

**WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: BATTLE OF BRITAIN****Extract from 'The Battle of Britain debate'**

Extract taken from: ['The Battle of Britain debate'](#)

**The Royal Navy did not win the 'Battle of Britain': But we need a holistic view of Britain's defences in 1940**

By Christina Goulter, Andrew Gordon and Gary Sheffield

In truth, the notion that in John Keegan's words 'some 2500 young pilots had alone been responsible for preserving Britain from invasion' has long been disputed by historians. As far back as 1958 Duncan Grinnell-Milne made the case for the principal role of the RN [Royal Navy] in preventing invasion, and two years later Captain Stephen Roskill, the British Official Historian, argued for the primacy of 'lack of adequate [German] instruments of sea power' and the knowledge of their use in the thwarting of Operation Sealion. A few years later Telford Taylor produced what is still probably the most thorough study of the question, in which he integrated [put together] the air and maritime dimensions [aspects]. Wing Commander H.R. Allen, himself a Spitfire pilot, published in 1974 a controversial book on the subject. Allen defined the Battle of Britain widely, to encompass more than just the air battle, and concluded that the importance of the air and maritime dimensions had been respectively exaggerated and underestimated.

---

**Notes**

- Holistic means taking the whole story into account, not just one element
- John Keegan, Duncan Grinnell Milne and Telford Taylor are all historians.

---

**What is this source?**

This is a short extract from an article written in a web debate between military historians about the Battle of Britain.

The three authors are military historians.

---

**What's the background to this source?**

At the end of the Battle of Britain the country was looking for good news and found it in the victory over the German Air Force. The Prime Minister praised the RAF pilots as "the Few". The media also featured the brave young men who kept the Germans out because it was a dramatic and interesting story.

## WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Some military historians have long felt that the contribution of other factors was not recognised as much as it should have been by the population in general.

---

### **It's worth knowing that...**

This article was a response to another article that appeared in a history magazine in Britain in 2006. The article claimed that the RAF was much less important than the navy in terms of keeping Britain safe.

The three authors were quoted in the magazine article but they were very unhappy about the way they had been quoted. This is why they wrote the article.

---

### **What conclusions can you draw from this source?**

1. What was Keegan's view and how do historians feel about it?
2. What other factors appear to have played a part?
3. Explain what the three historians mean by a holistic approach mentioned in the title?
4. Look at the plan for your TV documentary.
  - o Do you think you will give some time in the documentary to the Big Debate about the Battle of Britain?
  - o How much of the 30 minutes do you think you will give?