



## Operation Sealion: The Planned German Invasion of Britain A List of Sources

*By Peter Antill*

Having come across this excellent site and signing up to the newsletter, I thought it might be useful to share the results of some research I've been doing into the subject I have been doing for several years. This is in preparation for writing a series of articles about Operation Sealion and the plans for British defence / resistance for a website two colleagues and myself run that is entitled 'The Military History Encyclopedia on the Web' and located at <http://www.historyofwar.org>. However, I thought I would write a few notes to explain what the operation was about.

The Luftwaffe attempt to attain air superiority over Great Britain by defeating the RAF, which became known as the Battle of Britain, was the main prerequisite for the planned German invasion of Britain, codenamed Operation Sealion and originally scheduled for September 1940. The evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk had left the Wehrmacht in control of the Channel Coast after the fall of France and while this was an enviable position to be in, it meant that the Germans were now forced to contemplate what to do about what the Chief of Luftwaffe Intelligence called 'the most dangerous enemy'. The dire state of the British Army after the evacuation from the continent demanded immediate attention and while it would take time for reorganise and re-equip the ground forces available, they could only get stronger as time went on. Whatever the arguments as to how serious Hitler actually was in contemplating an amphibious invasion of Britain, the preparations that were made were conducted in a serious manner and involved a considerable cost to the German war effort. Whatever their actual chances of success, the landings were planned as a contingency and were dependent on the efforts of the Luftwaffe to achieve air superiority over the landing area and much of southern Britain, in order to forestall both the RAF and Royal Navy intervening in the operation.

OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or High Command of the Armed Forces) was the main strategy-making body and was headed by Hitler with Generals Keitel and Jodl alongside. To this reported the high commands of the various services, the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres - Army High Command under Generalfeldmarschall von Brauchitsch), OKM (Oberkommando der Marine - Naval High Command under Grossadmiral Raeder) and OKL (Oberkommando der Luftwaffe - Air Force High Command under Reichsmarschall Göring). The main planning for the operation came out of two directives from Hitler and a supplemental one from the OKW, the first of which was issued on 16 July 1940. Up to this point, various meetings had occurred and planning documents had been issued by all three services and their High Commands, including a memo from Jodl dated 12 July 1940 which alluded to the operation being called *Lowe* (Lion) and being a broad front operation, not much

more complex than an extended river crossing. While the Heer found the idea appealing, rivers are not tidal, are not subject to severe weather and don't have the enemy's Home Fleet in a position to contest the crossing. Following this was a meeting between Hitler, von Brauchitsch, and General Fritz Halder (the Heer's Chief of Staff) on 13 July 1940 where Halder presented more detailed planning proposals that outlined an operation incorporating 39 divisions and around 500,000 men. Hitler authorised continued preparations but was puzzled over the lack of peace feelers from Britain, as he once again outlined that he would prefer a negotiated settlement as he did not wish to hand Britain a military defeat which would disrupt the empire and only be of benefit to Japan and the USA. Hitler also reviewed his decision to reduce the size of the army by thirty-five divisions to release additional manpower for the economy and scaled it down to a reduction of fifteen divisions. Fuhrer Directive No. 16 issued on 16 July 1940 stated that the Wehrmacht would 'begin preparations for, and if necessary carry out, an invasion of England. The aim of this operation is to eliminate Great Britain as a base of operations from which the war against Germany can be fought and, if necessary, the island will be completely occupied.' An invasion would be carried out on a broad front and preparations completed by mid-August. The Luftwaffe would eliminate the RAF as an effective fighting force and interdict the Royal Navy should it try to intervene and the Kriegsmarine would furnish an invasion fleet and protect it. Current army plans would form the basis of the operation, although the line would be shortened slightly to between Ramsgate and the Isle of Wight. Hitler also confirmed that the operation would be codenamed *See/owe* (Sealion). In some ways, it seemed that the Luftwaffe was expected to almost defeat Britain by itself. Goring and his commanders however, mostly ignored the directive and continued with their own plans - they thought an invasion was going to be unnecessary anyway, while the Raeder and the Kriegsmarine thought that OKW was insane. From this point, the Heer continued to be the main supporter of the plan, with the Luftwaffe lukewarm to the idea and the Kriegsmarine trying to torpedo the Heer's plan.

Following Fuhrer Directive No. 16, in which many historians highlight the words '*and if necessary carry out, an invasion*' as an indication of Hitler's lack of commitment, the second half of July was filled with various staff meetings and proposals where the Luftwaffe confirmed it would be able to start a major air campaign against the RAF in early August but the Kriegsmarine would not be able to complete its preparations until mid-September. On 28 July 1940 they proposed that if the invasion were to go ahead that a beachhead be established near Dover, the closest point to the continent, where a narrow corridor could be protected by minefields to each side as well as groups of U-Boats and E-Boats beyond these. The Kriegsmarine estimated it would take ten days to put the first wave ashore and needless to say, the Heer was horrified. It had wanted landings all along the south coast from Folkestone to Brighton with a separate landing from Cherbourg. It wanted wheeled and tracked vehicles and so all the car ferries were to be used along with all the other cross-channel tourist facilities. The first wave was to be landed over three days and consist of 260,000 men, 30,000 vehicles and 60,000 horses. This was followed by a memo dated 31 July 1940, which advised that given the Kriegsmarine's preparations would be complete by 15 September 1940, the dates most suitable for invasion would be from 22 - 26 September, when the weather was often bad. It could not however, guarantee to be able to protect the invasion from the Royal Navy and would not be able to guarantee resupply if there was indeed bad weather. It was

suggested that the invasion was put off until May 1941 when additional surface assets would be available and additional work be able to be carried out on converting or building vessels to allow for amphibious operations. Fuhrer Directive No. 17 was issued on 1 August 1940 (followed by one from OKW) and ordered the intensification of the air campaign against the RAF, targeting their air units, ground installations, observation facilities and aircraft factories. It also stated that all preparations for invasion would be completed by 15 September 1940, the original deadline being kept as Hitler had been concerned over the strength of the British Army if the invasion was postponed until the following spring. Despite misgivings, the Kriegsmarine continued to scour the waterways of occupied Europe for suitable craft, both powered and unpowered and proceeded to convert many of them by adding drop-down ramps, while the Heer conducted energetic landing exercises, with propaganda film crews in attendance.

Needless to say, the Luftwaffe's defeat in the Battle of Britain forced Hitler to postpone the invasion on 17 September 1940 and then on 12 October 1940 postponed it until the following year. By then Hitler's attention had moved eastwards and was focused on his main ideological opponent, the USSR, with planning and preparations being undertaken for Operation Barbarossa.

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*It Happened Here* (1964), Directors: Kevin Brownlow / Andrew Mollo, 97mins, English/German, B&W, ASIN: B000CBOZWG, Studio: Film First.

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*When Hitler Invaded Britain*, ITV1, 04 July 2004, 22.15 – 23.45, 90 mins.

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