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Teammates – This month, the LeMay Center highlights **The Battle of Britain & control of the air** as our Doctrine Paragon.

Air Force Doctrine Publication 1, *The Air Force*, states that “Control of the air is a necessary precondition for control of the surface.” AFDP 3-01, *Counterair Operations*, specifies the two categories of activities to achieve control of the air as *Offensive Counterair (OCA)* and *Defensive Counterair (DCA)*. This paragon will examine OCA and DCA as employed by the Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force (RAF) over the skies of Britain and the English Channel in the late summer to early fall of 1940.

The Luftwaffe (German Air Force) conducted offensive attacks on Britain with the intent of setting the conditions for the German invasion of the British Isles, known as Operation Sealion. The Luftwaffe was directed to achieve air supremacy (nearly uncontested control of the air) by destroying RAF fighters and airfields. To do so, the Luftwaffe executed OCA operations including fighter escort of German bombers, suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) strikes on RAF early warning radar sites, and attack operations to destroy RAF airfields.



In response, the RAF conducted DCA operations, using a network of early warning radars and observation posts to alert Hurricane and Spitfire fighters of incoming Luftwaffe bombers. The RAF responded to wave after wave of Luftwaffe attacks, maintained air parity (neither side controls the air) and never allowed the Germans complete control of the air domain. The RAF also employed passive DCA measures to protect airfields and aircraft, such as hardening facilities, burying telephone cables, and creating decoy airfields.

After 3 weeks of relentless assaults on the RAF, a change in the strategic environment caused Hitler’s priorities for the Luftwaffe to shift. Instead of continuing to target RAF aircraft and airfields, it began to prioritize strategic attacks against British infrastructure and population centers. The shift in German targeting priorities allowed the RAF to reconstitute and generate airpower free from Luftwaffe attack. The renewed effectiveness of the RAF allowed them to defend British skies until the fall, resulting in Hitler’s indefinite postponement of Operation Sealion. According to historians, a key factor influencing Hitler’s decision was the Luftwaffe’s failure to achieve air supremacy.



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### Why It Matters Today:

USAF doctrine emphasizes the use of OCA to gain air superiority or air supremacy as a necessary pre-condition required to enable the conduct of fires and maneuver by joint forces in other domains. It also highlights DCA's role as part of the joint Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) approach to provide protection for friendly forces in a theater. However, beyond OCA and DCA, the Battle of Britain shows it is possible to view the RAF's approach through an alternate lens: as the RAF defended British skies and



maintained air parity, they executed a de facto air denial strategy. In essence, the RAF denied German achievement of its operational and strategic objectives by denying it control of the air through defensive action.

The inability of air forces to gain air superiority relegates conflict to a state of air parity,

significantly reducing the freedom of action and maneuver of forces in other domains. Air denial strategies presuppose an attrition-based approach that relies on a resilient force and asymmetric advantages (such as Britain's early warning radar network). As evidenced by the current Russo-Ukraine conflict, such a state is likely to result in protracted or attritional conflicts where neither side is able to achieve and maintain a marked advantage over the other. Though undesirable, as seen in WWII in Britain, an air denial strategy was necessary. While it remains to be seen whether Ukrainian efforts will achieve similar results, Airmen should examine these case studies and consider whether such a strategy may be necessary in the future.

For more information on the discussion between air superiority and air denial methodologies, check out the latest Air Force Doctrine Podcast episode "[Deciphering Doctrine – Ep 16 – Lt Gen Hinote Challenges AF Doctrine: Maneuver vs Fires, Offense vs Defense, and Lessons from Ukraine](#)" available at [www.doctrine.af.mil](http://www.doctrine.af.mil) and on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, and DVIDS.

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