

So much is still owed to The Few

Eighty years after the climax of the Battle of Britain, **James Henry** pays a heartfelt tribute to The Few – and The Many who supported them on the ground

EIGHTY YEARS ago the skies above southern England were the stage for a daily, deadly aerial ballet as young men from the Royal Air Force and the German Luftwaffe attempted to machine-gun each other out of the air, and often succeeded.

By all accounts those who witnessed the Battle of Britain in the summer and early autumn of 1940 did report a kind of balletic beauty. The weather was predominantly good so the sky was often a cloudless blue. Swooping and looping aircraft painted vapour trail patterns high above the ripening wheat fields, the hop

gardens, the white cliffs and the steel-grey waves of the English Channel.

The green and gold patchwork of fields, villages and ancient woods viewed from the cockpits were the embodiment of the home the RAF was striving to protect, and the Britain that the Germans were aiming to destroy and subjugate.

Up above, it is doubtful that any of the fighter pilots of the Spitfires and Hurricanes, the Messerschmitt 109s and 110s or the crews in the Junkers, Heinkel or Dornier bombers, would have had time to consider the aesthetics or the bigger picture.

Nor would the personnel on the airfields that were the targets of the waves of attackers or the civilians living in range of the bombs that missed the runways and hangars.

Following the evacuation at Dunkirk in May, 1940, with Germany occupying France, the Low Countries, Denmark and Norway, Hitler began to plan Operation Sealion – the invasion of Britain.

He was fortunate with his daring plan to trick the French Army and the British Expeditionary Force by invading Holland and Belgium as a feint while a Blitzkrieg tank attack through



RAF Hawker Hurricanes make a head-on attack against German Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 110s

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the Ardennes Forest of Luxembourg surprised them from behind. The Ardennes plan would have been vulnerable to air attack. The complete surprise meant that Allied aircraft were busy covering the Holland attack.

It was a different story a few weeks later. Any invasion of Britain could not succeed now that the RAF knew where the attack must come and when they were in process of rapidly building up new aircraft and pilots.

That is, unless the Luftwaffe could wrest command of the air quickly. By early July squadrons of bombers began to target shipping and Channel ports.

By August they were targeting radar stations and fighter airfields and in greater numbers. Their first mass effort came on August 13, which the Germans named Adlertag (Eagle Day), with raids on coastal airstrips including Manston



English fighter pilots scrambling for their Spitfires in 1940 during the Battle of Britain

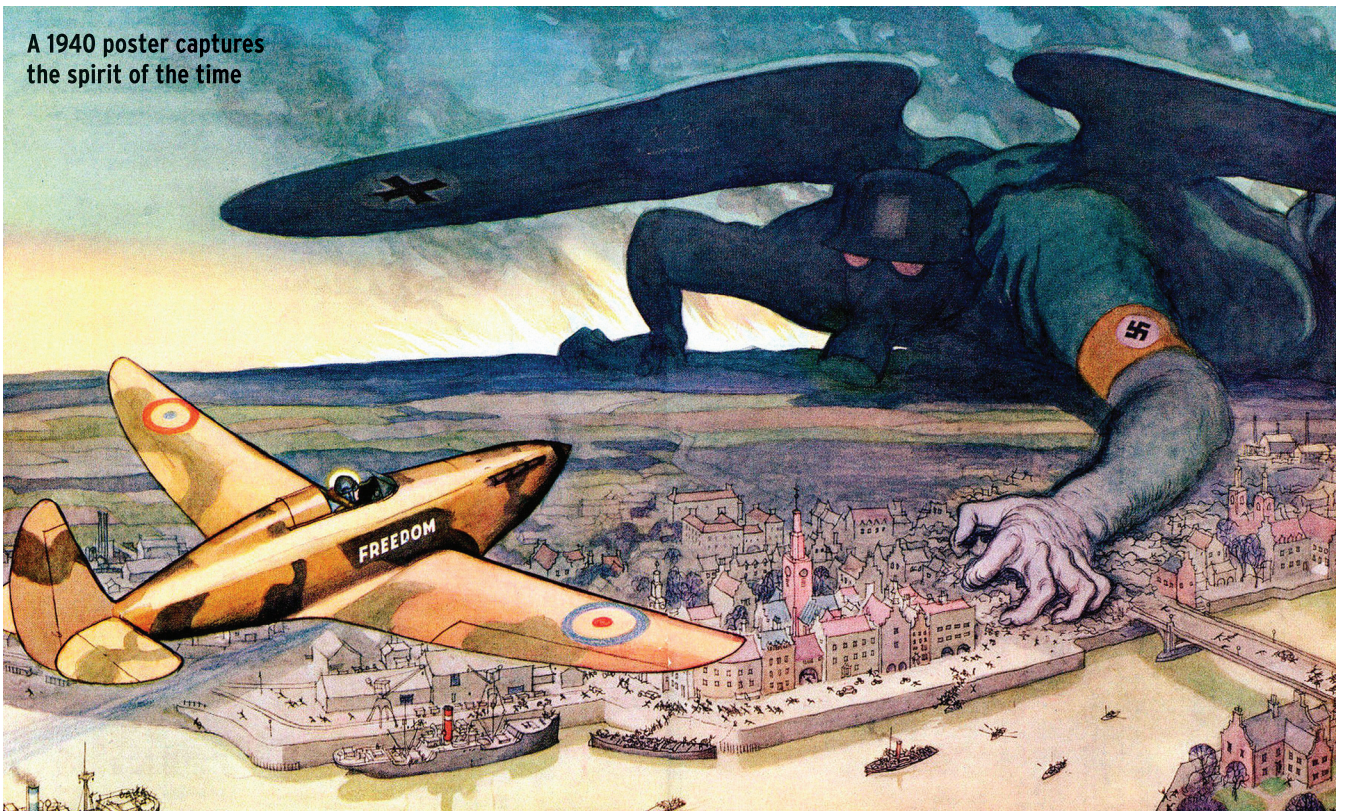
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and Hawkinge in Kent. The greatest number of Nazi sorties of the campaign came on August 15, including some in the North East where the raids were launched from Norwegian bases. But here they got a bloody nose. Out of 115 bombers and 35 fighters, 75 were destroyed and many others damaged. They never repeated the raids again.

It became a battle of attrition and August 18 saw the greatest losses of RAF aircraft to date, many on the ground.

That total was superseded on August 31 as resources seemed stretched to breaking point. Then bad weather stepped in to help by closing down raids for almost a week and giving the RAF breathing space to reorganise its defence.

A 1940 poster captures the spirit of the time



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Anniversary events defy the new national threat

This year's exceptional circumstances will affect the events to mark the 80th anniversary but in true British spirit the virus will not be allowed to win.

The Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel-le-Ferne near Folkestone has reopened to visitors on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays. They will be holding an open-air memorial service at 11am on September 15. Website: (www.battleofbritainmemorial.org).

The Imperial War Museum's website gives details of the Battle of Britain and opening of its sites, in particular RAF Duxford in Cambridgeshire. A special air show will be held there on September 19 and 20. Website: (www.iwm.org.uk).

The Battle of Britain Monument on London's Embankment on the north bank of the Thames, almost opposite the London Eye, is a magnificent and moving tribute to The Few. It is worth a visit at any time; its website (www.bbm.org.uk) will update you on any events that will be possible in September.

From September 7 the German targeting appeared to change as mass bombing of London and other cities, as well as aircraft factories, took place and attacks on airfields lessened.

They launched the biggest raid on London on September 15. Fighter Command was ready and inflicted the Luftwaffe's largest losses.

It was the most significant day of the battle, as two days later Hitler abandoned his invasion plans and turned his attention to the Eastern Front. This date was declared Battle of Britain Day and remains so now.

During October the city bombing was switched to night raids to reduce Luftwaffe losses. By October 31 it was clear that the RAF retained air superiority and the Battle of Britain was over.

On August 20 in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill reported on progress of the war in general as



A flight of Hawker Hurricanes speeds towards invading Luftwaffe aircraft

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the Battle of Britain was boiling above. Typically, even with the Nazi invasion fleet gathering in Calais and the Luftwaffe sending hundreds of attacking bombers across the Channel, he found optimistic, defiant and stirring words. His analysis of the air situation came towards the end of his speech:

"The great air battle which has been in progress over this Island for the last few weeks has recently attained a high intensity. It is too soon to attempt to assign limits either to its scale or to its duration. We must certainly expect that greater efforts will be made by the enemy than any he has so far put forth. Hostile air fields are still being developed in France and the Low Countries, and the movement of squadrons and material for attacking us is still proceeding."

He continued:

"The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed

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"These pilots, often aged just 19 or 20, took off several times a day for their deadly duels"

throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

That last sentence is arguably the greatest he ever penned, an accolade not easy to achieve among Churchill's many inspiring, rousing and incisive words.

While not exactly buried, it wasn't the payoff of the speech or even looking likely to light a flame of immortality. Churchill, though, almost certainly recognised its potential and carefully placed it as he honed the full speech.

It seized the imagination of the world.

However, The Few really were a few more than our image of pilots being scrambled as they sat around a Nissen hut waiting for the telephone to ring.

The RAF fielded 1259 pilots (in July), many from Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the USA as well as some French and squadrons

of Poles and Czechs. The Polish units were the most successful. Their pilots had gained experience as they defied the German invasion in 1939 as well as the motivation that came from their country being subjected to many atrocities. They simply sought revenge.

Pilots were in the front line of danger, stress and fatigue. It must have been incredibly terrifying to be constantly expecting to be shot at, especially thousands of feet in the air, and then, when attacked, to desperately try to outmanoeuvre your opponent. Yet these pilots, often aged just 19 or 20, took off several times a day for their deadly duels.

Backing them up was a big team. On the airfields each fighter had a ground crew to look after it: usually this included an armourer to reload the machine guns, a rigger to get the pilot into his parachute and kit and into the cockpit, and a fitter who had the engine started and warmed up ready for the pilot. There were engineers to maintain the craft and effect repairs to damage.

Then there were control room teams of women of the WAAF receiving information on incoming enemy formations and plotting them on a map table with croupier-style push sticks. They also plotted our own squadrons

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and positions, allowing controllers sitting on elevated desks to get a visual picture of the battle and direct our aircraft via radio.

Radar stations on the coast gave early warning of the raids, but as they only faced out to sea, thousands of observers were needed to plot them as they flew inland.

The radar and network of control rooms organising the RAF response to attacks was a key factor in winning the battle. The Germans did not understand how the RAF always seemed to have its fighter squadrons in the right place to meet its bombers.

The ground personnel, who also paid a price in death and injuries, were another key advantage. They were able to get airfields operational quickly even after heavy bombing. Biggin Hill, which suffered the worst damage, was only out of action for a couple of hours.

Strategically, Germany underestimated the strength of the

RAF and also made mistakes in moving attacks away from airfields to cities, although they still pounded the air bases.

Britain was also better in the war of attrition both of pilots and aircraft. By November, Fighter Command had 40 per cent more pilots operational than July despite the 544 killed and more wounded. By contrast, it is believed that the Luftwaffe’s pilot strength was 30 to 40 per cent less.

We were building planes quicker and training pilots quicker.

Other parts of the RAF weighed in, including anti-aircraft crews and the efforts of Bomber Command in staging raids on Germany which tied up enemy fighters. Coastal Command was important for locating downed pilots in the Channel. Because RAF pilots were over home ground, if they survived being shot down they could be hopefully operational again. For German pilots it was an encounter with Dad’s Army and straight to prisoner-of-war camp.

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The Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel-le-Ferne near Folkestone





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