

Anamnesis

“Vector two-three-five, Angels twenty-one, Bandits three-o’clock.” Add to this language the words ‘aileron’, ‘fuselage’, ‘undercarriage’ and you have some idea of the degree of difficulty a Polish pilot had in assimilating into an English fighter squadron.

“Squadron scramble.”

The ‘Tannoy’ blurted out the command and dragged me back from somewhere amongst the words of this strange English language to the reality of the sunshine flooding Rochford, a satellite aerodrome of RAF Hornchurch. The English dictionary fell off the chair where I had attempted to put it in my haste to start sprinting to my aeroplane.

“I was wondering what took Jerry so long to wake up this morning” blurted out young Roger Harper as we raced to our kites.

“Good luck, Sir,” quipped the ‘erk’ as he helped strap me in while I concentrated on the engine’s starting sequence. The Supermarine Spitfire’s Merlin engine growled into life and I began following Flight Lieutenant James Attin, my Flight Commander, onto the take-off area.

“Red and Yellow Sections - Go!” called Attin, whose call sign was Tracker One-Five, and I pushed the throttle right against the gate and the Merlin whirled the prop at ever increasing revs. The bumpiness of the grass began easing as the wings started to take the weight of the Spitfire and ‘A’ Flight was soon airborne. I pulled the undercarriage lever to raise the wheels and formatted on my Flight Commander.

The Sector Controller’s voice crackled over the R/T, “Tracker leader, Vector one-nine-five, saunter Angels twenty.”

While we climbed away, I thought of those whom I had left behind in Poland. Thirty is an age that has seen the edge knocked off the idealism of youth bringing with it a more philosophical outlook on life. I reflected on the fact that my brother and I were originally destined for the Catholic Priesthood. I smiled grimly to myself. It is amazing how fate sometimes intervenes, forever changing the course of a life.

When we had completed our schooling, we commenced our compulsory training at The Military College for Infantry Cadets at Rawa Ruska. Here fate had exposed me to observation balloons and my love of flight was first kindled. After the compulsory stint was over, I had applied to the Air Force as a trainee pilot and shortly afterwards I found myself at the Officer Cadets’ Flying School at Deblin.

Those were wonderful days; every moment was a new learning experience, perhaps akin to what many of the early pioneers of flight might have felt. All too soon the course was over and we were posted to our first operational units. I was considered to be a very precise pilot and so was selected to become a flight instructor.

Towards the end of the 1930's the days became bitter sweet as we watched the ominous signs of war clouds building up over Europe. Poland had been in the thick of war so many times in her history and this seemed to be a further occasion when we would be sucked into another European conflict whether we wanted to or not.

Soon our fears became reality. Hitler invaded Poland at dawn on 1ST September 1939 and Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Except for five squadrons of the Pursuit Brigade, most of the Polish Air Force was placed under the control of the Army. My comrades and I were flying PZL11 single seat fighters which were no match for the more modern German machines. We were also greatly outnumbered, short on fuel and either had no, or inadequate, radio communication. The

rapid advance of the German Army meant that the Army Air Force ceased to operate effectively by the 16th of September. During those two weeks our fighter pilots shot down nearly three hundred German aircraft and severely damaged a similar number.

On the 17th our High Command ordered us to escape to France via Romania. We slipped across the border and made our way to Bucharest, where we acquired passports from our embassy, before starting on a torturous journey which would eventually lead us to France.

The French were not prepared for war. They were neither very well organised nor were their aircraft a match for those of the German Air Force. My colleagues and I looked around carefully and came to the conclusion that the British would put up a more spirited resistance and so we made up our minds to move on to England.

It was a bleak February morning when our little band, the first Polish pilots to do so, reached the shores of England.

The Germans were equipped with Messerschmitt Bf109 and the RAF with Hawker Hurricane and Spitfire fighters that were the state of the art in 1940. In Poland we had flown outdated aeroplanes but the RAF soon took care of that situation. We were drafted into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and, after a few flight tests to ascertain our flying abilities, were posted to various training schools according to our individual talents.

I was fortunate enough to find myself about to be trained on what was then one of, if not the best, fighter aeroplane in the world - the Supermarine Spitfire. She could reach three hundred and sixty miles per hour in level flight and performed well at altitude. The Me109 had a slight edge at altitude but was not as fast - perhaps ten to fifteen miles per hour slower.

The armament of these two aeroplanes played a leading role in the early air battles. The German General, Adolf Galland, compared the Hurricane's and Spitfire's eight wing mounted machine guns with the Me109's nose mounted twin machine guns and single cannon as follows, "A good idea for a very good shot, but the average pilot is not so good: he needs a shotgun. The Spitfire is a real shotgun, so is better armed than the Me109 when shooting turning."

By now we were climbing through five thousand feet - 'Angels five' in RAF chatter - with my eyes glued to my Flight Commander's aeroplane as we were tucked into a tight formation.

My thoughts wondered back to those carefree childhood days in the village where we grew up, near the Russian border. We had attended school there until we were old enough to pass on to the senior school in Lwow. What a far cry from those days this was - yesterday I had been in the thick of an air battle where there had been red tracer bullets flying all around me. Here I was again today, flying in a strange country, trying to stop another German invasion. How far from the fields of a Polish village I was.

The training on the Spitfire had been a revelation, she was fast and manoeuvrable. I revelled in every moment that I spent in her cockpit. I had passed the course with flying colours. The Battle of Britain was under way and I was posted to one of the front line squadrons, number 65 based at RAF Hornchurch. It was the only fighter aerodrome to be equipped with no less than three Spitfire squadrons.

Hornchurch lies in Essex a few miles East of London, directly in one of the main flight paths used by the Germans to attack London. It was established in 1915 as RFC Suttons Farm and from it the Royal Flying Corps flew missions against the German Airship menace of the First World War. Now, a quarter of a century later, it was repeating this role against the modern German bombers that were flying down the same route used by their Zeppelin

counterparts of the First World War.

St. Andrews Church, Hornchurch, had a stone bull's head, with hollow copper horns, on its East gable. This was perhaps in some way related to the leather trade that the village was renowned for. The church became known as the 'horned church' and this presumably led to the village being named Hornchurch.

In 1928 the aerodrome was reopened as Royal Air Force Suttons Farm. However, within two months the name was changed to RAF Hornchurch and, probably because of its proximity to London, it became a 'must' for royalty, military top brass, politicians and overseas visitors. Almost a showcase aerodrome for the RAF.

I was delighted to find that, Franciszek Wolinski, a Polish colleague had arrived there a few days before I had. We were both befriended by a nineteen-year-old English pilot, Roger Harper. He felt that he could help us with our English while we in turn could pass on some of our combat experience.

As we passed through ten thousand feet on our climb to our patrol height, I thought of the insecurity of this lifestyle. The Windmill Theatre of London visited the various fighter stations in turn to provide some relief from the grim task of war and to remind us that there was a different side to life.

I saw our world clearly through the eyes of their Director when she told our Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Ian McCane, how poignantly the war had been brought home to her. During one of their performances a squadron had been scrambled. Twelve pilots had left their seats and a few minutes later she heard the roar of the Hawker Hurricanes as they passed over their makeshift theatre, a hanger cleared for the purpose.

Just on an hour later the squadron returned and nine pilots filed back in and retook their seats. She said. "I just could not take my eyes off those three empty seats that, just an hour before, had been filled by laughing young men."

The morning had started off misty but the skies had cleared. Met had forecast that cloud would begin moving in from France and that from early afternoon the South of the country would be clouded over. The Germans were about to make the best of this clear period.

The past five days had seen them sending over strong forces but using these to carry out scattered, rather than concentrated attacks. They had apparently given up on the channel convoys and the radar stations and now attempted to knock the RAF out on the ground. Fortunately for us many of these attacks were against Coastal Command and Fleet Air Arm aerodromes. Their intelligence gathering obviously left much to be desired. Their attacks were very uncoordinated - until today.

"Check your guns," the R/T blurted out. I turned the gun button to fire and checked to see that the reflector gunsight was working and thought of my arrival at Hornchurch.

Peter Rowlands was an ex service pilot who had left to become Supermarine's chief test pilot on the Spitfire. He had requested the chance to fly operationally so that he could learn, at first hand, what problems beset the operational pilots of the Spitfire. Aeroplanes, no matter what their breeding, do have their quirks.

Squadron Leader McCane was not entirely sure of Wolinski's, young Harper's and my gunnery ability and so he detailed Rowlands to take us out on a gunnery practice. We obviously got a good report as we were immediately cleared for combat.

At this stage of the battle the Germans could field nearly two thousand aeroplanes of which about eight hundred were Me109's. Ranged against this fleet the RAF had roughly eight hundred fighters. Hawker Hurricanes accounted for just on five hundred of these. I felt

privileged to be one the little band of pilots entrusted with the some three hundred Supermarine Spitfires.

Today was to be the day that the German juggernaut focussed its fight. First Biggin Hill and Kenley aerodromes were to be destroyed. Once this had been accomplished Hornchurch and other important Fighter Command aerodromes would be flattened. This would be a severe blow to the RAF as three of the main sector sections would be destroyed and, it was hoped, their aeroplanes as well. This would pave the way for Hitler's invasion of the British Isles which was now four weeks overdue thanks entirely to the RAF. Goering's estimate of 'six days' to subdue and destroy the Royal Air Force was far off the mark.

The first wave of German bombers was behind schedule as they had had difficulty in meeting up with their escorts in the cloud that was rapidly building up around Paris. The bombers consisted of Heinkel 111's, Junkers 88's, Dornier 17's and were escorted by Messerschmit 110's and the excellent Messerschmit 109 fighters. A group of the Dorniers were to fly at sea level and then at fifty to a hundred feet above the Kent countryside to avoid detection by radar.

While the formation of bombers formed up and gained height, a host of Me109's were sent as decoys towards London in an attempt to lure the RAF fighters away from the bomber formations.

We had been instructed to patrol at twenty thousand feet over Canterbury and were now well on our way to reaching this position.

The Observer Corps had spotted the low flying Dorniers and Fighter Command, caught with its pants down, scrambled the Biggin Hill and Kenley Squadrons. The Dorniers' target was Kenley. They were to destroy the aerodrome's ops buildings in a low level attack. The coup de grace would then be delivered by dive-bombing Junkers and finally by Heinkels bombing from high level.

All 111 Squadron's Hurricanes were scrambled from Croydon and, to their Squadron Leader's surprise, were instructed to patrol Kenley at a hundred feet over the aerodrome. "Are you bloody mad?" he quipped, "I could prune trees at that height." "I repeat, yes repeat, vector Kenley, patrol at one hundred feet, low level bandits approaching," came the voice of the Sector Controller over the R/T.

The Dorniers made a terrible mess of Kenley. As they approached, they spread out in an arc and Kenley's anti-aircraft guns could not fire until the low flying aeroplanes were almost on top of them. The parachute and cable defences were fired as the Dorniers approached. Rockets sent the cables up to five hundred feet at which point a parachute opened. If, while the parachute drifted slowly down, an aeroplane struck the cable, a second parachute would open at ground level dragging the aeroplane into the ground. This accounted for two of the raiders. Ironically Kenley's anti-aircraft guns shot down two Hurricanes.

This 18th of August was destined to be the day that saw the most casualties during the entire Battle of Britain. Before the day was out 69 German and 72 British aeroplanes were destroyed and many more suffered damage.

Suddenly the R/T crackled into life, "Hullo Tracker leader, hullo Tracker leader, bandits, three-o'clock, over." We looked right and there they were, the tiny but unmistakable silhouettes of Heinkels. We began closing in for an attack on the bombers when suddenly we were jumped by a flight of Me109's.

Tracers were flashing past me in the direction of my Flight Commander. I craned my neck and saw the German fighter screaming up on my right, aiming at Red One.

"Red One, break left immediate," I snapped and his Spitfire rolled into a split "Ess"

manoeuvre and dropped away in front of me. The Me109 followed in hot pursuit. I pulled into a wing over and followed them down. Flight Lieutenant Attin was twisting and turning to evade the bursts fired by the German but I was closing in on the Me109.

"Red one, break right," I snapped again and the execution of this manoeuvre seemed to catch the German off guard. I was now within firing range and gave him a short burst. My tracer seemed to float just over his cockpit and he put his nose down for the ground.

He was no fool, this German pilot. All my flying cunning was needed just to stay with him. As a result, it was difficult to get in a second burst of fire with my eight machine guns.

We were now at three thousand feet and he levelled off making a run for the coast. A little further on I got in another burst and the German, realising that I was closing on him, dived for the ground. I followed hard on his heels and soon we were twisting and turning literally inches above the Kent countryside.

All sorts of ground objects flashed through my peripheral vision but I was more concerned with getting the elusive German than with the topography of the Kentish countryside.

The coolness of years of training and instructing were suddenly replaced by an anger that cannot be described. A few days previously word had filtered through the already burgeoning resistance network that my sister had been arrested by the Gestapo. She was a school teacher and had apparently been fingered by a colleague who was a German collaborator. Her supposed 'crime' was that a relation of hers had escaped and that, as a pilot, he was probably fighting the German war machine in another country.

We knew of the brutality and tactics of the Gestapo and this knowledge fuelled my already smouldering anger over the invasion of my country. In the heat of battle these thoughts suddenly flooded my consciousness and there arose within me such an intense hatred for the German in front of me that I abandoned all rationality in my sudden determination to blow this Me109 right out of the sky.

The air is a very unforgiving medium; it demands your complete and utter attention - states of mind that are incompatible with the blinding rage that consumed me. In my anger I jinked the Spitfire from side to side to try and spray German with bullets.

Suddenly the Me109 pilot performed one of the oldest fighter tricks - he closed his throttle. My emotional state had slowed my reactions sufficiently so that I hesitated a split second before instinctively pulling back on the joystick to avoid ramming him - I was a fraction too late and struck his tail. The force of the collision knocked the nose of my Spitfire downwards and, at full throttle, it slammed into the Canterbury marshes....