



Readers' Guide

# **BREAKING POINT**

A NOVEL OF THE  
BATTLE OF BRITAIN

**JOHN RHODES**

## ABOUT THE NOVEL

*Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war (Winston Churchill)*

*The hour will come when one of us will break – and it will not be National Socialist Germany (Adolf Hitler)*

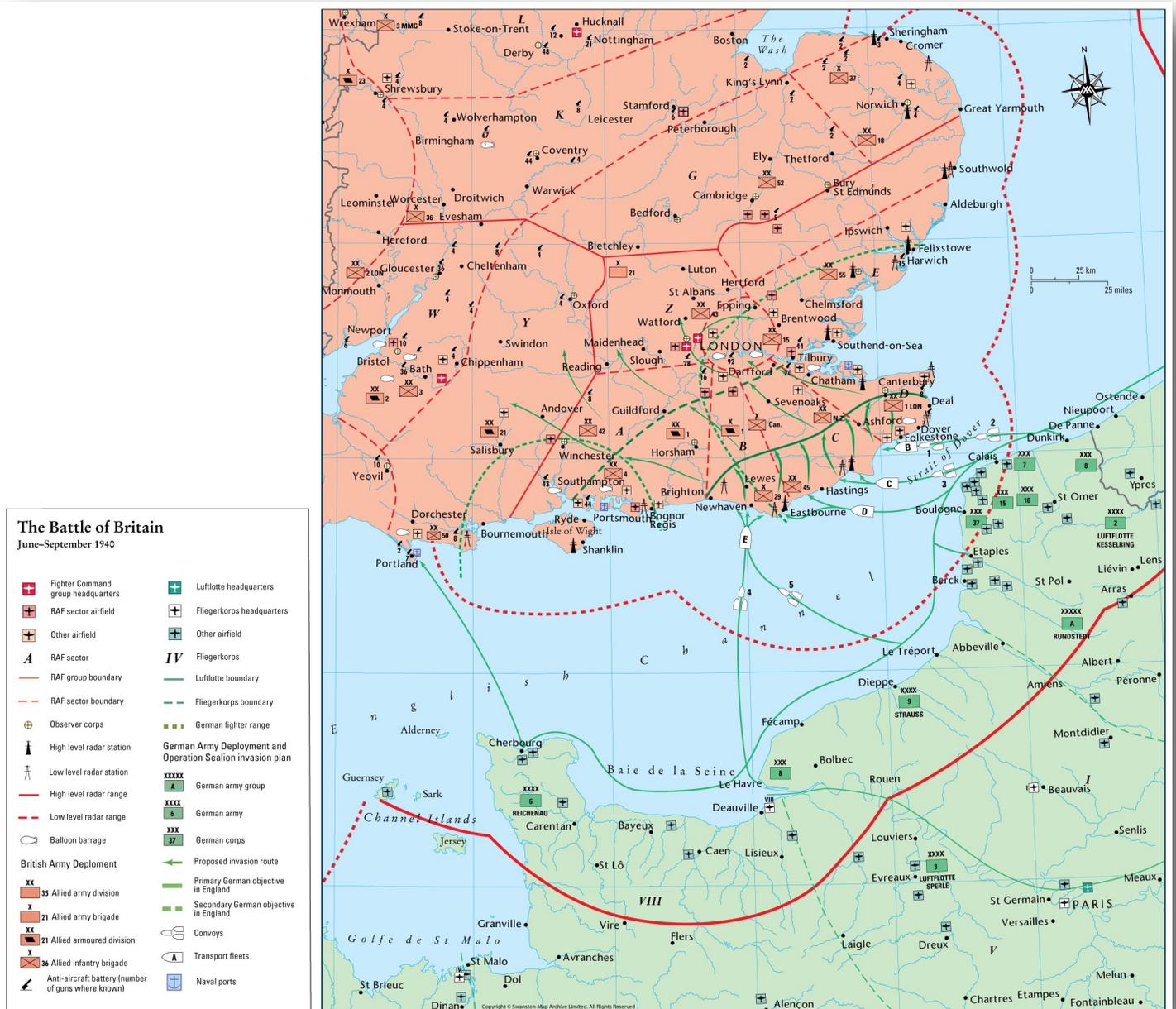
And now the hour has come ...

It is August, 1940. Hitler's triumphant Third Reich has crushed all Europe – except Britain. As Hitler launches a massive aerial assault, only the heavily outnumbered Fighter Command and the iron will of Winston Churchill can stop him.

Johnnie Shaux, a Spitfire fighter pilot, must summon up the fortitude to fly into conditions in which death is all but inevitable, and continue to do so until the inevitable occurs...

Eleanor Rand, a brilliant Fighter Command mathematician, must find her role in a man's world. She studies the control room map tracking the ebbs and flows of the conflict, and sees the glimmerings of a radical breakthrough...

*Breaking Point* is based on actual events in the Battle of Britain. The story alternates between Johnnie, face to face with the enemy, and Eleanor, using 'zero-sum' mathematical theory to evolve a strategic model of the battle. Their parallel stories merge as the battle reaches its climax and they confront danger together.





# JOHN RHODES

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Rhodes was born in World War II while his father was serving at an RAF Fighter Command airfield in southern England. After the war he grew up in London, where, he says, the shells of bombed-out buildings 'served as our adventure playgrounds.' Rhodes graduated from Cambridge University where he studied history. After a career in international banking he retired to Wilmington, North Carolina. He has written two (so far) Thomas Ford detective novels and is busy on a sequel to *Breaking Point*.

John's love of history informs his fiction. 'History is not just something to read about; it has to be felt and touched,' he says. For example, drawing at random from his wide knowledge of English history, he says one cannot understand Elizabeth I, and her decision to remain a virgin (at least officially,) without visiting Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire and walking in the garden in which the Earl of Leicester tried (officially unsuccessfully) to seduce her.

John rues the decline of history as a required field of study. 'If you don't know where you came from, you don't understand why you're here, let alone where you going to be next.'

Reflecting John's search for historical accuracy, the battles in *Breaking Point* conform to the actual performance specifications of the aircraft, down to the details of their rate of climb and turning circles. He believes there is a difference between historical fiction, in which the reader is presented with a combination of factual information and imaginary fiction; and fantasy, in which the reader knows that what he/she is reading might be fascinating but cannot be true.

John grew up in an era when reading was still a major pastime, and he inherited a love of old-fashioned detective stories from his father. His favorite authors were, and still are, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Josephine Tey, Margery Allingham, and in John's words, the 'immortal Dorothy L Sayers.' Sayers's fictional protagonist Harriet Vane is, John confesses, an archetype for his character Eleanor Rand in *Breaking Point*. It is extraordinary, he thinks, that it was this remarkable group of women, writing in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, whose works defined and exemplified the art of the British cozy, combining intellectual and literary skills of the highest order.

After many years living on the West Side of Manhattan, he now lives in Wilmington, North Carolina. 'My traveling days are over,' he says. 'Now I have the luxury of writing every day.'



### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE NOVEL**

The Battle of Britain took place in 1940. In the company of a handful of other great World War II battles—such as the D Day landings in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, the Battle of Iwo Jima—it has captured the popular imagination ever since.

This popular image arises in part, I believe, from a desire for moral clarity in war. Unlike more recent conflicts, World War II was unequivocally fought against very bad people for very good reasons, and even if the good side committed an atrocity or two, the bad side's actions were demonstrably worse and the bad side's ultimate defeat was absolute and their surrender unconditional.

The Battle of Britain was the first and perhaps the most decisive of all aerial campaigns in history. It pitted the David of Dowding's RAF Fighter Command against the Goliath of Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe. It was, quite literally, the battle that determined the course of World War II. Britain survived and fought on for another fifteen months until the United States entered the war following Pearl Harbor.

And, of course, the Battle of Britain was immortalized by the unparalleled rhetoric of Winston Churchill.

The battle produced many exceptional pilots on both sides—Douglas Bader, Adolf Galland, Sailor Malan, Werner Moelders, Stanford Tuck, and Helmut Wick, to name but a few. The vast majority of pilots, however, were not flying aces but simply very ordinary young men placed in very extraordinary circumstances. My fictional protagonist, Johnnie Shaux, was one such man.

The primary characters in this book are fictitious. When I have placed real historical figures in imaginary circumstances, and given them imagined dialog, I hope I have done so respectfully. There was no 339 Squadron and there was no RAF Station Oldchurch. The events of the two three-day periods covered in this novel are also fictitious; however, the general scope of the fighting on those days—the numbers and types of aircraft involved and shot down, the targets attacked, the timing and elevation of the bomber raids during the day, the weather conditions, and so on—reflects historical records.

## The Battle of Britain

By June, 1940, Hitler had been successful in gaining control of almost all western and central Europe. The one remaining part of the jigsaw puzzle, at least as the jigsaw puzzle was then defined, was Britain, which he intended to invade as soon as the Luftwaffe gained air superiority over the English Channel and southern England.

The Battle of Britain was the Luftwaffe's attempt to defeat the RAF and took place from July to September, 1940.

The climactic battle occurred on September 15<sup>th</sup>, which is now celebrated in Britain as "Battle of Britain Day." Massive Luftwaffe daylight attacks on London were met by intense resistance. 11 Group harried the attackers in its customary manner, and 12 Group, with adequate time to prepare, was able to put its big wings into action with devastating effect. The Luftwaffe lost eighty aircraft on September 15<sup>th</sup>, a blow so severe that even the Luftwaffe's numerical superiority could not absorb the damage. Thereafter daylight raids decreased sharply, and in October Hitler abandoned the attempt to invade Britain.

The story of Johnnie Shaux and Eleanor Rand begins on August 18<sup>th</sup>, known to the Luftwaffe as *Adlertag* or 'Eagle Day', and ends on September 8<sup>th</sup>, the day after the first major attack on London. During that period, the Luftwaffe lost an estimated eight hundred aircraft, and the RAF almost five hundred; the combined losses of the two sides averaged sixty aircraft per day.

The history of the RAF during the first year of World War II is summarized below.



## The “Phony War” and the Battle of France

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939. Poland quickly succumbed to Hitler’s invasion from the west and Stalin’s attacks from the east – Germany and Russia were allies in the early stages of the war.

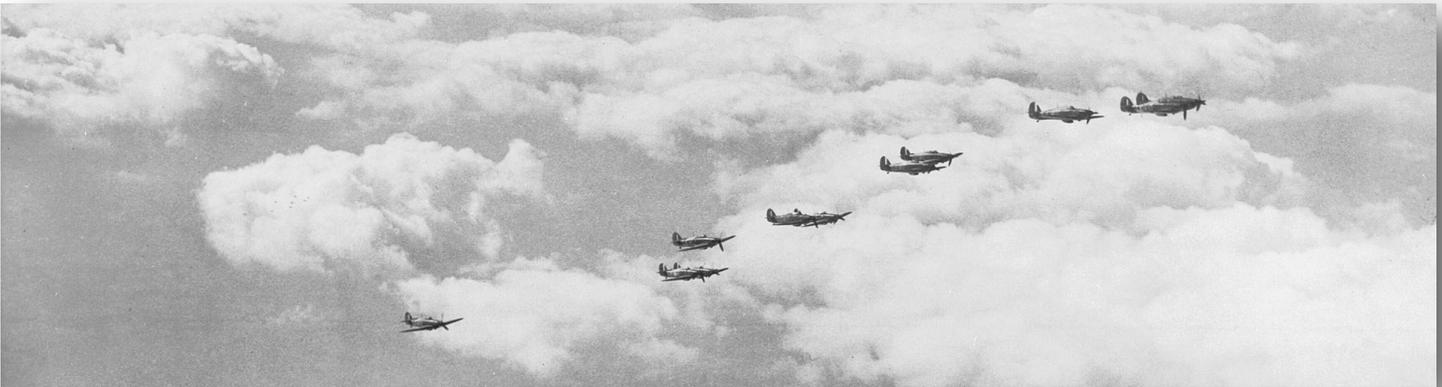
Britain and France declared war on September 3<sup>rd</sup>. France mobilized its army, which was then the largest in the world, and the British sent the British Expeditionary Force of approximately two hundred fifty thousand men to reinforce it. While the two sides faced each other on the French/German border without engaging, Hitler focused to the north. The Soviet Union occupied Finland, and Germany occupied Norway and Denmark. Finland, Denmark, and Norway were all neutral, but Stalin and Hitler were not bothered by such technicalities.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the German army abruptly attacked westwards with crushing effect. Luxemburg collapsed immediately, the Dutch surrendered on May 14<sup>th</sup>, and by May 24<sup>th</sup> Belgium had also surrendered and the BEF had been forced back on the port city of Dunkirk, from which it was evacuated. The scale and rapidity of the collapse of the western allies was so great that the Royal Navy could not possibly evacuate the stranded British army, but a fleet of private civilian vessels manned by volunteers – tramp steamers, tugs, fishing boats, ferries, pleasure yachts – crossed the North Sea and rescued them.

The German army now launched a frontal attack on France, savaging the French army. On June 14<sup>th</sup> Paris fell, and the last French resistance collapsed on June 22<sup>nd</sup>.

The RAF deployed approximately 250 aircraft in France during the Phony War and the Battle of France, primarily Hurricanes, Defiants, and Battles.

My fictional hero, Shaux, flew his Defiant during the futile attempt to defend the Low Countries between May 10<sup>th</sup> and May 25<sup>th</sup>, when he was shot down over Dunkirk. He was evacuated with the BEF, survived when his rescue vessel was sunk, and returned to France to participate in the second ineffectual attempt to stop the Germans. He escaped in his Defiant on June 15<sup>th</sup> as the French army collapsed before the German advance.



## The Battle of Britain Phase 1, “Kanalkampf,” July 10 to August 11

With continental Europe defeated, Hitler prepared to launch *Unternehmen Seelöwe* (Operation Sea Lion), the invasion of England across the English Channel. A key part of the plan involved destroying the RAF. Hitler wrote that the RAF must be “beaten down in its morale and in fact, so that it can no longer display any appreciable aggressive force in opposition to the German crossing.”

The first phase was to gain air superiority over the English Channel and drive British shipping out of it. The Luftwaffe succeeded, using an effective combination of dive bombing and 109 fighter cover.

## The Battle of Britain Phase 2, "Adlerangriff," August 12 to August 23

It should be noted that at this stage of the conflict the Luftwaffe had won every campaign it had waged since the beginning of the war, and the RAF had lost every campaign. Thus German confidence was running high as it prepared to "beat down the RAF" as Hitler had ordered.

The Luftwaffe assault on mainland England began on *Adlertag*, or "Eagle Day" with a series of punishing attacks against the Chain Home RDF stations and 11 Group airfields. These attacks continued with great intensity until August 19<sup>th</sup> when bad weather caused a break in the conflict.

The Luftwaffe was in shock. They lost over three hundred fifty aircraft in six days, including ninety-six on the 18<sup>th</sup> alone, a day they dubbed "the Hardest Day." In spite of Luftflotte II's great numerical superiority, 11 Group had been able to counter almost every raid. Spitfires, in battle for the first time, had proved to be superior to 109s. Every other German aircraft type was also vulnerable to Hurricanes.

As we now know, the Luftwaffe failed to grasp the significance of the RDF stations and the Fighter Command control system. The Luftwaffe had destroyed over fifty percent of 11 Group's strength, and yet, as if by magic, it seemed as strong as ever.

My fictional Shaux was heavily engaged in this battle; my story begins on August 18<sup>th</sup>, when the fictional 339 Squadron was bombed out of Christhampton and transferred to Oldchurch, and Eleanor met Park for the first time.



## The Battle of Britain Phase 3, August 24 to September 6

During the week of bad weather that followed August 18<sup>th</sup>, Goering and Kesselring reorganized the attack. The fearsome *Stuka* dive bombers were withdrawn—they'd proved to be as inadequate against the RAF as the RAF's Defiants and Battles had been against the Luftwaffe. The 110 heavy fighters had also proved vulnerable—from now on they'd only fly with 109 protection. The 110s and 109s were to be used primarily as close escorts for the bombers.

Finally, Goering, who (as noted) did not understand the significance of RDF, ordered raids on Chain Home to be discontinued.

On August 24<sup>th</sup> the weather cleared and the assault on 11 Group airfields recommenced. The results of Goering's and Kesselring's reorganization were as catastrophic as before; the Luftwaffe continued to lose over forty aircraft per day, and, in spite of repeated attacks on 11 Group airfields, 11 Group continued to send up surprisingly large numbers of fighters.

My fictional Shaux fought throughout this phase of the battle, while my fictional Eleanor pored over the results and developed her minimax theory.

## The Battle of Britain Phase 4, September 7 to September 15

By September 4<sup>th</sup> the German high command was losing patience. Hitler and Goering ordered attacks on London, apparently for two reasons. First, Hitler hoped that a series of devastating attacks would break British morale and force Churchill to the bargaining table. Second, Goering and Kesselring, who kept expecting Park to run out of fighters, hoped that 11 Group's remaining forces would be drawn into a decisive battle against overwhelming odds and decimated.

It was a critical mistake. Luftwaffe forces had put 11 Group was under severe pressure, and Churchill wrote later that: "The scales had tilted against Fighter Command."

Intense attacks on London began on September 7<sup>th</sup> and continued until September 15<sup>th</sup>. Although the Luftwaffe inflicted widespread damage, there was no evidence of civilian panic or that 11 Group was weakening. Worse yet, from a German perspective, London was in range of Leigh-Mallory's big wings and it was at the range limit of the 109s. Thus the bombers faced increased opposition and sharply decreased defenses.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> the Luftwaffe launched one more all-out effort, only to lose eighty aircraft.

The Luftwaffe had now lost over a thousand aircraft over England since August 12<sup>th</sup> without visible evidence of progress. Two days later Hitler postponed Operation Sea Lion. Although German raids continued for months, it was clear to both sides that the Luftwaffe could not gain air superiority over southern England, and that an invasion was impractical.

My fictional Shaux fought in this phase of the battle; he was shot down on September 7<sup>th</sup>. My fictional Eleanor used her minimax model to predict the attacks on London.

Thwarted by 11 Group, Hitler turned his eyes eastward. On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941, less than a year later, he launched his vast and infinitely brutal Operation Barbarossa against his former ally Russia.

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## INSPIRATION FOR THE NOVEL

The Battle of Britain was one of the most extraordinary events in history. While there have been many bombing assaults and many contests for air superiority, the sheer scale of the aerial combat was unprecedented and remains unique.

The participants were ordinary men and women placed in extraordinary circumstances. As the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these events approaches, I wanted to pay homage to their service.

## PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

### Historical Characters

#### Winston Churchill



So much has been written about Churchill that it seems foolish to attempt to summarize his tremendous and tempestuous career.

Suffice it to say that he was summoned to power in May 1940 (at the age of 66) when defeat or surrender seemed immanent and inevitable, and he left power five years later when victory had been won. The election of July, 1945, two months after VE Day, was a bitter blow to Churchill; despite his inspiring leadership during the war, he was routed in the polls.

The series of speeches he gave during his first few months in office are, arguably, the most powerful examples of oratory ever delivered, by any leader in any language on any occasion. It was Churchill who coined the term, "Battle of Britain," that encapsulated the existential nature of the struggle. Years later, on his eightieth birthday in 1954, he said:

*"I have never accepted what many people have kindly said – namely, that I inspired the nation. Their will was resolute and remorseless, and as it proved unconquerable. It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar."*

#### Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding

"Stuffy" Dowding was a successful fighter pilot and squadron leader in World War I. He assumed command of Fighter Command in 1936. A visionary thinker, he devised the command and control system which enabled the RAF to deny the Luftwaffe victory in 1940. He championed the early development of radar, IFF (Identification Friend or Foe), VHF radio, and many other technologies still basic to aerial combat; he also pushed a reluctant government to invest in modern fighter aircraft, the Hurricane and Spitfire in particular.

In the early stages of the war he resisted immense pressure to squander RAF reserves in a futile attempt to defend France, thus preserving Fighter Command as a fighting force. He made sure Park was left alone to fight the Battle of Britain without political interference, but he did nothing to heal or resolve the deep rift between his two key lieutenants, Park and Leigh-Mallory, thus weakening Fighter Command's effectiveness.

He was by all accounts a remote and intolerant man; he seems to have been respected but not liked, for evidently he was not very likeable.

Ironically, as soon as the Battle of Britain had been won, both he and Keith Park lost their positions in the political infighting that ensued.

He retired in 1942 and was raised to the peerage as Baron Dowding of Bentley Priory. In his later years he became deeply interested in spiritualism and believed in reincarnation. He died in 1970.

A bronze statue of Dowding stands beside St Clemens Danes church in the Strand in London. The inscription reads, in part: *"His wise and prudent judgement and leadership helped to ensure victory against overwhelming odds and thus prevented the loss of the Battle of Britain and probably the whole war. To him, the people of Britain and of the Free World owe largely the way of life and the liberties they enjoy today."*

## Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering



Hermann Goering (also spelled Göring) commanded the Luftwaffe throughout World War II. Although he is often depicted as an outlandish figure, rather like Shakespeare's Falstaff, he was a genuine war hero and a shrewd and successful politician.

Goering was a fighter pilot of great distinction in World War I, rising to command *Jagdgeschwader I*, after Von Richthoven's (the Red Baron's) death, and receiving Germany's highest award, the *Pour La Mérite*. He was enraged by Germany's defeat and the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and became one of the first members of the Nazi party.

He was central to the rise of the Nazis. He became a member of the Reichstag in 1928 and was its president in the crucial years of 1932 and 1933 when Hitler was consolidating his political power. He may have been responsible for arranging the Reichstag Fire, the critical event that established Nazi political supremacy. Thereafter he held many military and civilian positions of power and remained in Hitler's innermost circles until almost the very end.

Returning to the catalog of the bizarre: he may or may not have been the illegitimate son of a Prussian nobleman; he was addicted to morphine, which impaired his judgment as a wartime commander; he was given to extravagant costumes and uniforms; he collected titles and honors; he had a long affair with a married Swedish noblewoman named Carin, Countess von Fock, and built a vast estate named Carinhall, named in her honor, which he decorated with plundered artworks and surrounded by an extensive hunting reserve stocked with bison and elk; at the very end of the war he attempted to oust Hitler, only to be sentenced to death, a fate he evaded by surrendering to the Allies; he committed suicide in 1946 by taking cyanide, rather than face the humiliation of hanging as a common criminal.



Children Homeless After Bombing of London

## **Generalfieldmarshall Albert von Kesselring**

Albert von Kesselring—'Smiling Albert,' as he was known—commanded Luftflotte 2 in the Battle of Britain.

He spent the first thirty years of his career in army staff positions, eventually rising to become administrative head of the newly-formed Luftwaffe in 1936. Thus, unlike Park, Dowding, or Goering, he had no experience of aerial combat, and therefore no sense of what actually happened when the two sides met.

He commanded Luftflotte 1 in the Polish campaign, where his forces overwhelmed the Polish air force—and no wonder, for not only did Kesselring have fourteen hundred aircraft facing four hundred Polish aircraft, but in addition the best Polish fighter, the PZL P11, was not only far slower than Kesselring's 109s, but slower than the German bombers as well!

He must have been supremely confident at the beginning of the Battle of Britain. Once again he had enormous numerical superiority. He began with approximately sixteen hundred bombers and eleven hundred fighters, spread across airfields in northern France, Belgium and Holland. Park had only three hundred fighters to oppose him, and even though most of these were modern Hurricanes and Spitfires, they had not been able to prevent the Luftwaffe from seizing control of the skies of Western Europe during the Battle of France.

Unfortunately for him, Kesselring was facing Dowding's organizational genius and Park's tactical brilliance. He was also saddled with Goering's poor judgment and Hitler's catastrophic decision to bomb London. And no one in the Luftwaffe seems to have made note of the fact that, even though the Polish PZL P11 fighter had been hopelessly inferior, it had still managed to shoot down as many German aircraft as the Luftwaffe had shot down Polish aircraft.

As this book suggests, the Battle of Britain was not so much won by the RAF as lost by the Luftwaffe.

Kesselring's career did not suffer as a result of his defeat in the Battle of Britain. He became C-in-C of all German air forces in the Mediterranean theater (where, in the Battle of Malta, Park defeated him in the air for a second time,) and subsequently of all German forces in Italy, where he is said to have conducted a brilliant defensive campaign as the Allies fought their way northward. He also declared several Italian cities "open," thus preserving the antiquities of Rome and Florence.

In March, 1945, he was placed in command of all German forces fighting the Allies in Western Europe, but by then defeat was inevitable. He was sentenced to death for atrocities committed by German troops under his command in Italy, but subsequently reprieved and released. He died in 1960.

## **Air Vice Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory**

Leigh-Mallory's reputation has suffered in comparison to Park's and Dowding's, perhaps in part because he was killed during the war and wrote no memoirs. He has champions, such as Sir Douglas Bader, and detractors, such as Field Marshall Lord Montgomery, who is reputed to have described him as a "gutless bugger." For the purposes of this book I limited my characterization to his unquestioned quarrels with Park over fighter strategies and the "Big Wing" controversy.

During the Battle of Britain he commanded 12 Group, which was based in the Midlands to the north of London. It was not until the late stages of the battle, when the Luftwaffe were sending large formations with predictable flight paths against London, that 12 Group and its big wings made any notable contribution.

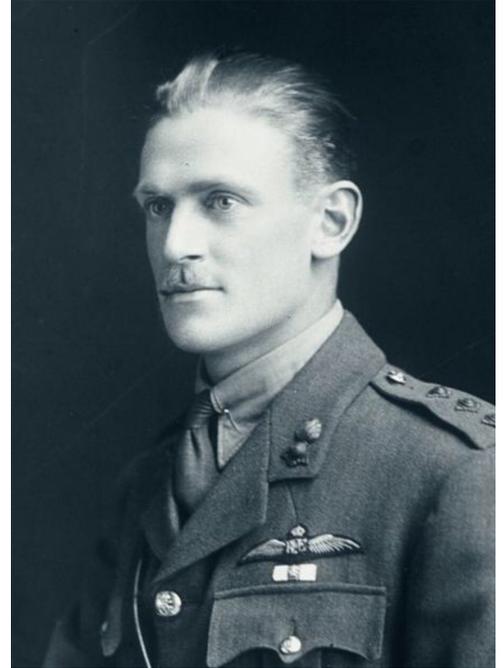
Following the battle, Park (although victorious) was stripped of his command and Leigh-Mallory replaced him at 11 Group. Leigh-Mallory subsequently became AOC-in-C Fighter Command (Dowding's old position) and C-in-C Allied Air Forces—including the US Army Air Force—for the D-Day invasion. Each of these appointments was surrounded by controversy, adding to his reputation as an ambitious schemer.

He was killed in a flying accident in 1944 while on his way to take up a new command. Ironically, this new position was filled by Keith Park.

## Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Park

I have given Park a significant role in this book, including extensive imaginary dialog and emotional reactions. I hope that I have not caused offense by so doing. My first objective was to bring to the fore his unquestionable brilliance as a tactical commander, which he displayed in an unprecedented situation—there had never been an air battle remotely like this one, in which Park was “writing the script” as he went along, and facing overwhelming numerical odds against him. My second objective was to provide a strategic overview (through the eyes of my Eleanor) to balance the close-up view of the battle experienced by the pilots (such as my Shaux.)

Keith Park was a New Zealander who fought with distinction in World War I, serving in Gallipoli and on the Western Front. He was so seriously wounded in 1918 that he was invalided out of the infantry, but immediately volunteered to become a fighter pilot. He received four awards for bravery, the citation for one of which reads: *For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in accounting for nine enemy aircraft, three of which were completely destroyed and six driven down out of control.*



He took command of 11 Group on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1940, and within a month had to deal with the explosion of German forces into Western Europe, when Hitler launched his blitzkrieg against the Low Countries and France. It is often written that he and Dowding abandoned the British and French armies to their fate, particularly by failing to commit Spitfires. In fact, the RAF had stripped half its forces to defend Europe, and lost almost two hundred aircraft defending Dunkirk alone.

Then, of course, the Battle of Britain commenced in August. By the end of September it was clear to both sides that, despite all odds, the Luftwaffe had been defeated—and Park was immediately relieved of his command in favor of his nemesis Leigh-Mallory!

Park was out of favor for almost two years. Then, in July 1942, he assumed responsibility for the air defenses of the island of Malta in the Mediterranean. Although less well known, the Battle of Malta was as strategically significant as the Battle of Britain, because Malta was the key to controlling Mediterranean airspace, at exactly the time that Rommel, the “Desert Fox,” was locked in his epic battle for North Africa against Montgomery, Bradley and Patton. Just as he had in 1940, Park organized a brilliant defense against overwhelming odds in the German air assault codenamed Operation *Herkules*, and then went onto the offensive, providing air support for the Allied invasions of Sicily and Italy.

As noted before, he ended the war in the position for which Leigh-Mallory had been intended, as the commander of all Allied air forces in Southeast Asia. He retired to New Zealand and died in 1975.

Park is often described as “prickly” and he may well have been so. On the other hand, he had a strong relationship with Dowding and he was enormously popular with his pilots (unlike Leigh-Mallory.) He kept a Hurricane for his personal use and often flew to meet his pilots.

As for his dispute with Leigh-Mallory, suffice it to say that Park’s strategy of sending small, nimble forces to disrupt the bombers before they reached their targets was designed to minimize bomb damage; while Leigh-Mallory’s big wings, which took time to assemble, certainly brought much more firepower to bear but often only after the bombers had reached their targets and were returning home.

And as for an epitaph, Lord Tedder, the chief of the RAF, wrote of him: *If any one man won the Battle of Britain, he did. I do not believe it is realised how much that one man, with his leadership, his calm judgement and his skill, did to save, not only this country, but the world.*

Fictional Characters

Eleanor Rand	WAAF, mathematician
Johnnie Shaux:	Spitfire pilot
'Diggers' Digby:	Spitfire pilot
'Froggie' Potter	Spitfire pilot
Harry Pound	RAF Station commander, mathematician
Rawley Fletcher:	Army staff officer
George Rand:	Hurricane pilot
Millie Smith	WAAF, bookkeeper
Kristofer Olsen	Mathematician



## Discussion Questions

### Women's issues in Breaking Point

Eleanor was brought up to believe that her primary purpose in life was to find a good husband and to bear his children. All else was secondary, including her brilliant intellectual and academic accomplishments.

How have women's views on their purpose in life evolved since Eleanor's time? Have men's views of women matched that evolution?

Eleanor's first two relationships, to Rawley Fletcher and George Rand, were unsuccessful.

Why did she submit to Rawley and tolerate George? After two failures, why did she reach out to Johnnie?

There are three women in this book: Eleanor, finding a role for herself in 11 Group; Millie, intelligent and hard-working, but denied an education because of her 'working class' background; and Dottie, whose husband is in a POW camp and now fills her days with volunteer work.

How does each of them react to their situations and challenges?

### The structure of the novel

The narrative alternates between Eleanor and Johnnie, from the strategic perspective of the Operations Room map to the tactical perspective of what Johnnie can see out of his cockpit. Often the narrative switches between the two with only a few minutes' difference in time.

Are we seeing the same story from two perspectives, or two parallel stories? When the narrative merges toward the end of the book, does one point-of-view dominate?

Park was a real figure, Eleanor is fictional. The 11 Group Operations Room and the 'Dowding System' were real, Eleanor's model is fictional.

To what extent can we believe that Eleanor and her model could have been real? Why or why not?

### The nature of war as presented in Breaking Point

Johnnie does not hate the Luftwaffe pilots who are trying to kill him. In fact he thinks of them as exactly the same as himself.

To what extent is it possible to fight a violent battle to the death and not hate one's enemy?

Johnnie reflects on Ovid's quotation that 'it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country,' '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*' He also recalls Owen's bitter retort:

*'My friend, you would not tell with such high zest*

*To children ardent for some desperate glory,*

*The old lie: Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.'*

Can it be 'sweet and honorable' to die for one's country?

Many historians describe World War II as a 'just war' against the forces of fascism and militant nationalism.

Is it possible to have a 'just' war? If so, what recent wars have been 'just'?

## Discussion Questions

### Johnnie's psychology

Johnnie deals with the prospect of imminent death by convincing himself he doesn't have anything worth living for, as exemplified by Yeats' poem:

*I know that I will meet my fate*

*Somewhere among the clouds above.*

Obviously Johnnie was in acute peril, but to what extent is stoic suppression of one's feelings and desires a good way of managing the vicissitudes of everyday life? Does modern society need more, or less, stoicism?

Johnnie's reluctance to pursue Eleanor stems in part from her evident lack of interest and in part from his fear of rejection.

If Johnnie had expressed his feelings before the end of the book, would their relationship have been different?