

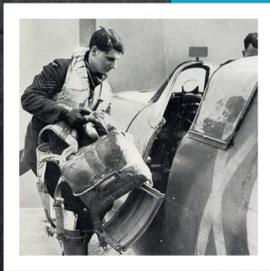


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BATTLE OF BRITAIN 1940



A Spitfire machine undergoing a test in the firing pits



A Spitfire pilot sits in the cockpit ready for take off



A W.A.A.F. flight mechanic helping the pilot of an aircraft take to the air



A German rear-gunner's view of a Spitfire which has swooped down before turning to attack



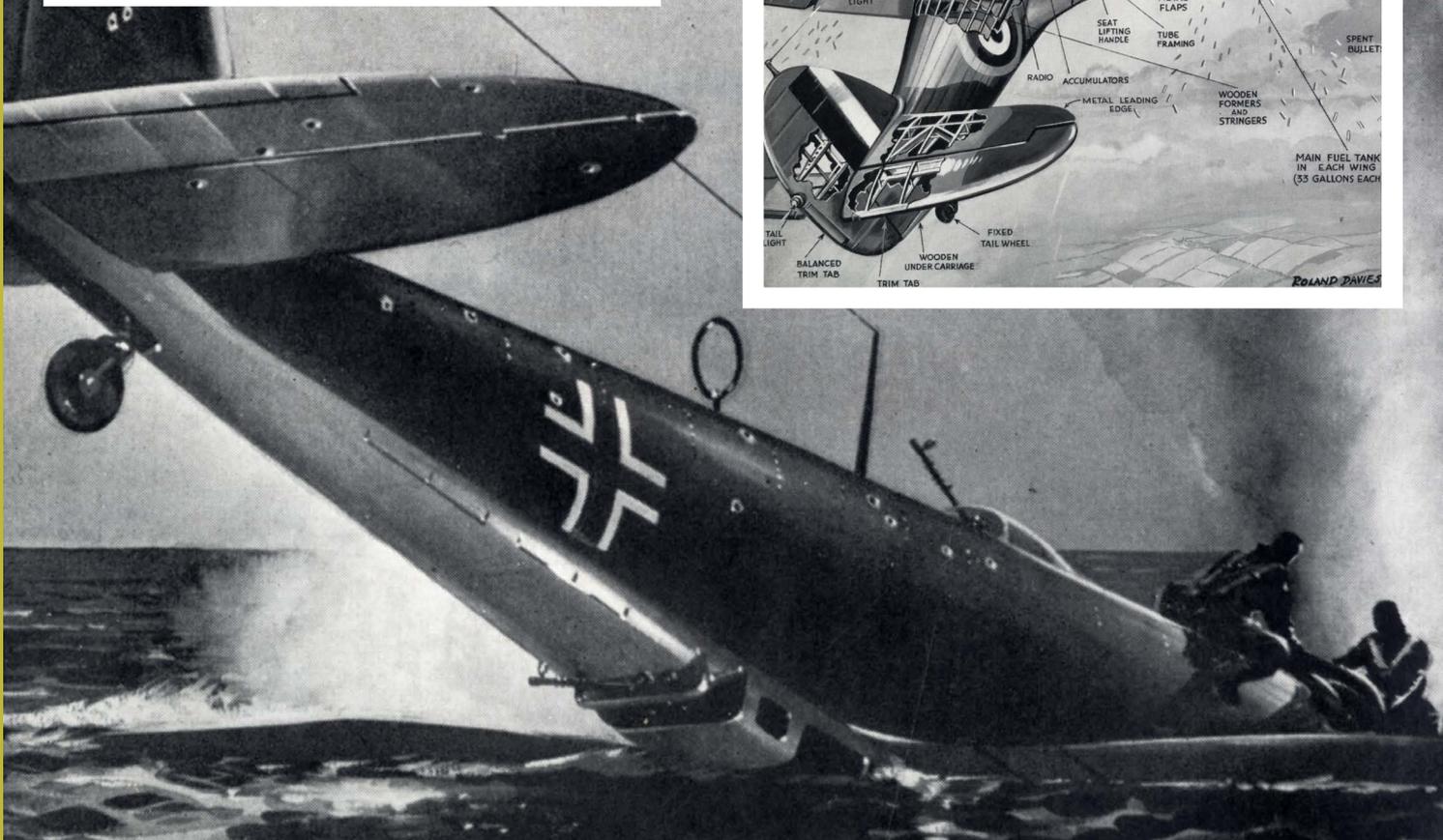
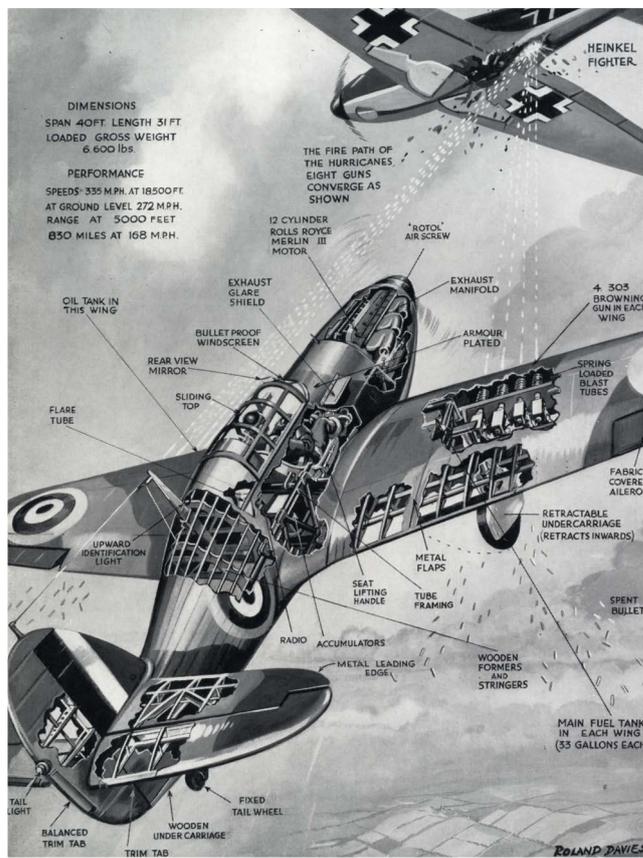
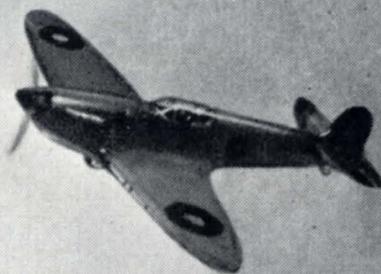
W.A.A.F. telephone operators - every split second counts when intercepting the enemy



Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh C.T. Dowding

BATTLE OF BRITAIN 1940

Original artist's impressions



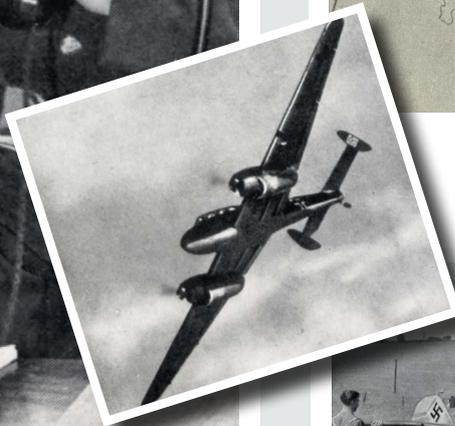
BATTLE OF BRITAIN 1940



A launch base receives news that an RAF pilot has bailed out, the message will be passed on speedily to a waiting rescue vessel



Plotters at work on a table in the operations room as fighter aircraft return to base (the actual plotting map has been obliterated for security reasons)

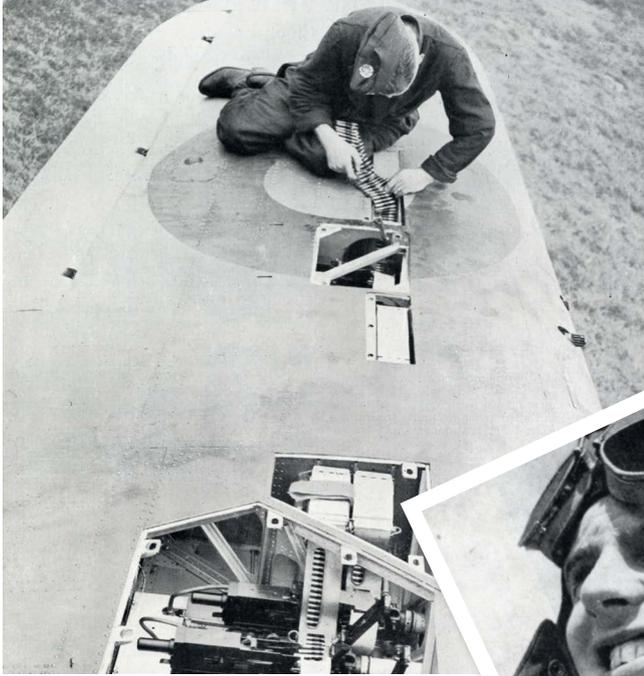


A new Me. 109F which was forced down into a cornfield by a vigilant Spitfire, the enemy pilot was held up by a passing motorist



A rescue launch has reached an RAF pilot forced to bail out, and he is pulled from the water as an anti-aircraft gunner keeps watch

BATTLE OF BRITAIN 1940



A young aircraftman feeding ammunition belts into a Hurricane's twelve machine-guns



Plotters in the operations room of a fighter station mark up the positions of the aircraft, while others man the telephones



Sergeant-pilot of a cannon-firing Hurricane standing by his aircraft, painted black for night flying



Four-cannon and eight-gun Hurricanes flying in echelon formation

BATTLE OF BRITAIN 1940



Bombed areas in London's East End were visited by the King and Queen on 11th September 1940



A grandmother sits with the four grandchildren she rescued when the house was bombed



Mr Winston Churchill inspects raid damage in Central London and the East End following a bombing attack



Taking their food and bedding with them thousands of Londoners seek shelter in the Underground stations during night raids over the capital



Royal Air Force pilots running to man Hurricane fighters

BATTLE OF BRITAIN

JUST HOW BRITISH WAS IT?

One of the little known things about the Battle of Britain is how many of 'The Few' who fought it were, in fact, foreign or Commonwealth pilots. According to Len Deighton's 'Battle of Britain', 537 of the 3,080 men who flew - just under 20% - were not UK citizens, and that doesn't even take into account dual nationals who signed up under their British passports. Additionally, these non-British airmen accounted for 102 out of the 520 brave men who gave their lives in the battle, again just under 20%. They came from Poland, New Zealand, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, South Africa, Australia, France, Ireland, South Rhodesia, Jamaica and Palestine, and without their help 'Operation Sealion', the invasion of the UK, might have spelt the end of Europe as we know it.

We had, of course, plenty of British young men ready and willing to join the R.A.F., so why the huge influx of men from other countries? A look at the operational histories of both the British and German air forces just prior to the battle helps to answer that question. The R.A.F. had of course gone to help when our ally, France, was invaded by Germany, but the combined French and British air forces were not only hopelessly outnumbered (the Germans having twice as many planes available), but outclassed. While the British and the French had largely never seen combat before the lightning month-long takeover, the German pilots had been meticulously trained and had tested their skill in battle both while helping Franco to win the Spanish Civil War and during the invasion of Poland. Many of the soldiers rescued from Dunkirk afterwards complained bitterly that the air support had been non-existent. The R.A.F. had in fact been present, and working hard too - British pilots flew 171 reconnaissance missions, 652 bombings and 2,739 fighter sorties during the battle - but their efforts had been cancelled out by the far more numerous and practiced Luftwaffe.

So, the R.A.F. was dangerously short on both numbers and skilled airmen even before the Battle of Britain commenced, and once it began the planes and men were decimated. According to Len Deighton, in the first nine days of the battle, up to 19th July, 118 British planes were lost, along with 80 Squadron and Flight Commanders. The R.A.F. risked extinction. With so many high ranking men being killed, and a need to

replace them quickly, British pilots were being sent into battle with just 20 hours of experience on Hurricanes or Spitfires. This was not enough, and they soon followed their comrades to the grave. In desperation, the R.A.F. appealed to all of Britain's allies and the members of the Commonwealth for help. It was not hard to recruit men; many countries, as present or former members of the British Empire, felt duty-bound to help defend the shores of their parent island. Others volunteered out of a thirst for revenge on the conqueror of their home countries.



Take Poland, for instance, the country that donated most men - 147 in all, 30 of whom would die. These men had escaped the brutally efficient takeover of their country, and ached to avenge the friends and family who had not been so lucky. Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding said of these men, and of the 87 Czechs who of course had seen their own country crushed, that they "swung into the fight with a dash and enthusiasm that is beyond praise. They were inspired by a burning hatred of the Germans, which made them deadly opponents." The Imperial War Museum, meanwhile, quotes Wing Commander Gordon Sinclair, who was posted to command the Czech 310 Squadron, as saying, "They were anxious to fly, and anxious to get at the enemy, very anxious, probably

more than we were... they didn't like the Germans." Even the official document 'The Battle of Britain', released by the Ministry of Information, announces proudly that "Polish and Czech pilots took their full share in the battle. They possess great qualities of courage and dash."

Well might the government praise them, as many of these foreign pilots were very skilled, having had better, more extensive training and greater combat experience than most of our pilots. Many had flown against the Germans before when their countries had fallen, and were extremely good at shooting. 'Battle of Britain' attests that in a gunnery contest that took place in April 1942, with 22 squadrons competing, Polish squadrons 303, 316 and 315 scooped all three top spots. In September 1940 303 squadron achieved the highest kill rate in Fighter Command, and 7 ½% of all aircraft destroyed in the Battle of Britain were taken care of by the vengeful Poles.

BATTLE OF BRITAIN

JUST HOW BRITISH WAS IT?

In fact, a lot of the 'aces' were not British; of the Top 10 on the Allied side of the battle, at least half were from other nations. This was inevitable, since when the best of the British pilots were killed, equally skilled replacements were needed. The most outstanding airmen and tacticians from the Commonwealth and other Allied nations were of course the first to volunteer, and these men were immediately shuffled into prominent positions and given ample opportunities to face the enemy. At a time when manpower was so desperately needed, no talent was overlooked for long. Then, after the outdated Gloster Gladiator was phased out and the production of the much more sophisticated and speedy Hurricanes and Spitfires was stepped up, the pilots had better equipment to work with and were more likely to make kills and emerge victorious.

The overall top scorer of the Battle of Britain, it seems (bearing in mind that few lists and books agree on each individual pilot's ranking), was UK pilot Eric Lock. He scored 21 kills, flying first with 41 Squadron, then as Flight Commander of 611 Squadron after he was seriously wounded while crash-landing. He was awarded the DFC and Bar and the DSO, but did not survive the war. There is some debate over whether fellow British pilots James Lacey and Archie

McKellar come next on the list, or whether the first foreign pilot enters at number two. Anyway, it is certain that Josef Frantisek was the top Czechoslovakian pilot of the battle, and one of the top five 'aces'. Before joining 303 Squadron he flew first in both Czechoslovakia and Poland, then laboriously made his way to Britain via internship in Romania, from which he escaped, and France, where he again flew. He claimed 17 victories in the Battle of Britain, for which he was awarded the DFM. He, too, died shortly after the battle when his plane crashed. New Zealand's top fighter is generally agreed to have been Brian Carbury, with 15 ½ kills. He had actually joined the R.A.F. on a temporary commission prior to the war, which was made permanent on its outbreak, and had already begun to assist with Spitfire training. He too is one of the top five scorers, and actually earned both his DFC and Bar during the period of the Battle of Britain alone! He survived the war.

Apart from their high scoring, many foreign airmen were given great responsibility in the war. The prime

example, of course, is Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, the New Zealander who was given control of the vital 11 Group. This was the group that fended off the brunt of the Luftwaffe's attacks, being responsible for South East England, not only the home of the capital but the closest sector to occupied France. Having fallen from his horse when an infantry officer in the First World War, and been declared unfit to continue riding, Park decided to try flying after seeing the great effect that aerial reconnaissance could have on the eventual course of a battle. Taking to his personal Hurricane to observe the battles fought by his men, Park studied the actions of all aircraft carefully, and learned to be an excellent tactician. It was he who realised just how outclassed Britain was in the early days of the battle, when men and aircraft were both in dangerously short supply and the Luftwaffe was certainly the more experienced of the two forces. Throwing large numbers

of planes into the air against them might briefly intimidate the enemy, he realised, but the smarter thing to do would be to send up only as many as were critically needed, to limit the losses and save resources for other skirmishes. He also deduced that it was no good attacking the fighters, formidable opponents that they were, and that aiming for the slower bombers would inflict greater losses on the Germans.



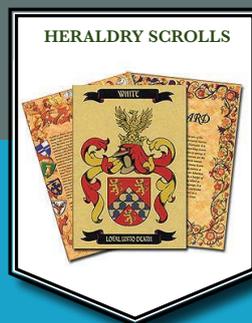
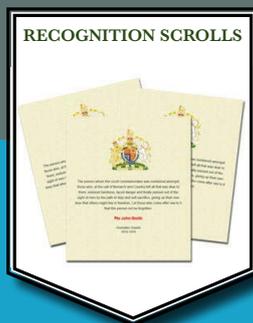
He later clashed with the leader of 12 Group, Air Vice Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, who favoured the method of 'Big Wing' flying, throwing as many planes as possible against the opponent in order to intimidate them. The argument led to both Park and Hugh Dowding being relieved of command soon after the battle finished, but many still believe that it was Park and Dowding's calm and measured tactics were ultimately responsible for protecting the depleted and over-matched R.A.F. from being utterly crushed at this crucial time. If 'The Few' saved Britain from invasion, then Park could be said to be responsible for safeguarding the lives of 'The Few'.

Every man who fought in the Battle of Britain was heroic, since the pilots took their lives in their hands each time they returned to the air, but Britain would certainly have fallen if she did not have her empire and her allies to rely on in this time of great peril. Seventy years later, we still remember 'The Few', both the home pilots and those who came from further afield to help protect this island.



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