The Battle of Britain

Before proceeding with the story of the *Automedon* let us now take a look at its wider context, the European theatre of war. Though it was fought far away from the Far East, the Battle of Britain turned out to be critically important to the destiny of Japan when her leaders failed to recognize the fact that the tide of war had changed in favour of Britain as early as the middle of September 1940. Then Hitler gave up his plan to invade Britain and directed his attention towards the Soviet Union thereby sealing his own fate forever. The Japanese leaders’ colossal failure led to another that committed Japan to her alliance with Germany and Italy on the 27th of the same month. Thereafter, naval cooperation between Japan and Germany was noticeably accelerated. It is regrettable that unbiased reports by the Japanese military attachés in London and other posts were accorded little attention in Tokyo. Thus, Japan placed herself on the final course to national disaster. Indeed, the Battle of Britain, which was the most crucial event in the history of the Second World War, continues to provide the main background to the story of the *Automedon*. 
Early in the morning of 1 September 1939, over a year before the *Automedon* incident, Germany invaded Poland with a coordinated air and land attack involving 1,300 aircraft and a large force of sixty-two divisions, triggering the Second World War. Britain and France declared war on Germany two days later. Yet Britain and France made no attempt to attack Germany from the rear while she progressed eastwards, and they appeared to abandon Poland.

In fact, the German defences on her western front were extremely weak. This was because Hitler, disregarding the protests of his General Staff and military leaders, had deployed almost all of his best-armed and mechanized divisions in the invasion of Poland. On the western front, thirty-three divisions, the majority of which were second-rate in terms of armaments and training, were stationed without aircraft or tanks. If Britain and France had seized this opportunity and invaded Germany in earnest the course of the war would have been very different.

Lacking in military strength and external support, the Poles capitulated to Hitler’s invasion in spite of their ardent determination to defend their homeland. Their desperate fight was in vain and they were vanquished in less than a month. Through the collusion of Hitler and Stalin, Poland was promptly carved up between Germany and the Soviet Union, and was erased from the map.

The Polish secret service is said to have been the most advanced in breaking German codes during the 1930s. At the start of the decade it had already discovered the inner workings of the Enigma machine with the help of German collaborators and had succeeded in its replication.\(^1\) Between 1932 and 1938, the Polish secret service had been intercepting and decoding German Enigma communications. Prior to the invasion it had supplied its British and French counterparts with all the documents, equipment and other materials it had accumulated. When France surrendered, the Polish decoding experts moved to England, where they assisted the code-breaking work of the Government Code and Cipher School at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, and contributed to its successes.\(^2\)

Soon the Royal Navy was in full command of the Enigma machine and was able to decode the German submarine fleet’s communications. This helped considerably to suppress U-boat activity in the Atlantic, where they had been wreaking havoc. The