Who Shot Rommel?
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Who Shot Rommel?

A letter found in the Museum’s archives sparks new questions

Reginald Byron

At the time of Operation Overlord, Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel was commander of the German forces in Normandy. The strafing of his staff car on 17 July 1944 is one of the most legendary incidents of the Second World War, not only because it removed one of Germany’s most capable senior commanders from the field at a critical moment which may well have helped the Allies break through the Axis defences, but also because, ever since, there has been uncertainty, controversy, and claim-and-counterclaim about who is to be credited with it.

The bare facts of the case, insofar as I have been able to establish some consensus about them from the sources I have seen, are that Rommel’s car was attacked south of Livarot on the N179 in the direction of Vimoutiers near the village of Ste Foy de Montgommery sometime between 4.00 and 6.30 pm local time (GMT+1). The aircraft appear to have been Spitfires. The car was forced off the road and Rommel was thrown out of it, suffering serious head injuries. He survived, only to die by his own hand three months later. Hitler had come to suspect Rommel of having been complicit in the von Stauffenberg Bomb Plot of 20 July, and in October gave him an ultimatum: the choice of a hero’s state funeral or being hanged as a conspirator.
In the six decades since the event, at least eight claims have been made about the identity of the pilot who strafed Rommel’s car. Within hours of the news report that Rommel’s car had been hit, the Americans claimed that one of their P-47 pilots was responsible. Capt. Ralph C. Jenkins of the 510th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, Ninth Air Force, reported shooting up a German staff car in the St Lô area and on a second pass is said to have seen bodies strewn in the road.

The Jenkins claim has since been re-told many times and has become something of a legend. The problem is that St Lô is 30 miles to the west of Ste Foy de Montgommery, which on the best evidence available today is the place where the incident happened. Jenkins may well have shot up a staff car, but it was in the wrong place for it to have been Rommel’s. And it is nowadays thought by most of those who have looked into matter that the attacking aircraft were Spitfires, whose size, shape, and sound are not easily confused with Thunderbolts.

Two Spitfire squadrons are known to have flown armed reconnaissance sorties that afternoon in the neighbourhood in question, looking for enemy aircraft and other targets of opportunity behind enemy lines. Pilots of both No. 412 (RCAF) Squadron and No. 602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron are said to have attacked staff cars on sweeps about two hours apart. The earlier sweep was by 602 Squadron, the later one by 412 Squadron. Both seem to have been in the right place, and involved the right kind of aircraft. Claims that the staff cars they hit were Rommel’s have been made in respect of both squadrons. Nearly 70 years after the event, can we disentangle what has been said about these claims, narrow down the possibilities still further, and say anything new? Let us see.

One very important thing to keep in mind is the time difference, since the timings of the squadrons’ sweeps in relation to the reported time of the attack on Rommel’s car are going to be a crucial matter that we shall have to sort out. Nowadays, we are used to the idea that Western European time is an hour later than British time. But, in July 1944, it was the other way round and this has caused a good deal of confusion over the years in discussions about the Rommel incident.

British Double Summer Time (GMT+2) was the official time used by the Allies during Operation Overlord and the notation used in the squadron ORBs that summer, whether the squadrons were operating from British or French airfields. Summer Time was not used in Axis-occupied Europe, so the clocks remained at GMT+1, making Allied military time an hour later by the clock in France, Germany, and elsewhere on the Continent. This is where it becomes important to appreciate that the local reports of the attack on Rommel’s car were quoted in local time, GMT+1, not Allied military time (GMT+2). Remember that the critical time frame is between 16.00 and 18.30 GMT+1 or, adding an hour, between 17.00 and 19.30 Allied military time.

First, let us look at the 602 Squadron claim. The page for 17 July 1944 in the 602 Squadron Operations Record Book, Form 540, summarising the events of the day, mentions three staff cars. Squadron Leader J. J. le Roux “destroyed a staff car and a motor cyclist”, and Flying Officer Bruce Oliver is credited with bombing one staff car and strafing a second one. As to the location of the staff car that le Roux attacked, nothing is said in the ORB. Oliver’s two staff cars were noted as having been hit “near Falaise” but it is unclear from the wording in the ORB whether this location refers to both staff cars, or only to the one that was strafed.
The Form 540 does not say when these staff cars were hit, or during which of the four sorties the squadron put up that day. Form 541 (Detail of Work Carried Out) lists the pilots for each sortie and the take-off and landing times, but says nothing at all about staff cars or other vehicles, mentioning only the enemy aircraft destroyed, damaged, or probable. However, we can draw some useful information from Form 541. It shows that Chris le Roux flew two sorties: the first was from 15.40 to 16.50, and the second (which was the fourth and last sortie put up by the squadron that day) from 22.10 to 22.40. The staff car credited to him could have been hit on either of these sorties; there is no way of knowing which it was from the information given. Bruce Oliver flew only one sortie that day, a front line patrol, which took off at 19.30 and landed at 20.30, so both staff cars credited to him must have been hit during this one-hour window.

Can the pilots’ flying log books shed more light? Chris le Roux was killed later in 1944, and the whereabouts of his log book, if it still exists, are unknown. Bruce Oliver died in a flying accident in 1958. The No. 602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron Museum Association has a copy of the relevant page of Oliver’s flying log book and kindly supplied us with a copy of it. It records his participation in the front line patrol that evening and the shooting-down of an Fw190, but nothing is noted about vehicles on the ground. Oliver’s Combat Report, lodged with Air Intelligence following that sortie, claims the Fw190 shot down but again makes no mention of staff cars or other vehicles.

I have looked for an official German incident report which might give more precise details about the time of the attack, but without success. If such a report exists, for the moment it is not available to us and we shall have to make do with other evidence. According to the eyewitness testimony of Karl Hulke, who was interviewed in 2001 and was one of Rommel’s bodyguards travelling in the same car, the attack occurred “schon abend” or after 17.00, the hour at which Germans customarily begin to use the greeting “Guten Abend” rather than “Guten Tag”. If Hulke’s recollection is accurate, then Chris le Roux’s afternoon sortie had been back on the ground for more than an hour.

Form 541 makes it plain that there were no Spitfires of 602 Squadron in the air between 15.50 GMT+1 when le Roux’s sweep landed and 18.30 GMT+1 when Bruce Oliver’s patrol took off. It is possible, shortly after he took off, that Oliver shot up the two staff cars that are noted in Form 540, but there is no mention of this in Form 541, or in his log book, or in his Combat Report and hence there is no corroborating official documentary evidence of his responsibility for attacking a staff car that might have been Rommel’s. All we can say on the basis of this evidence is that it is an open verdict on the 602 Squadron claim.

Let us, then, look at the 412 Squadron claim. In 2003, Lance Russwurm, the Canadian artist, put up a website showing his new painting of Rommel’s car under attack by two Spitfires of 412 (RCAF) Squadron. It depicted Charley Fox in the leading Spitfire, firing his guns at a large black convertible. That Charley Fox might have been the pilot who shot up Rommel’s car had been known locally for years. Russwurm says that everyone who knew Charley knew the story, but that Charley had never mentioned the incident publicly because he had very mixed feelings about it. Charley felt, among other things, that by injuring Rommel at that moment he had reduced the likelihood of an early surrender to the western Allies and may have prolonged the war by many months at the cost of countless lives. Lance Russworm had known Charley Fox, and his
story, for ten years but only in 2002 did Charley agree, at last, to authorise Lance to do a
painting of the incident and to tell his story to the world. Lance says,

“Charley laughed when I said the release of this story would make him a star —
at least in military history circles. But I did keep insisting that we had better be
very sure of our facts, and that the only one that had not been substantiated was
the time-of-day business. Charley told me that he’d have to find out where the
records were — he didn’t know at the time if they would be in Canada or Eng-
land. At some later point, someone involved in our project (probably Charley)
asked [Michel] Lavigne about this. Lavigne said that he was going [to Ottawa] to
check the records on another matter and that he would find out for us.

“I remember Charley being elated when we got the results. The last obstacle had
been removed. Charley had been at the right time and place. So, it was the im-
minent release of the print of the incident that led to us asking Mr Lavigne to
check the facts.”

Lavigne had checked the page for 17 July 1944 in the Operations Record Book of No.
412 (RCAF) Squadron in the National Archives of Canada, which put a flight of a dozen
Spitfires in the air at the right time and in the right place for the “staff car” mentioned in
Fox’s flying log book to have been Rommel’s. The armed recce Fox had flown took off
at 18.20 and returned at 19.35 GMT+2 (17.20 and 18.35 GMT+1). The timings of this 412
Squadron sweep slot in between the 602 Squadron sorties, covering the later half of the
gap from 15.50 to 18.30 GMT+1. They fit the general consensus on the time of the attack
on Rommel’s car as being sometime between 16.00 and 18.30 GMT+1, and agree with
the estimate made of the time as “schon abend” or after 17.00 by Karl Hulke, who, along
with Rommel, driver Daniel, and Hauptmann Lang (one of Rommel’s aides), was one of
the four occupants of Rommel’s staff car. The circumstantial evidence supporting the
412 Squadron claim is, then, much stronger than the 602 Squadron claim.

In an interview with Lance Russwurm, Fox is quoted as saying:

“Here are my recollections of the events of July 17, 1944:

“In the late afternoon, 412 (Canadian) Spitfire Squadron took off on an armed
recce. We were part of 126 Wing, 2nd Tactical Air Force, based at Bény-sur-Mer,
just inland from Juno beach in Normandy.

“Three sections of four aircraft, led by our CO, Squadron Leader Jack Sheppard,
got airborne and then broke up into three separate flights. These were led by the
CO, Flight Lieutenant Rob Smith DFC, and myself.

“I spotted a large black car travelling at high speed along a road with trees on ei-
ther side. It was coming towards us, on my left, at about 11 o’clock. I maintained
steady, level flight until the vehicle passed us at 9 o’clock. I then began a curving,
diving attack to my left, with my number two following to watch my tail. The
other two aircraft maintained their height, keeping an eye out for enemy activity.
I started firing at approximately 300 yards, and hit the staff car, causing it to
crash. At the time, I had no idea who it was. [It was] just a large black open car,
gleaming in the sun without any camouflage, which was unusual.

“The Americans claimed that one of their P-47s had shot up Rommel. Okay, end
of story, as far as I was concerned.”
Fox is also quoted by David McKittrick, in The Independent’s obituary of him in November 2008, as saying:

“I timed the shots so that I was able to fire and get him as the car came through a small opening in the trees. I got him on that pass. We were moving pretty fast, but I knew I got him. I saw hits on the car and I saw it start to curve and go off the road.”

There is more to the story. In May 1997, a former Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, Edward L. Prizer, and his wife Artice, visited the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum on a holiday trip to England from their home in Florida. Mr Prizer later wrote to the Museum, enclosing a four-page typescript recounting his experiences while stationed at Tangmere with 412 Squadron during the build-up to Operation Overlord in May and June 1944. This letter and typescript lay in one of the Museum’s storerooms until January 2011 when it was gathered up, along with hundreds of other loose documents that had accumulated here and there round the Museum, to be catalogued and filed in our document archive.

As the Museum’s archivist, I read the letter and typescript when they came my way, and guessed that they had been written by a practised and possibly professional writer; a journalist, perhaps. I decided to see if I could find out a little more about Mr Prizer’s wartime career, and began to do some research on the Internet. I discovered that both Mr Prizer and his wife died a few years ago, and that he had indeed been a journalist — first with the Associated Press in New York during the postwar years, and later as the proprietor and editor of the city magazine in Orlando, Florida.

And, completely unexpectedly, his name came up on a Czech website concerned with the strafing of General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s staff car on 17 July 1944. The website showed a scan of the page of the 412 Squadron ORB — the same page that had been referred to by Lance Russwurm and Michel Lavigne in connection with Charley Fox. On it was Prizer’s name, next to Fox’s, showing that the two of them took off and landed at exactly the same times on that sortie.

Could Ed Prizer have been Charley Fox’s wingman when Rommel’s car was shot up? Or at least an eyewitness to the incident? The address given on Mr Prizer’s letter was, by now, fourteen years old and I knew that both Mr and Mrs Prizer had died in the meantime and had had no children. But a little more research on the Internet revealed other Prizers living in the same town in Florida and also revealed, through a genealogical website, that Ed Prizer had been born in North Carolina and had at least one sibling, a brother named John M. Prizer. Among the Prizers living in the same town in Florida where Ed and his wife had lived was John M. Prizer, Jr. I wondered if this might be a nephew of Ed’s, so I wrote a letter to him.

It was indeed Ed’s nephew, who replied immediately, surprised and delighted to learn that there was a possibility his uncle might have been Charley Fox’s wingman on that sortie. Ed himself had never mentioned it, so far as the family knew, but fortunately Ed’s wartime diary, flying log book and some photographs of him in his RCAF days were located, still in the family, having been saved by Ed’s sister’s daughter Page Worthen. A flurry of e-mails, scans and photocopies then followed, including this scan of his flying log book covering the day in question:

8 The Tangmere Logbook
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
<th>Pilot, or 1st Pilot</th>
<th>2nd Pilot, Pupil, or Passenger</th>
<th>DUTY (INCLUDING RESULTS AND REMARKS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>Spitfire IX KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Armed Recon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Armed Recon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>KLB Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrols dive-bombing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Armed Recon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>F Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
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</tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Patrol</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Armed Recon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Armed Recon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>L Self</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Flank Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grand Total** (Cols. 1 to 10)

**Totals Carried Forward**

*Note: Dismantled and returned from chasing Blantyes to find the Spdna mixing with 10th Div before being destroyed by a bomber.anka destroyed one.*

*Note: Early morning. Cloud very dark. Home around.*

*Note: Dive-bombed bridge. Spdna mixed with 1075. Banks destroyed one.*

*Note: Armed Night show. Some accurate light fire.*

*Note: Stripped despatch rider.*

*Note: Attached lock with 1st Plnc. Chopped 1st of soldiers.*

*Note: Covered east flank of British. American crew.*

*Note:梦想 targets along front. not around.*

*Note: Covered hundreds of planes in black and white. War captured about dozens of those winded out*
At the same time, I contacted Lance Russwurm. I asked Lance if he knew who Charley’s wingman was on that sortie. Charley had said, initially, that it would have been his usual wingman, Steve Randall, but when he was shown the page from the ORB he realised that he had misremembered. Steve Randall, the ORB showed, hadn’t flown on that sortie. In April 2003 Charley wrote in his album, “According to the records an American — Ed Priser [sic] — serving in the RCAF was my number two, putting us in the air at the right time and place agreeing with the German records.”

There is no doubt that Charley Fox fired at the car, apparently with his 20 mm guns only. But did Ed also shoot at it? Ed was flying VZ-L, MJ350, an E-wing Spitfire Mk IX LF .5 armed with a pair of Hispano 20 mm cannon and a pair of .5 Browning machine guns. He was close behind Charley and could have let off a burst of fire from his Brownings without the tell-tale cannon-shell explosions that might have drawn Charley’s attention as he passed over the target. Ed used the words “attacked . . . with Fox” in his log book, words which, while slightly ambiguous, would be understood by most people as meaning both fired at the target, not just one of them. It is too late now to ask him, of course. But Ed Prizer did write in his diary on 31 July 1944:

“Days have been passing by, with our armies rolling along, sometimes by yards and recently by miles. News comes in of rebellions in Germany [the Bomb Plot of 20 July] and Rommel wounded by strafing. Perhaps the old boy was in a car our squadron attacked, perhaps one of mine. Probably never know.”

Indeed we may not. What we do know for certain is that Fox and Prizer attacked a staff car in the right place and at the right time for it to have been Rommel’s, but at that moment neither pilot could have known, and did not claim to know, that it was Rommel’s. Although we can never be absolutely certain, the circumstances fit together nicely, strongly suggesting that either Fox, or Fox and Prizer together, hit Rommel’s car.

No. 412 (RCAF) Squadron, Bény-sur-Mer, June 1944. Ed Prizer is kneeling in the front row, extreme left. Next to him is Steve Randall, Charley Fox’s usual wingman, who did not fly on the sortie in question. Charley Fox is kneeling fifth from the left just in front of the lower-left propeller blade.
There are still questions to which we have no answers. What sort of car was it, and is there any evidence about what kind of gunfire struck it? In his 2003 interview, Charley Fox described it as a “large black open car” or four-door civilian cabriolet of the kind familiar to us from German newsreels. This is the sort of car that Lance Russwurm, following Charley’s description of it, depicted in his painting. But, in contrast, field staff cars of the kind in which Rommel was often pictured both in North Africa and in Normandy were purpose-built Kfz.21 Kommandeurscabriolet, utilitarian vehicles designed for battlefield conditions. Could Charley Fox, recollecting the events of 60 years earlier, have misremembered what kind of car it was, as he initially misremembered the identity of his wingman? In his original log book entry, Charley merely wrote “staff car”, and Ed Prizer described the vehicle as a “truck”. Neither described it, in their log book entries made at the time, with words suggesting “large”, “black”, “open”, or “civilian”.

This photograph, shown on a reputable German educational website (lexi-tv.de) purports to be the still-smoking wreck of Rommel’s Horch staff car, of the same Kfz.21 type as shown on Page 4, with his field marshal’s pennant still in place near the radiator, soon after the strafing. The German officer on the left is SS Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich, with whom Rommel had conferred that morning at St Pierre-sur-Dives, and from where Rommel had begun his ill-fated road journey to Vimoutiers. If this photograph is what it claims to be (and it may not, as more than one staff car was attacked that day), the most interesting thing about it is the half-inch bullet hole in the centre of the windscreen. Had the projectile been an explosive 20 mm shell rather than a solid .5-calibre bullet, the hole would have been bigger and damage to the laminated glass much worse. Since Charley Fox is said to have fired only his 20 mm guns, the bullet must have come from one of the .5 Brownings of a second Spitfire. Was it Ed Prizer’s?

With grateful thanks to John M. Prizer Jr. (Ed’s nephew), Ed’s sister Catherine and her daughter Page Worthen. I am indebted to Lance Russwurm for his generous help in the preparation of this article, and also to Roddy MacGregor and Gerry Traynor of the 602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron Museum Association for their help in providing copies of the 602 Squadron documents.— RB
In the bright May sunshine, I stood outside the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum and gazed across green fields stretching to the horizon. Fifty-three years dissolved away. Distinctly, I heard the roar of Merlins overhead. And glinting in the May-time sunlight, I thought I saw a squadron of Spitfires wheeling across the sky, forming up for another show.

And then, just as suddenly, there was a vast silence and out there where all the camouflaged buildings and hangars and revetments and tents had filled the aerodrome lay only the endless waving grain.

So suddenly — gone. All of it, all the glorious days when we lived our brief chapter in history at this spot.

In those weeks before D-Day, anticipation and impatience mounted steadily. Troops were pouring by the hundreds of thousands into the staging area along the south coast of England. We knew the invasion was imminent. But how soon?

The streets of Chichester at night were jammed with soldiers and sailors and airmen, a solid sea of uniforms, hordes of thirsty men striving to get a beer. We would take a Jeep and drive in from the airfield and join the mob. Sometimes Wing Commander Johnnie Johnson would lead our group to the Unicorn, where he’d be received like a conquering hero. Pubkeeper Arthur King would pull bottles from a secret cache and set them before us. While desperate soldiers crowding the pub struggled to get a single glass of bitter, we drained bottles of whisky.

Sometimes Johnnie would take us to another town. Once we went all the way to Bournemouth and raised hell in the luxurious lounge of the Royal Bath Hotel. There was a big rhubarb when the bartender announced closing time. Our protests were in vain. Johnnie said, “All right, if that’s the way he feels,” and ordered his crew to lift a huge radio console and carry it from the lounge up to the street. With great effort it was deposited in the rear seat of the Jeep. How a dozen men managed to get aboard I’ll never know, but off we went, across the sleeping countryside, singing “My Gal Salome” with wild abandon.

The console came to rest in Johnson’s tent and I wonder if the Royal Bath management ever found where it went.

In mid-May I transferred from Johnson’s wing to 412 Squadron in George Keefer’s wing at Tangmere. The talk at dispersal was continually of the coming invasion. Group tried to keep us busy with shows across the Channel. My first op with 412 was a Wing Ramrod with drop tanks deep into Holland. We busted six trains. F/L Smith and I blew one locomotive sky-high outside Eindhoven.

At other times we flew sweeps south of Paris, seeking transport on the highways or an occasional airfield. We
strafed radar stations along the coast and dive-bombed “No-balls,” the incline ramps from which Jerry planned to launch buzz bombs.

Between shows, we spread a blanket outside the dispersal hut and played poker in the sunshine as strains of “Kentucky Babe” and “Remember the Night” and “Where or When” drifted from the open windows.

All the while we cursed the powers that be for their delay in getting the invasion under way.

Finally, the morning of June 5, we arrived at dispersal to find black and white stripes painted on our aircraft. The message was loud and clear. The big show was starting. Impatiently we waited all through the day, but we heard nothing.

Late that night we were called to the mess tent, where pilots from all the squadrons were crowding rows of benches.

The group captain stood up and shouted for quiet. “This is it, men,” he said. “We go in in the morning.”

An Army major set up a series of maps on easels at the front of the tent. There, spread out before us, was the master plan for the largest military invasion in history. He pointed out the five beachheads and showed where the airborne forces would soon be landing. There were shouted questions, but time only for a few answers.

Afterwards, we trooped out into the chilly night air. Dark clouds boiled across the sky, and once in a while spectral moonlight peeked through. We could hear a steady roar of heavy bombers winging outward to pound the beaches. Sometimes their ghostly shapes could be seen through the clouds, and we said a silent prayer for them.

We lighted cigarettes and stood around, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Squadron Leader Sheppard came out of the tent and paused to give us a brief and entirely superfluous pep talk. Finally, we drifted away to our tents and tried to catch a few winks.

We were up before daylight, and after a hurried breakfast in the mess tent, we rushed to our dispersals to await orders for takeoff. The Spitfires of 2nd Tactical Air Force were assigned to medium cover over the beachhead. Typhoons patrolled at low level and American Thunderbolts ranged across the sky far above, weaving patterns of contrails.

Squadrons were rotated throughout the day and pilots in each squadron took turns making the trip across. Every detail of my first patrol remains vividly in mind. We crossed the Channel at low level. Below us long columns of ships of every description, each trailing barrage balloons, steamed through the rough seas. What an incredible armada, moving steadily toward the fighting. There was a great congestion of ships just off the beaches. Some were disgorging landing craft, which scurried shoreward among sprays of water kicked up by enemy shells. Fires burned along the beaches and inland as well. The big naval guns offshore spurted flames. But the thing that was most surprising was the lack of all sound. The action below seemed like a tableau.

The biggest surprise was the almost total absence of enemy air opposition. The skies seemed to be swarming with allied aircraft, but scarcely a sign of the Huns. My squadron sighted a formation of 190s over Caen and we dived through the clouds in pursuit. But they managed to elude us in the cloud cover and we never found them again.

“When the hell are they going to come up and fight?” the pilots were grumbling that night around the bar.

In the days that followed, the squadrons continued to take off in rotation from Tangmere. Action across the drink was infrequent. The days grew warmer. The clouds melted away. We
filled the hours between patrols playing poker on the blanket at dispersal, or stretching out in the chairs for a nap.

As soon as troops drove inland from the beaches, work began on airstrips constructed with rolls of steel mesh laid out on farmland. Our wing was to be based at Bény-sur-Mer, a village just behind the lines facing Caen. All was in readiness by mid-June. On June 18, we took off, made a farewell circuit over Tangmere and headed out to the unknown future that awaited us in Normandy.

That was my last sight of Tangmere until my return last May. We made history here — but that chapter is now closed. It is good to know as I return across the ocean that we have a museum at the site to memorialize our passing.

Editor’s Postscript

This is the manuscript that Ed Prizer sent to the Museum in 1997, as mentioned in our story “Who Shot Rommel?” on Page 6 of this issue.

Edward L. Prizer was born in Southern Pines, Moore County, North Carolina, in 1922. Southern Pines had been established in the early years of the twentieth century as a health resort attracting wealthy New Yorkers and Bostonians. By the 1930s, the resort had become a private sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. Ed’s father, a medical doctor at the sanatorium, died at the age of 53 in 1938, leaving his Canadian-born wife Anna to care for their three children, Ed (the eldest, then aged 16), Catherine, and John.

By 1940, aged eighteen, Ed was keen to join up as a fighter pilot, but a slight impairment in his eyesight seems to have led to his rejection as an aviation cadet with the U. S. Marines. The United States had not yet entered the war, and the standards of entry into pilot training remained those of peacetime, with rejection and wash-out rates which meant than only 25% or fewer of those who applied initially actually succeeded in qualifying as pilots many months later. Canada, however, was already at war and in urgent need of pilots, so Ed used his half-Canadian parentage to advantage and tried to join the RCAF. His first attempt to pass the eyesight test failed, but, following a regime of eye exercises, on the second attempt passed the test.

He reported for basic flying training in May 1942 and passed out as a qualified pilot in September of that year. He was then selected for single-seaters and flew Hurricanes on home defence duties until the call came for an overseas posting to England in January 1944.

After further training in England and conversion to Spitfires, his unit moved to Tangmere to await D-Day and then on to France, through the Low Countries and Germany and eventually back to England. In 1945, his tour of duty completed, he was posted back to Canada and demobilisation. He completed his education and became a professional journalist with the Associated Press news agency in New York, writing syndicated newspaper stories.

During his overseas posting, from January 1944 to July 1945, Ed kept a meticulous diary of his wartime experiences, remarkable for its detail and for his appreciation of the significance of what he saw. We shall be serialising his overseas diary in future editions of The Tangmere Logbook. —RB
As early as 1942 it had become obvious that additional airfields would be required for the Allied assault on Europe, particularly during the build-up and during the actual landings. The need would be for rudimentary airfields that would require only basic facilities for day-only operations. These airfields, to be known as Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs), would therefore need runways, refuelling and re-arming points and hardstandings for the aircraft. The belief was that the ALGs would not be used during the winter months and therefore accommodation under canvas and in requisitioned nearby houses would suffice.

During the 1930s a private aerodrome had been built for Major Norman Holden, the owner of the Old Rectory, now called Norton Priory, adjacent to the village of Church Norton to the northeast of Selsey. On the site a hangar had been constructed in the corner of the field and aircraft such as the Avro 504 used the aerodrome until the outbreak of the Second World War when it was closed.

This prime agricultural land was surveyed in early 1942 as a possibility for an ALG because of its clear approaches, its flat surface and suitable accommodation available in the immediate vicinity and was adopted in the face of strong opposition from the Ministry of Agriculture.
The land was requisitioned in July 1942 and a site survey was carried out in October after which plans were drawn up for a NE/SW landing strip of 4,200 feet (1,280 metres) with a subsidiary NW/SE strip of 3,900 feet (1,189 metres) in the form of a cross. Penhold Barn and adjacent outbuildings were listed for demolition and trees requiring felling were identified. Norton Priory, Mitchard’s Croft and cottages near Cole’s Farm were earmarked for accommodation.

Authority for construction of the ALG was given by Fighter Command in December 1942 and the final site plan was issued on 16 February 1943, with work by an RAF construction unit starting immediately. The only grading required was to remove field boundaries but some cottages had to be demolished. To make way for the runways, Blythe Cottage came down on the Chichester Road and Wheatley’s Cottage and Rest Cottage were razed to the ground in Rectory Lane.

Sommerfeld square-meshed metal tracking was laid, Rectory Lane was closed where runway 31/13 crossed it and RAF Selsey was ready for the arrival of the Spitfire Vbs of No. 65 (East India) Squadron who flew in from Fairlop on 31 May 1943. Two days later, No. 245 (Northern Rhodesia) Typhoon 1Bs also arrived from Fairlop. Squadron personnel quickly settled in erecting their accommodation tents and field kitchens. They were to be at Selsey for a month — the Spitfires conducting Ramrod operations (escorting bombing missions) while the Typhoons carried out ground-attack sorties and tactical training.
Acting Squadron Leader R. J. McNair DFC, CO of No. 245 (Northern Rhodesia) Squadron at Selsey.

On 19 June 1943 a fatal accident occurred near the airfield when a No. 245 Squadron Typhoon crashed into Pagham Harbour shortly after taking off from Selsey. It is thought that the Typhoon pilot spotted a Mosquito transiting the area and engaged it in an unauthorised low-level mock combat. The Typhoon (DN 293) was seen to spiral into the harbour, killing the pilot Kenneth Clift. He was later buried at Portfield Cemetery, Chichester, but his grave reveals an intriguing mystery — on the headstone is engraved in addition to “K. Clift” the name of Thomas Barker.

Barker was an Australian who had served with the Royal New Zealand Air Force as Kenneth Clift. What lies behind this story? Research in 1983 revealed that Barker had “borrowed” the identity of his friend Ken Clift, and fled to New Zealand in 1937 after matrimonial and money difficulties. Joining up when war started, he trained, served and died as Kenneth Clift, his nom de guerre. In 1984 the remains of his Typhoon were salvaged from Pagham Harbour.

The month spent at Selsey ensured that Nos. 65 and 245 Squadrons were familiar with operating from these rudimentary airfields. By July, the aircraft had departed and the airfield reverted to stand-by status. During the autumn, work began at the airfield to prepare for the following summer with four Extra-Over Blister hangars erected to provide...
some protection from the weather for aircraft maintenance and repairs. Also extra metal track was laid for aircraft hardstandings.

On 1 April 1944, Selsey ALG was re-opened and six days later the Spitfire IXs of No. 485 (RNZAF) Squadron of No. 135 Wing, No. 84 Group, 2nd Tactical Air Force (TAF) moved in followed a few days later by No. 222 (Natal) Squadron RAF and No. 349 (Belgian) — both squadrons also equipped with Spitfire IX dive-bombers. The squadrons quickly settled in by setting up their dispersal areas. Large marquees were erected for the messes and six-man tents for the ground crews to live in. The Kiwis of No. 485 erected their tents near the red-roofed St Wilfred’s Chapel on the eastern boundary of the airfield. No 485’s CO was Squadron Leader J. B. (Johnny) Niven DFC, a Scot, who had taken over the squadron in February 1944. He went on to lead the squadron on more than 1,100 operational sorties without losing a single pilot due to enemy action.

Joe Roddis, now a Selsey resident, was a Sergeant engine fitter with No. 485 Squadron and was tasked with taking the Kiwi pilots over to Tangmere for a shower or bath using the CO’s Fordson staff car. No such luxuries existed at Selsey — the best that could be achieved was a strip-wash with a five-gallon drum of water heated on the fire outside the tent! Regarding incidents, Joe remembers one day when an American P-47 Thunderbolt fighter appearing over the ALG at about 500 feet with obvious engine problems. Unable to land because the Wing was getting airborne, the pilot climbed out onto the fighter’s wing and jumped — tragically too low for his chute to open.

Throughout April and May the Wing’s Spitfire IX dive-bombers were in action over northern France attacking radar and communication targets and in escorting bomber missions. In the weeks just before D-Day, squadron COs and Flight Commanders were called away to 2nd TAF HQ to be briefed on the forthcoming invasion plans. Finally on the evening of 5 June, airmen on RAF Selsey realised that the invasion of Europe was about to begin when Stirling and Halifax bombers and twin-engined Dakotas could be seen towing gliders full of troops heading for France.

The Wing’s main task on 6 June, D-Day, was beachhead patrols. During the afternoon one of No. 485 Squadron’s Spitfires shot down a Ju88 bombing the American beachhead at Omaha. This was the first enemy aircraft to be shot down on D-Day. The Spitfire, ML407 (Squadron code OU-V) is still flying today, now converted to a twin-seat aircraft owned and flown by Carolyn Grace.

No. 349 Squadron was also successful on D-Day when on its third patrol they intercepted a formation of Ju88s near Caen. Sergeant Bragard was able to claim the unit’s first confirmed kill with the squadron shooting down a second and damaging three others later in the day. On the evening of 8 June, the whole Wing flew a low-level patrol over the invasion beaches and intercepted twenty Fw190s and twelve Bf109s carrying bombs. In the following engagement, Nos. 222 and 485 squadrons claimed seven enemy aircraft destroyed. Two days later, No. 222 was again successful when Flight Lieutenant Varley shot down an Fw190. Later that same day No. 349 achieved the distinction of being the first unit to land in the bridgehead when a section refuelled and re-armed at the B2 (Brazenville) landing strip. On 13 June, No. 485 flew into B3 (St Croix-sur-Mer) to operate from the new ALG during daylight hours giving additional time on patrol.

Five days earlier, a U. S. Army Air Force B-24 Liberator, of the 489th
Bomber Group based at Halesworth, Suffolk, had made an emergency landing at Selsey after a long-range mission into Europe. Piloted by First Lieutenant Bob Boyle from Trenton, New Jersey, the aircraft found itself short of fuel due to strong headwinds on its return journey. Bob thought they would have to ditch the aircraft into the English Channel but the fuel held out and they coasted in over Selsey Bill. Seeing the ALG, Bob made an approach and managed to land the large bomber safely on one of Selsey’s metal runways. Later, after being refuelled, the aircraft departed with minimum crew to make its way back to Halesworth. Bob survived the war and in 1990 returned to Selsey where he was entertained by the Selsey British Legion, whose chairman, George Harris, presented Bob with a silver plaque. Later, he was entertained to lunch with Selsey councillors and Ted Campion, who was farming at Church Norton when Bob’s aircraft landed.

On 30 June, No. 135 Wing departed from Selsey, moving to another West Sussex ALG at Coolham, near Horsham. Here the D-Day black and white stripes on the top of the wings and on the upper fuselage were removed. They were soon to move on to another ALG at Funtington, close again to Chichester.

On 1 July, No. 145 (French) Wing arrived at Selsey. Equipped with Spitfire IXs, the Wing comprised Nos. 329, 340 and 341 Squadrons commanded by Wing Commander Crawford-Compton. During the six weeks they were at Selsey they were tasked with bomber escort missions and in attacking the new threat — the V1 (“No-ball”) sites. On 9 July the Wing achieved success when three Bf109s were shot down near Dieppe. However, during this engagement Captain Boudier of No. 341 Squadron was shot down by an American P-47 Thunderbolt, the Frenchman being forced to bale out. He was captured and ended up as a PoW — a victim of “friendly fire”.

No. 74 Squadron briefly joined the Wing for a week in mid-July but the Wing soon left Selsey, in early August, for the comfort of Tangmere. They were followed by the re-appearance of No. 135 Wing (Nos. 222, 349 and 33 Squadrons) to continue with their bomber escort duties. On 10 August, No. 33 left for a Normandy ALG while the other two squadrons of the Wing left Selsey on 19 August for Tangmere.

RAF Selsey had been operational as an ALG during 1944 for four and a half months. Its job was now done. It was not used again operationally but was retained as a back-up airfield until March 1945 when local farmers were given permission to graze sheep and cattle on the airfield.

The site was de-requisitioned soon after the end of the war. Rectory Lane was re-opened, the steel tracking was lifted and the blister hangars were removed. Today, the only sign of the existence of this very successful ALG is a blue plaque by the fields in Rectory Lane, Church Norton, to remind future generations of those hectic days in 1943 and 1944.


— DC
How the Battle of Britain Was Won

Myths, legends and facts about the origins of the Spitfire, Hurricane, and Messerschmitt Bf109

Part One

Matt Wright

Much has been written over the past 75 years about the Spitfire, Hurricane and Bf109, and the Internet is now a huge repository of information on these types of aircraft. I intend to set out some of the facts about them, particularly at their inception, and some of the anecdotal stories attributed to them.

People tend to champion one or other of the three aircraft. From the British point of view the Spitfire with its elegant aerodynamic lines, its classical elliptical wing and its deep sonorous Rolls-Royce Merlin engine it was undoubtedly the iconic aircraft of the Second World War — the thoroughbred of the pack. Several books such as Dilip Sarkar’s How the Spitfire Won the Battle of Britain promote the Spitfire. The Hurricane was rugged and sturdy — more of a workhorse. Leo McKinstrey’s book Hurricane: The Victor of the Battle of Britain places it at the front of the queue, as does Brian Milton’s
Hurricane: The Last Witness where it is claimed that without the Hurricane the battle would have been lost.

Some pilots, Douglas Bader included, would not have a word spoken against the Hurricane and he wrote that it “was a thoroughbred and looked like it . . . .” But he described the Spitfire as “fabulous . . . here was the aeroplane par excellence”. Bob Stanford Tuck said, “After the Spit, the Hurricane was like a flying brick . . . . a great lumbering farmyard stallion compared with the dainty and gentle thoroughbred [that] nearly broke my heart.” Another view was that of Ben Browning of 111 Squadron, who said of the Hurricane, “I liked it better than the Spitfire. I flew quite a lot of Spitfires but as a general-purpose aircraft the Hurricane could beat the pants off the Spitfire”. The Bf109 was the fighter that might never have been built due to a long-standing feud between Willy Messerschmitt and the German Secretary of State for Aviation. However, with its angular boxy shape, it was a formidable fighter and it shot down more Allied aircraft than any other fighter in World War II. Let us start at the beginning and trace the origins of the three fighters.

After World War I, Germany was disbarred from having an air force and military aircraft by the Treaty of Versailles. However, by the late 1920s it had started to build modern aircraft that were capable of conversion to a military role and its pilot training was undertaken by utilising its national airline, Deutsche Lufthansa, and Luftsportverband which was supposedly a private flying organisation but was training pilots for the future Luftwaffe.

Britain, meantime, had a small but splendid fleet of biplane fighters with open cockpits, fixed undercarriages and wooden propellers capable of flying at up to 200 mph, which was slower than some of the bombers that they were meant to intercept. The German development of monoplanes capable of speeds and heights far greater than those of our fighters energised the British military and the politicians to call for a new fighter to rearm the RAF. This resulted in Air Ministry Specification F.7/30 calling for a “Single Seater Day and Night Fighter”.

Eight companies, including Supermarine, put forward prototypes but the contract was awarded, albeit with a modified specification, to a biplane, the Gloster Gladiator, which had a top speed of 240 mph. It was hardly an innovative design and certainly not a night fighter.

Spitfire

R. J. Mitchell was Supermarine’s chief engineer and designer. He had worked on the design of the record-breaking seaplanes for the Schneider Trophy. These were monoplanes that could fly at 400 mph. Supermarine was taken over by Vickers in 1928 and their ambition was to break into the fighter market. Their entry for the F.7/30 competition was called the Type 224. It was an ungainly inverted gull-winged aircraft with an open cockpit, no flaps and a fixed trousered undercarriage and wheels. It was powered by a Rolls-Royce Goshawk piston engine but its performance, despite meeting the standard set by the Air Ministry specification, fell well short of the intended speed set by Mitchell. One of its designers described it as “fat and draggy”. Amazingly this aircraft was the first to be called “Spitfire” at Supermarine.

Sir Robert McLean, Chairman of Vickers Aviation Ltd, and Mitchell decided to persevere with the design of a monoplane fighter, and initially this work was undertaken
as a private venture with Rolls-Royce contributing £7,500 towards the development costs. However, on December 1, 1934 the Air Ministry issued a £10,000 contract for a new “killer” fighter under specification F.37/34, stipulating that it must use the Rolls-Royce PV (Private Venture) 12-cylinder V-type engine.

Supermarine gave the aircraft the designation Type 300, but it became known as the Spitfire after Sir Robert’s daughter Anne, who was described as “a little spitfire”. The word originated from spit and fire, and was a term meaning a fiery-tempered person. Mitchell did not approve of this name and said: “Bloody silly to call it by the same name as a previous failure”. Mitchell himself called it the Shrew, which one would assume referred to the small mouse-like animal with a long proboscis, but in fact it is another name for a spitfire. Maybe he was getting his own back at Sir Robert. Fortunately the name Spitfire was accepted by the Air Ministry.

Mitchell’s design was the first-ever British all-metal single-seater fighter to be produced. It used a stressed or monocoque method of construction (literally “single-skin”) to provide the strength of the airframe and wings. It was formed by fitting Duralumin sheets over metal bulkheads and stringers. This combined with a single main spar and the elliptical (oval) wing which had a narrow cross section but broadened near the fuselage to house the retractable undercarriage. The wings had a dihedral of six degrees and a washout which meant that the wing incidence reduced towards the tip. All the main controls were originally covered with fabric but following combat experience in the Battle of Britain it was found that the ailerons were ballooning during high speed chases with the air caught in the aileron, so the fabric covering was replaced with light alloy. The new engine that was called the Merlin was a development from the Rolls-Royce Kestrel. It was an inline V-12, 27-litre engine using an ethylene glycol cooling system with ducted cooling and a single radiator mounted under the starboard wing. The 66-gallon fuel tank was mounted between the engine and the cockpit, which was enclosed with a sliding canopy.

The original specification called for four machine guns, mounted in the wings. Research by Squadron Leader Ralph Sorley of the Operational Requirements Branch of the
Air Staff showed that more firepower would be needed to effect the damage required
during the short duration that the guns would be lined up on the target. Thus the speci-
fication was upped to eight Browning .303 machine guns. Mitchell is reported to have
said about his wing shape “I don’t give a bugger whether it’s elliptical or not, so long as
it covers the guns” — a curious statement, as his Deco-style wings became part of the
iconic beauty of the Spitfire.

The Type 300, K5054. Mitchell’s second design for a single-seat monoplane fighter clearly owed much more
to Supermarine’s highly successful floatplane racers. In many respects it was a scaled-up S.6.

The prototype Spitfire, K5054, was built at Supermarine’s Woolston factory near
Southampton. After delivery of the first Merlin and static engine runs in February 1936,
it was disassembled and transported to Eastleigh Aerodrome. The first flight was pi-
loted by Captain Joseph Summers, Vickers’s chief test pilot (nicknamed “Mutt” for his
habit of peeing on the rear wheel/skid of the aircraft that he was to test fly so that he
was not caught short!), on March 5, 1936.

The first flight lasted for eight minutes and Summers, probably under Mitchell’s in-
structions, had not retracted the undercarriage before landing back at Eastleigh. He
said: “I don’t want anything touched,” meaning that there were no major snags that
needed fixing before the next flight. Summers flew the initial flights, but handed over to
Jeffrey Quill, a 23-year-old ex-RAF pilot who was assistant test pilot at Supermarine.
Quill tells his story in Spitfire: A Test Pilot’s Story. His first flight was on March 23, 1936
and he was to be assisted in the testing and development flying by retired Flight Lieu-
tenant George Pickering AFC, another Supermarine test pilot. From the outset K5054
carried RAF roundels and markings as it was an Air Ministry contract. It was painted in
its cerulean blue finish about a month later.

Part Two will follow in the next issue of The Tangmere Logbook

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An arresting image greets visitors to the peaceful churchyard of St Andrew’s in the heart of Tangmere village, a short walk from the Museum: former enemies lying side by side in neat rows. Here, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible not only for the graves of thirty-nine Allied airmen who lost their lives in the Second World War, but also for thirteen graves of Luftwaffe aircrew.

While the dates of the Allied deaths span the war, most of the German graves relate to the Battle of Britain period. Two such are *Hauptmann* August-Wilhelm Strauch (aged 31) and *Feldwebel* Walter Bickel (aged 28). Strauch was the pilot and Bickel a crew member of a Ju88 from KG54 who died as a result of combat on *Adlertag* (Eagle Day), Tuesday, 13 August 1940. Their story has strong local connections.

*Adlertag* marked the start of the decisive phase in Luftwaffe plans to destroy the RAF, and particularly Fighter Command. After weeks attacking mostly Channel convoys and south coast ports, the primary focus was to switch to Fighter Command’s airfields and infrastructure. Significantly, preparatory attacks made on 12 August against south coast radar stations had, with one exception, failed.

The elaborate German plans for *Adlertag* envisaged attacks all day across the whole of southern England using hundreds of aircraft from Low Country and French airfields. The Ju88-equipped KG54, known as the *Totenkopf Geschwader*, based west of Paris, was part of the offensive. KG54 had been heavily involved during the German invasions of the Low Countries and of France.

By 5.35 am thirty-eight KG54 aircraft were airborne. Strauch’s aircraft, together with seventeen others from II/KG54, had taken off from St André-de-l’Eure to attack Odiham airfield, while twenty aircraft from I/KG54 had left their base at Evreux to attack nearby Farnborough airfield. Neither of KG54’s Hampshire targets were Fighter Command airfields, reflecting poor target selection, a German weakness during the Battle. These raids, together with a third — an eighty-eight-strong Ju87 raid on Portland — were escorted by about sixty Bf110s, while 173 Bf109s flew ahead. Thus, the aircraft of KG54 were part of an aerial armada some 360 strong.

However, despite a favourable weather forecast the previous evening, the capricious English summer had intervened: the day dawned with low cloud over the Channel and target area. At 6.15 am a frustrated Göring ordered a postponement of the attacks scheduled for the morning until later in the day. Communications blunders meant that most of those units which had already taken off failed to receive their recall orders. This included KG54 and the other units on the Portland and Hampshire raids, which flew on towards the English coast.

Confronted with cloud over Portland, the Ju87s turned back, but KG54 and the fighters pressed on. Radar had detected the formations approaching the coast east of Bognor. At 6.30 am the Hurricanes of 43 and 601 squadrons at Tangmere were scrambled and vectored onto the raids. As they headed east gaining height, the RAF pilots spotted the Ju88s, with tiered formations of escorting fighters above. The Hurricanes attacked and shortly thereafter Strauch’s aircraft was hit and severely damaged near Odiham.

The crippled Ju88 flew south.
Strauch and the other three members of the crew baled out, but Bickel’s chute got entangled in the tail of the aircraft. Observed by Squadron Leader Badger, CO of 43 Squadron, the pilotless aeroplane descended to crash into the wooded hillside on the western edge of the picturesque Swanbourne Lake at Arundel, east of Tangmere. It took Bickel with it to his death. The aircraft exploded and disintegrated on impact.

Strauch was found hanging in a tree in Worthing, seriously wounded. He died in hospital two days later. The other two crewmen — Oberleutnant H. Rose and Unteroffizier H. Scholz — were unhurt and captured on landing.

Fighters from other stations had also been scrambled. The German formations encountered persistent RAF opposition from the coast to the targets and on the return trip as far as mid-Channel. KG54 lost four aircraft, with II/KG54 losing a second Ju88 on the Odiham raid while I/KG54, targeting Farnborough, lost another two. Furthermore, eleven of KG54’s aircraft which returned to base had suffered battle damage, including four which belly-landed. A Bf109 was also shot down. Both targets were untouched.

The action had cost the RAF three fighters, with others damaged, and three pilots wounded. Returning German aircrew claimed twenty fighters shot down.

There were two other actions over southern England during the morning involving German units which had failed to receive recall orders, both costly for the Luftwaffe. By early afternoon the weather looked better and Göring, angry at the morning’s events, ordered postponed operations to proceed. From mid-afternoon the Luftwaffe launched a series of raids on airfields, from Rochford in the east to Yeovil in the west. Most of the airfield raids failed to find their targets, but an attack on Southampton docks got through. The raids were heavily opposed.

By the end of the day the Luftwaffe had flown nearly 1,500 sorties and Strauch’s aircraft became one of a tally of forty-seven losses. RAF fighters had flown over 700 sorties losing thirteen aircraft, giving Fighter Command its best daily loss ratio of the Battle (3.6:1).

Strauch and his crew became four of about ninety German aircrew lost (killed, missing or captured) that day; Fighter Command lost three killed. Of the airfields targeted, only Detling and Eastchurch, both Coastal Command, had suffered serious damage.

Hauptmann Strauch was an experienced flyer as his rank and the award of the “Bomber Operational Clasp”, signifying completion of at least twenty missions, indicate. The loss of many seasoned men like Strauch during the Battle ultimately left the Luftwaffe significantly weakened.

Tangmere was not a target on 13 August, but its two squadrons were in action both in the morning and in the afternoon, at a cost of four Hurricanes lost and three pilots wounded.

Days earlier Göring had sent a message to his units: “Operation Eagle. Within a short period you will wipe the British Air Force from the sky.” In practice, the first day of Adlerangriff (Eagle Attack) had been chaotic and costly for the Luftwaffe. However, for Fighter Command and for Tangmere and its squadrons, life was to get much tougher as August wore on. RAF graves at St Andrew’s churchyard testify to this.

Postscript

In the summer of 1989 Swanbourne Lake dried out, revealing remains of Strauch’s aircraft, including four unexploded bombs. One of these, of 250 Kg, is on display in the Museum in the Battle of Britain Hall.
Letters, Notes, and Queries

The Editor welcomes your artwork, photographs, letters, and contributions (long or short) on any subject of interest to our readers. If you have a question about a military aviation topic that you think another reader or one of our volunteers might be able to answer, please send it to the Editor. Test-your-knowledge questions and photo quizzes are also welcome! The Editor’s addresses are given on Page 3.

Mum’s Wartime Memories

I started at Tangmere as a plotter in January 1943, having had some initial training at a northwestern coastal town. At first we used St James’s School in Chichester as our operations room with a hard table and a map for plotting. We had magnetic rods and coloured arrows (previously moved manually) which we changed every five minutes as we got messages through from different airfields across the South on our headphones. Each WAAF was allocated a different position on the map.

Later, we moved to Bishop Otter College where we had a much bigger operations room and table for plotting. We also slept on the premises. We had four watches going to the main table in rotation 24 hours a day. I was on “C” watch and we did day and night watches alternately, about ten days at a time. Once we had the distressing misfortune of hearing the cries of one of our pilots as he crashed, which had accidentally been transmitted to us. If German planes were spotted we would cry “bandits!”

We also had a Range and Direction Finding Room, plugged into different areas around the coast; our planes flying that day were always put up on the blackboards for our benefit. Occasionally, we used to practise in a dummy operations room situated in St Martin’s Lane, Chichester.

Sometimes I would be asked to work on the tote: I would get messages through on my headphones such as how many German planes were coming over to bomb London. When we got the number of planes we would have to put it on the tote. This was like a scoreboard which you stood behind, whilst with another girl you added the number of planes going over. The controller would then read the numbers off.

On one occasion I was on duty all night without a break. I collapsed and had to be taken to the sick bay to recover. In the morning a message came through from my commanding officer, praising me for my perseverance and fortitude under pressure. I was on duty on D-Day (6 June 1944) when I plotted our planes as they supported our troops whilst being shipped out to France. It had all been kept very secret and we were not told until the actual morning when the ships embarked. There were four different groups on duty on D-Day, working in rotation.

I was at Tangmere from 1943 until 1945, when I was posted to Middle Wallop. As with Tangmere, the senior members of staff, normally officers, sat in a tier above us, as we plotted on the table below. As other stations phoned us with positions, we would have to plot the position on the map, which was divided into squares. Occasionally, we had a member of the government come and watch the proceedings, and I think possibly at one time Churchill was among them, and also the American head of state.

But there was fun to be had too. The dance at that time was the “jitterbug” a forerunner of “rock and roll”. Parties were often held in the hangars. On one occasion, at Middle Wallop, I danced with a naval officer in full dress uniform: everyone cleared the floor to watch us, and we won first prize. On another occasion, whilst based at Tangmere, I joined New Zealand’s 485
Squadron at a hotel in Chichester, where we sang Maori songs.

Although I found my job rewarding, I did not want to continue in the air force after the war, and was demobbed in 1946. In 1948 I married an airman, Tom Merritt, whom I had met when based at Tangmere. We settled in Midhurst, and had two daughters.

— Joan Merritt née Rose

Getting Some Hours In

During the middle and late 1950s, I was a Hastings captain with No. 36 Squadron. Our crews were part of the long-range transport capability of the RAF. During this period the British Government were conducting atomic weapons trials in Western Australia and in the Pacific Ocean in and around Christmas Island.

The schedule involved 96 flying hours for the return journey to Christmas Island via Iceland, Canada and the USA, and then 204 hours whilst based at Christmas Island. The idea was that the aircraft would return to base in the UK for the next main 300-hour inspection cycle.

The aircraft would normally leave from Lyneham to Goose Bay via Keflavik (Iceland) or direct, depending on load and weather. In those days during bad weather the landing was made using the radio range at Goose Bay. Following a night stop we would depart for Offutt AFB at Omaha, Nebraska (headquarters of the USAF’s Strategic Air Command) flying the American ADF airways system. The Americans were always very helpful and made the crews welcome in their messes and clubs. It was here that you were able to visit the “red telephone” and were able to talk round the world to all the American units. Next morning we would leave for Travis AFB at San Francisco, crossing the Rockies en route, in an aeroplane that was not very comfortable above 10,000 feet!

While at Travis, most people went into town and visited Top of the Mark (the cocktail lounge and observation deck on top floor of the Mark Hopkins Hotel), and then on to Fisherman’s Wharf for a seafood meal. The next day saw us on the Trans-Pacific Route to Hickham AFB (Honolulu). Generally speaking the aircraft could not fly this route with the required fuel reserves and so the Americans would write this on our flight plans. It was not unusual to be held up at San Francisco to await a favourable wind forecast, and the same applied to the return journey. Following the night stop at Hickham we would fly the short 6-hour leg to Christmas Island through the Inter-Tropical Front en route to our destination, Kiribati, just a few miles north of the equator. It was here that our passengers climbed out with the noise of our four Bristol Hercules engines ringing in their ears after 48 hours of flying.

Our six-man crew would now settle into our “luxury” tents for the next two-and-a-half months, flying up to Hickham, night-stopping then returning next day with fresh food and BFPO mail in support of the 3,000 male and 2 female folk stationed on the island. Occasionally other flights were requested to other Pacific Islands and to Australia or just search and rescue events were flown. As the aircraft hours reached 250 since leaving Lyneham, we began to plan the return to the UK, either the way we came out or via Australia, Singapore and across Europe.

In 1958, we were at Christmas Island over the Christmas and New Year holiday season. The island had a small church built of coral and a tin roof. My hairy old crew and I decided to go early to the Christmas carol service, and were seated in the church. When the service commenced with the opening carol, it was evident that the church was full, as were the surrounds of the church, with what appeared to be two or three thou-
sand military men and civilian scientists. And the two ladies (WVS and Salvation Army). It was a memorable few minutes in time. The RAF padre said the only time he had experienced a similar feeling was on D-Day before the troops set off for France.

These flights were a great experience, nothing like a British Airways flight of today. They were mostly flown between 8,000 and 10,000 feet, through all weathers, with no radar, poor ice precaution equipment, and by today’s standards poor landing aids. But, in retrospect, they were great days, and what an apprenticeship!

— John Millett

Snow on the Runway

In your Summer 2011 edition there were photographs of people with shovels trying to clear the Tangmere runway. I remember doing this at Barkston Heath when I was a Cranwell cadet. A hopeless task.

In the 1960s I was a Hunter pilot at Gutersloh where we had an MRD (mobile runway de-icer). I spent some hours in it during the wee small hours on a Christmas Day morning. It was a wheeled cab with two Rolls-Royce Derwent jet engines pointing forwards and discharging through flattened fish-tail orifices. It was pushed forwards slowly by a bowser which supplied the fuel. Inside the cab one required plenty of warm clothing and a “bone dome” for communication and to keep out some of the noise. The jet nozzles could be tilted up and down. Too high, and some of the snow and ice was not blown away. Too low, and you would blow the tarmac off the runway and taxiways. This was considered to be a very bad thing.

The Derwent engines — as fitted to the Gloster Meteor — were notoriously difficult to start, requiring very delicate opening of the high-pressure cocks. The electric starter motors would slowly increase the rpm, and at the appropriate rpm the high-pressure cocks could be opened a tiny amount to allow fuel to the engine to start combustion. The engine would then accelerate slowly, and the HP cocks could be opened a bit more. If not inched open enough the engines would not get enough fuel to sustain combustion. If opened too quickly there would be the grating noise of resonance and the turbine blades would be damaged if the HP cocks were not quickly closed a bit. The preferred MRD drivers were ex-Meteor pilots like me.

I wonder how it’s done these days?

— Colin Richardson

Answer to Photo Quiz, Summer 2011

Left to Right: Major Robin Olds DFC, USAF; Air Vice Marshal Stanley Vincent CB DFC AFC; Wing Commander George Parnaby OBE. The place is Tangmere, the date is 5 May 1949. Stanley Vincent was then Air Officer Commanding 11 Group, and the occasion was his Annual Inspection. Here he is visiting No. 1 Squadron accompanied by George Parnaby, the Station CO. Since March, the squadron had been commanded by Robin Olds, shown with his back to the camera offering his salute. Olds is still in his WW2-pattern U. S. Army “pinks”; the new blue USAF uniform was not formally adopted until April 1949 and did not become general until late 1950.

It was Stanley Vincent’s second official visit to Tangmere that year; in February he had attended the ceremonial revival of No. 43 Squadron, his old sparring partners when he was No. 1 Squadron “A” Flight commander at Tangmere from 1928 to 1932. History does not record whether AVM Vincent arrived on this occasion in his personal Hurricane LF363, as pilot of which he had the honour of leading the Battle of Britain Memorial flypast later that year, the crowning moment of an RAF career.
that had begun in 1915 and his last big ceremonial duty before retirement in February 1950.

The Editor seems to have stumped our normally keen-eyed readers this time. No one correctly identified any of the three men in the picture!

The Story of LF363

LF363 was built at Langley and first flew on 1st January 1944 before being delivered to 5 MU at Kemble on 28th January. It served operationally with 63 Squadron from March 1944 until 2nd November 1944 when it went to 26 Squadron.

Before the war ended it was with 62 OTU at Ouston and its movement card then has it placed on charge with Middle Wallop from 30th August 1945. By August 1947, LF363 was on the strength of the Fighter Command Communications Squadron at Northolt. In February 1948, LF363 was with the Station Flight at Thorney Island and in a bit of a sorry state, classified as u/s awaiting spares.

Following repairs it took part in the Battle of Britain flypast over London in September 1948. Soon after, LF363 had to force-land. The records show that it was made unserviceable at this time for “Accumulator stowage panel missing after flight”. The repairs column says, “Temporary plywood panel fitted at West Malling, inspected and classified serviceable for one flight only”. The aircraft also required repairs to the TR1143 radio and to the tail oleo strut. It was then sent to Hawker’s at Langley, where it just sat.

In the summer of 1949 an experienced Hurricane fitter was sent to Langley, under the instructions of Air Commodore Stanley Vincent, to get LF363 airworthy for a return to Thorney Island, where Vincent was based with HQ 11 Group and where he planned for it to undergo a full refurbishment so that he could lead the Battle of Britain flypast over London in the aircraft that September. LF363 was in poor shape and needed attention to several areas including undercarriage oleos, tyres, battery (all of which were flat!). The guns and the radio had disappeared, as had the Form 700, and it was in need of some major cosmetic attention.

When the aircraft was declared fit to fly it was ferried back to Thorney Island, but the pilot could not lower the undercarriage and performed a wheels-up landing on the grass beside the runway. Vincent was determined that LF363 would be fit to fly for the BoB flypast and so, in just six weeks of hard work, it was repaired and made airworthy again.

Stanley Vincent flew LF363, leading the flypast over London in September 1949, and I can think of nothing more appropriate as he had been the Station Commander at Northolt, a Hurricane station, during the Battle. (He was also the only RAF fighter pilot to make kills against the enemy in single-seat aircraft in both WWI and WWII). After that, LF363 bounced around several stations and units before becoming a founder member of the fledgling Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.

— Clive Rowley

(Squadron Leader Rowley, retired, is a former CO of the BBMF and now acts as the Flight’s unofficial historian)
Arthur Mobbs and Peggy Williams met in a London air raid shelter during the Blitz in 1940. Their wedding, on 3 November 1945, was at St Giles Church, Camberwell Green. Arthur had just returned from a 27-month posting as a radar operator with South East Asia Command. One of his final duties before demobilisation was as a key member of the operating team at RAF Heathrow controlling the Victory Celebration Flypast on 8 June 1946, involving hundreds of aircraft in close formations in far-from-ideal conditions of rain, low cloud, and poor visibility.
Photo Quiz

Up a gum tree?
Name the place, the date, the aviator, and supply an explanation of this scene.

Visit the Museum’s website for our events programme and other up-to-the-minute news at www.tangmere-museum.org.uk

Cover illustrations and photo credits

Front cover: We thank Lance Russwurm for providing us with a high-definition scan of his painting of Charley Fox and his wingman (who we now know to have been Edward L. Prizer flying VZ-L, not Steve Randall in VZ-K as painted) attacking Rommel’s car on 17 July 1944. Pages 4, 15, 17 (left), 22, 24, 29: Believed public domain. Pages 9, 10, 12, 14: Courtesy of the Prizer family. Pages 16 (drawing), 17 (right), 19: David Coxon. Page 20: Crown Copyright, reproduced under licence. Page 30: Courtesy of Brenda and Trevor Mobbs. Back cover: Zürich International Aviation Meeting poster by Otto Baumberger, 1937; believed public domain.
4th International Aviation Meeting Zurich
23rd July - 1st August 1937