

The Battle of Britain, a fictional extract...

I was posted to a Spitfire squadron on the third of July 1940. I was born to fly that machine; you don't ride a Spitfire so much as wear it. They had a few peculiarities, as does every air machine, but I found it easy to get used to and a joy to float about in.

Not that there was much joy on the horizon. My squadron leader was a strict 'team effort' man and he trained us hard to fly tight vic formations, so tight that my wingtip had to be pointing at the roundel on his fuselage. We practiced every day for a week, by the end of which I had notched up fourteen hours on Spits. We stopped practice flights after that, because the German attacks started.

After I was injured and getting over it at Lavering rectory, I found my uncle's flight log in his study. He told me that he'd thought of writing a war memoir, but that looking at the flight log gave him no inspiration; the entries did not remind him of the events. I couldn't imagine that when I was writing my log, but when I look the row of slim volumes now, I have the same problem: a lot of the entries don't mean a thing, so I cannot readily use the actual flight times to recount what I was doing in the air on those days.

The basic pattern of July 1940 was like this – we had to cover all the hours of daylight when the Germans might come over. They could overfly England at any time they chose and ground control would send up one aircraft, flight or squadron to intercept. Air Vice Marshal Park restricted us to no more than seven machines on each intercept. The early incursions were attacks on shipping in the channel and radar stations on the coast itself. Bandits are very hard to spot in the air. Radar told our sector control where we should look and at what height, but there could be hundreds of invisible German machines two miles from us, because we'd be looking for their profiles, whereas the Observer Corps saw them from underneath.

We developed a few tricks to help. Cloud was useful; get low enough and they might be picked out against the cloud, if they're flying under it. Similarly from above, if they're above the clouds, it's easier to spot them against the white. The trouble with 1940 was that it was quite a bright July, so we didn't have much cloud to use until August. A good giveaway as to where to look was our anti-aircraft batteries. We were on an interception patrol over Kent on the 12th July and could see the black smoke of their shells bursting ten miles away. We headed for the flak, as they had to be shooting at someone.

We hoped they were shooting at German machines and not at friendly aircraft and that they'd spot us for friendly as we came in to the attack and stop firing. It was my first real live ammunition air engagement and the same went for nearly all the pilots flying with us that day. The skipper had been in France with a Hurricane squadron and our flight leaders had been involved over Dunkirk, but that was it for combat experience. Once we had the enemy in sight we went from a formation to independent. The air machines to which our attention had been drawn that July day by the ack-ack fire were a *staffel* of Stukas. I didn't count them, but more than seven flying in loose formation at three different heights; without fighter cover, they were sitting ducks. The Stuka is a 'dive bomber', a ground attack machine, slow by fighter standards.

They go down at a very steep angle to drop their bomb. The pilot must feel weightless doing that. Anyway, behind him sits a rear gunner facing backwards and manning a single machine gun, so Stukas have some bite from behind. We had the perfect position on them though; a bit higher and coming in

from their starboard side with the sun behind us. The skipper said 'pick a target' and 'don't shoot until he fills your sight'. That reminded me to flip the reflector sight up. I was ready.

It was the first time I fired my guns in air combat. I focussed on the black cross on my target's starboard wing, waited until I was sure I was close enough and squeezed off a burst, timing it by reciting 'God bless you' in my head. I saw nothing happen at first, but the eight guns firing together had the effect of lifting the nose slightly and at the end of the burst I saw hits registering on the fuselage and his engine began belching black smoke. Then I passed over him and started a wide turn to get back at them, banking with the starboard wing down.

The sky behind me was a mass of black smoke trails and not a Stuka in sight. When we hit them, several had been damaged in our first pass. The undamaged ones had dropped their noses, as they would on their bombing run. Being a fairly slow machine, that was their quickest way out; they could not climb quickly, nor could they outrun us. They could out-dive us, though, as they had fuel-injected engines.

The Spitfire also had a rather thin wing profile; it's designed for speed. Think of it as a bit delicate. A steep dive could rip the wings off and any dive had to be done 'upside down' to avoid starving the carburettor of fuel. I used this technique to follow the smoke trails down to see if I could pick up another target. The other thing to mention about Spitfires is that, again because of the thin wing profile, they were not particularly good at fast low level flying. I suppose that the German pilots had been briefed about Spitfires, since their evasion tactic was their best option. They would have done the same if a Hurricane squadron had spotted them first. The difference would have been that the Hurricanes could probably have done a better job of following them down and engaging them again at low level.

Hopefully better than us: we lost two machines on that sortie with both pilots safe. They picked the same Stuka to engage and collided. After the initial action, I levelled out at two thousand feet and had a look around. I figured I was over the Isle of Sheppey, so in floating down I thought I might be east of the bandits, ahead of them. They were heading east when we hit them, following the Thames estuary out to sea for their crossing to Holland. I took a turn up the estuary, judging that the ack-ack batteries we had seen in action might have been those on the coast by Rochester. I gave it two minutes west, then turned back and headed down the estuary myself, all without seeing anyone else. I eased it north a bit; safer to fly mid-estuary than on the coast, over the batteries.

Then I saw flak bursting a way in front of me. Possibly from guns on the Essex side at Southend. I added speed and height intending to get above the flak and see who was in their box barrage. As I approached the box, the firing stopped and a moment later I could see two Stukas flying abreast. I gave the wings a little waggle to acknowledge the gunners on the shore, then slid down to a thousand feet to attack the enemy from below and behind. The port side machine was already damaged, trailing something, probably fuel. I set after the starboard machine, putting the sight right in the middle of the underside of his fuselage.

Pressing the button, I got as far as 'God bless...' when the Stuka exploded; a vivid print on the sky of red flames and black smoke which dissolved into falling debris as I flashed past where he'd been. The other machine may have sustained some damage in the explosion; he banked north as I went by, so I came about to pick him up. When I next saw him he was losing height and was over the muddy

beach exposed below Southend at low tide. I did not fire as the background to my sight picture was the town, whose citizens would not appreciate my bullets ploughing through their roofs and streets.

I floated around over the town and came behind the Stuka; he had committed to landing on the mudflats by then, which I could imagine would be tricky in a heavy machine with a fixed undercarriage; if the ground is too soft to land on, the wheels will dig in, which makes the aircraft flip over. The luckiest ones just tip on end and shatter their propellers, but if the ground is a bit softer and the air speed a bit higher and it could flip over upside down, which in the case of a Spitfire, complicates getting out of it afterwards. So if it were me, I would have kept the undercarriage retracted and bellied in.

It may still flip it over, but less likely than if landing on stalks. The Stuka pilot had no option. What he did was held his nose at an attitude intended for front and rear wheels hitting the ground together, which it did when he stalled. I didn't see exactly what happened; either his undercarriage sheered off or sunk in the mud. Either way, the engine and starboard wing hit the soft mud and the machine stopped. He went from over sixty miles and hour to static in a second, like hitting a brick wall, throwing up mud and spray. I turned west to fly along the coast past the Southend batteries, to take a bow as it were.

That plan was shattered when I noticed jets of water kicking up from the slimy estuary water: a German fighter using me for target practice. I had been told not to follow the enemy down and I forgot that advice to see what happened to the third Stuka. Now I had to get out of trouble, so full throttle, half turn and climb. I got the briefest glimpse of the Messerschmitt and also some flak bursts. Southend's gunners were trying to clean him off my tail. I don't think they got him; he probably broke off pursuit when I headed west as that would take him away from his base and those machines did not have the fuel to stooge around over England for very long at a time.

I was over Gravesend and heading for Croydon anyway when I got the recall on R/T, so I was justified in not seeking further targets. I had a head full of images that I needed to replay at debrief and in the mess; the better to store them in some tidy fashion to relate to Granddad Herbert next chance I got.

I was really buoyed up and chipper when I landed at Croydon. Ground staff punctured my elation smartly by drawing attention to all the damage on my machine. They reckoned the whole rear fuselage would need re-skinning; I thought they were exaggerating, but there were quite a few holes and some pieces missing. How they would repair it would depend on how much damage there was to the subframe. I blunted their criticism with a sharp "you should see the other fellas - all three of them," and marched off to debrief.

I went to the hut and reported my two kills and the third machine landing in the mud off Southend, which I could not claim because I had not fired on him. The mood was hard to gauge, as half the squadron had not returned. Eighteen of us had taken off for three intercept sorties. One turned back soon after the scramble with a mechanical problem - his undercarriage would not retract and the drag made him too slow. Two others had returned without firing their guns and I was the ninth to land. Two more came in together after me; one was a bit of a mess and the other had stayed with him to see him home. That was it - seven machines had not returned by the time my watch said that they were out of fuel. They had to be down somewhere.

So it was; I mentioned the two who collided. John Lydster reckoned he was firing at a Stuka when Alan Dinsdale cut in from below and to his left. Lydster's propeller shattered in the crash, but not before it had chewed Dinsdale's tail off. Lydster knew that Dinsdale had been firing as he came in and reckoned they should have half that one each. He saw it sprout flames before he had to concentrate on his more immediate problem, which was being at fifteen thousand feet with no propeller. He managed to glide it down and made a marshy landing on the shore near St Mary Hoo. He said the locals were all very friendly, took him to a public house to use the telephone and bar and then drove him to a railway station so that he could make his way back to Croydon.

Dinsdale was unaware of the damage to his machine being caused by a collision. He was focussed on the Stuka until a terrific bang knocked him off course. He found that he could not regain control of the aircraft due to the tail having abandoned ship so he climbed out and became the first person in our squadron to use his parachute. He came down in a field somewhere south of Chatham and was, in his words, 'escorted' to a police station to be identified. Having made the telephone call from there, the duty officer to whom he spoke advised him to stay put, as there was a recovery group in the area and he could get a lift back with them.

Peter Banyard has never been seen since that day, nor has any trace of his machine ever been found. Five landed at other airfields for fuel and straggled in when they could. One ran out of fuel and crash landed, spending the night hiding in a bush, unsure of whether he was in England or France. I could not imagine ever being that disorientated, but more experienced people respected his caution. From over Rochester, a Spitfire could be over Calais in about eighteen minutes. It only takes a slight mistake to get way off course and get thoroughly lost in a matter of minutes. It happens. I do not know how many pilots simply ran out of fuel over the sea and were never seen again. It must have been quite a few and there would also be those lost to enemy action about which we never heard anything more; but in July 1940 things were just livening up and we now felt the loss of one pilot.

The squadron had five sorties that day; I missed the second one as my machine was grounded and there was no spare available. That was the only day this happened; as the battle progressed over the summer it was the shortage of pilots that became obvious. There were days when we could not fly all the aircraft we had, so one time a 'squadron' scramble of just six machines took off past some two dozen new and almost new Spitfires that were parked up, waiting for the human element that would turn them into weapons of war.

I lived a day at a time. On the ground, I waited for my turn to go up and once up, I spent my time looking for tiny hostile specks against the blue sky. With hindsight, it does not matter how many I shot down, or how many Johnny Lydster got or who came home without firing his guns. What matters is that we stopped them. We were undefeated in the sky, collectively, and since we could not be beaten, the Germans could not launch their seaborne invasion against our coast.

Mark Brabham

A character in Alan J Summers' 'The Home Front' he'll be back in the sequel from which manuscript this extract was cribbed.