

## [The Myths of the "Few"](#)

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The Myths of the “Few...”

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English-speaking peoples like their heroes to be the “little guy.” Especially those in the United Kingdom (Great Britain) and the United States. The Second World War (WW II) provides two particularly apt cases of support for this observation.

Brits and Yanks want their heroes not to be bureaucrats, or rear echelon commanders, but rather warriors...and preferably the non-flag officer kind. They want a hefty dose of egalitarianism in their myths: greatest generation versus great men. The “few,” such as in Winston Churchill’s famous speech before Parliament from the second volume of his history of WW II, *Their Finest Hour* (1949), are the guys with the fighter planes and the guns. For our purposes here, they are those guys in airplanes.

The first case study is well-established. The professional journal of the Royal Air Force published an important article several years ago implicitly castigating Churchill, for whatever reasons, for taking the focus off of Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, the opaque visionary who created the first modern radar-based integrated air defense system (and civil defense system) that helped save Great Britain in the

so-called battle (really campaign) of Britain in 1940.<sup>[1]</sup> Churchill’s closing words in his chapter on the “Battle of Britain,” self quote the “Never...was so much owed” line without mentioning Dowding at all. He does mention, on the other hand the anti-aircraft artillery commander General Pile and Minister of Supply Herbert

Morison.<sup>[2]</sup> In the words of the author of the RAF article: “Due tribute must also be paid to the scientists and engineers who designed and built the weapons of war without which the ‘Few’ would have stood little chance of success...Dowding’s system...also proved decisive in minimizing the effects of a war of attrition.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Similarly, especially with the release of the latest film version of the Battle of Midway, again, the fliers, not so nameless in the U.S. case (e.g. Dick Best), are the heroes and Nimitz and his commanders are remembered only because Woody Harrelson plays Nimitz, but not for his actions and risk-taking.<sup>[4]</sup> Inside naval historical circles, though, Nimitz and Spruance get their just due, but the man in charge when 3/4ths of the Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk, Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher required an entire book by John Lundstrom to bring him back into the foreground he had been eliminated from by historians, Marines, and jealous colleagues like Richmond Kelly Turner.<sup>[5]</sup>

Do not get the wrong idea. I do not privilege “great men” any more than the common deck hands and the necessary bureaucrats or shipbuilders. But war is the realm of decisions by organizational leaders, many who eschewed self-promotion. However, in passing them by we foreclose a fuller explanation of causation, context, and contingency in the flow of the history.

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<sup>[1]</sup> \_\_\_ Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, “Employment of the Fighter Command in Home Defence,” *Naval War College Review* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 35-50.

<sup>[2]</sup> \_\_\_ Sir Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 339-340.

<sup>[3]</sup> \_\_\_ Group Captain Peter W. Gray, RAF, “The Battle of Britain: So we already know the story?” in *The Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 29-

<sup>[4]</sup> \_\_\_ Jonathan B. Parshall, “What WAS Nimitz Thinking?,” *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 75: No. 2 (Spring 2022), Article 8.

[5]

\_\_\_ John B. Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 508-515

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