of 1940. Wasn't it? Stuka formations were regularly "annihilated"; the Spitfire was the best fighter in the battle; "The Few" were vastly outnumbered. All true? **ANDY SAUNDERS** finds out how many of these well-worn clichés stand up to historical scrutiny

GROWING UP IN the UK in the 1960s during the era of Airfix kits and war comics, the author lived in East Sussex under the very skies where the Battle of Britain had been fought some 20 years earlier. Having developed a passion for history at an early age, it was inevitable that those Airfix kits and war comics would have significant impact. Indeed, with the Second World War well within living memory, this author would listen in breathless thrall as parents, aunts and uncles told tales of the Battle of Britain and what they vividly remembered.

ENDLESS SKIES OF BLUE . . ?

Often, these tales were triggered by showing off the latest clumsily-built Airfix kit of perhaps a Spitfire or Messerschmitt, the creation sparking "I remember when . . ." stories. To a ten-year-old, they were captivating tales. And they had a common thread running through them: it was a stunningly beautiful summer. But was it really fought out against that legendary backdrop of azure skies? In fact, even a cursory look at the weather statistics for that "glorious summer" shows the weather was somewhat average; today, with sarcastic derision, we might well call it a "typical British summer"!

Putting that into perspective, of the 114 "official"

ABOVE LEFT "Spitfires Into Battle" — this magnificent painting by MARK POSTLETHWAITE GAvA depicts Spitfires of No 19 Sqn undertaking a head-on attack against a large formation of Heinkel He 111 bombers of KG 26 and KG 1 on their way to bomb targets around London as the Battle of Britain reaches its critical phase in mid-September 1940. ABOVE Markers like this one showing 25 aircraft of Nos 92 and 72 Sqn at 20,000ft on a General Situation Map enabled controllers to keep track of the battle in real time.

days of the battle between July 10 and October 31, 1940, a third were rainy, squally, thundery, foggy or unsettled. Of the other days, many were hardly exceptional. So why is the Battle of Britain summer almost always remembered for its wonderful weather? The reason is simple.

On days of inclement weather, air action by either attacker or defender was often impossible. Further, the weather conditions on opposite sides of the Channel were sometimes very different and the science of weather forecasting was less advanced than today. Frequently, German formations would take off in weather well within operational limits — only to find their targets over England "socked-in" by cloud. Return to base the only option, the droning formations were very much heard but not intercepted. Sometimes, retreating formations randomly ditched their bombs. But battle was not joined.

As a result, those who lived through that