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The Supermarine Spitfire: Palimpsest, Performance, and Myth

By

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Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Kent

December 2017

Modern scholarship understands myth to be neither fact nor fiction, only what is believed, and what is believed is subject to change. In order for the British war-made myths of 1940 to prove sustainable post-war, they had to prove adaptable; they had to have the capability to evolve. Fortunately it is in the nature of myth to be both synchronic, transcending time, and diachronic, evolving through time. This study is an enquiry into how the Spitfire in performance has been one agent of the evolution of the war-made myth. Beginning in the 1950s, a new generation of adolescent boys wanted to experience the Battle of Britain as an imaginary playground. The Spitfire helped them to achieve this. By the late 1980s, those adolescent boys had grown up and had families of their own. A new generation wanted to know what the Battle of Britain had to say about nationality and collective identity. The Spitfire answered these questions too. It was able to answer these questions because almost from the day of its public debut, it has had the chameleon like facility of a palimpsest. The Spitfire has made an important contribution to the evolution of the war-made myth of the Battle of Britain, an evolution that has guaranteed the myth's cultural relevance post-war.

Word Count: 95,972

Page Count: 269

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my two supervisors – Stefan Goebel and Ulf Schmidt – for their unstinting enthusiasm, help and support. Their advice and comment at every stage of the project was as wise as it was illuminating. It must also be noted that their insistence upon absolute scholastic rigour at all times was as bracing as it was refreshing.

I'd like to thank the School of History at the University of Kent which has been my academic home for twelve years. Beginning as an undergraduate mature student living in West Kent, I am especially grateful to the university for providing first degree opportunities at its satellite centre in Tonbridge. It was the academic journey begun here, under the esteemed guidance of Elizabeth Edwards, which led eventually to this PhD.

Finally I'd like to thank my family. My two daughters, Sarah and Rosie, have grown up as I have studied. In the beginning I helped them with their homework now I find they help me with mine, particularly when it comes to technology. All my love and thanks go to my wife, Carolyn. Without her commitment, encouragement, scepticism and eye for detail, nothing good would have been done.

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Abstract

Modern scholarship understands myth to be neither fact nor fiction, only what is believed, and what is believed is subject to change. In order for the British war-made myths of 1940 to prove sustainable post-war, they had to prove adaptable; they had to have the capability to evolve. Fortunately it is in the nature of myth to be both synchronic, transcending time, and diachronic, evolving through time. This study is an enquiry into how the Spitfire in performance has been one agent of the evolution of the war-made myth. Beginning in the 1950s, a new generation of adolescent boys wanted to experience the Battle of Britain as an imaginary playground. The Spitfire helped them to achieve this. By the late 1980s, those adolescent boys had grown up and had families of their own. A new generation wanted to know what the Battle of Britain had to say about nationality and collective identity. The Spitfire answered these questions too. It was able to answer these questions because almost from the day of its public debut, it has had the chameleon like facility of a palimpsest. The Spitfire has made an important contribution to the evolution of the war-made myth of the Battle of Britain, an evolution that has guaranteed the myth's cultural relevance post-war.

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Abbreviations

AC	Air Commodore
ACAS	Assistant Chief of the Air Staff
ACM	Air Chief Marshall
AFS	Auxiliary Fire Service
AIR	Air Ministry
AM	Air Member
AMP	Air Member for Personnel
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
AVIA	Ministry of Aviation
BBMF	Battle of Britain Memorial Flight
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CAA	Civil Aviation Authority
CAB	Cabinet Office
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CUL	Cambridge University Library
DCAS	Deputy Chief of the Air Staff
DEFE	Ministry of Defence
DSD	Director of Staff Duties
DTD	Director of Technical Development
FO	Foreign Office
HO	Home Office
MGM	Metro Goldwyn Mayer
MOC	Museum of Childhood
PA	Parliamentary Archives
PREM	Office of the Prime Minister
RAF	Royal Air Force
SABC	Society of British Aircraft Constructors
SHC	Surrey History Centre
THUM	Temperature and Humidity Monitoring

TNA The National Archive, Kew
VCAS Vice Chief of the Air Staff
VD Vickers Documents

Introduction

On 1 September 1930, Air-Vice Marshall H. C. T. Dowding joined the Air Council as Air Member for Supply and Research. His was now the responsibility for RAF procurement, for translating the service's vision of its future into the aircraft necessary to serve that vision. However, it was a vision that had become blurred of late. Sitting on Dowding's desk awaiting his arrival was one casualty of this loss of focus, a specification for a new day-night fighter. Specification F7/30¹ had begun life almost a year before, in October 1929, in response to a requirement to replace the 178 mph fighter bi-plane, the Bristol Bulldog. Over four hundred Bulldogs would eventually be delivered to the RAF, equipping ten out of the thirteen home fighter squadrons and making it the standard RAF fighter of the early 1930s. As such, any firm supplying its replacement would have expected good business, but what the RAF expected remains controversial to this day. However, there is one point of consensus over specification F7/30 amongst historians of the Spitfire, and that is that this is the beginning of the Spitfire story.

After much discussion and delay, specification F7/30 was eventually signed off and sent out to tender in November 1931. Its arrival had been anticipated in the offices of at least one major airframe manufacturer. Sir Robert McLean, chairman of Vickers Aviation, had made it the topic of his October board meeting. Present at that board meeting were his three chief designers, the veteran Rex Pierson, who had made his reputation building bombers in the First World War, his new assistant Barnes Wallis, and R. J. Mitchell who had come up to London from Southampton, home of Supermarine. Mitchell, like Barnes Wallis, was a relative new boy. At Sir Robert McLean's request Supermarine had been bought by Vickers three years before in 1928. Supermarine's Woolston Works on the shore of the River Itchen had cost Vickers £390,000, but McLean had not bought Supermarine for its bricks and mortar; he had bought it principally to acquire the services of Mitchell. In 1928, Mitchell was considered to be the country's leading designer of flying boats, and it was in flying boats that Sir Robert McLean saw the future. Vickers Aviation was going to build the boats that would open up the Empire to civilian air travel.

¹ The specification number is broken down as follows, F identified the type of aircraft, in this case fighter, the number 7 referred to the seventh specification issued in a particular year and the year itself was the last number, in this case 1930.

It was a bold vision but, unfortunately for McLean, not one shared by Sir Eric Geddes chairman of newly incorporated Imperial Airways. It was Imperial Airways that was going to fly these new air services on behalf of the government as a monopoly carrier. Geddes was faced with daunting problems right from the start, logistical as well as financial, and decided on a cautious approach.² Imperial Airways was in no hurry to open up new Empire air routes and would prove, at best, a parsimonious purchaser of flying boats. Sir Robert McLean had persuaded the Vickers Main Board to pay £390,000 for the country's leading designer of flying boats just as the bottom fell out of the market. It was, therefore, no surprise that in October 1931 he was anxious to receive the Air Ministry's latest specification F7/30. This new specification was for a fighter aircraft, not a flying boat, but fortunately for Sir Robert, R. J. Mitchell was not only famous for his flying boats; he was even more famous for his work in high-speed flight. Mitchell's designs had won the most prestigious high-speed aero event in the calendar, the Schneider Trophy, an unprecedented three times. Just eight days before the Vickers Aviation Board convened to consider specification F7/30, Mitchell's latest Schneider winning racer the S6B, had broken the world air-speed record.³ It was, therefore, presumably with some confidence that Sir Robert explained his new plan to his board.

Mitchell and McLean drew up a tender document which the Air Ministry accepted. They were keen to see what Mitchell could come up with. The next step was to build a prototype. It soon had a number, Type 224, and then a name, the Spitfire. The unromantic Mitchell was not impressed. He reportedly said 'it's the sort of bloody silly name they would give it'.⁴ Sir Robert had apparently named it in honour of his feisty young daughter Annie.⁵ This prototype Spitfire turned out to be a disaster. The reason seems to have been a combination of conservatism and complacency. With both his Schneider racers and his outstanding his flying boats, Mitchell had been given a free hand, but with Type 224 he had not. He had to report to a design committee chaired by Sir Robert McLean himself, and Sir Robert knew nothing about aircraft design. In the spring of 1934, after the failure of Type

² The story of Imperial Airways is told in Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

³ The best guide to the Schneider Trophy is Ralph Pegram, *Schneider Trophy Seaplanes and Flying Boats: Victors, Vanquished and Visions* (Stroud: Fonthill, 2012).

⁴ Cited in Jonathan Glancey, *Spitfire: The Biography* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p. 1.

⁵ See Leo McKinstry, *Portrait of a Legend: Spitfire* (London: John Murray, 2008), p. 55.

224 and as gloom descended upon the increasingly idle Woolston Works, Mitchell and his team struck out on their own, initiating a re-design programme independent of higher authority. After seven months of intensive work in the Supermarine design office, which left both Sir Robert McLean and the Air Ministry scurrying to catch on and then catch up, the new design was ready for Supermarine's machine shop. Almost every angle, line and curve of the original and disastrous Type 224 had been erased and re-drawn.

This second Spitfire prototype had its maiden flight on 5 March 1936 and was delivered to RAF Martlesham Heath for testing on 26 May. Eight days later, Sir Robert had an order for 310 Spitfires. It was the beginning of a long and painful pre-production phase. Tragically, R. J. Mitchell died in June 1937. Mitchell was an innovator, a restless, creative designer and engineer. In the months before his death he had already moved on from the Spitfire and was busy on new projects, specifically a four-engine bomber. His successor as chief designer at Supermarine, Joe Smith, was not an innovator. Smith's talent was as a developer, and Mitchell's original Spitfire design was ripe for development. As Rolls-Royce steadily increased the power output of its Merlin engine and then went on to introduce the even more powerful Griffon engine, the Spitfire, in the hands of Joe Smith, just got better. This policy of incremental development also matched the moment. It was cheaper and faster to produce improved Spitfires than to move onto a new type, with all its disruption, especially as no new type ever offered significant improvements over what Joe Smith was achieving with the Spitfire. When production of the Spitfire finally ended in February 1948, some 20,400 Spitfires had rolled out of the factories.⁶ The end of the war saw the RAF with a surviving complement of 5,864 Spitfires. By September 1946, only two Fighter Command squadrons were still equipped with Spitfires.

The Spitfire was gone but it has not been forgotten and the fact of its continuing cultural relevance now forms the subject of this thesis. We must therefore begin with the source of the Spitfire's fame. That rests upon its participation in the Battle of Britain. We do need to be clear and unambiguous on this point. We do mean participation and not contribution. The Spitfire's contribution to victory in the Battle of Britain has long been a source of controversy. Stephen Bungay, who has written the best modern popular history of the

⁶ Alfred Price, *The Spitfire Story* (London: Arms and Armour, 1986), p. 249.

Battle, is one historian chary of entering this debate.⁷ ‘Some sobriety is needed in assessing the role played by the Spitfire and Hurricane and in comparing both with the Bf 109, for it is an emotional subject.’⁸ Just how emotional can be judged from this blast from former Hurricane pilot Roland Beaumont in 1996, in an interview he gave to the Imperial War Museum. ‘One hears so much about the superiority of the Spitfire over the Hurricane. It is all rubbish. The Hurricane was more rugged...You could aim could aim the guns more accurately than you could with the Spitfire because it was better directionally.’⁹ Perhaps it was, perhaps it wasn’t, and for most modern commentators, including Bungay, the Spitfire was the superior aircraft.¹⁰ On the merits of each fighter, though, this thesis will have little to say as it is not, as we will discover, strictly germane to the central question, which is why the Spitfire has remained culturally relevant.

Let us return to the Spitfire’s fame. Having noted the controversy concerning its technical prowess and fighting ability as compared to the Hurricane and Bf 109, there is an obvious first question to answer. Why was the Spitfire granted the position of *prima inter pares* during the Battle itself? We can go further and suggest this was actually a position settled to the public’s satisfaction before battle was even joined.¹¹ Evidence of just how early comes in the name scratched on so many collection tins proffered nationwide to buy replacement fighters for the RAF in June 1940. It was usually Spitfire and not Hurricane.¹² More evidence for this early decision comes in the famous ‘live’ broadcast from Dover by BBC correspondent Charles Gardner on 14 July 1940.¹³ What Gardner told his listeners he saw were Spitfires engaging German dive-bombers over the Channel. What he actually saw were Hurricanes as well as Spitfires. What almost certainly lay behind his mistake as well as the public’s early decision is answered in two parts.

⁷ The best modern scholarly account remains Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

⁸ Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Aurum, 2001), p. 80.

⁹ Roland Beaumont, Oral History Interview, tape 17129 <www.iwm.org.uk>collections> [accessed 12 Sept. 2017].

¹⁰ Recent interventions include Dilip Sarkar, *How the Spitfire Won the Battle of Britain* (Stroud: Amberley, 2010); David Isby, *The Decisive Duel: Spitfire vs 109* (London: Little Brown, 2012).

¹¹ The start and end date of the battle have both been subject to speculation. See Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 55.

¹² For a recent account of the Spitfire Funds see Helen Jones, *British Civilians in the Front Line: Air Raids, Productivity and Wartime Culture, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 126.

¹³ See Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 123-126.

The first part is wholly subjective. It lies in the eye of the beholder. Evidence of the Spitfire's aesthetic appeal is as longstanding as it is overwhelming. Admiration of the lines of the Spitfire began very early in its career. Charles Grey, the cantankerous founding editor of *Aeroplane*, first saw the Spitfire on static display in the new type park at the 1936 Hendon Air Show. It was only three months after its first flight. He was impressed by what he saw. 'Mr Mitchell's little Supermarine Fighter, like a baby Schneider Racer which folds up its feet, is a sweet little job all over.'¹⁴ Lord Balfour, Under Secretary of State for Air, from 1938 to 1944, recalled his impressions on being introduced to the Spitfire. 'I know I fell in love with her the moment I was introduced that summer day in 1938. I was captivated by her sheer beauty; she was slimly built with a beautifully proportioned body and graceful curves just where they should be.'¹⁵ What he actually said to the press that day was altogether more circumspect but no less positive for all its lack of purple prose.¹⁶ What was first said of the Spitfire, and by disinterested observers, has not been gainsaid. Martin Francis in his recent study of airmen in the wartime RAF is following in a long tradition when he notes of the Spitfire that 'its curved elegance and fluency in flight ensured that even the most prosaically inclined flyers testified to its aesthetic appeal'.¹⁷

The second part of the answer as to why the Spitfire was granted the position of *prima inter pares* during the Battle of Britain is prompted by the speed the matter was settled. On 14 July 1940, the BBC correspondent Charles Gardner did mistake Hurricanes for Spitfires engaging the enemy over the straits of Dover. It was a mistake born of expectation. In the early summer of 1940 the Spitfire was expected to shoot down the enemy. The Spitfire had only recently been widely acclaimed as an exceptional aircraft. The Spitfire's credentials had been presented to the public three months before the outbreak of war, on 20 May 1939, Empire Air Day. We can be so precise because this was the day of the Spitfire's first

¹⁴ 'New Types', *Aeroplane*, 1 July 1936, p. 9.

¹⁵ Lord Balfour, 'Foreword', in Gordon Mitchell, *R. J. Mitchell: Schooldays to Spitfire* (Olney: Nelson & Saunders, 1986), p. 11.

¹⁶ 'Minister Flies a Spitfire and says it's Docile', *Daily Mirror*, 26 Aug. 1938, p. 6.

¹⁷ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 165.

major public engagement, not its public debut, but the first time a large audience saw it in action, more than a million people nationwide.¹⁸

The occasion was the RAF's annual open day. There was to nothing routine about this particular occasion however. It was a celebration of the RAF's coming of age, its 21st birthday.¹⁹ It was also a chance to satisfy an acute need for recruits created as a consequence of an accelerated expansion programme which had begun four years before.²⁰ Acting as recruitment sergeant on the day was its brand new fighter, the Spitfire. The Hurricane had to play the bridesmaid because it had already had its press launch, a more muted affair, the year before.²¹ Reports on the day suggest that the Spitfire made quite an impression. It was in fact greeted by an unprecedented reception. No new aircraft had ever received such a reception on an Empire Air Day programme.²² There was a perception of outstanding performance, a perception fed on a drip-feed to the public by the press ever since 1934.²³ There was nothing that unusual in this. The Hurricane on its debut was trumpeted as state of the art.²⁴ Much more significant, however, in terms of the Spitfire's first major public display, was the timing. In May 1939 war clouds were gathering. The huge crowds were responding emotionally to a re-assuring sight. It was certainly reported as such.²⁵ An emotional response to the Spitfire will be a recurring theme in this thesis.

The Spitfire's credentials were presented before the outbreak of war but it was in the summer of 1940, during the Battle of Britain, that its fame was born. It was a fame that flourished in the early creation of a myth. Recent scholarship on mythology understands a myth to be 'not a lie or a false statement to be contrasted with truth or reality or fact or

¹⁸ For an account of the history of 'Empire Day' see Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', *Historical Journal*, 24 (2006), pp. 247-276.

¹⁹ The RAF was established on 1 April 1918.

²⁰ See Sebastian Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power: The Expansion of British Aircraft Production, 1935-1942* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).

²¹ For an account of the Hurricane's press launch see Leo McKinstry, *Hurricane: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: John Murray, 2010), pp. 68-70.

²² It was witnessed nationwide by correspondents from *Aeroplane* see 'Notes from Stations', *Aeroplane*, 24 May 1939, p. 17.

²³ See '250 MPH Secret Warplanes', *Daily Mail*, 21 June 1934, p. 16; 'Rearming for Peace', *The Times*, 5 March 1938, p. 14; 'London-Paris, 50 Mins.', *Daily Express*, 26 Nov. 1938, p. 7.

²⁴ See McKinstry, *Hurricane*, pp. 68-70.

²⁵ See 'Ace Pilot Spans Britain in 3 Hours', *Daily Mail*, 22 May 1939, p. 5; 'Cameras Are Seized at Slow-Flying Air Day Plane Crash', *Reynolds News*, 21 May 1939, p. 1; 'Empire Air Day Thrills Britain', *Sunday Pictorial*, 21 May 1939, p. 7.

history...a myth is above all a story that is believed, believed to be true.²⁶ Historians of the myths of 1940, of which the Battle of Britain is one, Dunkirk and the Blitz the other two components, have treated them with such due circumspection. Angus Calder describes myth almost scornfully as, ‘pseudo-explanation posing as a fact’.²⁷ Malcolm Smith is a little more balanced recognising myth as a ‘widely held view of the past which has helped us shape and explain the present’.²⁸ Both of these positions are tenable in the light of recent scholarship on myths and myth-making. It is also true that myths are no longer read as simple allegories for something else. Each is now treated as a unique entity, one with literary merit as well as a historical and psychological dimension in which what is true is less important than what is perceived to be true. In the 1960s and 1970s, a structuralist approach to myths, popularised by Claude Lévi-Strauss, attempted to strip myths down to simple universal building blocks. This is not an approach favoured today where certain tropes are consistently recognised, familiar symbols, themes and plot, but the variations are now judged so numerous as to defy attempts at unification.²⁹ There is one point of reference that binds the work of Lévi-Strauss to more recent scholarship on myth, and that is the idea that myths are diachronic. This is, the idea that myth, what is believed, evolves, changes over time.³⁰

We will return to this point in a moment but before discussing change we must establish origins. The myth of the Battle of Britain was very quickly established. Here it is presented almost fully formed in this Home Office communiqué from 1943. The occasion was the organisation of one of the first commemorations of the Battle of Britain.

it is intended to commemorate the air engagement known as the ‘Battle of Britain’, the prolonged series of night attacks that followed and the services of all those, whether members of the Royal Air Force, the Anti-Aircraft Gunners, The Civil Defence Services, the Police, the Royal Observer Corps, the aircraft workers or

²⁶ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 2.

²⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 3.

²⁸ Smith, *Britain and 1940*, p. 2.

²⁹ See Doniger, *Implied Spider*; Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

³⁰ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 34; Wendy Doniger, ‘Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth’, in Boris Wiseman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 211.

members of the general public, who by their skill, fortitude or devotion to duty contributed to the defeat of the whole of the attacks, which were aimed first at the invasion of this country and later at the destruction of the morale of the civilian population.³¹

Three key elements of the myth of the Battle of Britain are already firmly in place. The first is the seemingly obvious one of when it was actually fought, before the Blitz but after Dunkirk. The second is the reason that it was fought, to stop invasion. The third is the identification of exactly whom it was who was doing the fighting. It was not just the airmen of the Royal Air Force. This original manifestation of the myth was constructed in three quick phases. The first phase began even as the Battle was being fought. This was the British propaganda effort through the summer of 1940 'for the purposes of providing a running commentary for the news media, and thereby raising morale at a difficult moment'.³² It was not pre-planned and it was propaganda as facts fell by the wayside in the scramble to keep up. This was the moment when German losses resembled 'cricket scores' and the Few took on the mantle of David against Goliath.³³ Phase two began five months after the Battle effectively ended in March 1941 on the publication of Hilary Aiden St George Saunders' 32 page pamphlet the *Battle of Britain*.³⁴ Historians have always recognised this as a 'remarkable essay in near-contemporary history'.³⁵

What made it so remarkable was the fact that it defined the Battle, framing it, turning it into a coherent event with a start and an end and even defining a 'greatest day'. This was all something of a revelation in March 1941. 'Most observers would then have conceded that the air attacks were intense and sustained, but might have struggled to invest them with a deeper significance.'³⁶ It was no doubt one good reason for the pamphlet's prodigious

³¹ The National Archives (TNA), HO 207/214, Home Security Circular No. 138, 1943.

³² Garry Campion, *The Battle of Britain, 1945-1965: The Air Ministry and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

³³ See Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (London: Pearson, 2004), pp. 109-115.

³⁴ Hilary St George Saunders, *The Battle of Britain: An Air Ministry Account of the Great Days from 8th August-31st October 1940* (London: HMSO, 1941).

³⁵ Brian Bond, 'Introduction', in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 1.

³⁶ Campion, *Battle of Britain*, p. 2.

sales.³⁷ What made Saunders' account credible was its provenance. It had the imprimatur of the Air Ministry, the Ministry of Information and His Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO).

A battle had been fought and a victory won before a seemingly oblivious public, so its significance was also at stake. Phase three of the myth-making process now began. This was the start of a process of valorisation of the Battle of Britain. The Home Office communiqué quoted above talks of 'attacks, which were aimed first at the invasion of this country.'³⁸ The truth of this has never been firmly established.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is early evidence that this process of valorisation had begun and which would very soon take on a life of its own. Referring to Saunders' pamphlet, Garry Campion, author of a two volume study of the myth of the Battle of Britain, notes 'there is no question that it set in train a wide and creative response, the confidently asserted shape and importance of the Battle generating literature, films, art, radio plays and other celebratory cultural media from 1941 onwards, once the implications of the pamphlet's core message had sunk in'.⁴⁰

From 1941 onwards, and notwithstanding the significance of the Few, the Spitfire was well placed to take on the mantle of this newly created myth.⁴¹ First, there was its role as *prima inter pares* during the Battle itself. The Hurricane never would supersede the Spitfire in the public's affections, either during or after the war. The second reason was a significant intervention in the myth-making process on behalf of the Spitfire in 1942. At a time when 70% of the adult population frequented the cinema, and 32% went at least once a week, there was one wartime feature film made about the Battle of Britain.⁴² This was Leslie Howard's *The First of the Few* (1942), the story of the design and development of the Spitfire. As we will discover, the film, which was a big box office hit was more fable than fact. The third reason behind the Spitfire's seamless transfer into the myth of the Battle has much to do with the way the Battle was presented to children and young adults after 1941, not least potential RAF recruits. Valorisation of the Battle had little room for bad news,

³⁷ It sold 300,000 copies on the day of its publication and total sales are approximately 15 million. See Brian Bond, 'Introduction', in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 1.

³⁸ TNA, HO 207/214, Home Security Circular No. 138, 1943.

³⁹ See Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain: Myth and Reality* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 16-23.

⁴⁰ Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 4.

⁴¹ See Adrian Gregory, 'The Commemoration of the Battle of Britain', in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

⁴² Jacob Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences: Sociological Study* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1948), p. 252.

stories of death and life-changing injury. Focusing on the Spitfire as a ‘chariot of fire’ avoided such difficult issues.⁴³

We now return to the diachronic nature of myth. It was the question of perception, what was believed in the present rather than the past, which drew Angus Calder, one of the first and still most important historians of the myths of 1940, to study them in the mid 1980s.⁴⁴ Calder, according to Paul Addison, was responding to the ‘rhetoric of the Falklands war, and the sense of national identity upon which it drew...the myth of the People’s War. The myth, he remarked at the time, had become a monster.’⁴⁵ Calder’s study, setting claims of popular enthusiasm and solidarity against evidence of disunity and dysfunctionality, was influenced by the work of cultural theorists and most particularly Roland Barthes.⁴⁶ Calder examined the construction of the myths using a cornucopia of evidence. This included a host of artefacts from popular culture. It was an eclectic approach that has set the standard for all future examinations of the myths, their construction and reception. Such evidence includes film, television, radio programmes, books, comics, newspapers, posters, paintings, photographs, exhibitions and more. There is one piece of significant evidence, however, that has been all but lost in the deluge and it has to do with the diachronic nature of myth. The Spitfire, as this thesis will demonstrate, has acted as an interpreter of the myths, most particularly that of the Battle of Britain, for new audiences drawn to them post-war. These new audiences have typically wanted to believe something a little different from that which was presented in the Home Office communiqué of 1943.

What has enabled the Spitfire to do satisfy these new requirements has been its ability to behave as a palimpsest. What is a palimpsest? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) a palimpsest is ‘a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing’.⁴⁷ Sarah Dillon has studied

⁴³ See Owen Dudley Edwards, ‘The Battle of Britain and Children’s Literature,’ in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 163-190; Campion, *Battle of Britain*, p. 307.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Britain and 1940*, p. 2; Connelly, *We Can Take It!* p. 1.

⁴⁵ Paul Addison, ‘Angus Calder (1942-2008)’, *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), p. 303.

⁴⁶ For a recent comment on Calder’s approach to the Home Front and myth-making, see Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 2-7.

⁴⁷ ‘Palimpsest’, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edn. 2017).

the etymology of the word and suggests that it was Thomas De Quincey in 1845, in an essay in *Blackwood's Magazine* entitled 'The Palimpsest', who first introduced the substantive concept of the palimpsest.⁴⁸ Dillon, a literary theorist, suggests it is a concept on the move but here we will rely on the *OED*'s description of a palimpsest as a simile or metaphor. 'In extended use: a thing likened to such a writing surface, especially in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multi-layered record.'⁴⁹ This thesis will argue that the Spitfire possesses such a multi-layered record.

How has this ability to behave as a palimpsest been demonstrated? What is the process of engagement with post-war audiences? The answer lies in the air, in action, specifically in performance. This is not performance as theatre. What audiences see in a Spitfire flypast for instance is nothing to do with fabrication. It is a cultural production, a means of making meaning 'from a place other than the written word'.⁵⁰ It was Richard Schechner who first coined the term 'Performance Studies' and for the doyen of that field, that other place than the written word is action, what people do 'in the activity of their doing it'.⁵¹ This is activity that ranges across a broad spectrum of endeavour, from ritual to play, from popular entertainment to performing art, from the enactment of social, professional, gender, race and class roles to shamanistic acts of healing. One thing they all have in common is advocacy. Performance as a cultural production is all about acquiring knowledge, 'knowledge that comes from doing, participatory understanding, practical consciousness, performing as a way of knowing'.⁵²

Henry Bial offers a clear as well as usefully succinct explanation of performing as a way of knowing, a key concept in Performance Studies. 'All performance involves a consciousness of doubleness through which the actual execution is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.'⁵³ Let us return to that Spitfire flypast. The execution is the flypast, the remembered original model, is the myth. It is the act of mental comparison between the two, in the moment, which effects change.

⁴⁸ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), p. 1.

⁴⁹ 'Palimpsestic', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edn. 2017).

⁵⁰ Diana Taylor, cited in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 13.

⁵¹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 1.

⁵² Dwight Conquergood, cited in Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 26.

⁵³ Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

The myth of the Battle of Britain, in that moment of flypast, is examined and re-configured to better to suit the aspirations of those watching on.

This is a study about the past in the present; it is therefore a study about memory, particularly collective memory. The idea of collective memory originated in the 1920s with the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and was later developed by anthropologist Roger Bastide, in his work on African folk culture.⁵⁴ Historian and anthropologist Nathan Wachtels distils Halbwachs' ideas on the relationship between private recollections and collective. Halbwachs insisted that they 'only exist and are localised in the past by linking up with the memory of others: one only remembers as a member of a social group. The singularity, the irreducible originality of personal recollections are in fact produced by the criss-crossing of several series of memories which themselves correspond to the various groups to which we belong'.⁵⁵ It means, according to Halbwachs, that personal memory and social memory are inextricable.⁵⁶

This idea is contentious. James Fentress and Chris Wickham point to the danger that such an idea suffocates personal identity, renders the individual little more than an automaton.⁵⁷ Nevertheless the link between collective memory and identity was at the root of what Jay Winter has identified as a 'memory boom'. This was the start of a new politics of identity, which had its beginnings in the 1990s and is still reverberating today.⁵⁸ This 'memory boom' owed its birth to the legacy of the Second World War and had its own antecedence in the 1960s. It was in the mid 1960s, twenty years after the end of the war, that the narrative of resistance, so necessary for national reconstruction after the war, was finally called to account. Questions about the honour of the nation state soon turned to questions about the value of the nation state itself. Charles Maier has claimed 1960 to mark the 'end of

⁵⁴ See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Roger Bastide, *Les Religions Africaines au Brésil* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960).

⁵⁵ Nathan Wachtels, 'Introduction', *History and Anthropology*, 2 (1986), pp. 207-224.

⁵⁶ For a critique of Halbwachs' ideas see Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, 'Collective Memory-What Is It?', *History and Memory*, 8.1 (1996), pp. 30-50. For a review of subsequent developments in memory studies see Aleida Assman, *Arts of Memory: Cultural Memory and Western Civilization, Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵⁷ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. ix.

⁵⁸ Jay Winter, 'The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the "Memory Boom" in Contemporary Historical Studies', *Raritan*, 21 (2001), pp. 52-66.

'territoriality', the end of the process of state-building which had begun a century before.⁵⁹ In Europe new political constructs were evolving as old ones appeared to be in terminal decline. The European Community was growing in the shadow of the Berlin Wall and then the Berlin Wall came down.

1989 may not have marked the end of history as postulated by Francis Fukuyama, the end of ideological evolution and the triumph of Western liberal democracy, but much was crumbling along with the concrete of the Berlin Wall.⁶⁰ The start of the 'memory boom' has been seen as a reaction to a flawed historical discourse, an implied criticism of the 'stories' that were supposed to explain the contemporary world. Kerwin Klein dismisses the 'memory boom' as little more than 'a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse'.⁶¹ Geoff Eley, however is more considered, recognising a contemporary 'unease with history, inviting a different historical sensibility'.⁶² That new sensibility has seen memory become a meta-historical category 'where once we spoke of folk history or popular history or oral history or public history or even myth'.⁶³ There is a problem, however. This brand new meta-historical category is already looking vulnerable to stratification as memory becomes 'multidirectional', 'transactive', 'prosthetic', 'public', 'popular', 'mass', as well as a 'vector' in the hands of those working in the field.⁶⁴

There are still historians prepared to deal in myth, however, especially when considering the legacy of the Second World War in Britain. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that what has shaped historiographical interest in the wartime myths, an interest which began in the 1990s, has been an interdisciplinary collaboration between historians and cultural theorists.

⁵⁹ See Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crises of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3-18.

⁶¹ Kerwin Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 69 (2000), p. 145.

⁶² Geoff Eley, 'The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), p. 558.

⁶³ Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory', p. 128.

⁶⁴ See Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, 'Introduction' in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 2; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Graham Smith, 'Beyond Individual Collective Memory: Women's Transactive Memories of Food, Family and Conflict', *Oral History*, 35 (2007), pp. 77-90; Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Susannah Radstone, 'Reconcieving Binaries: The Limits of Memory', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), p. 136; Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (London: Berg, 1999); Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

In particular, it is the conception of memory as shaped by fields of representation, and which owes much to the work of Roland Barthes.⁶⁵ Barthes in his seminal study looked to the science of semiology for explanation.⁶⁶ It was certainly a debt owed to Barthes which was acknowledged by Angus Calder in his *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991).⁶⁷ Calder's debt to Barthes was not strictly methodological, however. Barthes, in his preface to the 1970 edition of his book, explained the motivation behind his own work. His was an ideological response. He wanted to 'account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature'.⁶⁸ This was 'myth as monster' and the starting point for Calder.⁶⁹

Calder tells us he was angry 'over the sentimentalism of 1940 by Labour apologists, then over the abuse of 'Churchillism' by Mrs Thatcher during the Falklands War'.⁷⁰ His self-appointed task was to try and undermine the credibility of the mythical narrative altogether, to dismiss 'events flattering the dominant particularism within Britain'.⁷¹ He was also perhaps annoyed with himself. 'I did so in a spirit of self-criticism, since I realised that many, perhaps most, readers of my *People's War* (1969) has seen the book as confirming the myth.'⁷² Calder's thesis in that seminal account of the Home Front was of a war, particularly the first half, fought in a ferment of participatory democracy which had seen its reward in 1945 with the establishment of a welfare state. It was a thesis which had not met with general academic acceptance.⁷³ It turned out that his new work, *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991), was for many critics just as disappointing. 'It actually reads as a surprising endorsement of the myths he has been so ready to dispatch'.⁷⁴ The implied criticism was that Calder still believed in what he had written in 1969. Calder now made no apology. 'The Myth, while it dealt tenderly with antiquated elements in the British social structure, was

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993).

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶⁷ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. xvii.

⁶⁹ Addison, 'Angus Calder', *History Workshop Journal*, p. 303.

⁷⁰ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. xiv.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷² Ibid., p. xiii; See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1999).

⁷³ Addison, 'Angus Calder', p. 302.

⁷⁴ Bill Schwarz , review of Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, in *History Workshop*, 33 (1992), p. 283.

firmly orientated against snobbery, selfishness and greed and could be given a forthrightly egalitarian emphasis.⁷⁵

What Calder described in 1991, to the dismay of some, has not in fact been significantly revised since. The heat of revisionist battle over the Home Front was actually at its most intense during the 1980s, when Calder was writing, led by the ‘sensationalist revisionists’, as described by Mark Connelly, the likes of Clive Ponting and Nicholas Harman.⁷⁶ This battle swept over the individual myths of 1940 but left no indelible marks.⁷⁷ Where the historiography of the myths has made gains is in its analysis of the reception of the myths post-war, a subject which had inspired Calder and which he briefly examined at the end of his own study.⁷⁸ Geoff Eley made the important observation that ‘remembering World War 2 [sic] requires no immediate experience of those years’.⁷⁹ What he was alluding to was the fact that later generations had discovered a war of their own through a range of filtering media. The effect was inevitably evolution. The diachronic nature of the myths of 1940 has been further explored by Graham Dawson and Michael Paris. They noted what Calder had identified as a ‘forthrightly egalitarian emphasis’, had replaced with a more individualistic impulse as younger audiences became interested in the myths in the 1950s.⁸⁰ The complicated politics of myth perception has been explored by Mark Connelly who has identified a shift from left to right. ‘In abandoning the field, the left opened the way to a right-wing domination of the myth-history of the Second world War.’⁸¹

This brings us to this present study and its place in the historiography. This does seem an appropriate moment to define cultural history as it will be understood in this thesis. For that we turn to Jay Winter. In response to a review of his book, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), he provides us with this useful statement: ‘Cultural history, I take it, is the study of the codes, gestures and

⁷⁵ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 272.

⁷⁶ Connelly, *We Can Take It!* p. 9; See Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London: Hamish-Hamilton, 1990); Nicholas Harman, *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

⁷⁷ Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 251-272.

⁷⁹ Geoff Eley, ‘Finding the People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II’, *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), p. 818.

⁸⁰ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994); Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000).

⁸¹ Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 296.

representations, expressed in action as well as in imaginative forms, which people in the past used to ascribe meaning to the world in which they live.⁸² This present thesis is in the tradition of the cultural turn(s) but it does not aspire to be *the* cultural history of the Spitfire. Codes, gestures and representations, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, have been the evidence base for scholarly research into the wartime myths of 1940, both in terms of the myths creation and post-war evolution, and it is a historiography shaped by media history. Garry Campion's comprehensive two-volume survey of the Battle of Britain and mass media, from 1940 to 1965, is the most recent example of this methodological approach.⁸³ This thesis is not a media history, however, but instead seeks to locate the evolution of the war-made myth of the Battle of Britain post-war in performance.

In terms of the historiography this study finds itself at the confluence of four historiographical streams. The first is the myth-history of 1940 which had its beginnings with Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991) as noted above. The second is the history of flight. The 'memory boom' injected new life into the historiography of flight. Two notable interventions were the two volume cultural history of aviation, a cross border general survey by Robert Wohl and Gordon Pirie's more parochial study of civil aviation and the British Imperial project in the inter-war years.⁸⁴ The third historiographical stream draws us closer to the Spitfire. This is the cultural turn in object history. It has proved a contentious one. Bernhard Rieger's *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle* (2013) explored how a car rooted in Nazi propaganda became a hero of 1960s counter-culture.⁸⁵ It was well received but when cultural historians intruded upon territory traditionally held by military historians, the reception was cooler. Naval historian Geoffrey Till was not impressed with Duncan Redford's *The Submarine: A Cultural History from the Great War to Nuclear Combat* (2010). 'Is the cultural approach to subjects like this a real

⁸² Author's Response to David Fitzpatrick , review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* <www.history.ac.uk> [accessed 11 September 2016].

⁸³ See Campion, *The Good Fight*; Campion, *The Battle of Britain*. For a recent introduction to the field of media history see Martin Conboy and John Steel (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to British Media History* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁸⁴ Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Pirie, *Air Empire*.

⁸⁵ Bernard Rieger, *The People's Car: A Global History of the Volkswagen* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013).

alternative to the technological determinism that the author thinks so often frames conventional analyses – or simply another way of looking at it?’⁸⁶

We now turn to the fourth and final historiographical stream that informs this study that of the Spitfire itself. Little scholarly work has been done on the Spitfire. The reason for this, as is invariably flagged up in the few scholarly works extant on the aircraft, is the lack of useful archive material. The specific problem is a lack of material on its early development phase. R. J. Mitchell was notoriously allergic to the written word. His diary failed to even note the first flight of the Spitfire let alone comment upon it. Worse, his reticence seems to have been shared by those working under him. Kenneth Agnew has studied this very problem. His conclusions were that that there was a work place culture in the 1930s design office, which was at odds with the idea of record keeping. He notes it particularly impacted upon work in progress.⁸⁷ It means that the closest we can get to a step by step account of the development of the Spitfire is in memoirs. There are two of especial note. The first is Gordon Mitchell’s *R. J. Mitchell: Schooldays to Spitfire* (1986).⁸⁸ This is a work of homage from a son to a father and gathers together the recollections of many who knew R. J. Mitchell and worked alongside him on the Spitfire. The second is a personal memoir, Jeffrey Quill’s *Spitfire: A Test Pilot’s Story* (1983).⁸⁹ Quill had worked beside Mitchell on the Spitfire prototype and on all the Spitfire Marks that followed. His character study of Mitchell is one of the most insightful and valuable we have.

Turning to the work of historians of the Spitfire, there are three popular histories worthy of note if only for the breadth of their research. The first is Alfred Price’s *The Spitfire Story* (1986).⁹⁰ This is an archive-based general narrative. The second is more of an encyclopaedia, Eric Morgan and Edward Shacklady’s *Spitfire: The History* (1987).⁹¹ It is an exhaustively detailed account of the Spitfire’s operational career. The third, a generation on from Price and paying more attention to the political context, is Leo McKinstry’s *Spitfire*:

⁸⁶ Geoffrey Till, review of Duncan Radford, *The Submarine: A Cultural History from the Great War to Nuclear combat* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), *English Historical Review*, 126 (2011), p. 1571.

⁸⁷ See Kenneth Agnew, ‘The Spitfire: Legend or History? An Argument for a New Research Culture in Design’, *Journal of Design History*, 6 (1993), pp. 121-130.

⁸⁸ Gordon Mitchell, *R. J. Mitchell: Schooldays to Spitfire* (Olney: Nelson & Saunders, 1986).

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Quill, *Spitfire: A Test Pilot’s Story* (St Anne’s on Sea: Air Data, 1983).

⁹⁰ Alfred Price, *The Spitfire Story*.

⁹¹ Eric Morgan and Edward Shacklady, *Spitfire: The History* (London: Guild, 1987).

Portrait of a Legend (2008).⁹² What all three volumes have in common is what Ben Marsden and Crosbie Smith might consider as an unduly ‘Whiggish’ approach to the history of technology, ‘the inexorable march of material technological progress; the individual triumph over adversity and the forces of conservatism; and the moralised life of the engineering “visionary”, outside – and yet ahead of – his time’.⁹³ This is almost exactly what we find in the way in which the best of the popular histories on the Spitfire tell the story of R. J. Mitchell’s achievement.

There is one more important volume on the Spitfire which is neither a memoir nor a straightforward chronological history. This is the published account of the proceedings of the Mitchell Memorial Symposium which was held at Southampton University on 6 March 1976. This symposium was organised by the Southampton Branch of the Royal Aeronautical Society to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the first flight of the Spitfire from Eastleigh (now Southampton) airport. Invited speakers that day included senior Supermarine alumni as well as RAF pilots, all of whom had been intimately involved in the Spitfire’s development, production and operational career. Such a distinguished gathering would not likely be repeated.

Any cultural study requires a broad range of sources and this study is no exception. In terms of archive resources two have been of particular value. The first is the Vickers Archive held at Cambridge University Library. In lieu of any useful archive material on R. J. Mitchell himself, the best way to approach Supermarine in the 1930s is to be found here. The Vickers Archive is particularly well-served with material on the takeover of Supermarine by Vickers in 1928. The second archive used extensively in this study is The National Archives in Kew. Dissecting the story of the Spitfire Funds is only possible in the Home Office Files, and those from the Air Ministry are invaluable for the establishment of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. In terms of useful memoir and biography, notwithstanding the two mentioned above, there are gaps. Leslie Howard has been well served by his children, but there are no major biographies on three other important personalities who appear in this

⁹² Leo McKinstry, *Portrait of a Legend: Spitfire* (London: John Murray, 2008).

⁹³ Ben Marsden and Crosbie Smith, *Engineering Empires: A Cultural History of Technology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.

thesis, the film producer Harry Saltzman, the Vickers Aviation chairman Sir Robert McLean, and most astonishingly of all R. J. Mitchell himself.

With regard to the media and print media in particular, the Spitfire's development phase is almost a complete blank but once deliveries of the Spitfire began in 1938, its media profile blossomed. The episode of the Spitfire Funds in the summer of 1940 is especially well covered, unsurprising perhaps as press baron Lord Beaverbrook was at its centre. After the war the commemoration of the Battle of Britain saw to it that the Spitfire remained something of a press staple, if only from September 1953 when it finally joined the lone Hurricane in the air. In terms of ephemera, there is no question of any lack. On 9 June 2016, I typed Spitfire into Google search. Google responded with 16,600,000 results. Not all would have been references to the aircraft but it has encouraged attention to Garry Campion's own dictum when writing on the myth of the Battle of Britain. 'Within the strict context of cultural history I suggest that any object, publication or broadcast item (TV and radio) which is an original representation of a theme or an event should be considered primary source material in this context.'⁹⁴ A good example of an 'alternative' primary material source used in this study is the Airfix box art of Roy Cross.

Before leaving the subject of sources there is a point I wish to make concerning a notable inclusion. That inclusion is a local history case study, which would perhaps be more accurately described as a community history case study. Geoff Eley has noted the problems 'local' history has had in trying to be taken seriously in the academy and suggests it is short sighted. He makes the point that there are 'new fields of connection between the national and the local to be opened and viewed, where the "local" describes all the quotidian spaces (family, household, neighbourhood, work, schooling, play, entertainment, sexuality) far away from the recognized and legitimate public frames we generally use for the assigning of political meaning.'⁹⁵ Such a search for connections is the reason why in the first chapter of this thesis I have used a case study to help elucidate the story of Beaverbrook's Spitfire Funds. On the one hand it is a demonstration of the egalitarian impulse Calder described so

⁹⁴ Campion, *Battle of Britain*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ Geoff Eley, 'Foreword', in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xv.

effectively but also of how easily it could be subverted. It is an early indication of the diachronic nature of one particular myth.

Finally we come to how this study is structured. It is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters focus on the Spitfire as a palimpsest, chapters three and four on the Spitfire in performance. Chapter one will examine the nature of the Spitfire as a palimpsest, that multi-layered record. Between May 1939 and August 1942 the Spitfire drew three distinctly different narrative texts to itself. There were no obvious connections, no natural relationship between the three, but that is the nature of a palimpsest, a ‘phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other’.⁹⁶ Chapter two will investigate why the Spitfire, post-war, has no one dominant cultural construction. The lack of such has contributed almost more than anything else to its flexibility to be able to re-interpret the myths for new audiences. Turning to the Spitfire in performance, chapter three will examine the chaotic circumstances that kept the Spitfire flying at the dawn of the jet age. If the Spitfire, on operational retirement, had been grounded for good it is the contention of this thesis that the Spitfire would have lost its cultural relevance as an agent of change and would have disappeared from more than just the skies. Finally, chapter four will examine the Spitfire in action. We will discover the Spitfire re-interpreting the war-made myth of the Battle of Britain for a new audience, not once but twice.

⁹⁶ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 4.

Chapter 1 - The Creation of a Palimpsest: A War-Made Capability

This thesis argues that the Spitfire has been able to behave as a palimpsest, a vehicle for the transmission of texts and images. These texts and images are necessarily ill-defined, overlapping and evolving. As such, they represent narrative threads rather than complete stories. It is the function of a thread to stretch in both directions as it is woven, and it is this Janus-like quality, of looking back and forward simultaneously, which has seen the Spitfire prosper post-war. The three threads that we are concerned with have been woven about ideas of exceptionalism, empowerment and identity. In tracing the origins of these three narrative threads what we discover is the genesis of the Spitfire's ability to behave as a palimpsest.

In terms of chronology, it is the link between the Spitfire and ideas of exceptionality that comes first. 20 May 1939, Empire Air Day, was the occasion of the Spitfire's first major public engagement. The few Spitfires as yet available to Fighter Command performed to well over a million people up and down the country. It was all for the benefit of the RAF, a promotional exercise to encourage recruitment. The tremendous reception that greeted the Spitfire that day, however, spoke of more than the immediate needs of the RAF. It was less than four months before the outbreak of war. What the crowds up and down the country were cheering at was the potential of a war-winning weapon.

The second episode to be explored in this chapter sees the beginning of the Spitfire's link with ideas of empowerment. In the spring of 1940, it was a Jamaican newspaper the *Gleaner* that first suggested it would be a good idea for the public to buy a fighter plane for the RAF. It turned out to be a very good idea, and one soon taken up with enthusiasm across the United Kingdom and beyond. What began as an opportunity to buy a fighter soon became the chance to buy a Spitfire. So much money was raised in the summer of 1940 that the matter ended up in the hands of lawyers. Two points wanted clarification. Who owned the Spitfires now being purchased by public subscription and what in fact did ownership of a weapon of war mean in a democracy presently engaged in a war? The lawyers' answer was as elegant as it was simple. They concluded that the raising of Spitfire Funds was an egalitarian impulse, a duty of citizenship, and therefore the Spitfires belonged

to the nation. It may have been a duty but it was a sense of empowerment that drove this egalitarian impulse. It was this sense of personal involvement in a national crisis which would be the legacy of the Spitfire Funds.

The third and final narrative thread to attach itself to the Spitfire was as a result of the premiere of the 1942 film, *The First of the Few*. Starring Leslie Howard and David Niven, the film told the story of R. J. Mitchell's development of the Spitfire. The film bore only a passing resemblance to real events and instead concentrated on a creation story much more in keeping with the mood of the times. What cinema audiences saw, and enjoyed, was a fable. It was a story of good triumphing over evil. This was wartime, however, and good triumphing over evil was a national cause. But in the hands of Leslie Howard, the film's creative force, this was less a patriotic cause and had much more to do with nationalism. Howard was an ardent nationalist, he considered himself first and foremost an Englishman. In his hands both Mitchell and the Spitfire were stamped with his own mark of Englishness. Post-war, what could still be seen of that mark was, however, less important than the fact of its existence. Howard's contribution to the legacy of the Spitfire was to begin a conversation about identity which continues to this day.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that these were all fragile beginnings with no guarantee of survival. However, as will be seen in the final chapter of this thesis, seventy years after these three narrative threads were first spun we find them strong and secure.

The Invention of a 'Champion'

To date, there are 513 titles listed on the British Library website with the word Spitfire in the title.⁹⁷ Setting aside the works of romantic fiction and Shakespearean criticism, it still leaves the majority as testimony to the popularity, amongst the reading public at least, of the Supermarine Spitfire. In telling the story of the Spitfire there is one theme that unites almost all these works together, and that is 'exceptionalism'. The business of Spitfire publishing has depended upon it, both as an idea to be celebrated and one to be repeatedly

⁹⁷ Accessed 31 May 2017.

'proved'.⁹⁸ What made the Spitfire exceptional maybe the concern of so many titles housed at the British Library, but it is not the prime concern here. Instead we want to trace the idea back to its beginning. A palimpsest thrives on stories superimposed on stories, on narrative threads that combine and re-combine to form something new, but there has to be a beginning and for the Spitfire it all began with the idea of a champion.

On Saturday, 20 May 1939, on a fine spring day, a correspondent from the *Manchester Guardian* visited Hendon aerodrome in North West London. It was Empire Air Day, the aviation industry's annual 'at home'. Seventy-eight military and civilian airfields up and down the country had put out the bunting in the hope of attracting a good crowd not least because all profits from the day were going to the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund. The correspondent from the *Manchester Guardian* was certainly impressed by the turn out at Hendon, 'the size of the crowd was positively astonishing. I could not guess how many thousands were there, but the boundary was black with masses of people as far as I could see in both directions.'⁹⁹ The Air League of the British Empire, organisers of the 'at home', had expected a half million visitors across the country; over a million came. Why those visitors came in such numbers finds us drawing out the Spitfire's first enduring narrative thread.

Empire Air Day had its beginnings six years before in a memorandum sent to the Executive Committee of the Air League of the British Empire in the late autumn of 1933. Its author was the Air League's Secretary-General Air Commodore, J. A. Chamier.¹⁰⁰

The Secretary-General submitted the details of a general scheme he had devised for bringing the public into closer contact with aviation. His scheme proposed the throwing open of all aerodromes (civil and military) on one day of the year (preferably Empire Day), in the course of which the public would be shown the working of the aerodrome and not be herded in enclosures to watch flying displays.

⁹⁸ Recent examples of the former include Jonathan Glancey, *Spitfire: The Illustrated Biography* (London: Atlantic, 2006); Ivan Rendall, *Spitfire: Icon of a Nation* (London: Phoenix, 2009); Paul Beaver, *Spitfire People: The Men and Women who made the Spitfire the Aviation Icon* (Sherborne: Evro, 2015). Recent examples of the latter include Leo McKinstry, *Spitfire: Portrait of a Legend* (London: John Murray, 2007); Dilip Sarker, *How the Spitfire Won the Battle of Britain* (Stroud: Amberley, 2010); David Isbey, *The Decisive Duel: Spitfire Vs. 109* (London: Little Brown, 2012).

⁹⁹ 'Empire Air Day at Hendon', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 May 1939, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Despite an eventful career in the RAF, at Vickers Aviation and as the Air League's Secretary-General, Chamier has yet to find his biographer.

He did not think that his scheme could be regarded as competing with travelling or club flying displays.¹⁰¹

It was to be both a civilian as well as a military event, which was a reflection of Chamier's own career to date. Having served in the RAF and before taking up his appointment with the Air League, Chamier had moved across into the commercial sector as a member of the board of Vickers Aviation. He had in fact attended the board meeting in October 1931 that had green-lighted the Spitfire project. Unfortunately for Chamier, that board meeting had been one of his last. Appointed by Sir Robert McLean, chairman of Vickers Aviation, to oversee the work of Vickers triumvirate of Chief Designers, Chamier found himself in an invidious position. The problem was that triumvirate, the highly experienced Rex Pearson, the brilliant but obstinate Barnes Wallis, and the temperamental R. J. Mitchell, would not be overseen. It cannot have been a surprise to anyone when Chamier moved on to take charge of the Air League. Chamier was not replaced. As we shall see in chapter 2, however, Sir Robert McLean, a railway engineer steeped in a culture of teamwork, did not learn any useful lesson about the individuality of his aircraft designers.



Figure 1. Sir John Adrian Chamier, by Walter Stoneman, bromide print, 1931

¹⁰¹ Air League Office, *Minute Book*, 3 Oct. 1933, p. 110.

Chamier's new employer, the Air League, had been founded in 1909 as the Aerial League of the British Empire. This was a time of the founding of a number of nationalistic leagues, 'to counter slackness and to keep warm the embers of patriotism'.¹⁰² The Navy League was particularly successful, with a membership of 21,500 in 1908 which then jumped to more than 125,000 by 1913. The Aerial League of the British Empire would never be able to boast such figures, never more than 10,000, but lack of members was belied by its effectiveness and never more so than when Chamier was in charge.¹⁰³ Chamier was soon busy.

Most people interested in air matters will have heard that the Air League has been re-organised and has already set to work very actively to educate the Government, Members of Parliament and the public on air matters. The press has given us every assistance and a large lecture programme throughout London and the Provinces for the Autumn and Winter is being drafted...

The "peace regardless" element of our population is strong and vocal, and we get little help from the older Services who foresee the possibility of a break-up of the Royal Air Force. Other nations are jealous of our technical excellence and the comparative prosperity of our aircraft export trade, and of our air transport services in time of World depression.

It is foolish to fold our hands and trust that all will be well, we have an immense field for the spread of air knowledge, and nobody except the Air League can do the work.¹⁰⁴

It did not take long for Chamier to present his big idea to his Executive Committee. It was going to be called 'Empire Air Day'. His intention was not to establish a new event from scratch, a costly exercise and one always prone to failure, but to take advantage of a celebration that was already established in the calendar and in the public consciousness. What Chamier was proposing to do was to exploit Empire Day.

¹⁰² Geoffrey Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 512. On the Navy League see Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰³ Uri Bialer, 'Elite Opinion and Defence Policy: Air Power Advocacy and British Rearmament during the 1930s', *British Journal of International Studies*, 6 (1980), p. 38.

¹⁰⁴ 'The Air League', *Aeroplane*, 5 July 1933, p. 402.

Empire Day, which originally marked Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May, was what Eric Hobsbawm has identified as an 'invented tradition'. These late nineteenth century, early twentieth century additions to the nation's ceremonial repertoire were, according to Hobsbawm, necessary to underpin increasingly unstable national and imperial projects.¹⁰⁵ It was certainly a sense of unease that had driven Reginald Brabazon, the twelfth Earl of Meath to establish Empire Day in 1904.¹⁰⁶ Brabazon was an imperialist, a zealot, who had been dismayed by the outcome of the South African War and the negative message he believed it sent to the British nation. His response was for an annual patriotic festival to be held in schools. It would, he believed, plant the seed of imperialism in the next generation. Empire Day was an immediate success, but not just with schoolchildren, and not entirely for the reason Brabazon envisaged. Empire Day soon escaped the schoolyard because in the ten years before the First World War it became a public holiday, a day off work as well as an opportunity to demonstrate patriotism. It was a holiday atmosphere charged by patriotic concerts, military parades, church services, and public lectures.

After the First World War, Empire Day's overt jingoism and its convivial atmosphere were no longer deemed appropriate. Overt celebration now turned into muted commemoration as Empire Day found its place in the nation's act of remembrance.¹⁰⁷ Empire Day was proving a tradition to suit the moment and by the early 1930s this meant change once again. Brabazon's original vision of imperial triumph was gone, but its legacy remained, and what now emerged was a vision of imperial co-operation.¹⁰⁸ This was good news for the British aviation industry. By 1933, opening up imperial air routes was at the top of both commercial and government aviation agendas.¹⁰⁹ Chamier had indeed spotted his opportunity. He would reach out to the air minded by fusing two ideas, Empire Day's recalibration as a celebration of imperial co-operation and aviation's pioneering spirit. That

¹⁰⁵ Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ For an account of the history of 'Empire Day' see Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', *Historical Journal*, 24 (2006), pp. 247-276.

¹⁰⁷ See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁸ See John MacKenzie, *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, and the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); Brad Beaven, *Visions of Empire: Patriotism, Popular Culture and the City, 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁹ See Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

his idea fell on fertile ground is clear from this note from the Acting High Commissioner for Australia on the announcement of the first Empire Air Day in April 1934.

The progress of aviation for peaceful and beneficial purposes is a matter of the highest interest and importance to Australia. The advantages of rapid communication by air, not only with the outside World but between distant points within its own boundaries, have in Australia abundantly demonstrated their value. I therefore wish the Air League of the British Empire the fullest measure of success in their endeavours to promote an Empire Air Day celebration with the object of encouraging flying and accelerating aerial progress imperially.¹¹⁰

In order to successfully promote Empire Air Day Chamier needed partners. In terms of military aviation that meant the RAF. Fortunately for Chamier and the Air League, the RAF understood the value of positive publicity. At the end of the First World War, the RAF had nearly lost its independence as the War Office and Admiralty fought to regain control of military aviation. The Air Staff response to this existential threat, as well as the draconian budget cuts that followed the ending of the war, was a publicity campaign within and outside Whitehall. The Air Staff searching for an idea to justify their continuing independent existence had come up with imperial policing from the air.¹¹¹ It was an idea bound to find favour in Whitehall's most influential ministry, the Treasury. The price of a few aircraft might replace the heavier financial burden of garrisoned troops. Imperial policing from the air was sold somewhat differently to the public however. It was less financial stringency and more fireworks. A demonstration of the efficacy of air policing, the bombing of a cardboard and glue imitation native village, always made for an exciting end to the annual Hendon RAF Display.¹¹²

In 1934, therefore, Chamier received a sympathetic hearing at the Air Ministry. Chamier's problem proved to be in the commercial sector, specifically a lack of interest from the Society of British Aircraft Constructors (SBAC).

¹¹⁰ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 11 April 1934, p. 623.

¹¹¹ See Phillip S. Meilinger, 'Trenchard and "Morale Bombing": The Evolution of Royal Air Force Doctrine before World War II', *Journal of Military History*, 60 (1996), p. 254.

¹¹² For an account of RAF Hendon see Andrew Renwick, *RAF Hendon: The Birthplace of Aerial Power* (Manchester: Crecy, 2013).

The Secretary-General reported the progress made in the organisation of Empire Air Day. He had attended a meeting at the Air Ministry and was gratified with the enthusiasm shown by the flying side...He was also disappointed with the manner in which the Society of British Aircraft Constructors had withdrawn from the scheme after having given it enthusiastic welcome.¹¹³

Why did the SBAC, which included all the major airframe manufacturers, pull out of the first Empire Air Day and then stay out as the crowds grew year on year? The reason was Chamier's vision, of raising awareness of British aviation amongst the general public, did not suit the stakeholders in the SBAC. Its members, who included Vickers Aviation, owner of Supermarine, sold their wares to governments and airlines and rarely to individuals. The age of the privateer was almost over. The SBAC had its shop window in any case, an invitation only event held at Hatfield immediately after the RAF's Hendon Air Show. There was also the Royal Aeronautical Society Garden Party which was held annually between 1935 and 1939 at Harmondsworth. In fact, the Spitfire was first put through its paces at Hatfield in June 1936 long before it flew for the public.

This decision taken by the SBAC was a blow to Chamier and the Air League's vision to spread 'air knowledge' that is both civilian as well as military. Nevertheless, the first Empire Air Day went ahead and was a success. Thirty nine RAF stations opened their gates on 24 May 1934, and the Air Ministry counted 82,000 visitors through their gates.¹¹⁴ Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane*, was fulsome in his praise.

Whoever first thought of Empire Air Day deserves the thanks of the British People. And no matter who thought of it, the Air League reborn to a new activity, had begun a great movement by stirring up all in this country who are concerned with flying, to organise, each in their several ways and in their several places, demonstrations to the people of this country of what flying is and all that it entails.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Air League Office, *Minute Book*, 10 April 1934, p. 117.

¹¹⁴ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 30 May 1934, p. 860.

¹¹⁵ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 30 May 1934, p. 865.



Figure 2. Poster for Empire Air Day, 1934 Shows aerodromes in England, Wales, Southern Scotland and Northern Ireland, all of which were open for Empire Air Day. Additional Manuscripts Collection West Sussex Record Office

As this poster promoting that first Empire Day demonstrates, Grey was right that it was ‘each in their several ways and in their several places’. There was nothing London centric about the new Empire Air Day. It was a nationwide event, unlike the Hendon Air Display. Looking forward, though, Grey also saw the clouds on the horizon which would soon obscure Chamier and the Air League’s vision for Empire Air Day.

The first Empire Air Day has come at just the right moment. Those newspapers which appeal to the mentally lower classes in all grades of society had worked up almost a panic about the awfulness of air war. The air minded Members of Parliament had driven into the minds of the Cabinet the idea that the British people insist on strengthening the Royal Air Force.¹¹⁶

Those newspapers that had so raised Grey’s hackles included the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror*.¹¹⁷ What Grey was referring to was the ‘air panic’ which had erupted in the winter of 1934 and would rumble on into the new-year. It was sparked by

¹¹⁶ ‘Empire Air Day’, *Aeroplane*, 30 May 1934, p. 865.

¹¹⁷ For an account of the ‘Air Panic’ see Brett Holman, ‘The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion between Disarmament and Rearmament’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), pp. 288-307.

the revelation of German rearmament and fanned into flame on Fleet Street. It was good news for the RAF. It saw the beginning of the major expansion of the RAF and encouraged the development programme that would eventually result in the Hurricane and Spitfire. As already noted Chamier lacked a counter weight to the RAF. It was not until 1938, however, that the relationship between the two started to unravel, just in time to significantly impact upon the manner of the unveiling of the Spitfire before the British public.

Empire Air Day was very soon established in the nation's events calendar. In only its second year *Aeroplane* could report 'there can be no doubt that Empire Air Day has become a national institution among all classes and all ages'.¹¹⁸ In 1936, there were forty four RAF aerodromes open to the public, and by 1937, including civil aerodromes, that number had climbed to over a hundred. Attendances were growing significantly too, from 82,000 to over 600,000 in 1937.¹¹⁹ Initially, the RAF appeared something of a reluctant partner for the Air League. In 1936, the ministry left it a bare eleven weeks before gates were to open before informing the Air League of their co-operation, as this rather testy internal minute reveals. 'The Secretary-General announced that the Air Ministry had finally agreed to the participation of the Royal Air Force in Empire Air Day, 1936.'¹²⁰ As for the next year, at Christmas 1936 when plans ought to have been well forward, 'it was reported to the meeting that the Air ministry had given no official notice that they were prepared to participate in Empire Air Day, 1937'.¹²¹ They did participate, and the 1937 Empire Air Day was a tremendous success. This lack of enthusiasm had much to do with the RAF's new rate of expansion. It simply did not need the promotional platform Empire Air Day provided, but this was all set to change.

In February 1938, the Air League wrote angrily to its partner. 'The Air Ministry should issue a statement that Empire Air Day 1938 was being organised by the Air League. In Press announcements made so far the Air league had not been mentioned.'¹²² The RAF had done a complete U-turn in its appreciation of Empire Air Day and was now proving an uncomfortably overbearing partner. In 1938 the writing was on the wall and the following

¹¹⁸ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 29 May 1935, p. 616.

¹¹⁹ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 2 June 1937, p. 662.

¹²⁰ Air League Office, *Minute Book*, 4 Feb. 1936, p. 169.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 15 Dec. 1936, p. 194.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1938, p. 225.

year, Chamier understood his original vision of a celebration of both military as well as civilian aviation had been completely corrupted.

The secretary General...asked the Committee's guidance as to whether next year the League should not try and steer the day more towards a universal aviation day where every aerodrome would be opened to the public even if it could not put up a special flying display.

The Secretary-General stated that the idea of an "At Home" had rather been lost and the day was in danger of becoming a series of miniature "Hendon's".¹²³

Chamier's frustration even leaked out into his public statements.

I am a little disappointed that the original conception of Empire Air Day is being lost sight of. It was planned more on the lines of an "At Home" than as a display – more of an occasion when Mr., Mrs. and the youngsters could wander around and see aviation from a new angle. Flying displays have been held since aeroplanes flew, and there is no novelty in standing behind railings watching brilliant pilots perform dazzling manoeuvres.¹²⁴

Why had the RAF decided to appropriate Empire Air Day? The reason was recruitment. It found itself in need of a shop window just as it abandoned the Hendon Air Display. The timing was unfortunate. Hendon had been held for the first time in 1920, all part of the campaign of the Air Council to justify the RAF's independence. But by the mid-1930s, as its rapid expansion began, the RAF had lost interest in Hendon. It pleaded the dangers of an increase in housing around Hendon, the nuisance to schools and hospitals, and the cramped conditions of the airfield itself, even the disruption to ongoing training.¹²⁵ All this was true but not the point. In 1937, when the last Hendon display was held, the RAF's independence was secure and its budget the envy of the Admiralty and the War Office. In 1937, it no longer needed the Hendon Air Display.

Two years later, however, and it certainly did. Back in 1937 the Air Council had not reckoned with the knock-on effect of accelerated re-armament, specifically the need for

¹²³ Ibid., 13 April 1939, p. 255.

¹²⁴ 'The Story behind Empire Air Day', *Flying*, 27 May 1939, p. 7.

¹²⁵ See Renwick, *RAF Hendon*, p. 11.

recruiting to keep up. What was intended in 1939 by the RAF therefore, was just as Chamier feared, a nationwide ‘series of miniature “Hendon’s”’.



Figure 3. Poster for Empire Air Day 1939 at Warmwell near Dorchester

Empire Air Day 1939 was going to be the Spitfire's first major encounter with the British public. As the poster shown above from Warmwell suggests, the RAF wanted to take full promotional advantage of its brand new fighter squadrons even if this poster speaks more of a Hurricane than a Spitfire. The fighter aeroplane in the poster has the straight wings and humped cockpit redolent of a Hurricane. Note the modernist aesthetic that informs this 1939 poster, however. The message is reduced to essentials, the colours are vivid and a sense of speed is evoked. Such an aesthetic would in fact not impress itself upon the Spitfire because British Modernism, as championed by Kenneth Clark, was grounded in conservatism. Vivid colours were eschewed and instead the brooding qualities and apocalyptic vision of Neo-Romanticism was encouraged. Nevertheless such an aesthetic at such a time is important for the argument here. For many, the Spitfire on its first major

public engagement was being favourably compared with the products of a Fascist war machine, one rooted, visually at least, in a modernist aesthetic.¹²⁶

The Spitfire was to be the centre of attention on the day but why was the Hurricane being forced into a secondary role especially as the RAF's brand new fighter squadrons were then stocked almost exclusively with Hurricanes? The problem was that the Hurricane, in terms of publicity, was old news. It had received its moment in the limelight fifteen months before with a high speed run from Edinburgh to London. That high speed run had excited the national press. They had proclaimed, misleadingly, the dawn of a new era of 400 mph fighters.¹²⁷ It was no more than a day's headline, however. In terms of impact, the timing of the Hurricane's publicity stunt was unfortunate for Sydney Camm and all those involved in its development. In early February 1938, there was no imminent threat of war. In fact, Chamberlain and the then still lord president of the council, Lord Halifax, were exploring ways of improving Anglo-German relations.¹²⁸ The Hurricane had therefore been unveiled in February 1938 before an indifferent public. It would all be very different for the Spitfire.

Officially at least, Empire Air Day was not going to be the Spitfire's public debut. That had taken place a long time ago at Supermarine's airfield base at Eastleigh before a small invited audience on 18 June 1936. It had even met the paying public before at that year's Hendon Air Display. But it was an unheralded debut, one prototype lost amongst many. It took a connoisseur's eye to appreciate it that day. Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane* though, had such a connoisseur's eye. 'Mr Mitchell's little Supermarine fighter, like a baby Schneider Racer which folds up its feet, is a sweet little job all over.'¹²⁹ Yet outside the specialist and regional press, the Spitfire made little impact and then after that brief encounter the Spitfire almost disappeared completely from public view. The reason was that Sir Robert McLean had no need to publicise his 'sweet little job'. The first large order for the Spitfire for 310 aircraft had been placed, a contract worth £1,860,000 plus £136,400 for spares. In July 1938, both Pathe and Movietone had featured the Spitfire in their newsreels, and in

¹²⁶ See Brian Foss, *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 184-188.

¹²⁷ See Leo McKinstry, *Hurricane: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: John Murray, 2011), p. 69.

¹²⁸ See Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 125.

¹²⁹ 'New Types', *Aeroplane*, 1 July 1936, p. 19.

December of that year the newsreel cameras had descended upon Southampton to see the progress of Spitfire production. It was but a tantalising glimpse, however.

Reports in the national press before the summer of 1939 were few and reliable facts about the Spitfire even fewer. What was said about the new fighter was, however, distinctly encouraging. Much was left to the journalistic imagination. In March 1938, the newspapers were full of talk of an attempt on the world landplane speed record. ‘The machine selected for the 500 mph attempt is the tiny 1.054 horse-power Supermarine Spitfire single-seater fighter.’¹³⁰ There was some truth to this story. The forty eighth production Spitfire (K9834) was modified and became known as the ‘Speed Spitfire’. Unfortunately, in trials it was unable to best the required five hundred miles per hour. It stuck a long way short at 408 mph, and it never did make the record attempt. The drip feed of news stories about the Spitfire continued. In July 1938 came the news of a remarkable commercial coup for Lord Nuffield. It was another opportunity for speculation. ‘The Supermarine Spitfire is still on the semi-secret list, but it is believed to be the fastest fighter in the RAF...Incorporated are all the latest aids, such as flaps for slow landing and an undercarriage that folds up into the wings to reduce resistance in flight, and it is capable of diving at about 500 mph.’¹³¹

Public sightings of the aircraft before Empire Air Day were rare. It was only on 4 August 1938 that the first Spitfire was delivered to a front-line squadron. Jeffrey Quill flew K9789 to Duxford and handed it over to Squadron Leader H.I. Cozens, CO of 19 (Fighter) Squadron. It was not the start of a flood of deliveries. It would take months for other front-line squadrons to see their first Spitfires. In fact, it would not be until the turn of the year that the RAF would have enough Spitfires to put on any kind of nationwide show at all.¹³² The numbers of available Spitfires in May 1939 was small but it was going to be turned to dramatic advantage by a very good idea. It had been arranged for Squadron Leader Stainforth, of Schneider Trophy fame, to fly from aerodrome to aerodrome. He would conduct high speed, low level passes affording a teasing dramatic glimpse of the new and still mysterious fighter. As we shall see, reaction to this *coup de théâtre* was all that the RAF

¹³⁰ ‘R.A.F. Plan 500 m.p.h.’, *Daily Express*, 10 Mar. 1938, p. 1.

¹³¹ ‘Fastest Fighter’, *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1938, p. 10.

¹³² For an account of the trials and tribulations of getting the Spitfire into production see Alfred Price, *The Spitfire Story* (London: Arms and Armour, 1982).

might have hoped for. What might have surprised the RAF was the amount of people there to see it.

The RAF had taken over Empire Air Day in order to recruit. Sir Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air, in his introduction to the Empire Air Day's programme made that quite clear. 'I hope, too, that many of those who visit the Royal Air Force to-day will consider the opportunities for service it affords'.¹³³ The need was, after five years of accelerated expansion, greater than ever.¹³⁴ 'The recruiting programme for 1939 is very large and, including the Reserve and Auxiliary services, we require 75,000 officers and men this year.'¹³⁵ Recruitment, however, was not on everyone's mind. Less than a month before, on 25 April, Sir John Simon had presented his second budget and the sharply rising defence budget was at the heart of the debates both inside and outside parliament that followed.¹³⁶ On 20 May 1939, for the readers of the *Daily Mail* setting out for their nearest aerodrome this meant 'today, Air Day, gives to the keenly air-minded public their first insight into the rapid achievements of the British rearmament of the last twelve months'.¹³⁷ There would certainly have been some on a personal quest, with a decision to make, just as Sir Kingsley Wood hoped. There were others, however, who had already made that decision and were coming in hope of confirmation of a decision well made.

As a result of the expansion of the R.A.F. and its Reserves and Auxiliaries in recent years, The Great British Public went to see not so much the Royal Air Force as that station of the R.A.F. at which "Our Bill" is serving. Of all the hundreds of thousands of people who went out on Empire Air Day, there were comparatively few who were not accompanied, throughout their tour of flight-sheds, workshops, canteens and barrack rooms, by some young man in uniform showing off with pride and talking a language already becoming familiar to those he was escorting.¹³⁸

¹³³ *Empire Air Day Official Programme* (London: Air League of the British Empire, 1939), p. 11.

¹³⁴ The literature on re-armament in the late 1930s is large but an excellent single volume account of the expansion of the RAF in particular is Sebastian Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power: The Expansion of British Aircraft Production, 1935-1942* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹³⁶ Todman, *Britain's War*, p. 159.

¹³⁷ 'Empire Air Day', *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1939, p. 18.

¹³⁸ 'Empire Air Day', *Aeroplane*, 24 May 1939, p. 646.

The RAF's need for recruits, however, hardly explains the size of the crowds on the day. Chamier had anticipated a crowd of half a million, but well over a million people attended events nationwide on Empire Air Day 1939. Why had Chamier, an experienced organiser by now got it so wrong? The reason was all to do with timing. The late spring early summer of 1939 was the moment which in Frank McDonough's telling phrase waited upon a decision for 'peace or war'.¹³⁹ The last twelve weeks leading up to Empire Air Day in May 1939 had seen the German army enter Prague, Chamberlain's offer of guarantees to Poland and Mussolini's seizure of Albania. Chamberlain had offered further guarantees to Holland, Switzerland and Denmark and conscription of all men aged between twenty and twenty one had just been introduced. These were not ordinary times, according to Zara Steiner 'following the Munich conference saw a striking change of perception and a toughening of both official and public mood'.¹⁴⁰ Opinion polls conducted between September 1938 and July 1939 were not favourable to Chamberlain and his appeasement policy. 'All pointed to a sea-change in feeling that ruled out an early election and made Chamberlain ever more circumspect about revealing his thoughts about the right road to peace.'¹⁴¹ In late June, only weeks after Empire Air Day, newspapers right across the political spectrum embarked upon a campaign to 'stiffen the government's determination to fight'.¹⁴² It was a new mood attested to in the unexpectedly high attendance on Empire Air Day in late May.

What the crowds expected to see that day was probably just as the *Daily Mail* suggested, 'their first insight into the rapid achievements of the British rearmament'.¹⁴³ What the crowds would not have expected was the perfectly staged managed sight of a Spitfire flying fast and low over the horizon. We are fortunate to have a number of reports of the impact of this *coup de théâtre*. Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane* had had the foresight to place correspondents at all the major aerodromes that day. At Biggin Hill it was reported that there was 'a breathtaking performance of power diving and acrobatics by a Spitfire, which dived at amazing speed and zoomed vertically so that it appeared to be drawn upwards by

¹³⁹ Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 82.

¹⁴⁰ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 765.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 766.

¹⁴² Todman, *Britain's War*, p. 158.

¹⁴³ 'Empire Air Day', *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1939, p. 18.

magnetic force'.¹⁴⁴ At Catterick, 'the effect of all the Spitfires in line astern all shooting hard one after the other and with a genuine M.G. noise was very heartening'.¹⁴⁵ At Manchester (Ringway), a Spitfire 'flashed over the airport several times in wide circuits, and the movement of the heads in the crowd below it was reminiscent of the famous Shell advert'.¹⁴⁶ At Tern Hill, 'the appearance of the Spitfire on the horizon was the signal for tremendous cheering'.¹⁴⁷ At Wyton, 'more than nine thousand people penetrated the windy wilderness of Huntingdonshire to attend E.A.D...Air drill by three Spitfires ("Whew" was the crowds comment as they dived past)".¹⁴⁸

The Spitfire made quite an impression. We must be careful not to push the evidence too far but such reactions suggest something more than satisfied curiosity. What are we to make of that comment from Catterick that the sound of its machine guns was 'heartening' for instance, and what of that note from Tern Hill in Shropshire? How do we explain 'the appearance of the Spitfire on the horizon was the signal for tremendous cheering?' Why were they cheering? Was it perhaps relief at witnessing a potential champion? If it was then it was relief fuelled by a number of misconceptions. Even the most informed members of the crowd would have known little about the Spitfire. Any information about the Spitfire in the public domain at the time, and in particular performance figures, was little more than idle speculation. There was, however, some information in the public domain, and it does have a bearing on that 'tremendous cheering'.

Contemporary reporting of the Spitfire, for want of any real information, almost invariably linked the Supermarine Spitfire with Supermarine's victorious Schneider Trophy campaigns. Mitchell's sleek racers had won the Schneider Trophy outright for Britain in 1931. Not only was the race won and the trophy secured that year but the world speed record was broken as well. Journalistic prompting, provenance and its present mystery, may well have conflated Schneider racer with Spitfire in the minds of many that day, only one now with guns.

¹⁴⁴ 'Notes from Stations', *Aeroplane*, 24 May 1939, p. 647.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

There is also another link to be made between the reaction of the crowds on Empire Day at the sight of a Spitfire and the Schneider racers of 1931. As noted above, in late May 1939, questions over the need to confront Hitler were being raised.¹⁴⁹ Thoughts, even within the conservative establishment, were turning to ways to ‘stiffen the government’s determination to fight’.¹⁵⁰ Back in 1931, Supermarine’s Schneider racers represented a similar disconnection between government policy and certain well-connected constituencies within the public sphere. The last Schneider campaign had been mired in controversy from its beginning. After Ramsey MacDonald’s bankrupt Labour government had withdrawn its support, it was the wealthy Lady Houston who had stepped in to fund Supermarine’s Schneider entry. She made no secret of her reasons why, reasons loudly applauded in the conservative national and specialist press at the time. ‘I am utterly weary of the lie-down-and-kick-me attitude of the Socialist government. It appears painful for them to contemplate any victory by their own countrymen in any contest, either in sport or war.’¹⁵¹ Lady Houston’s reputation may have dimmed after the war because of her fascist sympathies, but it was intact in 1939.¹⁵² It was still intact in 1942 when Leslie Howard alluded to her generosity in his film about the development of the Spitfire *The First of the Few*. What her support for the Schneider campaign in 1931 in opposition to the government of the time may well have done therefore, was to lend something of a radical, populist air to all that cheering on 20 May 1939.

To sum up this first episode, a palimpsest has to have a beginning; the first text has to be written. For the Spitfire, it began on the day of its first major public engagement. The event chosen for this first major public engagement turned out to be an ideal crucible. Empire Day, onto which the Air League had grafted its new Air Day, was itself something of a palimpsest. A celebration of imperial conquest had been re-cast as a day of commemoration and by the early 1930s it had been re-cast once again as an opportunity to inspire imperial co-operation. Because of the timing of the event, whatever the RAF expected from the day, they were never likely to be in complete charge of the agenda. Those that were streaming through the gates of aerodromes up and down the country in

¹⁴⁹ See Steiner, *Triumph of the Dark*.

¹⁵⁰ Todman, *Britain’s War*, p. 158.

¹⁵¹ ‘The Widows Curse’, *Aeroplane*, 4 Feb. 1931, p. 184.

¹⁵² See David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity, and Machines* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

huge numbers had a long enough agenda of their own. A national conversation was going on about the need to confront Hitler. Into that conversation flew the Spitfire with a remarkable *coup de théâtre*. All that tremendous cheering was at the sight of a timely new champion.

A Sense of Empowerment

Turning now to the second narrative thread to be explored in this chapter, we find it has something in common with Lady Houston's own small stamp upon the Spitfire, her 'radical' appeal. The origins of the phrase 'The People's War', as applied to the home front in Britain during the Second World War, is obscure, and despite its contentious post-war historiographical career, particularly in the hands of Angus Calder, it has never been discarded as a useful descriptive tool.¹⁵³ Arthur Marwick, a firm advocate of the radical potential of war, was prepared to use it as such and he gave four reasons why. The first was that ordinary people were on the frontline. The second was that direct participation by 'ordinary people' was vital to the war machine. The third was that spokesmen emerged for this participatory class. His own example was J. B. Priestley. Marwick's fourth reason was that there was a discernible movement across sections of society in favour of radical social reform.¹⁵⁴

Geoffrey Field situates the high tide of such popular radicalism in the early years of the war. He suggests that at a time of the Blitz, battlefield defeat, growing anxiety, and dissatisfaction over the conduct of the war 'people were swept by powerful emotions – of anger, fear, a sense of betrayal and of desperation'.¹⁵⁵ Angus Calder suggested such powerful emotions in the early phase of the war did turn into direct action. 'The people increasingly led itself. Its nameless leaders in the bombed streets, on the factory floor, in

¹⁵³ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969, p. 17. For a critical response see Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo, *England Arise, The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). For a more recent as well as more benign interpretation see Todman, *Britain's War*, p. 489.

¹⁵⁴ Marwick, *The Home Front*, p. 180.

¹⁵⁵ Geoffrey Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 307. See also Jon Lawrence's review, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24:3 (2013), pp. 484-6.

the Home Guard drill hall, asserted a new and popular spirit.¹⁵⁶ One example of this new and popular spirit, and one with direct implications for the legacy of the Spitfire, was the raising of the Spitfire Funds which took place in the summer of 1940. What we are about to see are Marwick's 'ordinary people' fired by a sense of empowerment. This left its mark upon the Spitfire. In terms of the Spitfire as a multi-layered record, this is the second layer to follow that of champion. In studying the raising of the Spitfire Funds, we will approach it from two different directions. A top-down view, from Whitehall, will offer the wider political context; a bottom-up view, a selected community of concerned citizens, will locate for us some of those participating 'ordinary people'.

On 19 February 1941, J. Eaton Griffiths sent a note over from his office at the Ministry of Aircraft Production to the 10 Downing Street Annexe. It was addressed to J.M. Martin Esq., secretary to the Prime Minister.

Dear Martin,

Lord Beaverbrook has in mind to issue a public statement on the lines of the attached.

He would like the Prime Minister's concurrence.

The Prime Minister will, of course, appreciate that the statement has been worded with a view to popular appeal and that the tone is consistent with the general level of the "Spitfire Fund" Campaign.

In Lord Beaverbrook's own words this has been one of "constrained flamboyancy".

Yours sincerely

Eaton Griffiths¹⁵⁷

As Beaverbrook's secretary, Eaton Griffiths would have been familiar with Beaverbrook's 'own words'. He was one of three civil servants seconded from Whitehall to 'produce orderly administration from near-chaos'.¹⁵⁸ Beaverbrook, on his appointment to the

¹⁵⁶ Calder, *The People's War*, p. 18.

¹⁵⁷ The National Archives (TNA), PREM 4/14/8, J. Eaton Griffiths to J.M. Martin, 19 Feb. 1941.

¹⁵⁸ Anne Chisholm & Michael Davie, *Beaverbrook: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 1993), p. 377.

Ministry of Aircraft Production in May 1940, had looked beyond Whitehall to assemble his team. According to his first and most sympathetic biographer, A.J.P. Taylor, at least half of the typists in the ministry typing pool were on the payroll of the *Daily Express*.¹⁵⁹ But Eaton Griffiths was not a Beaverbrook place-man, he was a career civil servant, and this explains the tenor of his note to his colleague in the 10 Downing Street Annexe. He was not being presumptuous or patronising in translating Beaverbrook's message; as a career civil servant he would have appreciated that Prime Ministers and Private Secretaries dealt in a different lingua franca to men of the cut of Lord Beaverbrook. Eaton Griffiths was probably right, however, to leave Beaverbrook's well turned phrase 'constrained flamboyancy' well alone. It captured the spirit behind the Spitfire Fund perfectly. It was not suitable however for the public statement which Beaverbrook went on to release a week later.

Through the generosity of the public, through the gifts we have received from warm-hearted people at home and abroad, we have been able to carry out a splendid enterprise.

The ten million pounds spontaneously given us for the aircraft fund pays for the replacement of all the Spitfires and all the Hurricanes lost in battle from the day the Churchill Government took office to the end of 1940.

We propose therefore to devote to the Benevolent Funds of the three fighting services ten percent of the money sent to us after the end of March.

It is our belief that, by doing so, we shall interpret the desire of the public to unite their gratitude to the valiant defenders of freedom with their determination to strengthen the squadrons of the Royal Air Force.

Ministry of Aircraft Production.¹⁶⁰

This statement, released at the height of the Blitz, was good news, a publicity coup for Lord Beaverbrook, for his ministry, and for the war effort as a whole. Such a good news story was not about to be wasted, not in Whitehall and not on Grub Street either. Quick to spot an opportunity was the journalist Gordon Beckles. Beckles had joined Beaverbrook's *Daily*

¹⁵⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 419.

¹⁶⁰ TNA, CAB 67/9/26, 'Spitfire Donations and Service Benevolent Funds', 26 Feb. 1941.

Express in 1928, moving on to the *Daily Mail* ten years later, as assistant and then deputy editor. His time at the *Daily Mail* was not a success and he would spend the war as a freelance journalist, writing mainly for the railway bookstall. His living therefore depended on the timeliness and the speed of his pen. If he was quick with his *Dunkirk and After*; he was quicker still with his story of the Spitfire Funds.¹⁶¹ But Beckles's haste was not to the taste of everybody, not to the obituary writer in *The Times* after Beckles's untimely death in 1954 for instance. However, any suggestion of slipshod scholarship was leavened by a grudging acknowledgement that Beckles wrote 'in a white heat of passionate description'.¹⁶² Such was his rush to print on the Spitfire Funds that Beckles did not even bother to wait until he had an end to his story. His book appeared while many of the Spitfire Funds remained open; another £3,000,000 was going to be counted over and above Beaverbrook's ten million. Beckles account may have been poor in fact but, as a seasoned journalist, it was rich in observation, particularly when it came to the question of motivation.

A great pause had come in the war. For five weeks history had been written at break-neck pace. For millions in Britain the days had been punctuated by the arrival of newspapers and the listening to radio bulletins. Now a curtain had descended on France. And the events of the next act of the drama could only be guessed. All very well for the people to shake their fists at the raiders already coming over the coasts in ones or twos; how much more practical to put one fist in the trousers pocket and actually play a part in the coming conflict! It was a voluntary gesture, and because it was voluntary, it appealed to the freedom-loving British, there were taxes, taxes and more taxes; one had to pay those; but here was something that you could do because you wanted to do it.¹⁶³

It had all begun in June 1940 when the Ministry of Aircraft Production started receiving unsolicited sums of money. Almost everyone later agreed that it was from Jamaica that the very first significant sum came, but soon money was pouring in from all over the empire and quickly thereafter from all over the British Isles too. This money was for Spitfires, replacements for the aircraft being shot down over the Channel. Hurricanes were asked for

¹⁶¹ Gordon Beckles, *Dunkirk and After May 10th-June 17th, 1940* (London: Collins, 1941).

¹⁶² 'Mr. Gordon Beckles', *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1954, p. 8.

¹⁶³ Gordon Beckles, *Birth of a Spitfire: The Story of Beaverbrook's Ministry and its First £10,000,000* (London: Collins, 1941), p. 67.

too, and the more generic term of fighter or even bomber was used, but it was Spitfires that were requested most and hence the name of the funds was born. It was, according to Beckles, Sir Harry Oakes who asked the question how much did a Spitfire cost?¹⁶⁴ The back of a ministerial envelope was consulted, and the sum of £5,000 arrived at.

Sir Harry Oakes was in the fortunate position of being able to write a personal cheque for such a large sum but it was beyond the means of most. What began as an exercise in personal empowerment soon became one of collective empowerment. Fund raising ingenuity knew no bounds. There were pub quizzes, factory and farm collections, raffles and auctions. Shoppers gave up their change; a hat was passed around the air raid shelter at the sound of the ‘all clear’. In Tonbridge in Kent, which saw feverish fund raising activity throughout the summer of 1940, its citizens only had to look up to be inspired as the Battle of Britain raged overhead. But as in Jamaica, wherever the Union Jack flew in the summer of 1940, there was likely to be a collection tin close to hand. It was not only where the Union Jack flew either. The exiled Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands delivered his substantial cheque to the ministry by hand in September 1940.¹⁶⁵

But Spitfires were paid for out of general taxation. In Tonbridge, as we will discover, this was common knowledge.¹⁶⁶ Common knowledge too in Tonbridge, was the fact that increasing Spitfire production was dependent upon facilities not finance.¹⁶⁷ The raising of a Spitfire Fund therefore speaks of opportunity as much as of outcome. It was an emotional commitment as much as a logical one. Gordon Beckles wrote of ‘something that you could do because you wanted to’. To see this idea in action we need to leave the office of Lord Beaverbrook behind. The history of the Spitfire Funds has largely been examined as an addendum to studies of Beaverbrook for the very good reason that he claimed the spotlight, or at least it was claimed for him.¹⁶⁸ But did he deserve it? Did any one person deserve it or are we looking at a more popular movement with leaders in every community?

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶⁵ TNA, FO 371/39338, ‘Gifts to Spitfire Fund’, 1941-1943.

¹⁶⁶ See Martin Daunton, *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914-1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁷ ‘Tonbridge Council Turn Down Plan To Buy Spitfire’, *Tonbridge Free Press*, 9 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

¹⁶⁸ See Chisholm & Davie, *Beaverbrook*, p. 392; A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 425; Helen Jones, *British Civilians in the Front Line: Air Raids, Productivity and Wartime Culture, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 126.

To find out we must actually begin eleven years after the events to be described, with the correspondence between Lt-Colonel W. Byford-Jones and the Ministry of Supply in October 1951. The Ministry of Supply had absorbed the Ministry of Aircraft Production in 1946. Byford-Jones is of particular interest because he claimed, and thought he could prove, that the Spitfire Fund was his idea.

Early in the war before I was sent to Africa I conceived the idea of towns, federations and firms raising money to provide “their own Spitfire”. I made a speech about it under the chairmanship of Sir Robert Bird Bart ex. Conservative M.P. for Wolverhampton. I wrote an article about it and got the blessing for the idea from Lord Beaverbrook by telephone. I raised the money for the first Spitfire in the British Isles and four months later explained my idea to scores of people by pamphlet and word of mouth. The result was that the idea caught on and when I was sent abroad to join Lord Wavell’s staff similar funds were being raised all over the country.¹⁶⁹

But the Ministry of Supply rejected Byford-Jones’s claim. The reason was explained in a letter from the Minister himself, the Rt. Hon. G.R. Strauss to Captain J. Baird, M.P. for Wolverhampton North-East. Baird had taken up Byford-Jones’s case.

I am afraid that I still cannot accept his claim. I readily accept his claim to be the inaugurator of the Wolverhampton Spitfire Fund, but the fact is that a fortnight before he suggested in the Wolverhampton Express and Star that that a fund should be raised to buy Spitfires, we received £10,000 from Jamaica to buy a Spitfire. Incidentally, we received another £10,000 from this colony on the 7th June [1940]. These donations seem to have been the result of a letter published in the Jamaican ‘Gleaner’ on May 20th, 1940. I am told that there is doubt even the man who wrote this letter can claim to be the inaugurator of the various Spitfire funds.¹⁷⁰

Captain Baird was satisfied by this explanation, but Byford-Jones was not. He tried again only this time appealing to higher authority, the Prime Minister himself. Winston Churchill had just been returned after winning the general election in October 1951.

¹⁶⁹ TNA, AVIA 15/2486, W. Byford-Jones to G.R. Strauss, 29 Oct. 1951.

¹⁷⁰ TNA, AVIA 15/2486, G. R. Strauss to Capt. J. Baird, 8 Feb. 1951.

I am naturally very proud of the fact that I originated the Spitfire fund in this country and regard it as the outstanding feat of my career and I am equally sad that the claim was not acknowledged by the former Minister of Supply.¹⁷¹

Nobody at the Ministry of Supply or the Cabinet Office wanted to hurt Byford-Jones's feelings. His claim for absolute credit could not be substantiated but there was a sense that a measure of credit was undoubtedly due. The evidence was actually in Beaverbrook's own possession, a congratulatory note to Byford-Jones from Beaverbrook in June 1940, which can now be found along with the rest of his papers in the Parliamentary Archive.¹⁷² It took a subtly shaded reply from Churchill's private secretary, D.B. Pitblado, to satisfy Byford-Jones, or at least bring the correspondence to a close.

The Prime Minister is sensible of your valuable contribution to the war effort as originator and organiser of the Spitfire Fund in Wolverhampton in 1940. It is quite clear that this gave the lead to a number of towns and organisations which raised money for Spitfires, and that the country is indebted to you for the inspiration which you gave to this movement and for the work which you put into promulgating the idea.¹⁷³

What we can take from this correspondence is that in 1951, in the Cabinet Office, the raising of Spitfire Funds was understood to have begun, if not in Wolverhampton, then certainly not in Whitehall. This was despite the fact that in 1951, credit still stopped at the door of the Minister of Aircraft Production. Lord Beaverbrook was appointed Minister of Aircraft Production in May 1940, just a week before Dunkirk. He was to be Minister for less than twelve months, but at the end of the war he received the acclaim of both Winston Churchill and Lord Dowding as the man who made the planes that won the Battle of Britain.¹⁷⁴ His first biographer and personal friend, A.J.P. Taylor, fully endorsed the judgement of Churchill and Dowding, but more recent scholarship has proved more sceptical.¹⁷⁵ What has not

¹⁷¹ TNA, AVIA 15/2486, W. Byford-Jones to D.B. Pitblado, 29 Oct. 1951.

¹⁷² Parliamentary Archives, BBK/D/41, Lord Beaverbrook to W. Byford-Jones, 22 June 1940.

¹⁷³ TNA, AVIA 15/2486, D.B. Pitblado to W. Byford-Jones, 15 Feb. 1952.

¹⁷⁴ See Chisolm & Davie, *Beaverbrook*, pp. 394-395.

¹⁷⁵ For a re-assessment of Beaverbrook as Minister of Aircraft Production see A. J. Robertson, 'Lord Beaverbrook and the Supply of Aircraft, 1940-1941', in Anthony Slaven and Derek H. Aldcroft (eds.), *Business, Banking and Urban History: Essays in honour of S. G. Checkland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982), p. 97.

required revision, however, is Taylor's judgement that 'Beaverbrook ran his ministry in a blaze of publicity or, as his critics called it, ballyhoo'.¹⁷⁶

It was Beaverbrook's 'ballyhoo', not his active leadership, which was important to the raising of the Spitfire Funds.¹⁷⁷ He did not take charge of the campaign but he and his newspaper the *Daily Express* did actively promote it.

Calling Worcester and Wallasey, Gloucester and Greenock, Wigan and Wimbledon.
And all other towns in Britain of a fifty-thousand-or-over population.

Why not buy a "home-town" airplane to fight for Britain? An Airplane built with your money named after your town...

Daily Express readers have suggested the scheme. It would run parallel with the magnificent aid given by the colonies who have sent in recent weeks £1,600,000 for R.A.F. bombers and fighters. Public subscription lists if opened in British towns would be enthusiastically supported it is argued.¹⁷⁸

Such a suggestion did fall upon fertile ground. Maidstone has its opportunity to show its patriotism by adopting a proposal which comes from a local resident, Mrs. E. M. Kelly, who in a letter to the "Kent Messenger" says:-

'The 'Daily Express' suggests that every town of over 50,000 inhabitants should present a fighter plane to the nation. Our town, though not quite so large, is not lacking in patriotism, and we should take great pride and satisfaction in buying an airplane to help fight for us.'¹⁷⁹

Beaverbrook's contribution was not in terms of leadership but in promotion and endorsement. On 24 July 1940, he broadcast to the nation on the BBC.

We have had a flow of contributions flooding in, all of them sent to us for the purpose of buying aircraft. We value the cheque for £25,000, but we value, too, the

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 424.

¹⁷⁷ See Jones, *British Civilians*, p. 126.

¹⁷⁸ 'What about, Wimbledon?', *Daily Express*, 3 July 1940, p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ 'A Fighter Plane for the Nation', *Kent Messenger*, 6 July 1940, p. 5.

gift from the telephone operators at Winchester, who sent thirty-eight shillings to buy screws for a Spitfire.¹⁸⁰

Beaverbrook did take time personally to promote the Spitfire Funds and he did act as a figurehead.

In October 1940, the Mayor of Tunbridge Wells forwarded a cheque of £5,716 11s. 9d. to the Ministry. He got the following gracious reply.

Dear Mr. Mayor,

The Borough of Royal Tunbridge Wells has made a magnificent contribution towards the strength of our Air Force. And I send to you and Mr. Gunnis and to all who subscribed to your Funds this expression of my warmest thanks.

You have brought fresh encouragement to me and those who work with me. And your gift is inspiring proof of your Borough's devotion to the cause of liberty and justice for which we fight. While the spirit which inspired the contributions to your Fund is alive in Britain we need not fear defeat.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd.) BEAVERBROOK.¹⁸¹

What is less clear is whether Beaverbrook was behind articles like this that promoted him as the actual leader and driving force behind the Spitfire Funds.

Lord Beaverbrook has missed his vocation. He has tried almost everything in his time, business, politics, newspapers, and only his own conscience knows what else.

Let us admit that in these various occupations he has shown a moderate skill. Altogether he has collected a not inconsiderable sum of money, three newspapers, the scalp of one Prime Minister, the enmity of several more, and a vast Niagara of abuse from a multitude of political opponents.

¹⁸⁰ Cited in Beckles, *Birth of a Spitfire*, p. 85.

¹⁸¹ 'Lord Beaverbrook's Appreciation', *Kent & Sussex Courier*, 4 Nov. 1940, p. 4.

None the less he has overlooked his true calling. He should have been a sergeant in the Salvation Army. He has all the attributes; energy, enthusiasm, faith, fanaticism, lungs, larynx, and most of all, the indefinable genius for transferring money from the pocket to the plate.¹⁸²



Figure 4. Spitfire funded by Royal Tunbridge Wells Spitfire Fund

Beaverbrook's genius was perhaps to inspire copy like this, but even at the time, there were those in Whitehall who understood that this was not a centrally driven government campaign. In June 1940, the Metropolitan Police enquired of the Home Office whether the Spitfire Funds were to be considered collections for charitable purposes. Their reason for making this enquiry was prosaic. If they were then they would have to be subject to oversight and control. It would become the business of the Metropolitan Police. The Home Office sought legal opinion. The answer given, like that of the journalist Gordon Beckles, offers an interesting contemporary perspective. According to Kenneth Macassey, one of two lawyers consulted by the Home Office, the matter turned on the fact that whereas charity could never be considered an obligation, these new Spitfire Funds were in fact obligatory, as acts of citizenship.

¹⁸² 'All Want to Buy a Spitfire: Reprinted Courtesy of the Evening Standard', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 13 Sept. 1940, p. 2.

Is it not the correct view that in subscribing money for fighters people are discharging the primary obligation of citizenship – to exert themselves in the defence of their country?¹⁸³

A second opinion from a Mr. Eagleton served to confirm the matter.

It seems to me contrary to common sense to hold that a contribution to the King's service made from patriotic motives for the purpose of a war which H.M. is carrying on is "charitable", whether it consists of aeroplanes, guns, munitions, medical supplies or anything else which may be useful in war...A gift from the subjects to the sovereign to be used for the public service springs from different motives and stands on quite another footing.¹⁸⁴

That sense of obligation can best be examined in a case study. This was a nationwide campaign, but it was a local phenomenon. Here is an opportunity to examine Calder's claim that 'the people increasingly led itself. Its nameless leaders in the bombed streets, on the factory floor, in the Home Guard drill hall, asserted a new and popular spirit'.¹⁸⁵ No one case study of a nationwide campaign can hope to be definitive and the town chosen, Tonbridge in West Kent, did not even raise the required sum necessary to 'purchase' a Spitfire. Nevertheless, it is a very good example of an obligation fulfilled.

Tonbridge, which lies on the River Medway in Kent, was a small market town in 1940. Its wartime population stood at approximately 18,000.¹⁸⁶ This was some way short of the figure the *Daily Express* considered appropriate for the raising of a successful Spitfire Fund and Tonbridge was in any case not a wealthy town. It was a small market town and agricultural centre. Every Tuesday cattle and sheep were driven lowing and bleating through the streets as farmers congregated to buy and sell.¹⁸⁷ It did have some light industrial capacity, notably in the printing trade, working on government contracts for circulars, pamphlets and forms. The only outstanding feature the town possessed, apart from its picturesque castle ruins, was its collection of highly regarded schools, not least one

¹⁸³ TNA, HO 45/25082, 'Misc. Gen., Metropolitan Police Office', 16 Aug. 1940.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Calder, *The People's War*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁶ *Tonbridge Official guide 1946* (Tonbridge: TUDC, 1946), p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

of Kent's great public schools. But Tonbridge never had the fashionable allure of its neighbour Tunbridge Wells, or the economic vitality of the county town of Maidstone, a few miles downriver. Its citizens were in no position to write out personal cheques for £5,000 like Sir Harry Oakes, the Canadian mining millionaire.¹⁸⁸

It was having a very good war. Between 27 May and 4 June 1940, 565 special troop trains had passed through its railway station bringing back the exhausted British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. A relief operation had been launched in the town. On the station platforms, chocolate, fruit, sandwiches, tea and cigarettes were all handed out by local volunteers. Telegrams and letters were collected and dispatched free of charge to waiting loved ones. The cost for all this was borne by the citizens of Tonbridge, who were happy to pay. 'There was a queue formed outside the station, waiting to put money in the cash box.'¹⁸⁹ It was a noble effort and recognised as such. Mrs S.G.A. Collard, wife of the stationmaster, would later receive an OBE in recognition of her leading role in the relief operation.



Figure 5. The helpers at Tonbridge Station (stationmaster E G Collard) who supplied food etc to 300,000 soldiers passing through during the Dunkirk evacuation, 1940

Tonbridge had shown itself well in an emergency, and it was well ahead in its more ordinary war work too. It was answering every call to save. A week after the community's triumph on the station's platforms, the *Tonbridge Free Press*, run by long standing editor Arthur

¹⁸⁸ Beckles, *Birth of a Spitfire*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁹ 'Great Welcome for B.E.F. Heroes', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 7 June 1940, p. 1.

Doody and owned by a syndicate of local businessmen, was able to report that 'National Savings week in Tonbridge has been an unqualified success...Lend to defend is the new slogan.'¹⁹⁰ Tonbridge was proud of doing its 'bit' so how galling must it have been for its citizens to read this in its local paper under the headline 'Tonbridge Council Turn Down Plan To Buy Spitfire'.¹⁹¹

With one dissentient voice, Tonbridge Urban District Council at their meeting on Tuesday turned down a proposal that Tonbridge should raise the money to buy a Spitfire fighter plane as a contribution to the national cause.

Efforts had been made to secure the council's blessing and support for this scheme, which had been mooted in the town, but the opinion of members generally was unfavourably disposed towards the proposal.¹⁹²

The stand taken did not reflect well on traditional authority in the town.¹⁹³ The views of four members of the council are reported, three against, and one for. The first is that of the council's chairman Cr. H.W. Christie. Christie had been a resident in Tonbridge for twenty six years and like so many others in the town, made his living in the agricultural business. He was a committee man, secretary of the Sevenoaks Fat Stock Association and one of the founders of the National Farmers' Union in Kent. He professed to no party affiliations, but what Christie had to say about the proposed Spitfire Fund would have appealed to the pockets of the conservative Tonbridge Ratepayers' Association.¹⁹⁴ He also added a note of caution which was to prove prescient.

Many People I know take the view that they are already being taxed very heavily and that whatever money is over goes to National Savings. One point occurs to me, and that is that unless we are able to obtain sufficient – which would be about £5,000 – it would be rather lamentable if we only got half way.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ 'National Savings Week', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 14 June 1940, p. 5.

¹⁹¹ 'Tonbridge Council Turn Down Plan to Buy Spitfire', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 9 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ The detail can only be found in the account given by the *Tonbridge Free Press*. The Council Minute Book held at Tonbridge Reference Library is a marvel of brevity.

¹⁹⁴ See Ken Young, *Local Politics and the Rise of Party: The London Municipal Society and the Conservative Intervention in Local Elections* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1975).

¹⁹⁵ 'Tonbridge Council Turn Down Plan To Buy Spitfire', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 9 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

Following his Chairman came Councillor L. A. Le May. Le May, unlike Christie, did have visible party associations; he was vice-president of the Tonbridge Division Conservative Association. He was chairman of the Tonbridge Constitutional Club, an organisation that supported the Conservative Party, and vice-chairman of the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men. Founded by city businessmen in 1897 to promote the interests of the County of Kent, this was a conservative organisation too, though one unaffiliated with the party.

This is what Le May is reported to have said.

He did not want to be unpatriotic, but it seemed to him another form of voluntary taxation. ‘If I thought that by putting up the money we could get an extra Spitfire in the air to fight the Bosche, I would put my hand up at once in favour of the plan, but I do not for one moment think that this would be the case.’¹⁹⁶

The third and final naysayer reported by editor Doody on behalf of the *Tonbridge Free Press* was Councillor J. Angell. Angell was another with strong conservative associations, member of the Tonbridge Rotary Club, a Freeman of the City of London, and like Le May, a member of the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men. The reason for his reluctance to support the prospective Spitfire Fund was slightly different from those that had been given before.

Cr. Angell said there would be another scheme going forward shortly, and this was the plan to raise funds for the Y.M.C.A. mobile canteen. He would prefer to vote to support the canteen scheme.¹⁹⁷

There was one dissenting voice in the council chamber that evening. Councillor W. A. J. Mann had been elected to the council only the year before. He was a commercial traveller and a member of the Labour Party. Labour Councillor Mann’s political antenna that evening was more finely attuned than that of his conservative colleagues. He was inclined to favour the project. ‘It would at least show that we were alive to the need for having more Spitfires in the air.’¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Reaction in the town to this decision to reject a Spitfire Fund was both swift and strong.¹⁹⁹ One of the strongest and swiftest reactions of all took place in the offices of the *Tonbridge Free Press*. Editor Doody had supported the Council's decision; perhaps now he weighed his postbag. Whatever the reason, the following week, Doody did a spectacular editorial U-turn. Under the by-line 'the only Spitfire among them was one of the name of Mann', Doody went into battle. He began with logic.

What difference is there between 2s. 6d. a week going to National Savings and 2s. 6d. a week towards a Spitfire? It's all in the same cause?²⁰⁰

Then he moved on to the matter of civic pride.

It is not a good advertisement for Tonbridge when one sees what other towns are doing.²⁰¹

Finally he lost all sense of disinterest and decorum.

I have the personal feeling that had some notable personage in the county put up the idea to Tonbridge, our urban fathers would have supported it at once. It is a great pity that in these days names should count before schemes are put forward. What does it matter whose idea the scheme was, providing it helps the war effort?²⁰²

The letters Doody now chose to publish were equally bitter, personal and to the point.

It is stated that the Men of Kent and Kentish Men's Association propose to open a fund for this purpose. I am wondering how many of our Councillors are members of this Association, and whether their attitude at the Council meeting was influenced by the fact that the M.O.K. & K.M. were opening such a fund. In other words, was this a case of "facing both ways?"²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Raising money in wartime through public subscription was not a new idea. In terms of the Spitfire Fund, the closest First World War example is the Tank Bank. See Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 220-233.

²⁰⁰ 'Diary of a Wartime Journalist', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 16 Aug. 1940, p. 2.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ 'Facing Both Ways', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 16 Aug. 1940, p. 6.

This barb was aimed at Councillors Le May and Angell whose wider county associations were well known in the town. Councillor Le May in particular felt the damage to his reputation keenly. The Spitfire Fund had become a local cause célèbre. Its promise then rejection had unleashed a tide of recrimination. ‘Who are the Council to speak for Tonbridge...It is a piece of impertinence that they should turn down such a plan without consulting us.’²⁰⁴ Here is our first true indication of a developing sense of empowerment. What was needed was that ‘some public spirited person will open this fund in spite of our Council’.²⁰⁵ It was not long before that public spirited person stepped forward, Labour Councillor Mann. With Mann now at the helm it all started optimistically enough.

Few causes have so captured the imagination of the public of this town and district as that of the “Tonbridge Spitfire Fund.” From the moment this fund was launched last week-end, offers of help have been coming from all sections of the community. There is now a band of many volunteers, and the subscription list is steadily mounting. Next week will be “Spitfire Week” in Tonbridge, when it is hoped that a big effort will be made to increase the total in hand.²⁰⁶

The Fund may have captured the public’s imagination but, contrary to Doody’s report, offers were not coming in from all sections of the community.²⁰⁷ The two big fund raising campaigns that had already taken place in the town, a comforts fund for Tonbridge men in the three services, and the National Savings Appeal, were both led by the Urban District Council. Its chairman, Councillor Christie chaired the Comforts Fund and his predecessor, Councillor Hearmon, chaired Tonbridge’s National Savings Committee. The benefits of having such official support were considerable.

For Savings Week the Tonbridge Urban District Council and the Tonbridge National Savings Committee co-operated, the former lending their electricity showroom for

²⁰⁴ ‘Diary of a Wartime Journalist’, *Tonbridge Free Press*, 16 Aug. 1940, p. 2.

²⁰⁵ ‘Ridiculous Arguments’, *Tonbridge Free Press*, 16 Aug. 1940, p. 6.

²⁰⁶ ‘Tonbridge Spitfire Fund Fires Public Imagination’, *Tonbridge Free Press*, 30 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

²⁰⁷ Working class enthusiasm for this form of fund raising had been notable in the First World War with the success of tank week. See Stefan Goebel, ‘Exhibitions’, in Jay Winter & Jean-Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. II: *A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 160.

the purpose of a publicity display and for answering inquiries from the general public selling stamps and Savings Certificates.²⁰⁸

But such official help would not be forthcoming for the Spitfire Fund. Worse still, the controversy over the Fund's founding effectively reduced the possibility of significant personal donations to almost nil. Tonbridge's conservative social and financial elite turned their backs on the campaign. A week into the campaign and the *Tonbridge Free Press* had already noticed what was going on. 'A feature of the efforts made so far has been that the poorer people of the town have rallied splendidly to the cause. The steady flow of pennies, sixpences and shillings speaks for itself.'²⁰⁹ So it did, but where were the pounds going to come from? Significant sums would in fact be donated to a Spitfire Fund by wealthier citizens of Tonbridge, but it would not be to the town's own Spitfire Fund.

The Tonbridge branch of the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men was the largest branch in the county. Its honorary secretary was Tonbridge Councillor Dudley Le May, brother to Councillor Leslie Le May, who, as already noted, was the association's vice-chairman. When Leslie Le May had stood up in the Council meeting to pour cold water on the idea of a Spitfire Fund his timing had been unfortunate. Only two weeks before, the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men had, just as the letter writer to the *Tonbridge Free Press* supposed, set up its own Spitfire Fund. It was 'a county fund for the purchase of a Spitfire fighter airplane for presentation to the R.A.F. to be known as the Kent County Plane.'²¹⁰ Six weeks into Tonbridge's Spitfire Fund campaign, and a few miles down the River Medway, a sum of £67 8s. 6d. was acknowledged by the *Kent Messenger*, Maidstone's local newspaper.²¹¹ The *Kent Messenger* was keeping track of all donations to the county fund. This particular gift was from the Tonbridge Branch of the Association of Men of Kent and Kentish Men. At the head of the subscription list was Lord de L'Isle and Dudley, Tonbridge's first citizen. His name and that of Councillor Dudley Le May, along with almost all the others on the list published in the *Kent Messenger*, would not appear on any one of the *Tonbridge Free Press*'s own weekly subscription lists to the town's fund.

²⁰⁸ 'Tonbridge's Magnificent Savings Appeal', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 21 June 1940, p. 1.

²⁰⁹ 'Tonbridge Spitfire Fund Fires Public Imagination', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 30 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

²¹⁰ 'Help to Buy a Spitfire', *Kent Messenger*, 10 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

²¹¹ 'County Spitfire Fund', *Kent Messenger*, 28 Sept. 1940, p. 5.

£5,000 was an almost impossible target for a penny and shilling affair, but failure to reach it would not be a result of any lack of effort, especially at the beginning. Collecting boxes were widely distributed, local clubs and businesses all rallied round.

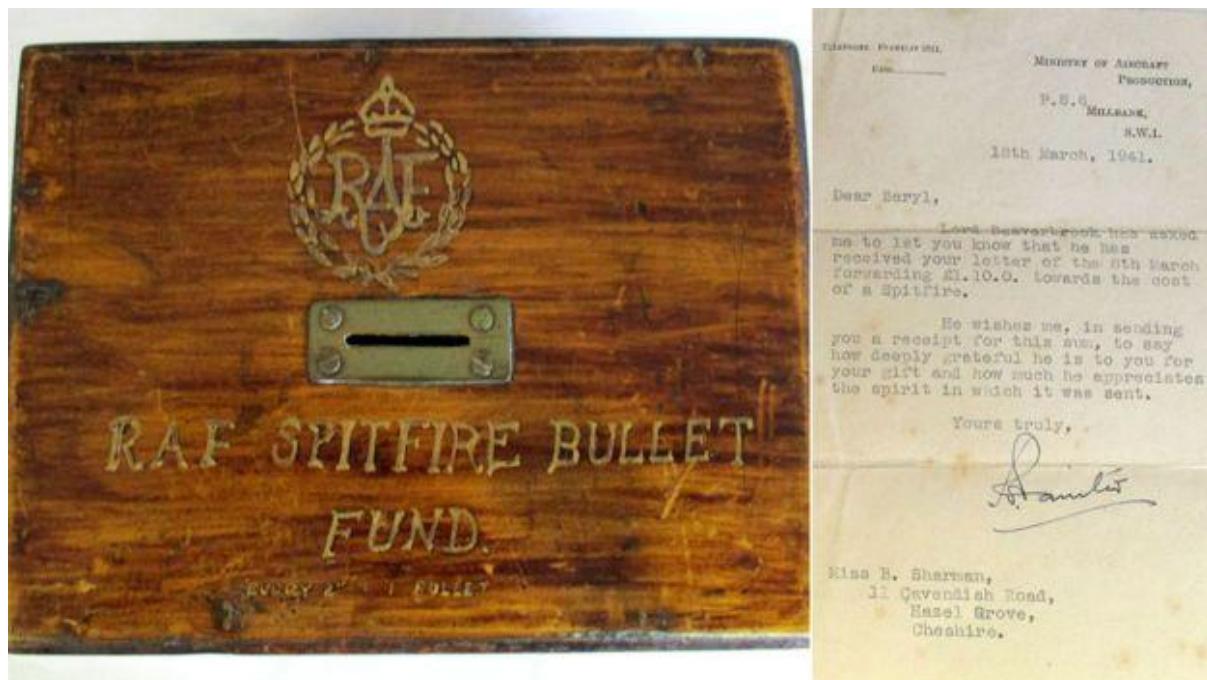


Figure 6. Spitfire Fund Collection Box

Particularly active were local civil defence workers. The fund raising efforts of the town's AFS Station and the various ARP Warden's Posts were repeatedly praised in the *Tonbridge Free Press*. But money was scarce, and sometimes there was none at all. Identified only as a 'Maid of Kent', this lady donated 'a necklace, a tea strainer, a silver chain, three small mirrors, a pair of ear-rings, three silver thimbles, three keepsakes, and a number of old and foreign coins.'²¹²

What helped to inspire the campaign in the town, especially in the August and September, was what was going on overhead. During the Battle of Britain, Tonbridge was on the front line just as Marwick had intimated in his estimation of a 'People's War'. This report from the *Tonbridge Free Press* of 13 September was properly vague, but it was describing scenes that those reading would have recognised.

Saturday saw air battles in the Kent sky at their zenith. Mass after mass of enemy bombers and fighters passed over the countryside at a height of 20,000 feet during

²¹² 'Spitfire Week in Tonbridge', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 6 Sept. 1940, p. 4.

the afternoon, and Spitfires and Hurricanes could be seen zooming and diving in and out of them. The machine-gun fire at one stage was particularly heavy and bullets sprayed the streets of a town, causing people to run for shelter.²¹³



Figure 7. Schoolboys' Fund Raising Event (Unknown location)

Tonbridge was on the front line, and it fought back through its Spitfire Fund. 'Some are putting a penny in the box every time the "all clear" is sounded.'²¹⁴ Bits and pieces of wrecked bombers, spent German cannon shells and even live bullets were picked up off the nearby fields and streets and sold in aid of the Fund. 'Penny a Jerry' clubs were started. Someone would be nominated to listen to the daily 8 a.m. BBC news, note down the count, and then collect the monies due. All these contributions added up, but once all the collection tins had been emptied, ultimately it didn't add up to enough. In October the following year, the committee led by Councillor Mann admitted defeat. A cheque for £1,600 not £5,000 was sent to the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Inevitably there were recriminations; the fact that the Council had not given its blessing, the fact that the only significant individual donation was one anonymous cheque for £50. There was, however, satisfaction taken in the fact that the greater part of the sum raised had been raised by the 'poorer people' of the town.

²¹³ 'Enemy Aeroplanes Litter Kent Countryside', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 13 Sept. 1940, p. 6.

²¹⁴ 'Tonbridge Spitfire Fund Fires Public Imagination', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 30 Aug. 1940, p. 1.

We can only hope that in the near future a Spitfire will take to the air bearing the name of Tonbridge, a patriotic little Kentish town whose none-to-rich inhabitants did their best under trying circumstances to put a nail into Hitler's coffin in the shape of a Spitfire.²¹⁵

Tonbridge failed to raise the required sum but succeeded on different terms. These were the terms and conditions the lawyer Kenneth Macassey described in his legal opinion for the Home Office. 'Is it not the correct view that in subscribing money for fighters people are discharging the primary obligation of citizenship – to exert themselves in the defence of their country?'²¹⁶ Exertion was much in evidence in Tonbridge. In terms of Marwick's four point exemplar of a 'People's War', the Spitfire Fund did demand the direct participation by 'ordinary people'. What makes Tonbridge a particularly illuminating example of a nationwide campaign was the exclusion of the elite of the town in the fund-raising effort. Here were in plain view Marwick's 'ordinary people'.

It was the raising of the Spitfire Funds that embedded a sense of empowerment into the legacy of the Spitfire, the second layer of a multi-layered text. Ordinary people could do extraordinary things. The third and final narrative thread whose beginnings are explored in this first chapter is, however, about two extraordinary men. In 1942, the film star and director Leslie Howard was at the peak of both his popularity and his creative powers. In what would be his last major feature film before he died a martyr's death, he chose as his subject R. J. Mitchell. The result was the third layer of a multi-layered text, the Spitfire's association with the question of identity.

The Cult of 'Englishness'

In 2009, the British National Party (BNP), a far-right political party, was ridiculed for using a Polish Spitfire to front a European election campaign calling for Eastern European immigrants to be barred from Britain. Much fun was had, in the media and at Westminster, at the BNP's expense when it was revealed that the particular Spitfire chosen by the BNP for

²¹⁵ 'Tonbridge Contributes to "Invicta" Fighter Squadron', *Tonbridge Free Press*, 17 Oct. 1941, p. 1.

²¹⁶ TNA, HO 45/25082, 'Misc. Gen., Metropolitan Police Office', 16 Aug. 1940.

their posters was actually flown by Polish airmen rescued from France shortly before Nazi occupation. John Hemming, MP for Yardley, Birmingham, was one who was bemused.

‘They have a policy to send Polish people back to Poland – yet they are fronting their latest campaign using this plane.’²¹⁷ Ridicule was heaped upon the BNP for getting their research wrong, but it is what Hemming said next which is of particular interest here. ‘It is absurd to make claims about Englishness and Britishness fronted by this image.’²¹⁸ Hemming was wrong; there was nothing absurd about it at all. The Spitfire has long had an association with the question of identity.²¹⁹

It was Angus Calder who helped draw attention to the wartime contribution made by Leslie Howard to the selling of ‘the wholly ineffable concept of Englishness’.²²⁰ Calder was referring specifically to the twenty-two talks on the BBC’s North American Service Howard gave between 16 July 1940 and 7 August 1941. The BBC valued his transmissions highly.

‘He was an appropriate person, vaguely aristocratic as his screen image was, to grasp the thorny problem of US dislike of British class distinctions.’²²¹ The talks came to an end in the summer of 1941 and one reason why was because Howard had seized upon another opportunity to project his ‘ineffable concept of Englishness’. What was to be the eventual result was first presented to the public on 20 August 1942.²²²

A magnificent sum was raised for the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund by the brilliant gala premiere of ‘The First of the Few,’ Leslie Howard’s screen biography of R. J. Mitchell – the man who made the Spitfire.

Held at the Leicester Square Theatre, the event attracted a large gathering of celebrities, including Mr Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, Mrs Winant, the wife of the

²¹⁷ ‘Polish Spitfire’, www.Telegraph.co.uk [accessed 12 June 2017].

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ In a rich field of study recent contributions on the question of the Second World War and identity include Richard Weight & Abigail Beach (eds.), *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Lucy Noakes & Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²²⁰ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 207. See Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: J. M. Dent, 1974).

²²¹ Ibid., p. 206.

²²² See Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

U.S. Ambassador, Air Chief Marshall Sir Charles Portal, the Countess of Oxford and Asquith, Mr and Mrs Charles Sweeny, Lord Bennett, E. T. Carr, R. P. P. Baker, Joseph Friedman, Leslie Howard, David Niven, Robert Donat, Rex Harrison, Anne Firth, Clive Brook, Lilli Palmer and a host of others.

Large crowds assembled outside the theatre, waiting to see celebrities arrive for the screening of the picture, which received a tremendous reception from an enthusiastic house.²²³

It would have been something of a surprise if *The First of the Few* had not received a tremendous reception. A gala premiere was no place for the disinterested. The great and the good had come to be seen but also to show their support because this gala premiere represented something of a statement of intent on behalf of British film makers. Evelyn Russel writing in *Sight and Sound* recognized the possibilities. ‘Finance and facilities were, I understand, unstinted. Can it be that at last somebody, somewhere, is sharing my belief that we can make films that matter in this country?’²²⁴ It would have mattered to Winston Churchill. It was his rhetorical flourish that had furnished the film with its title after George King and John Stafford, the film’s original producers, had cannily sought out his permission to use it.²²⁵ Whether money had changed hands is unclear, but even if it did not, it did at least peak the great man’s interest. It was Churchill who encouraged the RAF to co-operate with the production, which was as good as a command. But even Prime Ministerial favour would have counted for little if the producers’ ambitions had not matched Churchill’s authority. King and Stafford were in fact only small-time players in the British film industry and a minor production company attempting to make a major feature film was always going to struggle. That had all changed, though, once Leslie Howard’s services had been secured.²²⁶ His name, his reputation, even his phone call which, according to his son, had won the support of the Rank Organisation.²²⁷ There was no bigger name than Rank in

²²³ ‘Premiere Aids R.A.F. Fund’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 Aug. 1942, p. 6.

²²⁴ Evelyn Russel, ‘The Quarter’s Films Considered’, *Sight and Sound*, 43 (1942), p. 68.

²²⁵ Churchill’s use of the phrase has been examined by Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill’s World War II Speeches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 66.

²²⁶ For Leslie Howard’s films see Neil Rattigan, *This is England: British Film and the People’s War, 1939-1945* (London, Associated University Presses, 2001); Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007). The best available biography is Estel Eforgan, *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013).

²²⁷ Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father* (London: William Kimber, 1981), p. 106.

British film production at the time. No wonder that first night audience was so enthusiastic: what with the film's connections. But there would have been first night nerves too. What if the film turned out to be a flop?

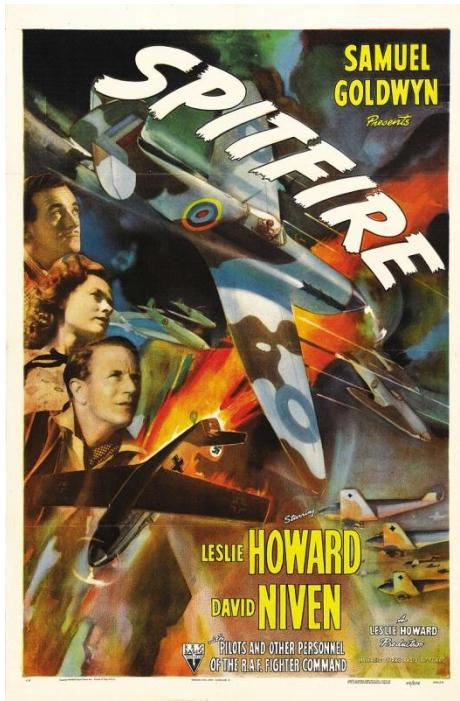


Figure 8. Poster for the film *Spitfire*, released in 1943 in the U.S.; re-edited from the 1942 British film, *The First of the Few*

Fortunately it was not; it was the biggest grossing British-produced picture of the year. It was only beaten at the box office by MGM's surprise hit *Mrs. Miniver*. It was not just the paying customers who enjoyed *The First of the Few* either. Leslie Howard's last major film was met with almost universal critical acclaim in both the trade and national press. There was one notable dissenting voice however. According to the *Documentary News Letter*, the film had the wrong star.

The documentary film maker would have made the Spitfire the centre and hero of his picture. *First of the Few* has as its hero R.J. Mitchell, the aeroplane's designer, and the aeroplane itself plays a secondary though important part. The interest and appeal of the picture mainly rely therefore on the human figure.²²⁸

Such a reliance ruined the film suggested the *Documentary News Letter*.

²²⁸ 'Film of the Month', *Documentary News Letter*, Sept. 1942, p. 128.

No clear picture is given of pre-war politics and no definite line is taken. This is a loss to the film and one that is not likely to be overlooked by audiences who are a good deal more politically conscious than they used to be.²²⁹

This film reviewer was being obtuse. The film had a strong narrative theme, as we shall see, but the wonder was that the film had got made at all. It must have seemed a miracle to many of the industry insiders who attended that gala premier. Many would not have forgotten the first year of war when the fate of their industry seemed to hang in the balance. As the sirens first sounded cinemas closed, seemingly for the duration. Sense had prevailed as cinemas re-opened, but it was now wartime and nothing was going to be the same as before. Exhibitors, the owners and managers of theatres, faced an ever growing list of obstacles. Equipment broke down and could not be repaired for lack of spares, staff left for lucrative war work or were called up into the services, and then there were those sirens with their promise of disruption or worse. As for distributors, those who supplied the films to the exhibitors, they had troubles of their own. New product from Hollywood was still available but supply from British production houses was drying up. This was because British film producers also faced difficulties at every turn. Film stock was hard to come by, key technical staff were disappearing into war work and even when the cameras were loaded and a competent crew was to hand, where were they actually going to film? Studio space vanished as more and more of it was requisitioned for storage or shadow factories. Between 1939 and 1942, 22 studios offering 65 sound stages had dwindled to nine studios and 30 soundstages.²³⁰

Much of the blame for this chaos was laid not at the door of the war, but at the door of the Ministry of Information.²³¹ Evelyn Waugh was quick to print with his own condemnation.²³² George King and his new partner, John Stafford, were two producers undaunted by difficult circumstances; they were intent upon making a major feature film. King had grown up in the 'quota-quickies' era of 1930s British cinema. These were films made on a conveyor belt

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 2. For a personal account of wartime film making see Adrian Brunel, *Nice Work: Thirty Years in British Films* (London: Forbes Robertson, 1949).

²³¹ See Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War 2* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979); Jo Fox, 'The Propaganda War', in Richard J.B. Bosworth/Joseph A. Maiolo (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Second world War*, vol 11; *Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 91-116.

²³² See Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1942).

to satisfy a government requirement that a percentage of films shown in British cinemas were British made. The problem was that with a guaranteed market, quick turn around and limited budgets, quality inevitably suffered. Stafford had spent much of the 1930s producing English language versions of Germans films for RKO-Radio British, where again time and budgets were limited. Here were two ‘second division’ film producers, but working together ambitions had grown.

King and Stafford were in the market for a big prestigious project. It came by way of Henry C. James, a jobbing Australian writer of plays, travel books and children’s fiction now based in England. He had approached Florence Mitchell, widow of R. J. Mitchell, in the autumn of 1940 with the idea of writing a life of her husband. Whether James initially had in mind a book or a film, what happened next decided for him. King and Stafford took out an option. For a small fee, King and Stafford now had exclusive rights to turn James’s story into a film. But a small fee only bought exclusive rights for a limited time and King and Stafford were a long way away from troubling the RAF for the loan of a Spitfire.

King and Stafford had their good story, and what was needed next was interest. This meant, in practice, the interest of a major star. King and Stafford could not finance the film themselves and any proposal to a production house would receive a much more sympathetic hearing if a star name was attached. King and Stafford set up a production company, British Aviation Pictures, and set off in search. But finding that star name was not easy. King and Stafford had their network of contacts but it was not of much use now. They were second-division producers used to dealing in second-division film actors. To catch their star they had to charge their project, boost it. It required an air of credibility. It had to appear as if it was already a first-division project, star or not. To do that King and Stafford turned to the trade press. They made a good start. Credibility came by way of a significant endorsement.²³³

The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, through the office of the Under-Secretary of State and the Air Ministry, has granted George King and John Stafford permission to

²³³ Gary Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 76.

use “The First of the Few” as the title for their epic film of the life story of R. J. Mitchell, the genius who created the Spitfire.

“Never in the realm of human conflict has there been so much owed by so many to so few.” Is one of the most inspiring thoughts spoken by the leader of this country, and it is in this spirit that the producers intend to create. “The First of the Few” is described as a screen monument to the Englishmen who lived and died to make possible the exploits of the mighty Few.²³⁴

Shrewd operators both, Stafford and King had spotted an opportunity for some good publicity but the phrase, as a tribute to the Battle of Britain fighter pilots, had in fact not had an auspicious public debut.²³⁵ It had been included by Churchill in his report on the general war situation to the House of Commons on 20 August 1940. Churchill had buried it, not featured it in his report. It made no great impression on those who heard it in the House of Commons. John Colville, his private secretary who was there, thought Churchill’s delivery was poor in any case, a mumbling performance, and as for the House, it was half asleep in the summer heat.²³⁶ Nevertheless, it was a phrase quickly spotted by journalists and their editors who were already working hard to promote the idea of the fighter pilot as hero. It made for a perfect publicity storm.²³⁷

It was in January 1941 that King and Stafford had gone on the publicity offensive with the promise to industry insiders of a major project in the offing.

“The First of the Few” will be produced on a scale commensurate with the dignity and importance of the subject, with the full co-operation of Mrs. Mitchell, the widow, as well as the interested authorities Messrs. Armstrongs-Vickers, Ltd., and the Air Ministry.

Their full collaboration throughout the production has been assured to George King and John Stafford, who are now finalising details of the story, and dovetailing the

²³⁴ ‘Premier Approves’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 Jan. 1941, p. 9.

²³⁵ See Toye, *The Roar of the Lion*, p. 69.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Campion, *The Good Fight*, p. 81.

many facts emerging through the life work of "R. J." as Mitchell was affectionately known to his familiars. Important stellar assignments are now being negotiated.²³⁸

The anticipated big deal, however, those 'important stellar assignments', came to nothing. Henry C. James's story had been handed over by King and Stafford to Miles Malleson to turn into a film scenario, a package containing a storyboard, character sketches, and initial script ideas. Obtaining the services of Malleson had been a shrewd move, more industry credibility. 'Miles Malleson, ace screen writer, has been signed by British Aviation Picture'.²³⁹ Malleson was not only an 'ace' screen writer, he was an actor too. He can be seen as the affable hangman in the 1949 film *Kind Hearts and Coronets* measuring up his ducal victim, and he was also extremely well connected. It was Malleson who introduced the project to Robert Donat.

Robert Donat was precisely the calibre of film star King and Stafford needed. He had both popular appeal and the respect of the critics. Donat had won Best Actor at the 1939 Academy Awards for *Goodbye, Mr Chips*, beating Clark Gable in the process. At the time Malleson approached him, Donat was two pictures into a six picture deal with MGM. As a consequence he was obliged to take the project to them. Complications immediately arose. Despite Donat's obvious enthusiasm, MGM would not make the film unless they had sole rights, which King and Stafford were unwilling to sell. MGM involvement would also have meant the film would have to have been made in Hollywood. In 1941, MGM had neither the facilities nor the inclination to make films in Britain. It would have made a mockery of the film's subject in any case. Seeing the Battle of Britain fought against a Los Angeles skyline might have suspended disbelief just that little bit too far.²⁴⁰

Nevertheless, this was still a tremendous setback for King and Stafford. It required another round of 'Boosterism'. On 27 March 1941, there was another advertisement in *Kinematograph Weekly*.

'The First of the Few' is claimed to be the most inspiring film yet conceived by any producer, and the production of such a film at this time cannot be measured in mere

²³⁸ 'Premier Approves', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 Jan. 1941, p. 9.

²³⁹ 'Miles Malleson to do the Script', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 6 Mar. 1941, p. 25.

²⁴⁰ The surest guide to this tortuous process is Leslie Howard's son Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father*, pp. 104-116.

terms of commercial enterprise. Rather, and as well, it is the work of the greatest possible value to the national effort, because of its inspiring theme, and the inspiration and encouragement it will afford to every man and woman engaged in the war effort.²⁴¹

Such hyperbole denotes a hint of desperation, but now King and Stafford's luck changed. Robert Donat's agent in England was David Henley. He was also the agent of Leslie Howard. Howard, like Robert Donat, was the calibre of star that might get this project off the ground. It was propitious timing; Howard was looking for a prestigious project, and more importantly, one to boost the war effort. Howard, a patriot, had abandoned Hollywood in August 1939 to return to England. It was a decision that cannot have been taken lightly. It was one which had been met with much derision from within the English actor colony. 'Many of these friends spoke as perpetual exiles living contentedly in a place where the oranges were the biggest in the world and the sun shone almost every day of the year, summer and winter...Their allegiance lay where their bread was buttered.'²⁴²

Howard's involvement in King and Stafford's big prestigious project began in the spring of 1941 after Robert Donat had pulled out. At the time Howard was not contractually committed to any one studio, which is why he was free as well as able to pick up the phone to set up the meeting that secured the crucial funding from J. Arthur Rank. There was another reason why Howard was prepared to act so precipitously. King and Stafford had finally realised their abilities could not match their ambitions and had agreed that Howard could buy them out of the project. Howard wanted absolute control, as star, director and producer. Once the funding was in place Howard moved quickly. A new scenario was begun by Miles Malleson this time with the assistance of long time Howard collaborator Tolly de Grunwald. Howard was obviously going to play Mitchell but there were two other major parts to fill. That of Mitchell's chief test pilot went to David Niven who had also abandoned 'lotus-land' for the duration.

Filming began in the autumn of 1941 based at Denham studios, which was the largest facility in the country still open, and one owned by Rank. King and Stafford's earlier wooing

²⁴¹ 'Script Progressing of Spitfire Epic', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 Mar. 1941, p. 18.

²⁴² Howard, *In Search of My Father*, p. 24.

of Churchill now paid off handsomely for Howard and his team. RAF Ibsley and Warmwell were made available along with the use of a Blenheim bomber to act as a camera ship. There was also the invaluable gift of a captured Heinkel to shoot down as many times as necessary.²⁴³ Phil Samuel, production manager on the film, always carried with him a letter from Churchill, ‘a kind of *laissez passer* in the event of difficulties with officials.’²⁴⁴ He said it proved very useful.



Figure 9. David Niven and Leslie Howard on the set of *The First of the Few*

Once the location shooting was finished in November 1941, everyone returned to Denham. It took approximately eight to twelve weeks to finish the principal photography. Post-production added more time and the film was finally completed in the spring of 1942. As is usual with any feature film, then as now, one of the very last jobs to be done was the scoring of the film. Part of that score would enter the concert hall repertoire.

²⁴³ Simon MacKenzie, *The Battle of Britain on Screen: 'The Few' in British Film and Television Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 32.

²⁴⁴ Howard, *In Search of My Father*, p. 107.

For some reason, Leslie could not be at the running of the film with William Walton, so he told me beforehand very elaborately what he wanted from the music. Walton listened to my version of all this very carefully and then said, ‘Oh I see, Leslie wants a lot of notes’, and he went away and wrote the Spitfire Fugue.²⁴⁵

With the film finished, it was now in the care of General Film Distributors, the distribution arm of J. Arthur Rank’s empire. In 1941, Rank had acquired the highly profitable Odeon cinema chain as well as a controlling interest in Gaumont-British. General Film Distributors now had first call on over 600 cinemas nationwide.²⁴⁶ The first step was a press-book, a marketing package targeted specifically at the critics about to review the film and the exhibitors about to show it. A press-book provided two key pieces of information to those with the power to influence public opinion. It offered a basic synopsis of the plot and the reasons why the public would want to watch the film in question.

The most obvious selling lines on ‘First of the Few’ are the stars’ names and ‘The greatest human story ever told’. It is a phrase that aptly sums up a magnificent screen entertainment that depicts with tremendous sincerity the career of one of England’s greatest men – R.J. Mitchell - the genius who sacrificed his life to give Britain the fastest, toughest fighter plane in the world...

One special point is that you want to get your audiences to realise that ‘The First of the Few’ is NOT A WAR FILM. Tell them it is the human story of a great man who helped to put Britain right in the forefront of the world of aviation. Play up his magnificent Schneider Trophy victories that secured the coveted award for this country for all time.

Play R.J. Mitchell as the devoted husband and father- the man of simple tastes. Weave drama into his vision of a streamlines airplane based on the inspiration of a seagull. Picture him as a man of purpose who overcame difficulties and achieved his object.

²⁴⁵ Eforgan, *Leslie Howard*, p. 183.

²⁴⁶ Useful accounts of the British film industry in the 1940s include Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents...A Lifetime of Films* (London: Hutchinson, 1969); Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Studio Vista, 1977); Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Run side by side photographs of Leslie Howard and R.J. Mitchell-the likeness is astounding. Stress Howard's performance as the greatest work he has yet done on the screen.

Tell your audiences...that such real figures as Messerschmitt and Mr. Royce (of Rolls Royce) all play their part in the fascinating, factual mosaic of the narrative.²⁴⁷

There are three core messages here that the professional reader was being asked to consider. The first was the fact that the film was a star vehicle. By 1942, Leslie Howard's star had risen so high that it was the film's strongest suit. The second core message requires a little context. '*The First of the Few* is NOT A WAR FILM'. Two months before the premiere of *The First of the Few*, C. M. Woolf, the President of the British Film Producers' Association, had addressed his association's annual general meeting. He had noted his industry's predilection for films with a wartime subject and pointed out that cinema-goers' were 'already getting tired of this type of picture and were asking for films which took their minds off the tragedy now taking place.'²⁴⁸ Hence *The First of the Few* was being promoted as a human drama not a war film.

The third and final core message the press-book for *The First of the Few* wanted to impress upon its professional readership was its claims upon revealing real events, and portraying real people, a 'fascinating, factual mosaic'. Nowhere in the exploitation document is this idea made more ridiculous than in the physical comparison of Howard with Mitchell. 'Run side by side photographs of Leslie Howard and R.J. Mitchell-the likeness is astounding.' The two men could hardly have been more different. Nevertheless, the claim was one of verisimilitude. It was a claim of course made more credible by the fact that the Spitfire had been developed away from the public gaze.

There was no guarantee of success in trying to manage the reception of a new film but what followed was a vindication of the press-book. We can begin with the reviews of the film in the trade press. *Monthly Film Bulletin* understood that this was a star vehicle. 'Outstanding is the portrait of R.J. Mitchell by Leslie Howard. Simple and straightforward, and therefore

²⁴⁷ British Film Institute, Press Book Collections, PBM-29620, *First of the Few*, 1942.

²⁴⁸ Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 79.

most moving in its appeal, this characterisation is unforgettable.²⁴⁹ *Today's Cinema* was impressed by the film's sense of verisimilitude. 'Grimly realistic commentary on Government pre-war apathy in grudging money for aerial expansion, together with sincere tribute to designer's foresight in realising country's danger after visit to Germany and fraternising with famous rival, Messerschmitt.'²⁵⁰ This last was all nonsense of course; Mitchell never did visit Germany. It was Leslie Howard's own skiing holiday to Austria shortly before the Anschluss that probably inspired this particular episode in the film.²⁵¹ The trade press had followed the lead of the press-book but what of the national press? Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Express* recognised a star vehicle. 'Leslie Howard and David Niven have made rich human drama'.²⁵² The *Daily Express* accepted the film as faithful to events, a true story, 'a superb picture, inspiring and real'.²⁵³

The writers of the press-book had been vindicated. Both the specialist and national press had followed its lead. Nevertheless, it could not guarantee a hit; only the box office could do that. The scene was now set for the film's premiere and it was a very good night for all the film's connections. 'Large crowds assembled outside the theatre, waiting to see celebrities arrive for the screening of the picture, which received a tremendous reception from an enthusiastic house.'²⁵⁴ It would prove to be a satisfying few months too after the film opened nationwide. The film was a box office hit.

What had Howard now achieved beyond a satisfying box office hit? The film critic Roger Manvell describes audience reaction to the film, in particular to the part played by Leslie Howard. 'Leslie Howard's portrayal of Mitchell became, of course, a sensitive re-enactment by a well-known star in a manner very familiar to the public – Mitchell was Howard rather than Howard Mitchell'.²⁵⁵ This is an important point. According to Manvell, an act of transference had taken place. We can now take this idea to its logical conclusion on behalf of the Spitfire. If Howard was Mitchell then Howard as Mitchell created the Spitfire in the public's imagination. This being so then it is but a small step to take to suggest that what

²⁴⁹ 'The First of the Few', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Sept. 1942, p. 111.

²⁵⁰ 'The First of the Few', *Today's Cinema*, 21 Aug. 1942, p. 9.

²⁵¹ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 56.

²⁵² 'The Man Who Made the Spitfire', *Daily Mail*, 21 Aug. 1942, p. 2.

²⁵³ 'The First of the Few', *Daily Express*, 22 Aug. 1942, p. 2.

²⁵⁴ 'Premiere Aids R.A.F. Fund', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 Aug. 1942, p. 6.

²⁵⁵ Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p. 107.

Howard personified would now be personified by the Howard/Mitchell creation, the Spitfire, too.

Evidence to support Manvell's idea of an act of transference, during the first run of the film at least, can be found in the Mass Observation Archive.²⁵⁶ This engineering student from Wallington said he had watched 'a clear simple dramatisation of something topical and important. Accurate, restrained performance by Howard'.²⁵⁷ How could this student have possibly known it was an accurate portrayal without special knowledge and access? This social science student from Edinburgh was convinced too of an accurate portrayal. 'Historic interest. Photos of flying and aeroplanes superb, and good acting and convincing story.'²⁵⁸ In the mind of this correspondent from Llangollen this act of transference had literally taken place. For her, Leslie Howard and Reginald Mitchell had become one and the same person. It was a 'Leslie Mitchell' she referred to in her report.²⁵⁹ It was of course probably only a slip of the pen, but a Freudian slip is evidence too. This young female typist from Tottenham was sure 'Leslie Howard seemed very fitted for the part'.²⁶⁰ The question we would like to ask of this young female typist is exactly why? Being unable to do so, we must therefore pose a different question. If Mitchell was Howard than who was Howard?

Howard was a patriot. For much of the 1920s and 1930s, Howard had lived the life of an exile in America as he established himself first on Broadway and then in Hollywood but he was quick to return to England at the beginning of the war. He seems to have had no compunction about leaving the land 'where the oranges were the biggest in the world and the sun shone almost every day of the year, summer and winter'.²⁶¹ Howard was a patriot but he was also a nationalist. His own sense of identity was rooted in that 'wholly ineffable concept of Englishness'.²⁶² Howard was the son of immigrants, third generation on his mother's side and first generation on his father's. His mother Lillian's family, the Blumberg's, had arrived in England in 1834 from Courland in Russia. They had landed as a

²⁵⁶ For a good introduction to the Mass Observation Archive see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁵⁷ Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 233.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 269.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 264.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁶¹ Howard, *In Search of My Father*, p. 24.

²⁶² Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 207.

Jewish household, but by two generations on many of the extended family including Lillian herself were Christian. Howard's father, Ferdinand Raphael Steiner, was born in Szigetvar in Hungary. His family was Jewish but he himself was not a strict observer. Leslie Howard, though a deeply spiritual man, professed no faith at all. The decision Howard took, and precisely when is unclear, was to abandon his cultural inheritance for a new one. His was the fervour of the convert.

Howard the man, his sense of identity, would never be separated from Howard the actor, the character he portrayed up on the silver-screen. Howard understood perfectly well his limitations as an actor. 'He was a technical actor – one who relied not on emotion but on technique to carry the part. I can never remember him living a role at home for five seconds after he stepped off the stage or away from the camera.'²⁶³ What Howard understood was that his success was based upon a projection of his own personality. 'Howard never tried to be anything he was not.'²⁶⁴ It was a projection very familiar to British audiences. Historians of British wartime cinema often bracket *Pimpernel Smith* and *The First of the Few* together.²⁶⁵ They do so for good reason. Both are propaganda pieces, both were in production in 1941, both were the artistic vision of one man, produced, directed and starring Leslie Howard, and in both that vision is identical, a projection of his own personality.

In *Pimpernel Smith* Howard played a Cambridge archaeology professor, Horatio Smith, who takes his students to Nazi Germany to help on his excavations. He has a secret agenda, which is to free inmates from German concentration camps. In *First of the Few* Howard plays Mitchell who visits Nazi Germany and returns with an agenda too, to save his country. The two characters, Smith and Mitchell, are similarly drawn by Howard, a cultured speaking voice, an absent minded air, a dry wit. Both Smith and Mitchell, as played by Howard, show restraint, are possessed of an ironic, understated humour, and have a sense of proportion as well as compassion. 'He returned again and again to the role of the intellectual humanized, brought down from the heights of academe to discover personal commitment

²⁶³ Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father* (London: Longmans, 1960), p. 4.

²⁶⁴ 'Leslie Howard an Appreciation', *Observer*, 6 Jun. 1943, p. 5.

²⁶⁵ See Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 45.

in the real world.²⁶⁶ There was Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion* (1938), Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Horatio Smith in *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) and finally R. J. Mitchell in *The First of the Few* (1942). Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*, can perhaps best be described as an American cousin. Taken together, this is what Roger Manvell is referring to when he describes a manner familiar to the public. What that manner was, is summed up by Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards. ‘What he represented to wartime audiences was that visionary aspect of Englishness, that fey, mystical quality, that striving after the secrets of the eternal, that crops up periodically in English writing and English thought.’²⁶⁷

It was such a representation that greeted cinema audiences in *The First of the Few*. Howard set aside Mitchell’s actual personality and replaced it with his own. In one of the most famous scenes in the film, Howard’s re-invention of Mitchell rooted in ‘that visionary aspect of Englishness’ reaches an apotheosis.

In a long sequence he was shown dreamily, romantically and almost spiritually studying at length the seagulls flying around the cliff-top. The implication was only too clear, namely that he was dreaming of his future designs for aircraft based on the flying characteristics of those graceful, but rather noisy, birds. I was never happy with those scenes.²⁶⁸

So unhappy was Gordon Mitchell, R. J. Mitchell’s son, that he later took it up with Jeffrey Quill, a test pilot who had known Mitchell well in the last years of Mitchell’s life. ‘Your father was a hard-headed, highly practical man and, in my opinion, the last thing he would have done when he had any problems or was seeking inspiration, was to hang around watching bloody seagulls!’²⁶⁹

In 1942 the cinema audience would have known nothing of this. Mitchell was a name that had touched upon the public consciousness, the Schneider victories had seen to that. But the last Schneider victory had taken place ten years before, in 1932. Mitchell never courted publicity; he was not a man comfortable in the spotlight. His death in June 1937 had been acknowledged in both the specialist and national press but that was all. What little

²⁶⁶ Aldgate & Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 53.

²⁶⁷ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 54.

²⁶⁸ Gordon Mitchell, *R. J. Mitchell: Schooldays to Spitfire* (Olney: Nelson & Saunders, 1986), p. 307.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

audiences knew of R. J. Mitchell in 1942, they knew less about the Spitfire. As noted above, right up until 1938, public sightings of the Spitfire were minimal and even then they were fleeting at best. What information the press was able to offer was never better than speculation.

Such a mystery gave Leslie Howard his artistic freedom. Instead of the roll call of test pilots that peopled Mitchell's career Howard only gives us one. David Niven's pilot, down to earth, practical, comedic, bears little relation to any actual Mitchell test pilot. Howard wanted light relief to better reflect his own more studied depiction of Mitchell. Three Schneider victories are effectively concertinaed into one, the 1927 race in Venice. Howard does this to better display bumptious authority in contrast to his own more considered Englishman. Howard has Mitchell visit Germany to see the Fascist danger for himself. In fact, the Spitfire project was given the green light in October 1932. Hitler had not yet been appointed Chancellor of Germany. Howard did play fast and loose with the facts, and with consummate skill. Ill-informed cinema audiences were likely lulled by the film's sense of verisimilitude. Almost all the reviews had said here was a film based on fact, and the look of the film was convincing. Production values were high, unusual for a British film at this time, and Howard had the full co-operation of the Air Ministry.²⁷⁰

Howard had now added Mitchell to his book of Englishmen. We now return to that young female typist from Tottenham who was sure 'Leslie Howard seemed very fitted for the part'.²⁷¹ A conservative patriotism had been a feature of the commercial cinematic experience up to this point and films would continue to 'purvey the conventional image of gallant officers doing heroic deeds or to project the traditional image of the nation as a class-bound, hierarchically structured society'.²⁷² *The First of the Few* fitted comfortably into such tropes. What made it more exceptional was its overt nationalism, that 'ineffable concept of Englishness'.²⁷³ We must be careful, however, not to mix up intention with reception. Howard may have professed himself to be an Englishman in Britain, but

²⁷⁰ The reviews in the trade press took particular encouragement from this point. As an example see 'The First of the Few', *Today's Cinema*, 21 Aug. 1942, p. 9.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁷² Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 14.

²⁷³ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 207.

patriotism in the Second World War had a British focus not an English one.²⁷⁴ The correspondents from Mass Observation who reported on *The First of the Few* make this distinction perfectly clear. The housewife from Huddersfield was not the only one who enjoyed the film the more ‘because it was British’.²⁷⁵

What did this all mean for the Spitfire in terms of transference? Howard had made a film about an Englishman. That housewife from Huddersfield had enjoyed the film ‘because it was British’.²⁷⁶ The point of contact between the two is of course a sense of identity. The question was which one represented the Spitfire? The answer, moving forward, would depend entirely on the perspective of the questioner. It was the start of a conversation about identity which has been a feature of the Spitfire’s legacy since.

To sum up this first chapter, a palimpsest is a multi-layered record, and for the Spitfire the accumulation of those layers began on 20 May 1939 Empire Air Day. The RAF opened the gates to its bases nationwide and pulled out all the stops to put on a good show; they were urgently in need of new recruits after five years of accelerated expansion. The Spitfire, as its latest fighter to go operational, was its recruitment sergeant on the day. What those large crowds witnessed, as the Spitfire swooped low and fast over the horizon, was more than a recruitment drive, however. In May 1939 war clouds were gathering. The Spitfire, shown off to its best advantage, appeared to the assembled crowds to possess the reassuring qualities of a champion, a potential war-winning weapon. A year before the Battle of Britain, there was already a distinct mark of difference between the public perception of the Spitfire and that of the Hurricane which had little to do with technology.

The second layer was the only one actually deposited during the summer of 1940. As the Battle of Britain raged overhead what could the non-combatant man, woman and child do to fight back? The answer turned out to be heard in the rattle of collecting tins. The raising of the Spitfire Funds was a phenomenon because it was a chance to make a personal contribution to a national crisis. How effective it was in terms of making war planes is highly

²⁷⁴ ‘Creatures of Habit’, BBC Home Service, 10 Nov. 1940. See also Patrick Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain* (London: Pan, 2002), p. 729.

²⁷⁵ Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, p. 280.

²⁷⁶ Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, p. 280.

debatable but it did offer a sense of empowerment. At the cost of a penny there was a way for everyone to be involved.

In the autumn of 1942, came the third and final layer to make up the multi-layered record. What Leslie Howard produced in his cinematic tribute to Mitchell and the Spitfire, *First of the Few*, was a fairy story. Good triumphed over evil. This was wartime, however, and good became the national cause and its champion, Mitchell, an ardent patriot and nationalist. The Spitfire, according to Howard, was the product of one man and that one man, Mitchell, represented the genius of a nation. What Howard set out to achieve in his propaganda piece was to stamp the Spitfire with the mark of English identity and the last layer in what was now a multi-layered record.

Chapter 2 - The Spitfire's Construction: A Question of Provenance

We have discovered the multi-layered record of the Spitfire. However, for it to be able to behave as a palimpsest after the war required the Spitfire to have one more special feature. It required a lack of provenance. It had to be free to be claimed by a new generation. It could not be bound to the mores and strictures of the generation of 1940. Leslie Howard in his own telling of the story of the development of the Spitfire in *The First of the Few* (1942) had actually worked hard to negate a sense of time, of chronology, in his narrative. It was necessary to help him draw out one of the central themes of the film, that of a timeless English genius. He was as vague about dates as he was about place. Mitchell's Schneider Trophy victories were blurred and homogenised. He was uninterested in the Spitfire as a technical achievement. Perhaps the most famous scene in the film is not Mitchell at the drawing board but watching gulls in flight. Howard's message to his audience was that Mitchell's inspiration was not born of any struggle with a 1930s slide rule but was instead rooted in something more elemental. Howard also avoided the business of design almost altogether and by so doing ignored the contributions made by key stakeholders in the 'real' story of the development of the Spitfire. Vickers, Supermarine and the Air Ministry are all peripheral to Howard's vision. Rolls-Royce only enjoyed a moment in the spotlight because it suited Howard's purpose. When Mitchell visited Rolls-Royce in search of an engine, it was to meet another personification of timeless English genius, Sir Henry Royce.

Today, we might admire how artfully this was all done, but in 1942 his audience was being deceived, which does beg a question. What about after the war? Surely the 'true' story behind the creation of the Spitfire emerged to shatter Howard's artfully constructed conceit? The fact is that it did not emerge. More than that, Howard's conceits actually received authoritative confirmation. In 1949, HMSO began publishing its official histories of the war, but there were always more questions than answers on the development of the Spitfire. Denis Richards and Hilary St George Saunders's magisterial three-volume account of the RAF's wartime operations published in 1953-4 was all but silent on the origins of the Spitfire.²⁷⁷ Basil Collier's *The Defence of the United Kingdom* (1957) offered a bare half

²⁷⁷ Denis Richards & Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1953).

paragraph and even then managed to get Mitchell's name wrong.²⁷⁸ Michael Postan, Denys Hay, and John Scott's, *Design and Development of Weapons: Studies in Government and Industrial Organisation* (1964) was alert to the legacy left behind by Leslie Howard. 'It is doubtful whether the popular version pays sufficient attention to the less personal and romantic stages of the story.'²⁷⁹ Unfortunately they were unable to offer much by way of a corrective. They even got some of their facts wrong.²⁸⁰

Such evidential mishap was a surprise considering the involvement of John Scott. He was a historian better placed than most to tell the story of the development of the Spitfire. In the late 1950s, the board of Vickers had invited Scott to write a history of the company. It was published in 1962, two years before *Design and Development of Weapons*.²⁸¹ Scott was given full access to the company's papers, which included those of Supermarine. He took his commission seriously and nowhere more so than in his research on the Spitfire. As is revealed in the Vickers archive, Scott interviewed or corresponded with almost every surviving senior member of Mitchell's design team. But even after all Scott's hard work, a credible account of the development of the Spitfire remained elusive. A clue as to why can be found in the preface he wrote to his history of Vickers. It reads like a historian's lament.

As regards what would now be called 'high-level' papers, the whole practice of discussion by memoranda, and of the keeping of records of what was said, by whom, on particular occasions, which is second nature to civil servants and people in public life, is very much a product of the answerability of ministers to Parliament, and does not necessarily have any counterpart in private business. It is hardly surprising therefore if no record is now available of the discussions which led to some of the most important decisions in this history. The record may have been destroyed; or the discussions may never have reached paper at all.²⁸²

Scott was talking about the Vickers archive, of which a subset was the Supermarine archive. Kenneth Agnew, who searched in the same archive thirty years later, was much more

²⁷⁸ Basil Collier, *Defence of the United Kingdom* (London: HMSO, 1957), p. 42.

²⁷⁹ Michael Postan, Denys Hays & John Scott, *Design and Development of Weapons: Studies in Government and Industrial Organisation* (London: HMSO, 1964), p. 87.

²⁸⁰ Confusion seems to have arisen over what was and what was not an experiment in terms of fighter construction at the Supermarine Works in the early 1930s, see p. 87.

²⁸¹ John Scott, *Vickers: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962).

²⁸² Ibid., p. xvi.

specific about the problems involved in tracing those ‘important decisions’ concerning the Spitfire. In preparing a case-history lecture for engineers, he had wanted to use the story behind the development of the Spitfire’s elliptical wing. What he discovered would not have surprised John Scott. He complained about ‘the extraordinary reluctance of designers to document in any way their early work...explained by the historic and persisting confusion of draughting with designing, and the consequent office culture of destroying any paperwork which is not a numbered and checked orthographic drawing with a border round it.’²⁸³ Agnew was perhaps being a little naive. What he was railing against was a typical work place culture, familiar even today, which does discourage the documentation of process as opposed to outcome.

Both John Scott and Kenneth Agnew had been frustrated, but so too had the Ministry of Aviation when it made its own enquiries into the origins of the Spitfire in 1958. The Ministry had commissioned John Jewkes, Fellow of Merton College and Professor of Economic Organisation, University of Oxford, to write a short developmental history of the Spitfire. Jewkes was an obvious choice. He had recently published to critical acclaim *The Sources of Invention*, an examination of commercial innovation evidenced by fifty different case studies.²⁸⁴ The Spitfire would make fifty one. Researchers working for, or, on behalf of Jewkes, sifted the Air Ministry files for clues as to the origins of the Spitfire. The result of their efforts was the compilation of one single large file which can still be viewed at the National Archives today, along with Jewkes’ twenty-page manuscript.²⁸⁵ Unfortunately, sifting also seems to have meant sorting, a tidy up which has left its own problems for students of the Spitfire. As it turned out Jewkes’ manuscript was only a modest affair, badly hampered by its narrow Air Ministry perspective. This may have simply been a consequence of his brief but it does mean that today, interest lies more in the reason why he was commissioned than what he actually wrote.

Jewkes, Scott and later Agnew were all hampered by a dearth of documentation on the Spitfire. What this meant, and still means, is that for the story behind the development of the Spitfire, anecdotal evidence, the memories of those that were primarily involved there,

²⁸³ Kenneth Agnew, ‘The Spitfire: Legend or History? An Argument for a New Research Culture in Design’, *Journal of Design History*, 6 (1993), p. 126.

²⁸⁴ John Jewkes, *The Sources of Invention* (London: Macmillan, 1958).

²⁸⁵ TNA, AVIA 46/119, ‘Type Biography Spitfire’, 1958..

is of prime importance. Of course we must exclude Mitchell himself who died on 11 June 1937 leaving no written legacy. There is a work diary, but Mitchell was no Samuel Pepys. He failed to even mention the first flight of the Spitfire. As noted above, Scott, for his chapter on the Spitfire in his Vickers history, interviewed almost all of the surviving members of Mitchell's design team in 1959. The evidence he gathered formed the basis of that work. There was one person he interviewed, however, whose evidence he took but did not use.

In November 1959, Scott travelled up to Galashiels to interview a frail but still mentally vital Sir Robert McLean, the former chairman of Vickers Aviation. It was McLean who had persuaded the Board of Vickers to buy Supermarine in 1928 and it was McLean who four years later commissioned the Spitfire from Mitchell. If anyone alive in 1959 could shatter Leslie Howard's artfully constructed conceit it was McLean. No-one was closer to the source. He knew its *raison d'être* having commissioned the Spitfire from Mitchell. As Mitchell's superior, and a trained engineer himself, he had been consulted by Mitchell at almost every stage of the Spitfire's development. McLean had insisted upon it. From drawing board to prototype, from prototype to first flight, from first flight to production, it was McLean that held the ultimate authority and responsibility for the Spitfire. Mitchell may have designed the Spitfire but McLean was in charge.

What McLean had to say to Scott in November 1959 was controversial, but then that would have come as no surprise to the Vickers historian. McLean was only repeating what he had already said in *The Times* in August 1957.²⁸⁶ Scott would probably have been surprised if McLean had said anything else having interviewed others who had known and worked for McLean at Supermarine. What Scott was hoping to achieve by visiting McLean is not entirely clear. Presumably he was intent on taking the measure of the man and his controversial story himself.²⁸⁷ In his finished chapter on the Spitfire in his Vickers history, Scott put considerable effort into trying to explain, if not excuse, McLean to his readers. Scott was obviously impressed by the man he met in Galashiels and recognised his

²⁸⁶ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

²⁸⁷ In his interviews and correspondence with various members of Mitchell's design team, Scott had been given conflicting accounts of the personality and management style of McLean. See CUL, VD 701, 'Note of an Interview with Dr Wallis at Weybridge', 28 Sept. 1959; CUL, VD 746, 'Shenstone corrections for Scott's sixth draft of Chapter 19', 29 Jan. 1960.

importance to the Spitfire story. What Scott did not do, though, was pass on to his readers what McLean told him. McLean's reminiscences were of an incendiary nature. When he had been given a public platform, in *The Times* two years before, what he had said had effectively scuppered any hope of a post-war consensus view emerging on the creation of the Spitfire. It meant there would be nothing to replace the imaginary tale told by Leslie Howard.

The Controversy is Born

What appeared in *The Times* in August 1957 was actually an epistolary spat between McLean and Sir Edward Ellington, Marshall of the Royal Air Force. Ellington had no personal animus toward McLean and was in fact going into battle on behalf of his ex-colleague and friend Lord Dowding. The spat was prompted by the publication of Basil Collier's authorised biography of Lord Dowding in the summer of 1957 which had just been serialised in the *Sunday Times*. Collier had impeccable credentials for such a biography. He was an intelligence officer in Dowding's Fighter Command during the war, and had been appointed its Air Historical Officer at its end. On leaving the RAF in 1948 he had joined the Cabinet Office as a member of the team working on the official histories.²⁸⁸ It was two paragraphs in particular from the new biography that seemed to have goaded McLean into picking up his pen.

The two paragraphs in question deal with Dowding's decision to withdraw the government's support for a replacement for the Schneider Trophy after Mitchell had won it outright for Britain with his third Supermarine victory in 1931. Dowding was, at the time, a year into his new job as Air Member for Supply and Research. This is what McLean read.

He recommended that, instead of spending any of its scanty funds on further racing, the Air Ministry should give aircraft manufacturers and designers an opportunity of putting this experience to good use in the national interest, by ordering two landplanes built to give the highest performance compatible with a practical landing-speed on such aerodromes as were available.

²⁸⁸ Collier's contribution in the United Kingdom Military series was *Defence of the United Kingdom* (London: HMSO, 1957).

This recommendation was accepted. Manufacturers likely to be interested were invited to submit designs, and a number did so. Those submitted by Hawker Aircraft Limited and Supermarine Limited seemed most suitable. In due course prototypes built to those designs were ordered. Thus were born the Hurricane and the Spitfire. Only after this step had been taken was the potential value of these machines as high performance fighters recognized. Appropriate specifications were then drawn up... The popular impression that their designers conceived them from the outset as a means of saving Britain from the onslaught of a militant Germany is a misconception fostered by writers and film-directors doubtless unaware that both machines were ordered in the first place as an experiment.²⁸⁹

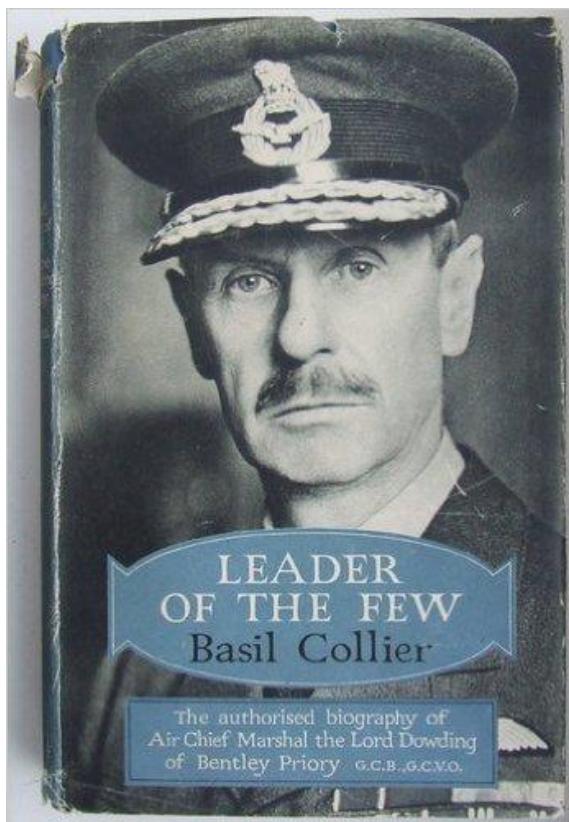


Figure 10. Cover of *Leader of the Few* Authorised Biography of Lord Dowding of Bentley Priory

²⁸⁹ Basil Collier, *Leader of the Few: The Authorised Biography of Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding of Bentley Priory, G.C.B., G.C.V.O., C.M.G.* (London: Jarrods, 1957), p. 141.

Collier is of course referring to Leslie Howard's 1942 summer box office hit *The First of the Few*. Collier's interpretation of events was clearly too much for McLean. He picked up his pen and composed a letter to the *Sunday Times*. It was in *The Times*, however, which had quickly jumped on the story that the spat now proceeded for two weeks in August 1957.

An Air Ministry order for an experimental fighter aircraft 'so experimental that nobody wanted anything to do with it' led the Vickers aircraft company to design and build a fighter aircraft of their own, which later became the Spitfire, Sir Robert McLean, formally Managing Director of Vickers (Aviation) Ltd., said yesterday...

'We were not great friends at the time and it was not likely the Air Ministry would pick on my company to do anything like build a new fighter; they gave us this crazy thing and called it an experimental machine. It was so experimental nobody wanted anything to do with it...The only thing to do was to build one ourselves. We had a large development fund and I used my own discretion, and we were on our own.'²⁹⁰

The Times then added some useful context for its readers.

In a letter to the *Sunday Times* yesterday Sir Robert McLean commented on Mr. Colliers's statement in an extract of Lord Dowding's biography, published last week, that both the Hurricane and the Spitfire were ordered by the Air Ministry as an experiment from designs submitted by Hawker Aircraft and Supermarine respectively. Sir Robert McLean said that the two companies were each chosen to build an experimental machine, but the one allotted to Supermarine seemed in the eyes of their chief designer, Mr. R. J. Mitchell, 'to incorporate many conceptions hostile to the very basis of fighter efficiency, speed, and aggressiveness.'

...Sir Robert McLean...felt that Mitchell and Dr. Barnes Wallis would do better by devoting their qualities not to the official experimental fighter but to a real killer fighter which was eventually to become the Spitfire. After unfruitful discussions with the Air Ministry, he and his opposite number in Rolls-Royce, the late A. F. Sidgreaves, decided that the two companies should themselves finance the building of such an aircraft. 'The Air Ministry was informed of the decision, and were told that in no

²⁹⁰ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

circumstances would any technical member of the Air Ministry be consulted or allowed to interfere with the designer.’²⁹¹

McLean’s version of events was given added credibility when *The Times* now went in search of corroboration.

Sir George Edwards, Managing director of Vickers-Armstrongs (Aircraft) Ltd., said that it was the accepted legend in the company that the Spitfire came about in spite of everything the Air Ministry could do. There was a specification for an aircraft, but in Mitchell’s opinion it would not have been any good.

‘He was an individualistic man, as brilliant designers have to be, who said he was not going to be tied down to an Air-Ministry inspired and dictated aeroplane, and could do much better if he was given a free hand.’ Sir George Edwards said.²⁹²

Lord Dowding was asked for his comment too. What he said to the reporter from *The Times*, however, did not corroborate McLean’s version of events at all.

Lord Dowding said his recollections was clear that the prototypes of the Hurricane and Spitfire were ordered, not to a specification as fighters but as experimental machines which would take advantage of the aerodynamic and engine knowledge gained in winning the Schneider Trophy, to fly as fast as possible and with no limitations except for landing and take-off...²⁹³

It was now that Sir Edward Ellington, a member alongside Dowding of the Air Council in 1931, later to be Chief of the Air Staff himself, entered the debate on his old colleague’s behalf.

I agree with Lord Dowding’s statement that what eventually became the prototype of the Hurricane and the Spitfire were ordered as experimental aircraft pure and simple, with the only restriction that they could be used from existing landing grounds and flown by the average fully trained fighter pilots. As Air Member for Supply and Research, Lord Dowding had at his disposal a sum of money which he

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

could use at his sole discretion for experimental orders, and he wisely devoted the money to this object.

The Hawker Aircraft Company and Supermarine Company received these orders and both, foreseeing that no production orders could follow even success, decided so to design the aircraft that, with a change of wing, they could become fighters. The Air Ministry, knowing this, arranged that the wings should be designed to contain eight .303 machine guns, since the experiments conducted at Northolt under the supervision of the Fighter Committee had shown that no smaller number would produce what they called a 'lethal density' on the enemy target in the time an average pilot could hold his sights on the target....I cannot recognize 'the real killer fighter' referred to by Sir Robert McLean.²⁹⁴

Could anyone recognize 'the real killer fighter' referred to by McLean? Was McLean dealing in falsehoods as Ellington seemed to be implying? Looking for adjudication on the matter, *The Times* asked the Air Ministry for its view, but received nothing useful by way of a reply.

The Air Ministry official said that at this stage they did not wish to cross swords with Vickers or to deny the genius of the late Mr. Mitchell, the designer of the Spitfire.²⁹⁵

The Air Ministry was probably wise to maintain a diplomatic silence because its own Air Historical Branch was implicated in the affair. In 1955, Collier had approached J. C. Nerney, leader of the Air Historical Branch, asking for permission to consult official documents for his biography of Dowding then in development. Nerney agreed on two conditions. The first was that he or at least his department would be able to inspect the manuscript before publication. The second was that it had to be clear to the reader that the biography was not an official history.²⁹⁶ Dealing with the personalities of senior commanders, ensuring a balanced portrayal, was a sensitive issue for the Official Historians.²⁹⁷ Collier's use of the term 'authorised' in his title was therefore ambiguous at best. It was authorised only in the

²⁹⁴ 'The Spitfire's Origins', *The Times*, 23 Aug. 1957, p. 9.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ TNA, AIR 2/17032, J.C. Nerney to B. Humphrey Davis, 3 Aug. 1955.

²⁹⁷ See Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A History of Bomber Command* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), pp. 137-157.

sense that Lord Dowding had co-operated in its preparation. As we shall see, this was not what McLean took it to mean.

As agreed, Collier sent the galley proofs to Nerney before publication. They can be read today at the National Archives with what are presumably Nerney's own emendations in the margins.²⁹⁸ Nerney demanded very few revisions but he did want one which had a significant bearing here. In the galley proofs, Collier had ended the paragraph that so offended McLean with the words 'ordered in the first place as experimental craft'.²⁹⁹ Nerney insisted on the change from 'experimental craft' to 'experiment'. As Nerney explained, 'surely 'experimental craft' meant that this would be used for war purposes. Otherwise there was little purpose in the R.A.F fostering them'.³⁰⁰ This was no mere quibbling over semantics. Nerney wanted Collier to imply that the Spitfire was ordered as a war machine fully-formed, an experiment perhaps, but war-ready nevertheless. Dowding only ever said, and he said it once again when asked by *The Times*, that the Spitfire was ordered as part of an experimental programme. The change of emphasis insisted upon by Nerney suggested that Dowding and the Air Ministry had in fact specified the high performance Spitfire rather than being surprised by it, which was in essence McLean's point.

Who was telling the truth? It ought to be repeated, in terms of the development of the Spitfire, with no step by step documentation and no Mitchell, it was McLean that was in effect, the primary source. Here he was being given the perfect opportunity to set the record straight, to disavow Howard's fable and replace it with the story of what actually happened. If he had, the Spitfire's career as a palimpsest might have looked very different. It might even have ground to halt then and there. McLean, however, did not set the record straight. He did not disavow Howard's fable, he actually went some way to confirming it. The question for the rest of this chapter is why did he do such a thing?

There appear to be two paths to understanding. The first has to do with Collier's use of the word 'authorised'. At a time when official histories were regularly going to press, 'authorised' meant only one thing to McLean and that was the unseen hand of the Air Ministry. He says as much in yet another letter to *The Times* which they ignored having

²⁹⁸ TNA, AIR 2/17032, Biography of Lord Dowding - Galley Proofs, n.d.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ TNA, AIR 2/17032, 'Comments by Head of A.H.B. on Manuscript Submitted by the Author', 13 Mar. 1957.

finally grown tired of the story.³⁰¹ As we shall see, for McLean, such an idea would have been a red rag to a bull. The second reason is to do with his own role in the creation of the Spitfire. There is an argument to be made that Mitchell designed the Spitfire not because of McLean but in spite of him. McLean may have been an obstructive rather than a constructive presence for Mitchell. The explosion of claim and counter claim in August 1957 did not offer a clear alternative to Leslie Howard's fable which was left, if anything, even more secure. Added security was now a cloaking miasma of misinformation. In tracing the troubled career of Sir Robert McLean as chairman of Vickers Aviation, and exploring his working relationship with Mitchell, we may hope to find out why he misled readers in *The Times* and in fact all those seeking answers to the question of the Spitfire's provenance.

The First Mistake by Sir Robert McLean

A vital contributory factor for McLean's outburst in *The Times* in 1957 was his belief that the Air Ministry was behind Basil Collier's new biography of Lord Dowding. It had been a long simmering hatred, one which had its roots in McLean's first dealings with the Air Ministry almost three years before the Spitfire project was first mooted. It was to a degree his own fault, a consequence of a mistaken decision he took right at the beginning of his tenure as chairman of Vickers Aviation. In February 1928, Anthony Vickers, scion of the great armament house of Vickers, wrote to the chairman of Canadian Vickers Ltd. 'At long last we are beginning to put our Aviation house in order. A separate Company is being formed, the Chairman Sir Robert McLean – a most excellent fellow who has come into the business lately, a good engineer, a fine organiser, thoroughly practical and absolutely white!'³⁰² The new man's *curriculum vitae* was certainly impressive. McLean had been educated at Edinburgh Academy and Edinburgh University, where he had taken a degree in engineering. In 1905, he became an Assistant Engineer in the Indian Public Works Department working on the maintenance and operation of the railways and the survey and construction of new railways in India and Burma. He had a good war record. He had served with the British Expeditionary Force in Aden and Mesopotamia and in France. In 1920, he had become Secretary to the Railway Board, Government of India. His services were loaned in 1921 to the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Co., of which he was first Deputy General Manager and,

³⁰¹ CUL, VD 746, Unpublished Letter to *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1957.

³⁰² CUL, VD 687, Anthony Vickers to George Barr, 6 Feb. 1928.

later, General Manager. Such a fine record of public service was rewarded with a knighthood in 1926 and the apogee of his Indian career was reached with his tenure from 1923 till 1927 as a Trustee of the Port of Bombay.³⁰³ It was a record of achievement but what of McLean's character, what was Anthony Vickers alluding to when he called McLean 'absolutely white'?



Figure 11. Sir Robert McLean

The most illuminating analysis of McLean the man is to be found in the official history of Vickers written by John Scott and published in 1962.³⁰⁴ Scott described McLean as 'a man of granite integrity and austere independence of mind, McLean accepted authority as something which his character was bound to bring him, and the loneliness of high responsibility as his natural habitat.'³⁰⁵ The key to understanding his character according to Scott was his vice-regal attitude. This had consequences for all those who had to deal with

³⁰³ 'The S. B. A. C.', *Aeroplane*, 5 June 1935, p. 7.

³⁰⁴ Scott, *Vickers*.

³⁰⁵ Scott, *Vickers*, p. 200.

him. ‘Men cast in a less august mould were, however, apt to find McLean’s uncommunicative independence trying or even unnerving.’³⁰⁶

Mclean had been handed a golden opportunity at Vickers Aviation. He had arrived at Vickers in February 1927 in the middle of the negotiations for the merger of Vickers with Armstrong Whitworth. Vickers main board was distracted and McLean’s appointment seems to have been waved through on the nod. Whether McLean was promised an independent command, the opportunity to build an empire of his own, we do not know, but in June 1928, that was in effect the opportunity he was given. ‘McLean was directly responsible to the Board of Vickers Limited and there was no intermediary control. He was therefore in a position of considerable independence and authority.’³⁰⁷ In practice, McLean had only to report to General Sir Herbert Lawrence, very soon to be chairman of the Vickers Board. Lawrence would prove a staunch ally of McLean’s. It would be Lawrence who would protect him when that Augustan character began to betray itself. It was a matter of empathy according to Scott, Lawrence recognised a kindred spirit, ‘there was after all pro-consular blood in his own veins.’³⁰⁸

When McLean sat down in his office at Vickers House in London for the first time in February 1927, there was no doubt that things needed shaking up. Vickers’ aviation interests had been in the care of a rising star at Vickers, Sir Charles Craven, but he was an ex-naval officer and a ship man. ‘Craven had been in charge, but having no interest in or knowledge of aviation, he had been doing nothing except allow the company to run on in accordance with the routines already been formed.’³⁰⁹ How was McLean to proceed? He quickly discovered he had three choices. The first was to expand the military side of the business upon which Vickers Aviation had been built.

The Great War had not so much as encouraged a growth of the British aviation industry as caused one. In 1914, the combined efforts of the entire industry built ten aircraft a month. By 1918, this figure had risen to 2,688 and would not stop climbing until it reached 4000 a

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ CUL, VD 701, ‘Note of an Interview with Dr Wallis at Weybridge’, 28 Sept. 1959.

³⁰⁸ Scott, *Vickers*, p. 200.

³⁰⁹ CUL, VD 252, Notes of a series of Interviews with Sir Robert McLean at Galashiels, 8/9 Nov. 1959.

month.³¹⁰ Vickers enjoyed more than its fair share of this bounty. In 1918, the newly expanded Vickers plant at Brooklands alone accounted for one tenth of the industry's monthly production quota.³¹¹ Such prodigious output had grown a new military giant. By the end of the war the RAF, formally established on 1 April 1918, was the world's largest air force. It possessed 22,647 aircraft and 103 airships and had over 26,000 trained pilots and a further 266,000 officers and men. Supporting this giant was the world's largest aircraft manufacturing industry employing approximately 177,000 men and women.³¹² But such good times were to come to an abrupt halt. 'It seems to be a trait of democracies that after a victorious war their military forces do not simply demobilize, they disintegrate'.³¹³ This is what happened to the RAF, a complement of over 22,000 aircraft in November 1918, was by March 1919 reduced to a bare 200.³¹⁴

Although the military market collapsed, it did not disappear altogether. David Edgerton has argued that talk of the period 1920-1934 as the 'lean years' is misleading.³¹⁵ It was certainly true that prospects brightened as early as 1923, when the government announced it would create a 52 squadron home defence force. Vickers, in the first years after the war, was actually doing rather well out of the Air Ministry and certainly better than anyone else.³¹⁶ This was largely down to Rex Pierson its chief designer. He was a good designer but a better salesman. Pierson had secured a 'special relationship' with senior Royal Air Force officers. By the late 1920s, 'Pierson was uniquely regarded as the Air Force's own designer, almost as an RAF officer himself'.³¹⁷ McLean was not minded to interfere. His second option was the lighter than air business, airships. Vickers was already building the R100 under contract for the government but there were precious few other customers, even worldwide, for a half million-pound airship. This left McLean with one last option, the civilian market, and it was here that his gaze settled.

³¹⁰ Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 21.

³¹¹ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 22.

³¹² Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 21.

³¹³ Meilinger, 'Trenchard and "Morale Bombing"', p. 251.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ See Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, p. 35.

³¹⁶ Sebastian Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power: The Expansion of British Aircraft Production, 1935-1941* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.

³¹⁷ Jack Morpurgo, *Barnes Wallis: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 196.

McLean was not interested in the private flyer.³¹⁸ What he was interested in was the potential of the airline market, bigger craft and bigger profits. Imperial Airways had been incorporated by the government, three years before in 1924, with capital of one million pounds and a further subsidy of another one million pounds.³¹⁹ One of the stipulations the government had made to Imperial Airways in consideration of that sum, was the requirement to buy from British manufacturers. British aircraft were going to open up the British Empire. ‘In prospect were better public administration (quicker personal travel and document exchange); cheaper and more effective aerial survey and management of natural resources; quicker trade in small, light and precious commodities; less alienating (semi) permanent overseas settlement; more rapid receipt of letters and news; easier social circulation by imperial elites.’³²⁰ It was a long and potentially profitable list. McLean’s mind was made up.

In 1927, there was no mystery as to what sort of aircraft would be required to satisfy Imperial Airways. Infrastructure or rather the lack of it dictated that.³²¹ There were no airfields along the routes now being planned to crisscross the Empire only water-ways. This meant flying boats. In the Vickers Archive there survives a memorandum written by McLean to the Vickers Board entitled ‘Flying Boats’.³²²

The Board are aware that we have been looking into flying boat business to see if we could usefully acquire a holding in one of them. The reason is that there is virtual unanimity that as aircraft increases in size they must take the form of boats, as land aerodromes, except at prohibitive first cost, cannot take heavy land machines in all conditions of weather. Orders given by the Air Ministry for flying boats are restricted to the firms of boat builders on their list, viz: Blackburns, Saunders, Shorts and Supermarine.³²³

³¹⁸ In the memorandum McLean wrote to the Vickers Board explaining his vision for Vickers Aviation, the private flyer is not mentioned. See CUL, VD 747, Sir Robert McLean, Memorandum to Board, 29 Oct. 1928.

³¹⁹ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 72.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

³²¹ See Pirie, *Air Empire*, pp. 197-200.

³²² CUL, VD 747, Sir Robert McLean, Memorandum to Board, 29 Oct. 1928.

³²³ Ibid.



Figure 12. Aerial view of the Supermarine Factory, Woolston, (1919)

McLean was new to the aviation business but he was already aware of its guarded perimeter. At the end of the First World War, the Air Ministry in anticipation of the financial tsunami about to sweep through the aviation industry had decided to establish a 'list', 'family', or 'ring' (it has been called all of these) of approved manufacturers to whom it would parcel out its much reduced peacetime orders. By so doing it hoped to maintain a core capacity upon which it might build in any future emergency. It was not just a matter of rationing orders. The Air Ministry wanted to maintain capability as well as capacity. It therefore decided only to feed individual design departments with the type of projects it wished them to specialise in. Rex Pierson at Weybridge for instance built bombers for the Air Ministry not flying boats.³²⁴ This meant McLean had to buy a company from which the Air Ministry would be prepared to buy flying boats, that is to say Blackburns, Saunders, Shorts or Supermarine.

I have inspected Blackburn's Works, which are not in a flourishing condition, and though I have not seen Shorts, their aviation is so intermixed with other activities that the business would not be what we are seeking. In May last I had a conversation with Mr. Saunders, but they were broken off as he asked an

³²⁴ See Ritchie, *Industry and Airpower*, pp. 22-29. For how Air Ministry procurement policy impacted upon Vickers Aviation see CUL, VD 747, Sir Robert McLean, Memorandum to Board, 29 Oct. 1928.

unreasonable sum for his properties while his business has little or no goodwill. In August, I heard that Commander Bird, who owns Supermarine, would not be unwilling to dispose of his interests.³²⁵

McLean then goes on to extol the virtues of Supermarine to his board.

The chief designer of Supermarine is Mr. Mitchell, who produced the winner of the last Schneider Cup, the machine on which the attempt on the speed record is about to be made, and has now in hand two machines for the next Schneider Cup. He is responsible for the 'Southampton', which has a world reputation after its recent flights, and moreover is the only military flying boat which has ever been produced in quantity. Mr Mitchell is bound to the company for a further 7 years and in him they have the most outstanding British designer of flying boats.³²⁶



Figure 13. R. J. Mitchell with plans in the drawing office at Supermarine

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

Those 'recent flights' were path-finding journeys to Australia, which had impressed the industry just as much as they had impressed the public. 'The journey of the far east flight, RAF, in four all metal Southampton's to Singapore, round Australia back to Singapore, and thence to Hong Kong and back is one of the world's greatest achievements and it is certainly the greatest performance put up by flying boats.'³²⁷ Finally, McLean confirmed his strategy to his board and the tactics he meant to employ to succeed.

Hitherto Supermarine has concentrated on military craft. They have done little or nothing in the commercial field and that, both flying boat and amphibian remains to be developed. The Air Ministry are now taking the first steps towards the development of big boats by calling for tenders for the construction of a boat up to 60,000 lbs. From that, it is their intention to proceed by substantial increases in weight to larger craft. One essential step in the development will be the application of steel, and especially stainless steel, to hull and superstructure construction. No organisation in the Industry is so well qualified as Vickers to study and try out such development, and as size increases and the boats become more seaworthy, the field for civil craft will undoubtedly expand.³²⁸

The Vickers Board was persuaded and an offer of £390,000 was sent to Commander Bird on the 31 October 1928 and accepted. There were, as is the way of these things, a number of conditions attached to the offer. Almost all of them were coincidental, pension provisions, the sale of property, but one particular condition spoke volumes about this acquisition. 'Mr. R.J. Mitchell is bound to the company without option of terminating his agreement before 5th December 1933'.³²⁹ Unfortunately it did not take long for McLean's strategy to show signs of stress and it was all because of Imperial Airways.

The civil aviation market in Britain had been monopolised on behalf of the government by Imperial Airways in the mid-1920s, but it must have seemed a monopoly to very little purpose. 'Both in terms of type and quantity of aircraft ordered, Imperial Airways was not able to offer the stimulus to the British aircraft industry that would enable its many gifted

³²⁷ 'On 1928', *Aeroplane*, 26 Dec. 1928, p. 47.

³²⁸ CUL, VD 747, Sir Robert McLean, Memorandum to Board, 'Flying Boats', 29 Oct. 1928.

³²⁹ CUL, VD 122, Copy of Commander James Bird's Contract with Vickers (Aviation) Limited, 31 Oct. 1928.

designers to produce path-breaking large civil airliners.³³⁰ To make matters worse for McLean, Mitchell and Supermarine, what flying boat work was being done in Britain was being done increasingly on the Medway, not the Solent. Shorts of Rochester had stolen a march on Supermarine with their pioneering use of metal structures. McLean had told the Vickers Main Board that the future of aviation laid in stainless steel, but in 1931 Supermarine was still shaping in wood.

The worst blow was yet to fall. In May 1929, only seven months into the new regime, Supermarine had received Air Ministry specification R.20/28. This was for a forty-seat civil flying-boat. It was a big contract and a feather in the cap for the new team of McLean, Mitchell and Supermarine. This six-engine 185 foot wide wingspan flying boat monster was precisely the type and scale of contract McLean had envisaged when he had persuaded the Vickers Board to buy Supermarine. The contract was cancelled in February 1932. It was not just McLean or Mitchell that were left dumbfounded, consternation rippled across the industry. Questions were raised in the House of Commons. Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane*, made his feelings perfectly clear, ‘the cancellation of the Supermarine is the falsest of the false economy. A Chancellor who understood the difference between false economy and efficient expenditure and had sufficient intellect to keep in touch with the great developments of the day, of which air transport is perhaps the most important to the welfare of the Empire.’³³¹

What it meant for Supermarine, was redundancies. ‘The office boy emerged 20 times from Joe’s office to tell draughtsmen that Joe wished to see them.’³³² Joe Smith was Mitchell’s right-hand man and chief draughtsman. As for Mitchell himself, this calamity was neither forgotten nor forgiven. A year later and it still rankled. In an article written for the *Daily Mirror* in October 1934 commenting on the Macpherson Robertson England-Air Race he wrote this. ‘Our Empire is so widely spread that fast aerial transport is perhaps the most

³³⁰ Peter Fearon, ‘The Growth of Aviation in Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20 (1985), p. 32.

³³¹ Cited in Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: Widening Horizons 1930-1934* (London: HMSO, 1979), p. 127.

³³² Mike Roussell, *Spitfire’s Forgotten Designer: The Career of Supermarine’s Joe Smith* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), p. 76.

vital necessity of our existence. Why are we so slow in the development of our big air-liners, and why are we being left behind by other countries?³³³

McLean's first contact with a government sponsored aviation programme had not gone well. In fact it had proved a complete miscalculation. It was not of course strictly McLean's fault but that was not the point, it was his responsibility. What it did not do was deter him from bidding for government contracts. On the contrary, in the winter of 1931 he had a new plan. What it did do, though, was clarify for him the nature of the beast he was dealing with. It was another mistake. He judged, and was never to waver in his judgement, that the Air Ministry was a deeply conservative organisation, and proceeded to act accordingly. He held the Air Ministry in contempt right up to the point of his departure from Vickers Aviation in October 1938.

The Second Mistake by Sir Robert McLean

On 7 October 1931, almost three years to the day since Supermarine had been acquired; a board meeting of Vickers Aviation was called. Present at that meeting were McLean, his three chief designers, Pierson, Mitchell and Barnes Wallis, the company's chief test pilot Mutt Summers, and Air Commodore Chamier, poached by McLean from his post as Director of Technical Developments at the Air Ministry to co-ordinate the work of Pierson, Mitchell and Barnes Wallis. It was a management arrangement that was in fact about to end. This was almost the last board meeting Chamier attended. McLean had mismanaged the integration of Supermarine into Vickers Aviation. The first mistake he had made was with the appointment of Chamier. The problem was not in Chamier's capabilities so much as the position he now found himself in.

Air Commodore J. A. Chamier has been appointed Head of the Design Department of the combined Vickers and Supermarine works. With Mr Mitchell of the Supermarine works, and Mr Pierson of the Vickers Weybridge works working as a team there is little doubt that the new Vickers product will go far towards putting this country in front of the world in the development of practical air transport.³³⁴

³³³ 'What is Happening Now in Air Transport', *Daily Mirror*, 23 Oct. 1934, p. 12.

³³⁴ 'Vickers (Aviation) Limited', *Aeroplane*, 8 Jan. 1930, p. 7.

It never did properly work as a team, neither Pierson nor Mitchell appreciated Chamier looking over their shoulders. The success of the arrangement can be judged by its longevity, just over two years. Chamier resigned from his position to become Secretary-General of the Air League. McLean next interfered on the Supermarine shop floor which had been Mitchell's private domain before the takeover. He appointed his own man, Trevor Westbrook, 'to ginger up the production arrangements'.³³⁵ Westbrook's methods were not appreciated. Here is a view from the shop floor. The view from the senior manager's office, however, was very different.³³⁶ Westbrook's 'persuasive' manner would eventually see him seconded to the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

Trevor Westbrook [the Superintendent appointed by Vickers Weybridge on taking over Supermarines] was making his presence felt in a rather unpleasant fashion...Many of his decisions were far too hasty and caused considerable resentment amongst the staff on top of that already generated by the take-over....We, rather naturally, considered that we built better aircraft than Vickers and the idea of being bossed about by them did not appeal to us at all. A rather crude joke went round the Workshops in the form of a question and answer. The question – 'Why are we like a crowd of choirboys?' The answer 'because we are being buggered by Vickers!'³³⁷

McLean then almost brought complete calamity down on his head. He informed Mitchell that Barnes Wallis, assistant to Rex Pierson at Weybridge, was going to be Mitchell's new design partner at Supermarine. Jack Morpurgo, Barnes Wallis's biographer, takes up the story. 'When they were together they seldom spoke, but after a few weeks they were seldom together in the office they were supposed to share, for one or other of them was up in London complaining that the situation could not be allowed to continue.'³³⁸ Mitchell won this battle. Barnes Wallis was recalled to Weybridge. But it was indicative of wider

³³⁵ Jeffrey Quill, *Spitfire: A Test Pilot's Story* (Manchester: Crecy, 1996), p. 80.

³³⁶ See Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power*, p. 100.

³³⁷ CUL, VD 1900, D. Le P. Webb, 'Never a Dull Moment: A Personal History of Vickers Supermarine 1926 – 1960', unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 39.

³³⁸ Morpurgo, *Barnes Wallis*, p. 219.

problems at Supermarine. ‘There was not a great deal of work going on in those days and in about 1930-31 in particular Supermarine were very short.’³³⁹

Those summoned to the Board meeting that October day in 1931 would have known very well which way the financial winds were blowing.³⁴⁰ It was not just Supermarine that was in the doldrums, it was the group as a whole. Mitchell, Pierson and Barnes Wallis, as co-chief designers were all paid the same by McLean. In 1929 they had each received a handsome bonus of £1,105, but it was a figure not to be repeated anytime soon. The bonus for the coming year was to be a more modest £691.³⁴¹ As for their basic salary, a generous £2,500 per annum, all three chief designers would shortly be agreeing to ‘accept the cut of 5% enforced throughout the group in April 1932’.³⁴² The Vickers group was struggling, 1930 was a poor year, and 1931 was even worse.³⁴³ As for 1932, it turned out to be the worst year of the Depression.³⁴⁴ No-one was immune to these poor trading conditions but it was the travails on the South coast that were the main concern that day. The meeting began with a summation of the problems facing Supermarine.

The object of this meeting was to discuss the present position of unfilled types in the services and the possibility of selecting a civil or military type or types, which might be designed and built at Southampton with a view to filling a possible gap if boat business diminishes.

There was general agreement that in the present state of world economics, a civil type, however successful, was not likely to bring a substantial volume of work to the factory, and it was felt that it was better, at the risk of a gap of some extent, to try to win a competition for an Air Ministry type, with the assurance of satisfactory orders over a period should we be successful.³⁴⁵

McLean was intent on a strategic U-turn and he had come prepared. He had a proposal to put before his Vickers Aviation Board that October day. He had intelligence, perhaps via

³³⁹ CUL, VD 701, Note of an Interview with Trevor Westbrook, 15 Oct. 1959.

³⁴⁰ Ritchie, *Industry and Air Power*, p. 9.

³⁴¹ CUL, VD 332, ‘Designers Agreements’, April 1932,

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ See Scott, *Vickers*, p. 195.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ CUL, VD 321, ‘Programme of Type Development’, 7 Oct. 1931.

Chamier, that the Air Ministry would shortly be in the market for a new Day-Night Fighter. This was understood to be a replacement for the 178 mph fighter bi-plane, the Bristol Bulldog. Over four hundred Bulldogs had been delivered to the RAF equipping ten out of the thirteen home fighter squadrons which made it the standard RAF fighter of the early 1930s. Any firm supplying its replacement might therefore expect considerable and profitable business. The board was told ‘the specification for this type is due out shortly. It seemed, so far as known, a specification that would lend itself to a low wing monoplane or a pusher.’³⁴⁶ The issuing of a specification was the first stage in a competitive tendering process. As it was to be a competition the discussion quickly turned to the matter of competitive advantage.

It was thought that the Schneider atmosphere could be reproduced in a Supermarine prototype, carrying prestige with the Air Ministry and with possible foreign purchasers. It was agreed, therefore, that Supermarine would enter for this competition hoping to get a prototype order, but if not, probably building a private venture.³⁴⁷

Mitchell’s latest triumph in the Schneider Trophy had happened only three weeks before. It was only the week before, on 29 September, that Flight-Lieutenant Stainforth piloting Mitchell’s S.6B had broken the world speed record. There had been tremendous public interest generated by these events.

We now come to that specification. In *The Times* McLean had said ‘they gave us this crazy thing and called it an experimental machine. It was so experimental nobody wanted anything to do with it.’³⁴⁸ Sir George Edwards, the managing director of Vickers-Armstrongs (Aircraft) Ltd., appeared to agree. ‘There was a specification for an aircraft, but in Mitchell’s opinion it would not have been any good.’³⁴⁹ It seems quite clear therefore that the specification was for a ‘crazy thing’ which Mitchell immediately disavowed, leaving him free to get on with his own Spitfire design. This was nonsense, a misrepresentation of the facts and a misrepresentation too of Mitchell’s opinion on that specification. To discover

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ ‘Spitfire’s Origin in an Experimental Thing’, *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

what actually happened we have to start in 1930, with a new appointment in that organisation which McLean already held in suspicion if not yet quite contempt.

Air-Vice Marshall H. C. C. 'Stuffy' Dowding joined the Air Council of the Air Ministry as Air Member for Supply and Research on 1 September 1930.³⁵⁰ Although Dowding's new title was Air Member for Supply and Research, he was not actually in total command of the Air Ministry's procurement process. He had to work with and through Operational Requirements, a small section directly responsible to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff. Its remit was to take soundings and identify the qualities necessary for any new aircraft type. Once requirements were identified, the responsibility for its delivery was handed over to Dowding's department. Those responsibilities were onerous.

This meant deciding what technical features were required to meet the new operational demands, what modifications, if any, were needed in the existing types and whether types should be ordered from the industry. If a new type was to be ordered, its broad technical characteristics, or what would be usually termed its specification, had to be formulated. This also involved inviting designs from firms; judging the quality of the firms' projects (whether produced in response to Government Specifications or as private ventures); ordering prototypes; watching over the successes or failures of the prototype tests and development, and finally recommending the new aircraft or the modification of the established aircraft for quantity production.³⁵¹

Dowding's department was itself split into two directorates. The directorate of technical development worked closely with operational requirements and the directorate of scientific research took the task of overseeing basic aeronautical research. This more strategic directorate was primarily a funding body, the work itself carried out by the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, the universities, and within industry itself. Financing air frame manufacturers to undertake basic research could on occasion blur the line between innovation and implementation, between experimental prototype and commercial

³⁵⁰ The most recent biography of Lord Dowding is Vincent Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008).

³⁵¹ Postan, Hay & Scott, *Design and Development of Weapons*, p. 46.

opportunity. We will return to this point; what was and what was not ‘experimental’ was germane to McLean’s 1957 version of events.

Sitting on Dowding’s desk awaiting his arrival at his new post in September 1930 was a draft specification for a new day and night-zone fighter, specification F7/30. The specification number was broken down as follows, F identified the type of aircraft, in this case fighter, the number 7 referred to the seventh specification issued in a particular year, and the year itself was the last number, in this case 1930. This specification had begun life in October 1929 in response, as noted above, to a requirement to replace the 178 mph fighter bi-plane the Bristol Bulldog. The specification had, however, run into problems. It had fallen victim to a loss of confidence at the Air Ministry. This is how Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane*, interpreted the problem.

Precisely what use the high-altitude interceptor fighters would be against an enemy well equipped with modern machines is rather difficult to see. If the enemy had high-speed day-bombers of the class of the De Havilland Hound and the Fairey 111.F with the special Napier engine, the high-altitude machines could never catch them on the level. And the bombers would be so far below the best height of the fighters that unless they happened to fly right under a fighter formation the fighters would never even catch them by diving on them.³⁵²

Grey’s was no voice crying in the wilderness either. What he said was not controversial.³⁵³ Colin Sinnott’s PhD thesis explains the RAF’s tactical thinking in response to this dilemma.

Fighters of class (a) were stationed in the Aircraft Fighting zone. They were to take-off at the first sign of an attack and climb to pre-determined patrol lines, from which they would be directed by radio to intercept incoming aircraft. This was the main system for the defence of London. Interception fighters (class (b)) would operate by day only. They were not required to carry radio equipment and had less endurance

³⁵² ‘On Further Considerations of the Next War’, *Aeroplane*, 23 May 1928, p. 22.

³⁵³ See Uri Bialer, ‘Elite Opinion and Defence Policy: Air Power Advocacy and British Rearmament during the 1930s’, *Journal of International Studies*, 6 (1980), pp. 32-51; Brett Holman, ‘The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion between Disarmament and Rearmament’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), pp. 288-306; Meilinger, ‘Trenchard and “Morale Bombing”’, pp. 243-270.

than zone fighters. Clearly, a zone fighter could serve as an interception fighter, but not vice versa.³⁵⁴

When Dowding assumed his new role as Air Member for Supply and Research in 1930, in an effort to overcome this lack of speed the RAF recognised two types of fighter, zone and interceptor. It was to be the Spitfire and Hurricane which would merge these two roles into one, but it was going to be a five year journey to get there. Peering into the future in 1930 almost no-one saw a 300 mph fighter, not even Charles Grey at *Aeroplane*. It meant that when Dowding picked up the draft specification in September 1930, it was in trouble. The Air Staff wanted a 215 mph maximum speed, a useful improvement on the outgoing Bulldog, but performance assessments indicated that this increased speed was incompatible with a landing speed of 55 mph, the figure deemed acceptable for night-time operations. We might remember Dowding's comments to *The Times* in 1957, 'to fly as fast as possible and with no limitations except for landing and take-off'.³⁵⁵ Much that was said in 1957 by all parties was correct but out of context.

Returning to September 1930, Dowding decided on delay. 'I should like to go a little slow in the issue of the specification if there is no strong objection.'³⁵⁶ There were strong objections, and from within his department on the grounds that the financial window would close and the specification would be lost altogether. The matter was settled by the intervention of Sir John Salmond, the Chief of the Air Staff. He demanded a six months postponement of his own. The reasons given for the postponement do not suggest that speed was as yet high on the agenda. 'The specification was postponed for 6 months from November 1930 to May 1931 to allow for progress in certain items to be incorporated in the new machine, i.e. new guns, heated cockpit, new R.T. apparatus, etc.'³⁵⁷

If the Air Ministry in 1931 had not yet found its appetite for speed, the same could not be said of influential voices within the wider industry. The Air Ministry did not take manufacturers into its confidence, treating them as dependents not partners, but some were keener than others to peer into the future especially if they thought the Air Ministry

³⁵⁴ Colin Sinnott, 'RAF Operational Requirements 1923-39', PhD thesis, King's College London, 1998, p. 104.

³⁵⁵ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

³⁵⁶ Sinnott, *RAF Operational Requirements*, p. 145.

³⁵⁷ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 8 May 1930.

might be listening. It was during the time of the six-month postponement of specification F7/30, on 11 February 1931, that Dowding chaired a lecture at the Royal United Services Institute. The lecture was given by C. R. Fairey, of Fairey Aviation. Throughout the 1920s, Fairey Aviation had been the country's most profitable airframe manufacturer and by 1930 its market share was over double that of Vickers Aviation. The title of Fairey's lecture that evening was 'The Future of Aeroplane Design for the Services'. After a series of opening remarks he turned to the matter of specifications. 'Although the present system of co-operation between the Air Ministry and the RAF on the one hand, and the manufacture and designer on the other hand, was working fairly well there was still a tendency for specifications to be too restrictive.'³⁵⁸

What he meant was that the technology was already available to take a big if not a giant step forward. He went on to demonstrate exactly what he meant. 'He said that the present World's Record-breakers might be assumed to represent the utmost the designer could do when unhampered by any restrictions, and it might be interesting to devolve these backwards, taking their existing performances and adding by stages the various practical or military requirements.'³⁵⁹ He put up a slide of the S6, Mitchell's Schneider winning design of 1929. Fairey then went on to load up the S6 with evermore 'operational requirements' until he had reduced that 400 mph record breaking aircraft into a still swift 250 mph fighter aircraft. It was fifty miles an hour faster than any fighter the RAF was then flying or contemplating flying.

Fairey's lecture is of interest here on two counts. First it demonstrates that within the industry, in 1931, there was a conversation taking place about the restrictiveness of Air Ministry specifications. Secondly, Fairey's lecture suggests that the link between speed and fighter efficacy, had been or at least was being, made by manufacturers, and being promoted to the Air Ministry. Was the Air Ministry listening? The evidence is suggestive. In May 1931, three months after the lecture, speed is not a primary concern for those re-drafting the specification. 'D.T.D [Director of Technical Development] says the re-draft of specification should specify that the aircraft is for day and night use, to climb to 15,000 feet

³⁵⁸ 'The Future of Aeroplane Design for Services', *Aeroplane*, 18 Feb. 1931, p. 24.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

in 8.5 minutes and speed to be not less than 200 mph at that height'.³⁶⁰ By October 1931, speed is very much on the agenda. 'Consideration should be given to advantages offered by low wing monoplane or pusher. The main requirements are:-Speed/rate of climb/manoeuvrability/ease of quantity production and maintenance.'³⁶¹ There it was, speed, right at the front of the queue.

Bi-plane versus monoplane was an unresolved question in 1931 but it does appear that Mitchell's triumphs with low-wing monoplanes in the Schneider Trophy were a trump card in any discussion. Fairey in his lecture had predicted the future from the cockpit of an S6 and Dowding, at least according to Basil Collier, was aware both of Mitchell's success and its implications. 'Dowding was advised that bi-plane construction was better since it offered more lift for a given weight. Bi-planes, he was told, were therefore inherently lighter and stronger than monoplanes. Admittedly the monoplane offered a lower head-resistance, but the experts made light of that advantage. Dowding asked laconically why, in that case, bi-planes were not entered for the Schneider Trophy contest.'³⁶² It is a good story but is it nothing more than hindsight? How forward looking was specification F7/30?

For almost twenty years after the war, historians were not disposed to be kind to specification F7/30. Postan, Hay and Scott, for instance, saw a specification of only 'modest ambitions'.³⁶³ Time has leavened this view somewhat however. Eric Morgan and Edward Shacklady take a very different view, praising the specification as forward looking, 'a bold move'.³⁶⁴ Reading through specification F7/30 today, it is hard to recognise McLean's charge that it was 'hostile to the very basis of fighter efficiency'.³⁶⁵ On the contrary, for all its detail F7/30 does offer precisely the degree of latitude that Fairey was asking for in his 1931 lecture. Its position on a power unit is a good example. 'Any approved British engine may be used.'³⁶⁶

A strait jacket may have been the model for Air Ministry specifications in the 1920s, as Fairey suggested in his lecture, but it does seem the ministry was intent on doing something

³⁶⁰ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 5 May 1931.

³⁶¹ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 1 Oct. 1931.

³⁶² Collier, *Leader of the Few*, p. 147.

³⁶³ Postan, Hay & Scott, *Design and Development of Weapons*, p. 87.

³⁶⁴ Eric B. Morgan and Edward Shacklady, *Spitfire the History* (Stamford: Guild, 1989), p. 1.

³⁶⁵ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

³⁶⁶ Morgan and Shacklady, *Spitfire the History*, p. 597.

about it at the dawn of the 1930s, or at least with this one particular specification. Reading through the internal correspondence on F7/30 today, there does seem to have been a spirit of innovation informing the discussions. It reached right up to the top. In July 1931, after its postponement but before its final approval, the Chief of the Air Staff, Sir John Salmond, made his own views on the matter quite clear. ‘There remains one point to which I attach importance: that is encouraging novel types so as to get away from the tractor biplane... If we are to get serious attempts at novel types to meet this specification, we shall have to provide the incentive.’³⁶⁷ The incentive was of course a budget for a prototype with the prospect of a major order to follow. Let the final word on specification F7/30 be that of R. J. Mitchell himself. One of his closest colleagues, Alan Clifton, head of Mitchell’s technical office, remembered Mitchell’s initial view on the specification. ‘In the early days at least, the F7/30 design seemed to Mitchell quite reasonable, and even quite forward – for example, the design allowed for a ceiling higher than the existing world’s record.’³⁶⁸

The anticipated specification F7/30 arrived at Supermarine a few weeks after the Vickers Aviation board meeting in which it was discussed. McLean and Mitchell’s response in the tender document they returned to the Air Ministry was conservative. It boasted of the fact. ‘Although different in type from existing fighter aircraft, it cannot be considered very experimental. It embodies the experience gained by the Supermarine firm in the construction of high speed monoplanes, and other monoplane types of varying characteristics.’³⁶⁹ McLean was stepping warily around his potential customer. A bold vision was no longer the order of the day. How we reconcile this conservative tender document, however, with McLean’s 1957 claim to have torn up the specification and embarked upon ‘a real killer fighter’ is unclear. Conservative the tender document was, but Supermarine won the contract for a prototype nevertheless. As it turned out, they were that bit less conservative than the competition.

³⁶⁷ Leo McKinstry, *Spitfire: Portrait of a Legend* (London: John Murray, 2007), p. 35.

³⁶⁸ CUL, VD 701, Note of an interview with A. N. Clifton, 13 Oct. 1959.

³⁶⁹ Morgan and Shacklady, *Spitfire the History*, p. 3.

The Air Ministry did want something interesting. ‘Tenders were treated from the point of view of promising new ideas. Supermarines the most attractive design modelled on racing aircraft practice with a speed of 25 m.p.h. faster than any other type.’³⁷⁰

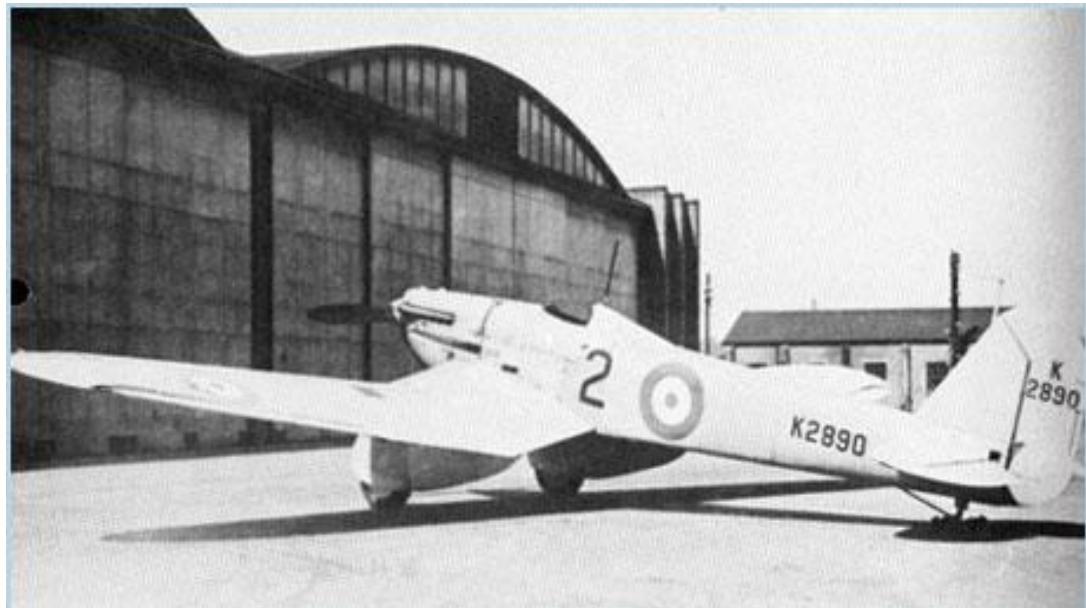


Figure 14. Spitfire Type 224

Supermarine did win the contract and a prototype was built, but the result, the Spitfire Type 224, was a disappointment. Jeffrey Quill, chief test pilot on the Spitfire project, was not the only one unimpressed. His own list of faults include a lack of speed, a slow rate of climb, a cooling system that didn’t work, and drag being ‘patently too high’.³⁷¹ Quill even had the temerity to joke of it in the presence of Mitchell. ‘The evaporative cooling system was a real pain in the backside, with the red (warning) lights flashing on all the time. I once made a jocular remark to Mitchell about the system. I said that with the red lights flashing on all over the place, one had to be a plumber to understand what was going on. He didn’t say

³⁷⁰ TNA, AVIA 46/119, ‘Type Biography Spitfire’, 27 May 1932.

³⁷¹ Jeffrey Quill, *Birth of a Legend: The Spitfire* (London: Quiller, 1986), p. 52.

anything, he just looked very sour. He was rather sensitive about the aeroplane and obviously I had trodden on his toes.³⁷²

What had gone wrong, and how does this failure fit into McLean's 1957 narrative? Many of Mitchell's colleagues later suggested that all the problems associated with the first prototype boiled down to an over-cautious approach which began with that conservative tender document. This was the view of Alan Clifton. 'It was his first venture in military aircraft and the Company was very anxious to break into this field.'³⁷³ Clifton's comments help explain a particularly cryptic remark made by McLean in 1957. 'Mitchell and Dr. Barnes Wallis would do better by devoting their qualities not to the official experimental fighter but to a real killer fighter which was eventually to become the Spitfire'.³⁷⁴ No-one, and certainly not Barnes Wallis, ever denied Mitchell the credit for designing the Spitfire. It was not a collaborative venture. So what was McLean talking about in 1957? He seems to have been referring to a committee which oversaw Mitchell's work on the first failed prototype.³⁷⁵ Barnes Wallis did sit on that committee, along with Rex Pierson and chief pilot 'Mutt' Summers. The committee was chaired by McLean himself. Mitchell, it appears, was on a short leash when it came to the first prototype.

The Air Ministry's Resident Technical Officer at Supermarine reported on 2 February 1934 'that F7/30 (Type 224) flew for the first time in the morning. Aircraft and engine functioned satisfactorily'.³⁷⁶ Satisfactory was about all that could be said of Type 224. Trevor Westbrook, the Works Manager noted the gloom that descended upon Supermarine. 'For two or three months after the first flight of the F7/30(Type 224)...everyone was feeling disheartened.'³⁷⁷ For McLean this was more than disheartening, it was a disaster. There would be few Supermarine flying boats crisscrossing the Empire and it must have appeared that there would be no squadrons of Supermarine fighters either.

What he did next, how he came to terms with the failure and responded, would find its apotheosis in his 1957 spat in *The Times*. His reaction was threefold. First there was the

³⁷² John Shelton, *Schneiders Trophy to Spitfire* (Yeovil: Haynes, 2008), p. 205.

³⁷³ CUL, VD 701, Note of an interview with A. N. Clifton, 13 Oct. 1959.

³⁷⁴ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

³⁷⁵ See Morgan and Shacklady, *Spitfire the History*, p. 7.

³⁷⁶ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 20 Feb. 1934.

³⁷⁷ CUL, VD 701, Note of an Interview with Trevor Westbrook, 15 Oct. 1959.

matter of responsibility. Commendably, he refused to blame Mitchell, and he refused to blame the committee that he chaired which oversaw Mitchell's work. Instead he turned his ire upon the Air Ministry and their specification F7/30. Immediately after the first flight of the disappointing Type 224, in April 1934, Rex Pierson, Trevor Westbrook, Mutt Summers and Beverley Shenstone went on a fact-finding mission to America. Appended to their report on their return to England is this pertinent note by McLean.

In one direction, particularly, the policy adopted in this country seems to have been short sighted, and that is to regard the Air Ministry specification as the final objective, a prototype machine being dropped or scrapped if it did not succeed in winning a competition. I feel certain that this is a wrong policy. If a machine is of a type basically sound, there are many occasions on which it would pay the constructor to buy his machine back from the Ministry, if unsuccessful, and proceed with his own developments in order to perfect his machine, to the great advantage of later products. Mr Pierson points out that as much as seven months' flying was done on the Douglas machine before she was passed out to the air line, and the Martin Bomber, far from satisfactory when first built, was steadily persevered with until it is now one of the most outstanding machines in the world.³⁷⁸

McLean's view had hardened when he gave a speech a few months later on 7 December 1934 at the annual dinner of contractors hosted by the Officers of the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Martlesham Heath. Charles Grey, editor of *Aeroplane*, was at the dinner and was suitably impressed by what McLean had to say.

He made the sound suggestion that when aeroplanes came up for test and are found to embody promising ideas which are not fully developed, and unfortunately show certain defects as well, they should not just be turned down as bad aeroplane. He suggested that they should be still further tested for the sake of the good ideas that are in them, and that those ideas should be developed. He reminded us that the success of to-morrow is often the failure of to-day.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ CUL, VD 332, USA Visit: Note inserted by Sir Robert McLean, 31 July 1934.

³⁷⁹ 'The Martlesham Dinner', *Aeroplane*, 12 Dec. 1934, p. 11.

So impressed was Charles Grey in fact that he made the substance of McLean's remarks the comic centrepiece of his Christmas message to his readers that year.

The Air Force of a Dream

(With Apologies to Rudyard Kipling.) A Fantasy by 'Caramajo'

Dear Sirs,-In pursuance of the Policy of my Department, and in accordance with the Manifest Desire of the Country that our Air Force shall be Modern and Effective, I hereby request you to submit, within the period of four months, a Tender for the Supply of a Minimum Number of 100 Single Seater Fighters, the performance figures for which shall be based on the following rough lines...

There will be no interference whatsoever by the Air Ministry or by any of the Departments under the control of the Air Ministry. Machines will be designed and built entirely in accordance with your own ideas, and the prototype will be expected to come up to, if not exceed, the performance figures stated in your tender.³⁸⁰

Right or wrong, McLean's views had industry purchase. Receiving such support can only have helped to confirm McLean in his own opinions. McLean never changed his mind about specification F7/30.

As noted above, McLean's reaction to the failure of the Type 224 was threefold. Having divested himself of responsibility, he next identified a new cause to promote. Something in the workshops at Weybridge caught his eye, as Mitchell's aerodynamicist Beverly Shenstone recalled in 1960. 'The Venom was, as far as we could see at Supermarine, inspired by a desire on the part of Weybridge to see what they could do in competition with Supermarine, so what they did was to take the basic aerodynamics and dimensions of the Jockey and re-design it completely with a smooth skinned wing, cowled engine, retractable undercarriage and landing flaps.'³⁸¹ So impressed was McLean that his enthusiasm for the Venom even survived the first flight of Mitchell's second and successful attempt at a Spitfire. Here is McLean writing to the newly appointed chairman of Vickers, Sir Archibald Jamieson, in July 1937, a year after the first flight of the redesigned Spitfire. 'The pilots also say that as a single fighter she is probably a better bit of equipment than either our Spitfire or the Hawker Hurricane'.³⁸² The pilot, who was supposed to have said this, Jeffrey Quill,

³⁸⁰ 'The Air Force of a Dream', *Aeroplane*, 19 Dec. 1934, p. 7.

³⁸¹ CUL, VD 746, 'Shenstone corrections for Scott's sixth draft of Chapter 19', 29 Jan. 1960.

³⁸² CUL, VD 536, 'Selected Personal Letters Sir Robert McLean', 1 Nov. 1935 -13 Oct 1938.

actually denied he ever did which does say something about McLean's *modus operandi*.³⁸³ Here was a man comfortable in that liminal space between fact and fiction. The Venom did not prosper due to engine problems but McLean's switch of allegiance did at least mean that McLean's third reaction to the failure of the Type 224 was to leave Mitchell alone. The design committee that Mitchell had had to report to went into abeyance.

We have now reached May 1934, two months after the disappointing first flight of the Type 224. What happened next in the drawing office at Supermarine, according to Trevor Westbrook, was down to Vickers Aviation's chief test pilot Mutt Summers. 'Summers went around getting them steamed up with the idea of a really terrific private venture fighter'.³⁸⁴ This brings us to another point in McLean's narrative of 1957. 'The only thing to do was to build one ourselves.'³⁸⁵ We need to refer to the minutes of the board of Vickers Aviation in October 1931 which had green lighted the Spitfire project and which Mutt Summers attended. 'It was agreed, therefore, that Supermarine would enter for this competition hoping to get a prototype order, but if not, probably building a private venture.'³⁸⁶ Returning to May 1934, are we sure Summers used the phrase 'private venture'? It was after all Westbrook remembering the words of Summers after the fact. Summers had died in 1954. It does seem plausible none the less. As we know Summers had attended that critical board meeting in October 1931 where such an approach had been mooted. He therefore also understood the vital importance of winning a military contract to revive the fortunes of Supermarine.

What exactly was a private venture? Let Dowding himself explain.

The basis of the system was the Air Ministry's specification which said in effect this is what we want but it was always open to a firm to say we know what you want better than you do yourselves. We are going to enter this competition with our own experts and when you see our product you will agree that we are right and you will

³⁸³ See McKinstry, *Spitfire*, p. 50.

³⁸⁴ CUL, VD 701, Note of an Interview with Trevor Westbrook, 15 Oct. 1959.

³⁸⁵ 'Spitfire's Origin in an Experimental Thing', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

³⁸⁶ CUL, VD 321, 'Programme of Type Development,' 7 Oct. 1931.

have to give us the production order. If they fail in the attempt they have lost their money.³⁸⁷

Dowding was being a little disingenuous by suggesting that the door was always open. According to David Edgerton, ‘private ventures were rare, which is why they were given a special name’.³⁸⁸ There is no doubt that in May 1934, after the failure of the Type 224, McLean was in a position to finance a private venture. He had been careful to negotiate a substantial development fund on his appointment as chairman of Vickers Aviation as he later told Scott. ‘I asked Sir Robert about finance for all this design work, and he said that in or about 1929 General Lawrence agreed to a request that Vickers should pay up a quarter of a million pounds...Sir Robert had no further financial worries at all.’³⁸⁹ The question is, though, was the development programme beginning in May 1934 really a private venture? Was McLean telling the truth on this point in his interview with *The Times* in 1957?

The answer has to be no. What began in May 1934, out of sight of McLean whose head had been turned by the Venom, was a design exercise. Summers may have been calling for a private venture but he was in no position himself to authorise one. Only McLean could have done that and there is no evidence to suggest that he ever did. On the contrary, what evidence does survive suggests the opposite. Jeffrey Quill interviewed by Scott was adamant on the point. The F37/34 he is referring to in the interview is the second successful Spitfire. ‘The F37/34 was built under contract. “No tin was bent” until the Company got a contract from the Air Ministry, and it was therefore incorrect to call this aircraft a private venture.’³⁹⁰

Let us now turn to that design exercise. For want of an Air Ministry specification, Supermarine’s design office invented specifications of its own. Presumably under the direction of Mitchell, it also entered into correspondence with a distinctly unsympathetic Air Ministry. McLean’s fingerprints are not to be found on any of the documents that survive in the Vickers archive on this point in the process. Jack Davis took up the story. ‘The sequel to these exercises was an improved Supermarine Specification No. 425A. ‘It is proposed to

³⁸⁷ Cited in Postan, Hay & Scott, *Design and Development of Weapons*, p. 83.

³⁸⁸ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, p. 45.

³⁸⁹ CUL, VD 252, Notes on a series of interviews with Sir Robert McLean, 8/9 Nov., 1959.

³⁹⁰ CUL, VD 701, Notes of Two Interviews with Mr J. K. Quill, OBE, AFC, Military Aircraft Office, Vickers-Armstrongs (aircraft) Limited at Weybridge, 28 Sept. & 13 Oct., 1959.

modify the existing machine by building a new set of wings of reduced area with a retracting chassis and dispensing with the negative dihedral...Now the Spitfire was designated Type 300...The Air Ministry showed no interest in the new proposal so the design exercise continued.³⁹¹ The Air Ministry was unsympathetic for good reason. This was not the way it dealt with its suppliers in the spring of 1934.

A typical procurement project saw a specification drawn up which was then put out to tender. Having received the tenders a conference was held at the Air Ministry and the most promising proposals ordered as prototypes. Once these prototypes had taken to the air a competition was held between the prototypes and the winner was duly ordered into production. In the case of specification F7/30 three prototypes had been ordered from Supermarine, Blackburn and Westland. Under the circumstances, which were at this stage wholly unexceptional, the Air Ministry was unwilling to make any special allowance for Supermarine. It would have been unfair to Blackburn and Westland. No-one at the Air Ministry disputed the fact that Mitchell's proposed modifications would have increased the speed of the Supermarine prototype but that was not the point. 'AD/RDA (Mr Ginstead) agrees with Supermarines' estimate of 265 mph. for modified F7/30. He thinks firm's estimate of six months optimistic and unwise to have alterations before F7/30 competition to see whether the type is good enough to be developed.'³⁹² At this point in time there was no reason not to follow normal procedure.

All the while the Air Ministry deliberated in the late spring and early summer of 1934, Mitchell and his team kept on working. 'By the autumn the proportions of the wing had changed. It was thinner and of lower aspect ratio with the span reduced to 37'-1" and still straight tapered. Some final Spitfire characteristics showing were the cockpit faired back to the fin, the simple chassis retraction and thin ailerons. The estimated top speed was 280 mph, an increase of 12 mph. The engine was still the Rolls-Royce Goshawk with evaporative cooling.'³⁹³ Two things now needed to happen to expedite the process from drawing board to Spitfire of enduring fame. What was required was a change of engine and a change of attitude at the Air Ministry. It was the second that came first.

³⁹¹ CUL, VD 1908, 'The Basic Design of the Prototype Spitfire', 4 April 1984.

³⁹² TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 18 Aug. 1934.

³⁹³ CUL, VD 1908, 'The Basic Design of the Prototype Spitfire', 4 April 1984.

In July 1934, just as the rejection of Supermarine's proposals to modify the failed Type 224 was being decided in favour of holding the usual competition between the three prototypes, unsettling memos began circulating around the Air Ministry. They concerned recent intelligence gathered on the performance of American and Italian fighters. 'D.D.T.D. (Mr Buchanan) points out to D.T.D. that foreign fighters (notably U.S. and Italian) have overhauled us in performance. He suggests that special steps should be taken to produce high speed fighters.'³⁹⁴ The Americans were talking about speeds of over 500 mph, on the drawing board at least.³⁹⁵ The Italians, however, had got beyond the drawing board. They might not have had a 500 mph aircraft but they did now have the world speed record. The Italian team had not been able to contest the 1931 Schneider Trophy due to technical problems and this was seen as a blow to the prestige of the Italian aircraft industry. Mussolini's regime continued to pour resources into their high-speed programme with the result of a new world record time of 440 mph set in October 1934. This time would remain unbeaten until the eve of war.³⁹⁶

Buchanan's concerns were shared by his immediate superiors. 'D.T.D. tells O.R. that new specification (i.e. F.5/34) should be hurried along as other fighter specifications F.7/30, F.5/33 and F.22/33 all sacrifice performance for other operational characteristics. D.T.D. is afraid our fighters may drop behind foreign ones.'³⁹⁷ A minor panic now set in at the Air Ministry. A completely new fighter specification was required whose operational characteristics were subjugated to this new priority, speed. Speed, though, was a problem. 'We in this country need seven years to replace an obsolescent type by a new type.'³⁹⁸ Charles Grey was ruminating in his bunker at *Aeroplane* at precisely the time this minor panic had set in. Perhaps he had heard whispers?

How was the Air Ministry going to proceed? On 23 August 1934, Dowding received a request from his Director of Technical Development. 'D.T.D (Air Com: Cave) suggests that new F7/30 design from Supermarines and Interceptor Fighter design from Hawkers should be considered quite apart from F7/30 competition... He therefore recommends ordering a

³⁹⁴ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Design Branch Spec. F5/34', 13 July 1934.

³⁹⁵ Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: The Ominous Skies, 1935-1939* (London: HMSO, 1980), p. 84.

³⁹⁶ Ralph Pegram, *Schneider Trophy Seaplanes and Flying Boats Victors: Vanquished and Visions* (London: Fonthill, 2012), p. 337.

³⁹⁷ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Design Branch Spec. F5/34', 17 July 1934.

³⁹⁸ 'The Lesson of the Air Exercises (July 26-28)', *Aeroplane*, 1 Aug. 1934, p. 27.

new aeroplane from Supermarine to modified F7/30 as performance is higher than any existing F7/30 (265 mph) and it will be a useful machine to overcome problems of 8 gun Interceptor I.E. guns in wings, steam cooling, retractable undercarriage etc.³⁹⁹ Hawkers had indeed been quietly busy all the while Mitchell had been struggling with his first Spitfire prototype. Their tender for the F7/30 contract unlike Supermarine's had been turned down. They had then proceeded to do precisely what Sir Robert McLean later claimed for Supermarine, that is, self fund a prototype as a private venture.⁴⁰⁰

The situation facing Dowding was this. Of the three prototypes commissioned under the F7/30 specification only one carried with it the promise of speed, Supermarine's. The Blackburn and the Westland prototypes were bi-plane designs. The year before, in 1933, another round of tendering had taken place on a new fighter specification, but the resulting prototypes were at least two years behind those accepted for the F7/30 specification. It meant that in the summer of 1934 only the Supermarine Spitfire and the private venture Hawker Hurricane, were available to the Air Ministry for anything approaching a high speed development programme. What Air Commodore Cave was actually proposing to Dowding was less a programme and more an expedient. The Supermarine and Hawker prototypes could not be paid for as part of specification F7/30. The Hawker prototype had already been turned down for that specification and the modifications Supermarine were proposing, and upon which the Air Ministry now smiled after the reports from America and Italy, were outside the remit of specification F7/30 too. As a brand new specification was out of the question considering the time restraints, the solution was to dip into Dowding's modest fund for long-term primary research. A year later, in 1935, Dowding described the purpose of this fund. 'Since the time when we won Schneider Trophy outright we have ceased to seek after extreme speeds involving very high landing speeds and vast landing areas, but it has been policy to have one or two machines under construction which will be considerably ahead of latest service types in performance.'⁴⁰¹ Dowding was describing an experimental programme but it was being used now, thanks to Air Commodore Cave, as an expedient.

³⁹⁹ TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 23 Aug. 1934.

⁴⁰⁰ See Leo McKinstry, *Hurricane: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: John Murray, 2010).

⁴⁰¹ Cited in Sinnott, *RAF Operational Requirements*, p. 171.

The money had been found, but neither Dowding nor his Director of Technical Development, Air Commodore Cave, fully appreciated what it was they were finding the money for. They thought they were buying a new aeroplane, one based upon the Type 224, with a proposed top speed of 265 mph. This was in fact what they now asked for. On 4 September, the Air Ministry wrote to Supermarine to say that the proposed modifications were not to be applied to the existing Type 224, but were to apply instead to a new machine (not a completely new design) for which they were now anticipating a quote.⁴⁰² Had they known that Mitchell and his team had already moved on from the failed Type 224, it might have given them pause for thought.

But then who did actually know what was going on? If Dowding and the Air Ministry were in the dark as to what was going on in Mitchell's drawing office as September turned to October 1934, so was McLean. The minutes of the Vickers Aviation board meeting in October 1934 begin with a discussion of the failed Type 224. 'The Chairman reported the position regarding the development of this aircraft. It was not yet ready for delivery to the Air Ministry; but in view of the fact that the advance performances in foreign countries far exceeded the probable performance of machines in the F7/30 class, a proposal had been made to the Air Ministry for a modified machine of increased performance.'⁴⁰³ It appears the intelligence which had goaded the Air Ministry into action had reached Supermarine too. The Minutes from this board meeting then reveal that Mitchell was not being completely open and honest with either McLean or the rest of the board of Supermarine. The Spitfire Mitchell is referring to here is the failed Type 224. The name of Spitfire had been settled upon months before, in December 1933. McLean had been in the habit of referring to his daughter Annie by the soubriquet, and it does appear that the name for the new fighter was McLean's decision alone.⁴⁰⁴

In regard to the policy to be followed with the 'Spitfire' itself, Mr Mitchell considered that it was important, as an aid to the development of high performance aircraft, that some extra research and development work should be carried out on the

⁴⁰² TNA, AVIA 46/119, 'Type Biography Spitfire', 4 Sept. 1934.

⁴⁰³ CUL, VD 310, 'The Supermarine Aviation Works (Vickers) LTD Minutes 2 May 1933 – March 1935', 2 Oct. 1934.

⁴⁰⁴ This is certainly what he said to Scott see CUL, VD 252, 'Interviews with Sir Robert McLean at Galashiels on 8 and 9 Nov., 1959'. 'Spitfire' has a long pedigree. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first reference to 1600. See McKinstry, *Spitfire*, p. 55.

“Spitfire” before she was handed over to the Air Ministry for trial. Although the experimental features of the machine were generally satisfactory, there were certain refinements whose value should be explored in the interests of both Companies.⁴⁰⁵

Mitchell was playing for time. He was implying that he was still busy on the Type 224. There is nothing in the minutes from this meeting to suggest that anyone in the room knew what Mitchell was actually up to. On the contrary, the impression given is of complete ignorance. ‘After discussion, it was resolved to adhere to the policy that the Supermarine Company should, if possible, enter into the classes of high performance land machines, and that, subject to the Air Ministry being still prepared to place an order for a second modified machine, the order should be taken on the best price obtainable, the negotiations being left in the hands of the Chairman.’⁴⁰⁶ Supermarine’s board, just like the Air Ministry, was still thinking in terms of modified machines, not a completely new design.

Nevertheless, the pace being set by Mitchell in the Supermarine design office in October 1934 was dramatic. There were four factors behind this burst of creative energy. The first was that Mitchell and his team were aware that the Air Ministry was becoming increasingly interested in what they were up to even if the Air Ministry did not fully appreciate as yet just exactly what that was. The second was that Mitchell and his team had learnt lessons from the failed Type 224 and now sensed an opportunity to put things right. Mitchell was notorious for his sense of frustration at the end of a design project, even if that project had turned out to be successful. Referring to the failed Type 224 Alan Clifton makes the point, ‘if he was very dissatisfied with it by the time it flew, this was not an exceptional experience. It was normal for designers to be dissatisfied with aircraft by the time they flew and to be looking forward to a new one. And it was especially a characteristic of Mitchell to be like this.’⁴⁰⁷ Mitchell had sensed an opportunity and taken it.

The third and fourth factors both have to do with the actions of McLean. As noted above, McLean became very interested in a project being developed at Weybridge as a private venture, the Venom. His switch of attention, we might put it a little stronger, his loss of

⁴⁰⁵ CUL, VD 310, ‘The Supermarine Aviation Works (Vickers) LTD Minutes 2 May 1933 – March 1935’, 2 Oct. 1934.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ CUL, VD 701, Note of an Interview with Mr A. N. Clifton, MBE, BSc, FrAeS, Chief Designer Aircraft, Supermarine Works, At Weybridge, 13 Oct. 1959.

confidence was not lost on those in the drawing office at Supermarine. This is what Spitfire aerodynamicist Beverley Shenstone said to Scott in 1960. ‘The inter-action between Weybridge and Supermarine might also be of interest. In several instances, activity in one branch was a reaction against the other, or an action inspired by the other.’⁴⁰⁸ Was Shenstone referring directly to Weybridge’s Venom and Supermarines failed Type 224? Probably so, because it is in the same correspondence that Shenstone tells Scott the story of the Venom. Clearly Mitchell and his team had competitive instincts and here was a competition.

The fourth and final factor, however, was the most important, especially with regard to the inspiration behind the new design. Mitchell no longer had to answer to a design committee chaired by McLean. Right up to the point the Spitfire was given its elliptical wings, that is right at the end of the design process, McLean was only barely aware of what Mitchell and his team were doing. Here is Beverley Shenstone once again. ‘Without seeming to lack respect for Sir Robert McLean’s ability and energy, in my opinion the Spitfire would not have been born if Mitchell had not been willing to stand up to McLean, particularly in the era when McLean quite clearly preferred the Venom concept to the Spitfire concept because it was cheaper and lighter.’⁴⁰⁹ Mitchell and McLean were clearly following different paths in the late autumn of 1934 but now we find the paths coming back together.

It was all a matter of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. In September and October 1934 Mitchell and his team, so almost everyone believed, were working on a modified Type 224. In November McLean and the Air Ministry were still in correspondence about it, in particular about its engine.

The Chairman [McLean] reported the position of this matter and the arrangements he had made with Messrs. Rolls-Royce Limited regarding the development of the new single-seater fighter – F7/30- with the ‘Goshawk’ engine. He also reported that the Air Ministry were interested in trying out the Napier ‘Dagger’ engine in the new single-seater fighter, and had asked the Company to investigate performance and other figures. Since the aircraft with the ‘Dagger’ engine would be some 20 miles

⁴⁰⁸ CUL, VD 746, ‘Shenstone corrections for Scott’s sixth draft of Chapter 19’, 29 Jan. 1960.

⁴⁰⁹ CUL, VD 746, ‘Mr B. Shenstone’s comments for Mr J. D. Scott on 7th Draft-ch.19’, 4 Mar. 1960.

slower than with the ‘Goshawk’, it was felt that such investigation would take up the company’s time to little purpose and would interfere with the line of development along which the Company were now working, and it was resolved that the Chairman should see the Air Ministry with a view to persuading them to adhere to the original proposal.⁴¹⁰

The original proposal was of course to accept or at least pay for the first failed prototype, the Type 224. This minute has more to tell us though. It seems that McLean has at last some inkling of what Mitchell and his team was up to, ‘the line of development along which the Company were now working’. We must note too, the bullish tone of this minute. It speaks of accepting no interference. In 1957 McLean said this. ‘After unfruitful discussions with the Air Ministry, he and his opposite number in Rolls-Royce, the late A. F. Sidgreaves, decided that the two companies should themselves finance the building of such an aircraft. ‘The Air Ministry was informed of the decision, and were told that in no circumstances would any technical member of the Air Ministry be consulted or allowed to interfere with the designer.’⁴¹¹ I don’t think it is too much to suggest that this part of McLean’s highly imaginative 1957 narrative was rooted in what he probably, and the Air Ministry definitely, understood to be happening in the design office at Supermarine in October/November 1934. The Air Ministry did try to interfere, but only in what they understood to be a re-engine of the failed Type 224 which McLean was intent on stopping. His motive was simply to make the Air Ministry pay for what they contracted to pay, namely the original Goshawk engine Type 224, failure or not.

Mitchell did have an engine choice to make, not for the Type 224, but for the new design. Hawker with their Hurricane fighter, which because of the time Mitchell had spent on the failed Type 224 was a full year ahead in development, had decided upon their engine. They had chosen the brand new Rolls-Royce PV12 (Merlin), and now Mitchell was determined to have it too. It is in fact only now that McLean becomes visible in any material concerning the new design which I have seen either at the National Archives in Kew or the Vickers archive in Cambridge. On 6 December, Mitchell and McLean travelled to London. ‘Notes

⁴¹⁰ CUL, VD 310, ‘The Supermarine Aviation Works (Vickers) LTD Minutes 2 May 1933 – March 1935’, 6 Nov. 1934.

⁴¹¹ ‘Spitfire’s Origin in an Experimental Thing’, *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

on conference at Air Ministry attended by representatives of Supermarines regarding improved fighter. It was agreed to use PV12 engine.⁴¹² We should note that the Air Ministry understood they were getting an ‘improved fighter’ not a modified fighter. There is nothing in the Air Ministry files which I have found that makes this distinction any clearer, but all talk of modified prototypes, any reference in fact to the failed Type 224, does now cease.

The choice of the new engine for the ‘improved fighter’ had been an easy one to make. Mitchell would have been persuaded by the performance figures Rolls-Royce was quoting for its new design just as Camm had been over at Hawker the year before. But what of McLean’s claims in 1957 about collaboration between Rolls-Royce and Supermarine? ‘After unfruitful discussions with the Air Ministry, he and his opposite number in Rolls-Royce, the late A. F. Sidgreaves, decided that the two companies should themselves finance the building of such an aircraft.’⁴¹³ What appears to actually have happened is this. A. F. Sidgreaves, managing director of Rolls-Royce, bought into the Spitfire project at a very late stage simply to insure selection of the Merlin.⁴¹⁴ It made sound commercial sense for Rolls-Royce. By November 1934, Sidgreaves would have known which way the procurement wind was blowing. The Air Ministry’s enthusiasm for Supermarine’s new ‘improved fighter’ was becoming obvious to all. Rolls-Royce’s buy in, at a relatively modest price of £7500, would eventually appear in the Supermarine books in May 1935, long after the new design had been settled.⁴¹⁵

We return to the drawing boards at Supermarine for the final piece of the puzzle. In the autumn of 1934 the aeroplane which was on those drawing boards bore no resemblance to the failed first prototype, the Type 224. But it bore very little resemblance to the Spitfire of enduring fame either. Specifically, there was no sign of its signature feature the elliptical wing. It was not until the second half of November and the beginning of December, that it did finally emerge. We know this because of dated technical drawings but also because we have the word of the man who apart from Mitchell himself is most closely associated with the elliptical wing, aerodynamicist Beverly Shenstone. ‘By the end of 1934 the elliptical

⁴¹² TNA, AVIA 46/119, ‘Type Biography Spitfire’, 6 Dec. 1934.

⁴¹³ ‘Spitfire’s Origin in an Experimental Thing’, *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

⁴¹⁴ Peter Pugh, *The Magic of a Name: The Rolls-Royce Story: The First 40 Years* (Duxford: Icon, 2000), p. 320.

⁴¹⁵ CUL, VD 314, ‘Expenditure on Prototype Aircraft (Other than against Grants)’, 22 May, 1935.

wing Spitfire with four wing guns outside the propeller disc had settled down and this still retained the D-shaped nose section of the wing as a steam condenser, the only difference being that it was smooth skinned instead of corrugated.⁴¹⁶

Why was Shenstone not able to be more specific about the date? The reason appears to be that there was no eureka moment for the elliptical wing, it did only emerge, that is settle down.⁴¹⁷ We do not know precisely when – the technical drawings are ambiguous – but we do know why which does help with the chronology. It was all a matter of practicalities. Mitchell's design signature was a thin wing. It was what he had given his Schneider Trophy winners and it was what he was determined to use now, being at last free to make his own decisions. It was in fact the new engine from Rolls-Royce which drove the design of the elliptically shaped wing.⁴¹⁸ The Merlin was heavier than the Goshawk engine which powered the Type 224. So to accommodate the added weight the thin straight tapered wing of October, designed with the Goshawk engine in mind, had either to be fattened in the manner of Hawker's Hurricane, or if kept thin, stretched forward into an ellipse. Mitchell demanded a thin wing and so the ellipse it was.

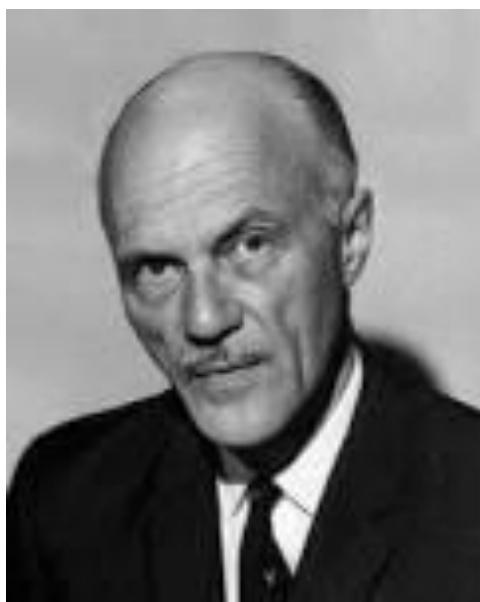


Figure 15. Beverley Shenstone

⁴¹⁶ CUL, VD 746, Mr B. Shenstone's comments for J. D. Scott Draft on Chapter 19, 4 March 1960.

⁴¹⁷ A technical commentary on the elliptical wing is provided by J. A. D. Ackroyd, 'The Spitfire Wing Planform: A Suggestion', *Journal of Aeronautical History*, 2 (2013), pp. 121-135.

⁴¹⁸ Shelton, *Schneider Trophy to Spitfire*, p. 208.

From Christmas 1934, both Hawker's Hurricane and Supermarine's 'improved fighter' were set on a developmental path which would see them enter RAF frontline squadrons in 1938 and 1939 respectively. Mitchell did not live to see that day, and McLean was gone by then too, resigning in October 1938. Mitchell did live to see the first flight of K5054, the second and successful Spitfire prototype, on 5 March 1936. He died just over a year later on 11 June 1937, aged only forty two. He left behind designs for a four engine bomber whose load, range and speed estimates far exceeded those of the Stirling and Halifax which were being conceived about the same time. As for the Lancaster, conceived later and Bomber Command's most successful and celebrated aircraft, it too fell considerably short in all three categories. Arguably, had Mitchell lived, Bomber Command might have looked very different and Supermarine might have been busier still.



Figure 16. The Spitfire Prototype K5054 in 1936

The Problem with the Truth

The question this chapter has set out to answer is what lies behind the Spitfire's lack of provenance? Why does the creation story told by Leslie Howard in 1942 still stand? It matters here because upon its answer rests to a considerable degree the Spitfire's post-war career, its use and re-use to configure the myth of the Battle of Britain to suit contemporary

audiences. In terms of provenance, Leslie Howard's creation story made no room for what David Edgerton has identified as a British military-industrial complex in the interwar years.⁴¹⁹ The lesson to be taken from Howard's fable was instead that the Spitfire was the creation of timeless English genius as personified by Mitchell. That lesson has left the Spitfire unattached. It has been free to be used by each new post-war generation safe in the knowledge that it was not subject to one dominant cultural construction, specifically not beholden to the generation of 1940. Howard's fable has never been successfully disavowed and it has been the contention of this chapter that there was a moment when it might have been held up to ridicule, but that moment passed. In fact, that moment, the intervention by Sir Robert McLean in 1957, gave it a new breath of life.

The timing of McLean's intervention was serendipitous. It came at a time when official reflection on the war was arguably at its most conspicuous. HMSO was busy. Readers were getting used to authoritative reflection. In terms of authoritative if not official reflection on the Spitfire, there was no-one better placed in 1957 than McLean. This was no doubt why *The Times* was prepared to publish his recollections, along with the fact that he was entertainingly controversial. McLean did not, of course, endorse Howard's fable directly, but for the sake of the argument here, the Spitfire's requirement for a lack of provenance, he did not have to. All that was necessary was that he, from his position of authority, offered no alternative. As it turned out his intervention was such a tangle of truths and half truths that it stymied any hope of a consensus forming on the origin of the Spitfire for at least another thirty years, if it ever has. Having examined McLean's disingenuous narrative of 1957, the final part of this chapter now seeks to understand the motive behind it.

The best place to begin is actually two years after the spat took place in *The Times*. When Scott interviewed McLean in November 1959, he found McLean infirm of body but not of mind. This ruled out any question of McLean's muddled thinking being a consequence of muddled wits. Scott made copious notes of those interviews, now in the Vickers Archive at Cambridge University Library, and in them we find McLean holding firm to his story.⁴²⁰ Scott did not repeat McLean's calumnies in his Vickers history. What Scott did instead was tread

⁴¹⁹ David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 15-48.

⁴²⁰ See CUL, VD 252, Notes of a series of Interviews with Sir Robert McLean at Galashiels, 8/9 Nov. 1959.

carefully around them, neither dismissing them nor confirming them. Remember Scott was writing after the spat had taken place, and that McLean's views were in the public domain. Scott did not condone McLean's story but he did try to explain it to his readers in terms of a disintegrating relationship. 'War with Germany, in his view, was inevitable: and that it would be won by the Wellington and the Spitfire was his doctrine, which he preached in and out of season, particularly to the Air Staff. His preaching was like that of John Knox to Mary Queen of Scots, and was received in somewhat the same way.'⁴²¹

Scott tried to be fair to both sides. He did not want to portray a martyr, but he did show a great deal of sympathy for McLean. Scott obviously believed in the integrity of the man if not his story. He was not alone in his admiration for McLean. A month before travelling up to Galashiels, Scott had interviewed Barnes Wallis. He found in Barnes Wallis a great supporter of McLean. 'He was anxious that the great part played by Sir Robert McLean should be acknowledged in the history of the company.'⁴²² Nevertheless Barnes Wallis painted no rosy picture of McLean's dealings with the Air Ministry particularly in his last months as chairman of Vickers Aviation. Barnes Wallis told Scott that McLean took a 'very argumentative, and indeed aggressive, line with the Air Staff.'⁴²³ What Barnes Wallis said next to Scott never made it directly into Scott's history of Vickers.

The crises came, since the Air Ministry had to decide between it and the Hamden. In Wallis's view Freeman was obsessed by Handley Page, partly at least because of the expansive personality and lavish hospitality of Sir Frederick Handley Page. Freeman much preferred Sir Frederick's form of diplomacy to McLean's progressive pugnacity, and the result of this was that McLean began to conduct a campaign inside the Air Ministry for the Wellington. Freeman of course greatly resented this and in the end went to Craven and said that either McLean must stop it or go. If McLean did not go Vickers would get no orders as the Air Ministry had no confidence in McLean.⁴²⁴

⁴²¹ Scott, *Vickers*, p. 211.

⁴²² CUL, VD 780, Notes of an Interview between Dr B. N. Wallis and Mr J. D. Scott at Weybridge, 9 June 1959.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

Sir Wilfrid Freeman was at the time Air Member for Research and Development and Sir Charles Craven a senior executive at Vickers. Scott in his account of McLean's demise avoided the libellous but took on board the message Barnes Wallis had given him.

The Vickers aircraft companies, or at least Sir Robert McLean as their head, were acting in the belief that the Air Ministry was, in matters of design, development and strategic planning, reactionary and inept; and the heads of design and development in the Air Ministry were acting in the belief that the Vickers aircraft companies, or at least Sir Robert McLean as their head, were obstinate, over-bold and intrusive.⁴²⁵

McLean resigned in October 1938, forced out, according to Scott and Barnes Wallis, by a Vickers Board intent on protecting their relationship with the Air Ministry. Scott and Barnes Wallis' sympathy seems to have been born of a belief that McLean had created a culture at Vickers Aviation, at Weybridge and Supermarine, which had nurtured innovation and adventure. It had after all produced the Wellington and Spitfire. 'Perhaps it was well that when Craven assumed control of the aircraft companies the supreme creative effort had already been put forth.'⁴²⁶ Scott was alluding here to the fact that Sir Charles Craven was a ship man. It was what the ex-works manager at Supermarine, Trevor Westbrook, had told him. 'He knew nothing of aircraft and neither did any of his Vickers Armstrong staff. In fact in the winter of 1939, he was of the opinion that aircraft were more or less a waste of time and told me so.'⁴²⁷

Whether Scott and Barnes Wallis were right or wrong, the point of interest for us must be the fact that McLean never forgot the disintegration of that relationship, nor forgave. McLean, in retirement, was a bitter old man. It was such bitterness that suggests the first of the two reasons reason why I think McLean said what he said in 1957. McLean had to create a narrative, no matter how rickety, that excluded the Air Ministry. He could not countenance any credit being given to his nemesis for the creation of the Spitfire. There is even a small piece of evidence from 1957 to support this hypothesis. It comes by way of a copy of a letter dated 25 August 1957, sent to *The Times* by McLean but never published, and now in the Vickers Archive. It is annotated in a shaky hand, almost certainly McLean's

⁴²⁵ Scott, *Vickers*, p. 214.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 211.

⁴²⁷ CUL, VD 746, Letter from Trevor Westbrook to Scott in response to draft of chapter 9, 5 Feb. 1960.

own. ‘*The Times* refused to print this letter, a refutation of Sir E. Ellington’s who gave the official reply. Once again *The Times* prefers to suppress the truth and defend officialdom.’⁴²⁸ By officialdom McLean can only have meant the Air Ministry.

What about that claim of a suppression of the truth? Scott was alert to the danger of believing McLean’s story, and so are we now, but what of McLean himself? Did he knowingly and deliberately lie in 1957 and again to Scott in 1959? Such an idea simply does not fit the character of the man Scott met in Galashiels, ‘a man of granite integrity and austere independence of mind’.⁴²⁹ What appears much more likely was that McLean believed what he said. The lengths to which he went to twist facts and re-arrange chronology spoke of a man creative in his analysis, immune to self criticism, and a little lacking in insight. As we have seen McLean’s role in the creation of the Spitfire was ambiguous at best. He commissioned the Spitfire but commanded a committee that shackled Mitchell to a conservative design which ended in failure. Success only came when McLean stopped interfering.

What does it all add up to? McLean’s failure to undermine Howard’s fable of 1942, or to offer a coherent alternative, merely served to confirm it. We must not forget either the contributions in 1957 of those drawn into the spat. These too served to confirm Howard’s fable. ‘He was an individualistic man, as brilliant designers have to be, who said he was not going to be tied down to an Air-Ministry inspired and dictated aeroplane, and could do much better if he was given a free hand.’ These were the words of Sir George Edwards, Managing director of Vickers-Armstrongs (Aircraft) Ltd. What of the Air Ministry? ‘The Air Ministry official said that at this stage they did not wish to cross swords with Vickers or to deny the genius of the late Mr. Mitchell, the designer of the Spitfire.’⁴³⁰ Without a coherent alternative from McLean here was the familiar trope inspired by Leslie Howard, the idea of timeless ‘English’ genius. If confusion did reign in the minds of those that read what Sir Robert McLean had to say in the summer of 1957, confusion was in the end all that mattered. It left the Spitfire’s legacy at liberty to be used in the evolution of the myth of the Battle of Britain.

⁴²⁸ CUL, VD 746, Unpublished Letter to *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1957.

⁴²⁹ Scott, Vickers, p. 200.

⁴³⁰ ‘Spitfire’s Origin in an Experimental Thing’, *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1957, p. 5.

Chapter 3 - The Spitfire's Performance: A Living, Breathing, Flying Museum

In just over three years beginning in May 1939, the Spitfire accumulated a multi-layered record which enabled it to act as a palimpsest and formed the basis of its future appeal to post-war audiences. Moreover the Spitfire was not subject to one dominant cultural construction, in particular, the mores and strictures of the wartime generation. This made the Spitfire able to support new readings of the wartime myths. Now we will look at the Spitfire in performance. We will first examine what performance is in terms of a cultural production, and then we will look at the performance characteristics of the Spitfire itself. What was the engine behind the Spitfire's ability to create new readings of the myth of the Battle of Britain post-war?

The answer to this question begins with something which would have been very familiar to anyone with an interest in the Battle of Britain, the Spitfire in action. As Angus Calder explains, the Spitfire had always been defined in action.

Several generations in Britain remembered, or grew up with, two indelible visions of the Battle of Britain. One is from the pilot's cockpit. Film camera or prose description gives us the image of the Messerschmitt attacking, as it were, ourselves like an immense wasp. Our paranoia is the pilot's. Our relief as the enemy hurtles blazing groundwards is his. Or, from the ground, we saw, we still see, we still imagine, the spectacle of 'our boys' duelling...with equally matched adversaries above our rooftops: a gallant show, perhaps leaving behind some of those vapour trails across clear blue skies which still haunt many people whose memory falsely tells them that the weather that summer was exceptionally fine.⁴³¹

Calder in his essay makes it perfectly clear that notwithstanding the Hurricane's contribution to winning the Battle of Britain, the pilot's cockpit that 'Britain remembered' was always that of a Spitfire, the gallant show always put on by Spitfires duelling

⁴³¹ Angus Calder, 'The Battle of Britain and Pilots' Memoirs', in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 194.

Messerschmitts. When we look at Calder's claim for two indelible visions a little more closely we soon discover he is right. We begin with the view from the Spitfire cockpit. In 1940, good quality combat footage was rare. What little there was, and especially from the pilot's point of view, was from a single source. This was grainy Air Ministry supplied gun-camera footage. RAF fighters carried a 16-mm G42 cine-camera which only operated when the gun-button was depressed.⁴³² What this limited functionality meant was that images so captured were almost invariably of close order combat and necessarily visceral. An attacking Messerschmitt did indeed look like an immense wasp.

As there was nothing else to describe the fighting, such images soon became common currency. Stills from the gun camera footage appeared in popular magazines such as *War Illustrated* on 21 June 1940. Newsreels as well as the Ministry of Information in their 'shorts' were happy to make room for such thrilling moving images.⁴³³ Movietone was so pleased with the footage in its *The Tactics of Air Supremacy* released in July 1940 that it used up air time to boast of the fact. 'We showed you shots by camera gun, located in a fighter, which recorded the actual destruction of the enemy in the air.'⁴³⁴ The makers of wartime feature films were not to be left out, eventually catching up with their more nimble media colleagues. Gun-camera footage featured in *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941) and, of more pertinence here, *The First of the Few* (1942).

Gun camera footage was common currency during the war and so it was to remain after the war was over. Calder, writing in 2000, surely had in mind the return of the 'immense wasp' in 1969. It was a return on a grand scale, in widescreen *Technicolor*, and right from within the cockpit this time. 'Being flown from the backseat, with a camera mounted in the front cockpit of the film's two-seat Spitfire, provided a pilot's eye view for the film.'⁴³⁵ The poor grainy image of 1940 was at last consigned to the small screen, used by the makers of television documentaries. The American financed big budget film *Battle of Britain* may well have been a critical as well as commercial failure but its forty minutes of authentic combat sequences, authentic in the sense that they took their visual cue from the original gun-

⁴³² See Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 104.

⁴³³ See 'The Tactics of Air Supremacy', *British Movietone News*, 15 July 1940.

⁴³⁴ Cited in Campion, *The Good Fight*, p. 170.

⁴³⁵ 'Battle of Britain Spitfire on the Silver Screen', *Aeroplane*, May 2014, p. 57.

camera footage of 1940, was well received. Such was its positive reception impact at the time that the legacy of those forty minutes is something we will be returning to in the next chapter.

What was true of combat footage in 1940, a limited repertoire widely disseminated, was also true of first-hand accounts of the aerial battle. There were only seven pilots' accounts of the Battle of Britain published during the war. In them, the view from the cockpit rarely varied. Here is Flight Lieutenant David Crook recording his experiences. 'I emerged from the cloud going at very high speed – probably over 400 mph, and saw a Ju. 87 just ahead of me. I opened fire and he seemed to fly right through my tracer bullets.'⁴³⁶ Richard Hillary saw the same thing too. 'He came right through my sights and I saw the tracer from all eight guns thud home. For a second he seemed to hang motionless; then a jet of red flame shot upwards and he spun out of sight.'⁴³⁷ Most pilot memoirs published after the war did not veer too far from this established narrative trope. Freed from the constraints of propaganda and censorship, criticism emerged over the conduct of the battle, but the view from the cockpit stayed the same. H.R. 'Dizzy' Allen had his own encounter with those wasps too. 'A German bomber whizzed past my head a few feet away. I could see the bomb-aimer in the Perspex nose of the Heinkel. A few yards away a couple of Me. 109s with dirty great yellow noses flashed past.'⁴³⁸

Ubiquitous gun-camera footage and familiar tropes in pilot memoirs did produce an indelible vision just as Calder suggests and so what of the view from the ground? Calder is correct here too, and for the same reason, the nature of the source material. Although the Battle of Britain was fought over southern England, in plain view, what people saw proved hard to contextualise. H. E. Bates tried his considerable best to describe what he saw when he looked up into the Kent sky in the summer of 1940. 'The entire affair was strangely, uncannily, weirdly unreal...Now and then a sputter of machine-gun fire cracked the heavens open, leaving an ominous silence behind. Now and then a parachute opened and fell

⁴³⁶ David Crook, *Spitfire Pilot: A Personal Account of the Battle of Britain* (London: Greenhill, 1942), p. 65.

⁴³⁷ Richard Hillary, *The Last Enemy* (London: Macmillan, 1942), p. 97.

⁴³⁸ Hubert Allen, *Battle For Britain; The Recollections of H.R.'Dizzy' Allen, DFC* (London: Barker, 1973), p. 66.

lazily...But for the most part it all had a remoteness so unreal that the spectator over and over again wondered if it was taking place at all.'⁴³⁹

It was this remoteness, the missing physical cues of combat, which led to a symbolic representation coming to define the view from the ground. Arguably its most famous wartime depiction was Paul Nash's 1941 oil on canvas *Battle of Britain*.⁴⁴⁰ In answer to those, who like H. E. Bates, were confused by what they saw, 'Nash set himself to find an aesthetic or rhetorical equivalent for the sheer strangeness of modern war'.⁴⁴¹ What he found, and what he painted was combat without the combatants. Set against a brilliant blue summer sky, he painted instead gently spiralling vapour trails which mirrored the winding River Thames below. 'It is chiefly remarkable because for the first time an artist has managed to extract real pictorial drama out of the tortuous white that make a kind of living graph of a battle in the upper air'.⁴⁴² General interest, a certain fascination even, in those vapour trails, contrails, had been a feature of the summer of 1940.⁴⁴³ Nash even painted his interpretation from a Ministry of Information supplied photograph.⁴⁴⁴ Fascination with the vapour trails had focused on their aesthetic quality, their beauty, and what Nash had painted was undoubtedly beautiful. It was a point seized upon in the enthusiastic press reviews of the work at its unveiling. Jan Gordon in the *Observer* became quite lyrical over the way 'the lighter trails arabesque on blue sky and ochreous land, split by a sinuous river'.⁴⁴⁵

It was, however, a beautiful image of deadly combat, a paradox. It was one Nash himself was perfectly aware of. 'Although I know how terrifyingly gay and decorative war and especially war in the air, can look, I would like to give a feeling of dreadful fantasy, something suave but alarming. It's difficult'.⁴⁴⁶ It was difficult and it left Nash a little perplexed as well as vexed at the painting's reception, particularly by those critics like Jan

⁴³⁹ Herbert Bates, *The Blossoming World* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 167.

⁴⁴⁰ For a critical assessment of Paul Nash see Charles Hall, *Aerial Creatures: Paul Nash* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1996); Brian Foss, *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴¹ Hall, *Aerial Creatures*, p. 35.

⁴⁴² 'The National Gallery New War Pictures', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jan. 1942, p. 5.

⁴⁴³ Campion, *The Good Fight*, p. 191.

⁴⁴⁴ Charles Hall, *Aerial Creatures*, p. 35.

⁴⁴⁵ 'Art and Artists', *Observer*, 1 Feb. 1942, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁶ Cited in Charles Hall, *Aerial Creatures*, p. 36.

Gordon who could only see beauty in his depiction of the vapour trails. ‘In using the patterns of exhaust trails to express the progress of the contest I meant to appeal to the only visible evidence of commonsense experience that existed.’⁴⁴⁷ Kenneth Clark, chairman of the War Artists’ Advisory committee (WAAC), wasn’t fooled by such special pleading though. ‘You have discovered a new form of allegorical painting. It is impossible to paint great events without allegory...and you have discovered a way of making the symbols out of the events themselves.’⁴⁴⁸ Whether symbol or common sense, suave or fantastic, its enthusiastic reception only served to confirm that what Nash had painted was ‘everyman’s’ view from the ground, ‘the spectacle of ‘our boys’ duelling’.⁴⁴⁹



Figure 17. Paul Nash *Battle of Britain*, 1941.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Calder, *Burning Blue*, p. 194.

Calder is correct in his analysis; the view from the cockpit and the view from the ground are two indelible visions that ‘Britain remembered’ of the Battle of Britain, but what has either to do with the Spitfire in performance post-war? The answer lies in the way that the Spitfire in performance was able to effect change to the World War II myth while satisfying audience expectations. Audiences were accustomed to seeing the Spitfire in action and this was how they would still see the Spitfire post-war. What was different of course was that in wartime the Spitfire in action was fighting, whereas post-war it was performing when any ‘action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance’.⁴⁵⁰

By performance, we do not mean the artifice of a theatrical production, but instead a cultural production as John MacAloon explains: ‘more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and histories, present ourselves with alternatives.’⁴⁵¹ It is important to note the double purpose here, the looking forward as well as looking back. It is what Richard Bauman makes clear in his definition of performance as a cultural production as rendered by Henry Bial. ‘All performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, according to which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.’⁴⁵² If we apply Bauman’s definition to a present day Spitfire flypast, what we see is not a re-enactment of the past, a theatrical production, but a re-examination of the past from a contemporary perspective. This is the ‘consciousness of doubleness’, the past in the present when we ‘reflect upon and define ourselves’.⁴⁵³

A cultural production is not the same thing as a theatrical production but there are elements in common. The most important is a sense of drama. A cultural production has emotional as well as intellectual content. Returning to our Spitfire flypast, this emotional content was very familiar to a man who has organised more Spitfire flypasts than most, David Ogilvy, one of the pioneers of historic air displays in Britain. He planned for it. ‘The commentator must

⁴⁵⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

⁴⁵¹ Cited in Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 212.

⁴⁵² Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

⁴⁵³ John MacAloon cited in Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 212.

know when to shut up and let the crowd enjoy the sound of the Spitfire.⁴⁵⁴ What Ogilvy meant by enjoy, was for the audience to experience a moment of emotional release. Such a moment has been seen many times by the Duke of Cambridge. ‘There are few sights and sounds that evoke a more emotional response than a display or flypast by the iconic aircraft of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. They tug at the heart strings, bringing many to tears.’⁴⁵⁵

What is happening here? The answer is that when the commentator falls silent, the crowd enters a privileged space, a ‘reality that exists on a different plane from “everyday” existence’.⁴⁵⁶ The hushed crowd is inculcated perhaps even tearfully overcome by an ‘awareness of some “original” behaviour, however distant or corrupted by myths or memory’.⁴⁵⁷ Richard Schechner describes this awareness as ‘restored behaviour’.⁴⁵⁸ Restore is an appropriate word in this context for although it means bring back, or return, it also means refurbish, renovate. What is actually happening in the moment of a Spitfire flypast, is both. The ‘remembered’ past appears in the shape of the Spitfire but it is contextualised in the present. Subject to an emotional charge, the myth of the Battle of Britain changes form.

It does, however, require a Spitfire to fly over. It was Walter Benjamin who drew attention to the idea of the ‘authority of the object’. ‘The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning...its testimony to the history it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction...What is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.’⁴⁵⁹ Squadron Leader Al Pinner in his introduction to Jerrod Cotter’s 2007 history of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF) wrote of ‘a living, breathing, flying museum of priceless pieces of national heritage’.⁴⁶⁰ What Pinner was referring to was the ‘authority of the object’. Every Spitfire flying today in a British air show, and not just those of the BBMF, will almost certainly be a restored original, manufactured between 1936

⁴⁵⁴ David Ogilvy, *Flying Displays* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 1984), p. 138.

⁴⁵⁵ Cited in Paul Eden (ed.), *Salute: Battle of Britain Memorial Flight 60th Anniversary* (Stamford: Key Publishing, 2017), p. 5.

⁴⁵⁶ Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, p. 47.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 28-29.

⁴⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), p. 220.

⁴⁶⁰ Jarrod Cotter, *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight: 50 Years of Flying* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007), p. 12.

and 1948.⁴⁶¹ Let us return to Bauman's definition of performance: 'the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.'⁴⁶² How much clearer is that comparison when the 'action', the Spitfire flypast in our example, is carried out by an original not a reproduction, an aircraft with the 'authority of the object'?

The survival of some fifty airworthy original Spitfires worldwide today is undoubtedly a result of the RAF's commitment to the Spitfire and to the commemoration of the Battle of Britain. For at least thirty years after the war only the RAF and its working partners, principally Rolls-Royce, had the resources to maintain airworthy Spitfires.⁴⁶³ The fact that the RAF did, though, turns out, on closer inspection, to be something of a surprise. In fact for almost twenty years after the war such was the Air Council's disengagement, we might even go so far as to say disenchantment, with the events of 1940 that it almost gave up on its flying heritage. It took a long time for the Air Council to fully appreciate the value of its stock of airworthy Second World War aircraft in performance. As this chapter will now demonstrate, it was more luck than judgement that kept the Spitfire flying in the hands of the RAF before the BBMF was finally established in 1969.

The Greatest Day

It was in June 1942 that the seeds of the Spitfire's post-operational flying career were first sown. Sir Richard Peck had begun his career in the Royal Flying Corps in 1916 and had secured one of the few permanent commissions available after the First World War as manpower was slashed to the bone. A successful career was capped with promotion to Air Marshall in July 1941. His wartime service was spent as Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (General). Assistant Chiefs were specialist advisers and the lieutenants of the Vice Chief of the Air Staff who administered the RAF and the Chief of Air Staff who directed its military operation. Peck in fact had a quite specific role during the war. He was the anonymous 'Air

⁴⁶¹ How much longer this will remain the case is unclear. The world record price paid to date for an original Spitfire at auction is £3,106,500. Such a price for a fully restored 'original' Spitfire has generated a market for 'new' Spitfires at considerably less cost. This market is now being catered for in America as well as New Zealand.

⁴⁶² Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, p. 5.

⁴⁶³ Rolls-Royce today maintains and operates Spitfire PS853 for promotional purposes.

Ministry Spokesman' who briefed the press on operational affairs. He was in effect head of RAF public relations. That was why, in June 1942, he was writing to R. H. Melville, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair. 'I think it is important that this year, and in the future, we should commemorate on September 15th, our victory, and our deliveries, in the Battle of Britain.'⁴⁶⁴

The previous year, the first anniversary of the Battle of Britain, the RAF had done nothing. Worse, the RAF had been embarrassed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. National Day of Prayer events had taken place on 7 September 1941, just as they had the year before, but these events were not specifically related to the RAF or to the Battle of Britain. Two weeks later, however, on Sunday 21 September, the Archbishop did lead prayers specifically for deliverance in the Battle of Britain and instructed that church collections up and down the country that Sunday should be donated to the RAF Benevolent Fund.⁴⁶⁵ Returning to the summer of 1942 therefore and Peck, as head of public relations, was all for an RAF show of commemoration but what sort of show that was the question.

First ideas I have are:-a church parade of the A.T.C. on the Sunday nearest to the chosen date; and an article summarising the Battle of Britain and any new points we can dig out on it as a hand out; a broadcast; some little reminder note on the news reels; a Thanksgiving Service, and a Special prayers at all our own RAF Services, on the nearest Sunday; a colour hoisting parade on the 15th at all units.⁴⁶⁶

The choice of commemorative date, 15 September, was not his. In fact it had not been made by anyone in the RAF at all. If anyone had a strong claim it was Hilary Aiden St George Saunders. Saunders was a writer of popular detective fiction before the war and after the war he would co-author, with Denis Richards, the official history of the RAF. It is his work during the war that is of interest here, however. For the sum of £50, the Air Ministry's Historical Branch had commissioned him in the late summer of 1940 to write a short popular account of the Battle of Britain. It was never intended for the university library.⁴⁶⁷ Published the following year in March 1941 under the title *The Battle of Britain: An Air*

⁴⁶⁴ TNA, AIR 20/4200, R. Peck to R. Melville, 11 July 1942.

⁴⁶⁵ 'R.A.F. Sunday', *The Times*, 22 Sept. 1941, p. 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ See Campion, *The Good Fight*, pp. 280-288.

Ministry Account of the Great Days from 8th August-31st October 1940, Saunders had singled out 15 September as a day for special attention. He did so, though, purely as a narrative device, concentrating on a particular day to help explain the ebb and flow of combat. He even said so in the text.⁴⁶⁸ Yet his caveats were lost in the noise generated by the astonishing success of his little HMSO pamphlet. It was, according to Garry Campion, ‘a propaganda masterstroke’.⁴⁶⁹ Measured in terms of sales, then so it was. Exact figures are elusive, even to the nearest million such was the phenomenon, but on its first day of publication it sold over 300,000 copies. Saunders, unfortunately for him, was not on royalties. He had, however, taken his £50 commission seriously. He had been given access to Air Ministry files and took full advantage. But such academic rigour rarely translates into a runaway bestseller, nor does it explain Richard Overy’s observation that Saunders’s short pamphlet has shaped the myth of the Battle of Britain ever since.⁴⁷⁰

Beginning with the extraordinary sales, they were down to a combination of good writing and good timing. In March 1941, with the Blitz already months old, a good news story was very welcome. Overy’s point, however, of a lasting authorial authority has much but not everything to do with the fact that Saunders was in that privileged position of being first into print, of shaping the historical narrative. His was also an ‘official’, authorised account. It had credibility from the outset. It received more from the pen of Churchill himself. Churchill’s account of the Battle of Britain in his *Finest Hour* volume was greatly influenced by Saunders’s pamphlet according to David Reynolds.⁴⁷¹ But why has it not been supplanted by the work of later historians? The reason can only be that with the help of his primary researcher Albert Goodwin, and the access he was granted to Air Ministry files, he was able to get most things right. It was fifty pounds well spent by the Air Ministry’s Historical Branch.

Saunders nevertheless made a number of editorial decisions which would probably not have been taken today. For instance, in his account of the Battle of Britain he decided, quite arbitrarily, that it had had taken place between 8 August and 31 October. In Stephen

⁴⁶⁸ Hilary St George Saunders, *The Battle of Britain; An Air Ministry Account of the Great Days from 8th August-31st October 1940* (London: HMSO, 1941), p. 24.

⁴⁶⁹ Campion, *Good Fight*, p. 281.

⁴⁷⁰ Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain: Myth and Reality* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 119.

⁴⁷¹ David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 156.

Bungay's account, he is almost half way through his entire narrative before he reaches 8 August.⁴⁷² Bungay, unlike Saunders, includes the air fighting over the channel in July and early August in his history of the Battle of Britain. There was also the matter of 15 September.

The battle took place too recently for a full account to be written...almost three months of continuous air fighting. The better to comprehend its nature it is necessary to examine in greater detail an individual day's fighting. Sunday, 15th September is as good a day as any other. It was one of 'the great days,' as they have come to be called and the actions then fought were described by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons as 'the most brilliant and fruitful of any fought upon a large scale up to that date by the fighters of the Royal Air Force.' The enemy lost one hundred and eighty-five aircraft.⁴⁷³

'As good a day as any' Saunders wrote as a caveat but it was under the heading of 'The Greatest Day'. It was the heading that people would remember not the caveat. It was the reason why the Archbishop had led prayers of deliverance on 21 September 1941, the nearest convenient Sunday, and why Sir Richard Peck was so exercised by that date in 1942. Whether the heading was Saunders's own or his editor's we will probably never know. The Air Ministry files tell us nothing useful about the commissioning of the pamphlet. In any case, as we can see from the quotation above, Saunders is being a little duplicitous because he goes on to make a case for 15 September being 'The Greatest Day' rather than simply 'as good a day as any'.

He does so with false information. The best modern estimate for Luftwaffe losses that day are fifty six aircraft lost, not one hundred and eighty-five.⁴⁷⁴ Saunders, however, was probably playing a little fast and loose with the facts, all the better no doubt to suit his tale. He was no fool. Claims of enemy losses were controversial at the Air Ministry, and in particular that figure for that day of one hundred and eight-five.⁴⁷⁵ But Saunders had other reasons to highlight this particular day besides the score. His choice did have the

⁴⁷² Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Aurum, 2001).

⁴⁷³ Saunders, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 24.

⁴⁷⁴ Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, p. 332.

⁴⁷⁵ Anthony James, *Informing the People: How Government Won Hearts and Minds to win WW2* (London: HMSO, 1996), p. 25.

imprimatur of the prime minister. Churchill had indeed stood up in the House of Commons on Tuesday 17 September to proclaim ‘Sunday’s action was the most brilliant and fruitful of any fought’.⁴⁷⁶ Whether it was or not, Churchill had witnessed it first-hand. Having looked out of his Sunday morning window and seen perfect flying weather, he had decided to visit the underground operations room at RAF Uxbridge. He was watching on as the scale of the battle that Sunday grew inexorably. He saw and later reported Air-Vice Marshall Keith Park commit the last of his reserves to the fight. Ever the journalist, Churchill recognised a good story. Ever the politician, he put himself right at the heart of it when he stood up in the House of Commons. According to Richard Toye, Churchill was juggling in his speeches at this time the demands of different audiences both at home and abroad, but all would have appreciated this good news.⁴⁷⁷

Saunders also knew where to turn for a compelling phrase. In an address to the nation on 14 July 1940, Churchill had said ‘this has been a great week for the Royal Air Force, and for Fighter Command. They have shot down more than five to one of the German aircraft which have tried to molest our convoys in the channel’.⁴⁷⁸ It is not hard to imagine Saunders take ‘great week’ and type ‘great day’. What it was typing through the winter of 1940 and into 1941 may well have defined the story of the Battle of Britain for future generations, but modern scholars do take him to task for concentrating on this particular date. Stephen Bungay is bordering on the defiant when he finally reaches Saunders’s great day in his account of the battle. ‘15 September was the day when some, though not all, of the people who mattered realised what had been going on, and acted accordingly. This began a slow process of enlightenment. It is for that reason it has become known as Battle of Britain Day.’⁴⁷⁹ No it isn’t, but even Saunders had never meant his choice to be taken quite so literally.

⁴⁷⁶ Randolph Churchill (ed.), *Into Battle: Speeches by the Right Hon. Winston S. Churchill P.C., M.P.* (London: Cassell, 1941), p. 276.

⁴⁷⁷ Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill’s World War II Speeches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 73.

⁴⁷⁸ Churchill, *Into Battle*, p. 250.

⁴⁷⁹ Bungay, *Most Dangerous Enemy*, p. 334.

Sir Richard Peck, head of the RAF's public relations did just that, though, in his note to R. H. Melville, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair.⁴⁸⁰ Why did he? A man in Peck's position probably knew better. Perhaps he was simply doing his job. Saunders had written a bestseller after all. The Archbishop had also already sanctified what Saunders had written. It was a golden opportunity any public relations man worth his salt would have relished. The problem Peck faced, however, was that what was obvious to him was less obvious to those whose approval he now needed. Peck took his proposal directly to the Office of the Minister for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair. If Sinclair approved then clearly the prospects for his proposal would have been enhanced, but Sinclair's support alone was not enough. What Peck needed was the support of the Air Council. The Air Council was the RAF's main board, this was its decision, and the politics of the situation was such that its approval depended upon its three senior members, Sinclair as Air Minister, Sir Charles Portal as Chief of Air Staff and Sir Wilfrid Freeman as Vice-Chief of Air Staff. These three men, the political, operational, and administrative heads of the RAF each held an unofficial but effective veto on any Air Council decision. It was Sir Wilfrid Freeman who voiced his displeasure.

The historical precedents for self-congratulatory celebrations in the middle of a war are not very happy. Belshazzar held a banquet whilst the enemy were outside his gates; he lost his throne the same night.

I do not suggest that any such consequences would necessarily follow from a church parade of the A.T.C. but the principle behind A.C.A.S (G)'s proposal seem to me very questionable. The so-called Battle of Britain consisted of a series of successful defensive operations by Fighter Command. It is true that the R.A.F. then saved this country from defeat, but in my view it is a misuse of words to refer to our victory or our deliverance. Victories are only won by offensive action; and deliverance must be permanent to give much cause for junketing.⁴⁸¹

The key sentence here is worth repeating. 'The so-called Battle of Britain consisted of a series of successful defensive operations by Fighter Command'. Freeman was giving an

⁴⁸⁰ Sinclair was not the most obvious candidate as a rallying point for Dowding and Fighter Command. See Gerard De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London: Hurst, 1993), p. 162.

⁴⁸¹ TNA, AIR 20/4200, Memorandum by ACM Sir W. R. Freeman, 14 July 1942.

early airing to an argument which would hamper the RAF's commitment to the memory of the Battle of Britain for the next twenty years. During the war, at the highest levels of RAF command, tensions existed over the credit, and publicity, given to Fighter Command for the victory in the Battle of Britain.⁴⁸² A whole generation of RAF officers, now senior commanders, had been schooled in the offensive spirit of Lord Trenchard. Unsurprisingly perhaps, objections were raised to the idea of credit being given to the defensive battle fought by Fighter Command.⁴⁸³ As a result, Fighter Command and more especially Dowding, had a distinct lack of friends on the Air Council. Notoriously, Saunders's HMSO pamphlet *The Battle of Britain*, sponsored by the Air Ministry's Historical Branch, forgot to even mention Dowding at all. It was as if the Battle of Trafalgar had been fought without Nelson.

Freeman's veto stopped Peck's proposals in its tracks. Why did Peck not fight Freeman? It can only be that he realised it was a fight he could not win.⁴⁸⁴ The 1942 commemoration like that of 1941 was a distinctly minor affair as reported in *The Times*. 'RAF units of all Commands at home and overseas yesterday held parades and short ceremonies.'⁴⁸⁵ What was significant, however, was the very fact that any parades and ceremonies were held at all. It was a coded message to the Air Council from the rank and file and one a sharp eared correspondent from *The Times* certainly heard. 'There is a spontaneous movement throughout the RAF to observe September 15 each year as Air Trafalgar Day, and members of the various Commands are hoping to receive official backing.'⁴⁸⁶ Such spontaneity may have been inspired by the previous year's big summer hit in the nation's cinemas, *Lady Hamilton*. This patriotic tale of derring-do was reportedly Churchill's favourite film during the war.⁴⁸⁷ The provenance of such an association more likely lies in the campaign launched to restore Nelson's flagship *Victory* on Trafalgar Day 1922. According to Don Leggett, it made 'the *Victory* an important part of the commemorative landscape in early twentieth-

⁴⁸² Dowding's contribution to victory in the Battle of Britain and the controversy surrounding his removal from Fighter Command have been recently examined by Jack Dixon, *Dowding and Churchill: The Dark Side of the Battle of Britain* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008); Vincent Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008).

⁴⁸³ For an account of Trenchard's influence on RAF doctrine see Phillip S. Meilinger, 'The Historiography of Airpower: Theory and Doctrine', *Journal of Military History*, 64 (2000), pp. 467-501.

⁴⁸⁴ Garry Campion, *The Battle of Britain, 1945-1965: The Air Ministry and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p. 148.

⁴⁸⁵ 'R.A.F.'s Greatest Victory', *The Times*, 16 Sept. 1942, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ See Holger Hoock (ed.), *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 76.

century Britain.⁴⁸⁸ Such an association with the Battle of Trafalgar actually gave the lie to Freeman's observation of a 'misuse of words to refer to our victory or our deliverance', at least away from the highest councils within the RAF. The Battle of Trafalgar represented everything Freeman was trying to deny. Its annual celebration on Trafalgar Day was about 'equating Britons with success, British arms with triumph and British heroes with national service.'⁴⁸⁹ Freeman was out of step with his own command but he was soon gone.

Only a few weeks after that desultory second commemoration, Freeman retired from the RAF to take up a new appointment as chief executive of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. Freeman's departure was not the only change at the top. Sir Bertine Sutton joined the Air Council as Air Member for Personnel. He was responsible for RAF recruitment, promotions and personnel welfare. He would have been lax indeed in his new duty if he had not been wise to a 'spontaneous movement throughout the RAF'. Almost his first initiative in his new job, his first request of the Air Council, concerned 15 September.

We recently had the opportunity to celebrate fittingly to its importance the anniversary of the Battle of Britain (15th Sept. 1940 on which the greatest number of victories were won); to impress thereby on the public and on Parliament the urge to maintain air superiority as its absolute necessary shield in defence and weapon in attack; and within the R.A.F. itself to trumpet the inspiration it should give to the qualities of determination, discipline and leadership upon which success in battle depends. It is my contention that we neglected this opportunity, and thereby lost most important benefits.⁴⁹⁰

Sir Bertine Sutton had put on record his position and his position would not change. Events now move onto June 1943 and the office of Harold Balfour, Under-Secretary of State for Air. Sutton was about to receive a sympathetic hearing. The public's reaction to Montgomery's victory at El Alamein in late 1942 had finally persuaded enough at the Air Ministry that a celebration of a victory of their own was required.⁴⁹¹ The question was what form would it

⁴⁸⁸ Don Leggett, 'Restoring Victory: Naval Heritage, Identity, and Memory in Interwar Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), p. 81.

⁴⁸⁹ Timothy Jenks, 'Contesting the Hero: The Funeral of Admiral Lord Nelson', *Journal of British Studies*, 39 (2000), p. 453.

⁴⁹⁰ TNA, AIR 20/4200, 'Air Council, Discipline, Morale and Leadership' – Note by A.M.P., 24 Sept. 1942.

⁴⁹¹ See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 303-305.

take? Sutton made his case for a strictly RAF show but it was Sir Arthur William Street, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Air, who made the most telling intervention at the meeting.

P.U.S. suggested that the Civil Defence Services should be brought into the celebrations. The Battle of Britain was fought over our own country...It was a victory of the RAF in the air supported by the civil defence forces on the ground, and he thought that would be a more inspiring theme than to confine the celebrations to those by the RAF alone.⁴⁹²

Two weeks after that meeting in the office of Harold Balfour came the next Air Council meeting. Sutton had to listen as Sir Douglas Evill, the new Vice-Chief of Air Staff, voiced his disapproval for a purely RAF show. 'V.C.A.S. suggested that it would be premature at this stage of the war to establish a purely Royal Air Force day as would be the case if September 15th were celebrated as proposed.'⁴⁹³ The Air Ministry had accepted the necessity for a celebration but it was only a grudging acceptance. Political considerations, and the need to reinforce the idea of a people's war, had clearly been weighing on the mind of Sir Arthur William Street. Reservations, first voiced by Sir Wilfrid Freeman the previous summer, preyed on the minds of those on the Air Council. Such reservations are caught here in the Minutes of the Air Council meeting where Sir Douglas Evill had voiced his disapproval. 'The point was made in discussion that too great an emphasis on the part played by Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain was to be avoided.'⁴⁹⁴ Once it became clear there was going to be a celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Britain in September 1943 every effort was made to sideline Dowding. It was an effort that was to continue after the war.⁴⁹⁵ Here is an Air Ministry briefing to the BBC. 'It was agreed that R.A.F. interest should not be confined solely to the fighter aspect but should embrace the part played by other commands; notably Bomber Command, Coastal Command and Maintenance Command.'⁴⁹⁶ What it meant was that in September 1943, the Air Council had already given up sole

⁴⁹² TNA, AIR 20/4200, Notes of Meeting chaired by Harold Balfour, 25 June 1943.

⁴⁹³ TNA, AIR 20/4200, Minutes of Air Council Meeting 10(43), 6 July 1943.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ See Adrian Gregory, 'The Commemoration of the Battle of Britain', in Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.), *The Burning Blue: A New History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 218.

⁴⁹⁶ TNA, HO 1223, 'B.B.C. Coverage of Battle of Britain Sunday', 17 Aug. 1943.

ownership of the ‘memory’ of the Battle of Britain. By this time notions of a ‘People’s War’ were culturally implanted.⁴⁹⁷

By this joint celebration, in which the Minister of Aircraft Production will co-operate, it is intended to commemorate the air engagement known as the ‘Battle of Britain’, the prolonged series of night attacks that followed and the services of all those, whether members of the Royal Air Force, the Anti-Aircraft Gunners, The Civil Defence Services, the Police, the Royal Observer Corps, the aircraft workers or members of the general public, who by their skill, fortitude or devotion to duty contributed to the defeat of the whole of the attacks, which were aimed first at the invasion of this country and later at the destruction of the morale of the civilian population.⁴⁹⁸

Celebrations were muted in 1944 on account of the on-going D-Day operations and the next significant step in the story of the ‘greatest day’ would have to wait until the end of the war. On 6 November 1945, the Air Council adopted the recommendations of a special committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Richard Peck. This was the same Sir Richard Peck who had seen his proposals vetoed by Sir Wilfrid Freeman. Peck’s ambitions had grown considerably since his tentative but still unacceptable proposals of June 1942. What the Air Council now confirmed was a cornucopia of separate events collected together under the banner of Battle of Britain Week. Highlights would be Battle of Britain Day observed on the ‘greatest day’, 15 September, Battle of Britain Sunday in acknowledgement of the Archbishop’s original initiative, and an RAF ‘At Home Day’ being the Saturday immediately preceding Battle of Britain Sunday. It was a programme designed to please all interested parties. This did bring with it a certain lack of focus. Both the church services on Battle of Britain Sunday and the ‘At Home Day’ were intended to celebrate the RAF as a whole and not just Fighter Command. Nevertheless, Fighter Command and the Battle of Britain were given pride of place. The Air Council had perhaps taken note of the growing political

⁴⁹⁷ The origins of the phrase ‘People’s War’ is obscure but it was common currency by at least 1942 as evidenced by a cartoon drawn by George Loraine Stampa which appeared in *Punch* that year. The image is of an old man, pipe in hand, addressing a young soldier in a quiet public bar. The text reads ‘...and you can tell your General that’s my opinion. This ain’t a soldier’s war – it’s a People’s war, this is!’ See Helen Walasek (ed.), *Punch Goes to War 1939-1945* (London: Prion, 2010), p. 124.

⁴⁹⁸ TNA, HO 207/214, Home Security Circular No. 138, 1943.

squeamishness over the results of the strategic air campaign carried out by Bomber Command.⁴⁹⁹

The new programme had its first airing the following year. Unfortunately, in 1946, 15 September fell on a Sunday which meant Peck's Battle of Britain Week, was squeezed into one soggy weekend. Nevertheless, it had taken place and it did culminate in an impressive service at Westminster Abbey. But the Spitfire was not yet a feature of the activities, and the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight was still years away from existence. Peck's initiative, his week-long package of events was not yet secure either. E. Colston Shepherd in the *Sunday Times* gave a detailed account of that damp weekend's roll call of events and right at the end of his report noted almost as an afterthought 'a special memorial in a chapel in Westminster Abbey to those who fell in the Battle of Britain is now being prepared. The king has consented to unveil it on July 10 next year'.⁵⁰⁰ What was also being prepared, however, was the first great crisis in the history of the commemoration of the Battle of Britain.

Lambeth Palace unlike the Air Council had been quick to recognise the anniversary of the Battle of Britain. Quick too was its progression from parish Sunday service to grand state occasion. This was a deft exploitation of the 'greatest day' by Lambeth Palace. Such special acts of worship were not new. As Philip Williamson has pointed out, they helped to guarantee the Church of England's leadership in the religious life of the nation.⁵⁰¹ On only the third anniversary, the bells of St Paul's Cathedral had wrung out to herald the arrival of the King and Queen for its special service of thanks giving. The following year this new state occasion had transferred to Westminster Abbey where 'from one of the two great towers of England's Abbey shrine at Westminster, there flew yesterday the light blue and roundel ensign of the Royal Air Force. In the Abbey a vast multitude had assembled and outside an even greater one to give thanks to God for the victory of the Few in the September days of 1940.'⁵⁰² But in the winter of 1946 all was not well at Lambeth Palace. It had many calls upon its purse and it had had enough of passing round the plate on behalf of the RAF

⁴⁹⁹ See Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A History of Bomber Command* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 140.

⁵⁰⁰ 'Fly-Past Tribute to "The Few"', *Sunday Times*, 15 Sept. 1946, p. 1.

⁵⁰¹ See Philip Williamson, 'State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings: Public Worship in Britain 1830-1897', *Past and Present*, 200 (2008), pp. 121-174.

⁵⁰² 'The Debt to The Few', *Daily Express*, 18 Sept. 1944, p. 3.

Benevolent Fund. What made Lambeth Palace even more aggrieved was that it could not get the co-operation it required to organise the next Battle of Britain Sunday service in the Abbey to be held in September 1947. It thought either its efforts were being taken for granted, notwithstanding the fact that it had initiated the service in the first place, or that the RAF was losing interest. The National Archives at Kew holds a number of increasingly agitated letters from Lambeth Palace to the Air Ministry. Such was Lambeth Palace's dissatisfaction with the whole situation, and presumably satisfaction at a job well done, it wondered whether it were not time to scrap the whole idea.

Context is important here; Lambeth Palace had just secured the shift of the principle war commemoration from Armistice Day to Remembrance Sunday. The official announcement was made in the House of Commons on 19 June 1946. Whether this was a cynical political move, a land grab, or as Adrian Gregory suggests a laudable desire to simply place the commemoration on a sound doctrinal footing, the decision may have coloured negotiations now between Lambeth Palace and the Air Ministry.⁵⁰³ The link between desire and need was under pressure from both sides. Lambeth Palace's suspicions over the RAF's commitment were well founded. Fighter Command's lack of friends was being felt once more.

In March 1945 Air Marshall Sir John Slessor had been appointed Air Member for Personnel (AMP) with a seat on the Air Council. Peace had brought with it a shift in the balance of power on the Air Council. Tasked with overseeing demobilisation, AMP was now one of its biggest jobs as Slessor's appointment confirmed, he was the coming man. In January 1950, after a short interregnum as Commandant of the Imperial Defence College, he would become Chief of Air Staff. Slessor was no friend of Dowding or Fighter Command. Max Hastings has noted he was 'one of the most passionate disciples of Lord Trenchard and his theories of strategic air power as a war-winning weapon'.⁵⁰⁴ Dowding and Slessor were not only at opposite ends of the RAF spectrum in terms of their strategic vision, there was little empathy between them either.⁵⁰⁵ Slessor now got the agreement of his Chief of Air Staff,

⁵⁰³ See Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 206.

⁵⁰⁴ Max Hastings, 'Slessor, Sir John Cotesworth (1897-1979)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn. 2011) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31692>, accessed 7 Nov 2015].

⁵⁰⁵ See Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command*, p. 77.

Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder to cancel the 1947 commemoration in the Abbey. The trigger for this decision takes us back to the subject of that passing note by E. Colston Shepherd in the *Sunday Times*. This interdepartmental memo from the Director General of Personal Services (DGPS) Air-Vice Marshall John D. Baker to the Director of Personal Services (1) (DPS1) Air Commodore A. S. Ellerton explains the who and what of the matter, but tactfully leaves out the why.

I have discussed your proposals in Minute 1 for the commemoration of the Battle of Britain this year with AMP. He decided that we should not hold another service in Westminster Abbey on Sunday, 21st September this year as it will follow so closely on the Dedication Service of the new memorial chapel to be held on the 10th July...

AMP would like arrangements made for your alternative suggestion that a brief service at the RAF Memorial on the embankment should be held on the afternoon of Sunday 21st September at which CAS should be asked to lay a wreath.⁵⁰⁶

The Sunday service was the climax of Peck's Battle of Britain celebration. A brief wreath-laying ceremony in a London street was hardly the stuff of state occasion. If this had gone ahead, as the parent of RAF Sunday, an already irritated Lambeth Palace would no doubt have been affronted. It may have even called into question the survival of Battle of Britain Sunday altogether. Had Battle of Britain Sunday been lost what damage would that have done to the status of Battle of Britain Week in the nation's ceremonial calendar? In all this we must bear in mind that the survival of airworthy Spitfires would ultimately come to depend upon the survival of that Sunday service. It was not a cleric or an air marshal who spotted the danger but a Labour politician and peer William Watson Henderson, 1st Baron Henderson. He had been elevated to the House of Lords in 1945 by Clement Attlee for services rendered to the party with a seat on the Air Council. Crucially, considering the nature of the crisis brewing here, services rendered included heading Labour's press and publicity department. He would have been alert to any potential publicity pratfalls. He spotted one now.

⁵⁰⁶ TNA, AIR 2/9754, DGP1 to DPS, 2 Feb. 1947.

1. I recognise the strength of the views expressed by CAS and AMP regarding a Westminster Abbey “Battle of Britain” service in September so soon after the Dedication in July.
2. Personally I would be most reluctant to see the established commemoration on Battle of Britain Day not maintained. Whatever may be said about V. E. and V. J. Days, the ‘Battle of Britain Day’ has an intimate significance all of its own for the people of this country, and more especially for the citizens of London and the South, and it does afford them an opportunity of spontaneously paying a tribute of gratitude, thankfulness and remembrance to the Service to which we all recognise that we owe so much.
3. It is also the one day of the year which I think should be regarded and preserved as exclusively the RAF Day. Continuity in the form of commemoration is surely, therefore, of very great importance. Even if the change were only for one year, a rainy day would seriously affect an open-air service at the RAF Memorial, and in any case continuity would be broken.
4. Moreover, I believe that the RAF itself stands to gain as a service by the public remembrance of ‘Battle of Britain Day’ as the day on which we commemorate the sacrifice, the gallantry and the achievement of the men who thwarted the enemy in its design to conquer our homeland. A national day of remembrance and dedication will help to make the spiritual appeal which is so necessary to attracting the right type of young man to his country’s first line of defence.⁵⁰⁷

Two points are made absolutely clear by Henderson’s intervention. The first was that Battle of Britain Day belonged to the ‘people of this country’ as a day of remembrance. This supports Adrian Gregory’s view that Second World War commemoration in the post-war years concentrated on the veterans of the armed forces.⁵⁰⁸ The second point being that it was an excellent shop window for the RAF. These two points would now be held in tension until the next great crises came in 1959, a crisis once again occasioned by the myopia of the Air Council. For now, however, Henderson’s arguments won the day. Slessor did not put up

⁵⁰⁷ TNA, AIR 2/9754, W. Henderson to DGP, 1 April 1947.

⁵⁰⁸ See Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 214.

a fight and Lambeth Palace was duly mollified. This crisis was over and it is now time to introduce the Spitfire into what were now secure commemorative proceedings.

The Flypast

The first recorded suggestion of a flypast to mark the Battle of Britain's anniversary is dated 11 August 1943. It was made by a Mr Mash, a public relations officer at the Ministry of Aircraft Production. He made it in a meeting at the Air Ministry of the newly constituted Committee on Battle of Britain Celebrations.

Mr. Mash suggested that it would demonstrate the quality of our aircraft if some aircraft which had actually been produced during the Battle of Britain period could fly over the parade. After discussion it was agreed that any ceremonial flying was undesirable. Group Captain Ardley stated that air cover would as a matter of course be provided for the parade.⁵⁰⁹

Undesirable it may have been in 1943 but the idea had been registered. In 1944 celebrations were muted on account of the D-Day landings but in September 1945, with the war over, the time was ripe to revisit Mr Mash's suggestion, although he would not get the credit.

The first Battle of Britain Fly-Past took place on 15 Sept. 1945, following a suggestion by the then AMP that such a demonstration might be appropriate in conjunction with the celebration of Battle of Britain Sunday, which was that year observed on 16th September. It was felt that this would meet a popular demand for a public manifestation by the Royal Air Force and that, at least as far as Fighter Command was concerned, the training involved would fit in with normal operational training. The idea was favoured by members of the Air Council, and subsequently approved by the Prime Minister.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁹ TNA, HO 207/214, Committee on Battle of Britain Celebrations, 11 Aug. 1943.

⁵¹⁰ TNA, AIR 2/7750, DCAS to the Air Council Standing Committee, 28 Nov. 1951.

This report was actually written in 1951 by Sir Arthur Sanders as part of a paper for the Air Council reviewing flypast policy. Unfortunately, the record of the decision making process behind this very first flypast is thin; although Baker's later account does offer some useful insights. The then AMP was none other than a newly appointed Sir John Slessor, who as we have already seen was no friend to Dowding's Fighter Command. Sir John Baker gives the impression that Slessor's 'suggestion' was for a strictly one off event. There is no hint of continuance. It was as if Slessor was attempting a commemorative full stop. It was a triumph. 'Three hundred planes thundered over London yesterday in the first "fly-past" to commemorate the Battle of Britain. As they swooped over Trafalgar Square they were watched by 10,000 people...In perfect formation the squadrons were led by Group-Captain Douglas Bader, the legless pilot who was shot down and taken prisoner during the war.'⁵¹¹ There would be no full stop, but such a spectacle, and such a success, did not register with the Air Council, not yet.



Figure 18. Douglas Bader

⁵¹¹ 'Bader Leads Fly-Past of "The Few", *Sunday Times*, 6388, 16 Sept. 1945, p. 1.

The next great military jamboree was the Victory Day Celebration planned for 8 June 1946. T. N. McEvoy, Director of Staff Duties (DSD) was acting as the Air Ministry's liaison officer. Here is McEvoy keeping his political master William Wedgwood Benn, 1st Viscount Stansgate, Secretary of State for Air informed about preparations but also trying to manage his political master's expectations knowing full well the mind of his service masters.

I understand from the Home Office representative on the Victory Celebrations Lighting Display Working Party (on which I represent the Air Ministry) that the Ministers are expecting a far more spectacular contribution from the Royal Air Force than will be practicable. Flares, illuminated aircraft and formation flying have been suggested.

A flypast by day has been spoken of, but Bomber Command could not spare the time to train for this, and the Air Staff considers that a flypast limited to Fighter Command would be unrepresentative. It would however be practicable if considered desirable.⁵¹²

Very soon it did become desirable. Here is Sir Albert Durston DCAS to Sir Douglas Evill VCAS.

You will have seen from your copy of D.S.D's minute now on this folder at enclosure 2A that the staff endeavoured to discourage any idea of Royal Air Force flying participation in the Victory celebrations on 8th June next. Nevertheless the Prime Minister subsequently (Hansard 18th Feb. 1946 page 787) stated in connection with the celebrations that 'The R.A.F. will stage a fly past'. I can find no trace in the files, or the minutes of the main Victory Celebrations Committee of how the Air Staff's opinion came to be overruled.⁵¹³

But there was no gainsaying the Prime Minister not even by CAS.

Since the promise of a 'fly Past' on June 8th has been given in the House we must, presumably, do our best to implement it. You will be aware however from Min. 6

⁵¹² TNA, AIR 2/9730, 'Victory Celebrations 8th June Flying Programme', 5 Feb. 1946.

⁵¹³ TNA, AIR 2/9730, Sir A. Durston to Sir D. Evill, 7 March 1946.

that our ‘best’ is likely to be rather like the widow’s wife – I hope it will be as fully appreciated.⁵¹⁴

As it turned out it was fully appreciated; the Victory Day flypast was another tremendous success. ‘Nor was authentic air support lacking on this great day. Before the procession, somewhat late, had passed a lone Hurricane, symbolising the Battle of Britain, led in three Sunderland flying-boats...first of a fly-past of more than 300 machines.’⁵¹⁵ That lone Hurricane is important to our story but not just yet. First the Air Council had to be reconciled with the idea of the efficacy of a flypast, any type of flypast.

The Air Staff’s objection to the Victory Day flypast had been on practical grounds, the problem of staffing, of training, even of available aircraft.⁵¹⁶ There were no perceived benefits to outweigh the inconvenience. But perceptions were about to change. It was time to weigh the benefits. In November 1948 the newly installed VCAS, Sir Arthur Sanders, sent a note to Slessor’s successor as AMP Sir Hugh Saunders.

We spoke the other day about devising some form of R.A.F ceremonial to mark occasions of national importance, particularly those connected with the Royal Family. Colour hoisting parades at R.A.F. Stations are all right from an internal and domestic point of view, but they do practically nothing to indicate to the general public that our service is taking its proper share in such celebrations, as do the firing of a salute in Hyde Park by the Royal Troop, R.H.A and the firing of salutes and dressing with flags by H.M. Ships. The action most appropriate to our Service would, of course, be formation flights, preferably over London.⁵¹⁷

Sanders, though was loathe to follow his own advice. It was the vagaries of the British weather which appeared to him an insurmountable problem. Instead, he suggested rather lamely, a salute by the Bofors guns of the RAF Regiment Light A.A. Squadron. Sir Hugh Saunders as AMP was not impressed by this suggestion and took it upon himself to go behind his superior’s back. Saunders now wrote to all the various commands, Fighter, Bomber, Coastal, Flying Training, Maintenance, Technical Training, Transport and Reserve.

⁵¹⁴ TNA, AIR 2/9730, Sir A. Tedder to The Viscount Stansgate, 15 March 1946.

⁵¹⁵ ‘Britain’s Tribute to War Victors’, *The Times*, 10 June 1946, p. 4.

⁵¹⁶ See TNA, AIR 2/9730, ‘Victory Celebrations 8th June Flying Programme’, 5 Feb. 1946.

⁵¹⁷ TNA, AIR 2/10410, Note from Sir A. Sanders to Sir H. Saunders, 23 Nov. 1948.

It was what he wrote, or rather the manner in which it was couched that was clever.

Saunders knew the answer he required.

1. I am directed to state that consideration is being given to devising a form of R.A.F. ceremonial appropriate to occasions of national importance...
2. It has been suggested that the action most appropriate to the R.A.F. would be formation flights over London. An objection to this form of ceremonial is the uncertainty of the climate, but against this it is thought that, even if the aircraft could not be seen, they could be heard and the public would thus be made aware that the R.A.F. was taking part in the celebrations.
3. A substitute for formation flights might be the firing of an appropriate salute by the Bofors guns of an R.A.F. Regiment Light A.A. Squadron. Such a ceremony, however, could only be an imitation of Army practice without the dignity of tradition, and there would be little to identify the ceremony with the primary function of the R.A.F.⁵¹⁸

In his note to the commands, Saunders had forgot to mention the seniority of the objector and so no-one in any of the commands felt themselves brave enough to disagree with what appeared the Air Council's direction of travel. Saunders, with the weight of the commands behind him, now took his case to the Air Council. It was persuaded, but it was not yet finished with the matter. If Saunders' had pulled off a coup the Air Council now played a masterstroke. To establish the flypast, any flypast, as worthy of 'taking its proper share in such occasions,' it required dignity. As a new invention it would naturally lack the gravitas of an established tradition, the salute in Hyde Park by the Royal Troop for instance, or the dressing of flags on H. M. ships.⁵¹⁹ The Air Council therefore decided what was required was the imprimatur of royalty. Only a direct royal connection would lend the flypast the solemnity to successfully compete with army and navy ceremonial. The Air Council wanted the general public as well as its rival services to understand that the flypast, any flypast, had the dignity of royal association.

⁵¹⁸ TNA, AIR 2/10410, Memorandum to Commands, 12 Dec. 1948.

⁵¹⁹ On the development of navy ceremonial see, Jen Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The problem was how to sell the idea to the palace; a royal occasion was one thing, but what about all other occasions? Here is part of the memorandum the Air Council sent for the King's approval and signature.

Most humbly submitted to your Majesty by your Majesty's most humble and most devoted servant that your Majesty may be graciously pleased to approve the introduction of Royal Air Force Ceremonial in the manner and on the occasions shown in the attached memorandum.

The Air Council recently considered the form in which the Royal Air Force should mark occasions of National importance, particularly those connected with the Royal Family.

After careful consideration the Council have come to the conclusion that a ceremonial Fly-Past is the only form of celebration which is appropriate to the Royal Air Force and are of the opinion that the following occasions of national importance are suitable for recognition by a ceremonial Fly-Past:-

1. The actual date of the accession, coronation and wedding of the Sovereign
2. The day announced in the London Gazette as the official anniversary of the Sovereign's birth
3. The wedding of the children of the Sovereign
4. The birth of a Royal Prince or Princess.⁵²⁰

These four examples of national importance were of course all royal occasions. The King might have been led to believe 'occasions of national importance' meant only royal occasions. It was presumably what he was supposed to think. The Air Council was trying very hard not to imply royal favour at the expense of the other two services. In an earlier draft of this memorandum the list of four examples is in fact a more revealing list of six. Example number five on that draft list was Battle of Britain Day, certainly not a royal occasion, but it was number six which the Air Council probably feared may have caused the royal pen to hesitate. It said simply 'on such other occasions as ordered by the Air

⁵²⁰ TNA, AIR 2/10410, Submission to the King, 21 Dec. 1949.

Council.⁵²¹ These last two were blue pencilled with the following comment. ‘Omit from submission but be careful to include in any Air Ministry Order by the Air Council.’⁵²² It was devious, the King did sign, and a list of six not four appeared in the Air Ministry Order ‘Introduction of Ceremonial Fly-pasts by the Royal Air Force to Mark occasions of National Importance’ dated September 3 1950. Royal association for any flypast had been confirmed.

Flypasts were now to be part and parcel of the RAF’s ceremonial repertoire but how did they impact upon Battle of Britain Week? Are we getting any closer to the saving of the airworthy Spitfire? In November 1951, Sir Arthur Sanders, now DCAS, having moved from his positions of VCAS, was invited to submit to the Air Council a paper summarising the arguments for and against mounting a fly past over London during Battle of Britain Week. We might remember that back in 1948, Sanders had been a naysayer, worried specifically about the weather. It had taken the intrigues of Sir Hugh Saunders to bypass him. But now three years on and he was a firm advocate.

The fly-past, as a single event in the many activities in Battle of Britain Week, has from the outset produced a very considerable amount of beneficial publicity in various forms; in fact interest in the fly-past, as reflected in press notices, has increased over the years since 1945...There is no doubt that the Press has come to regard it as the main feature of the Week – it has frequently been referred to as the ‘highlight’ and even the ‘climax’ of Battle of Britain Week. There has been no diminution of the volume of Press publicity during the past two years, in spite of the two successive complete cancellations.⁵²³

Bad weather had forced the cancellations of the anniversary flypast in 1950 and again 1951 but it did not dampen the enthusiasm of Sanders now.

It seems certain that to discontinue the fly-past in Battle of Britain Week would result in a considerable loss of prestige and publicity, which has been greatly enhanced by the association of the fly-past with Battle of Britain activities during the

⁵²¹ TNA, AIR 2/10410, Draft Submission, 19 Nov. 1949.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ TNA, AIR/7750, Sir Arthur Sanders to the Air Council Standing Committee, 28 Nov. 1951.

past seven years, and by such ideas as the 'lone Hurricane' leading the formations of the modern types. It has been contended that the publicity for Battle of Britain Week as a whole would suffer considerably by the elimination of the fly-past. This might well lead, in time, to a dimming of the present lively public interest in the annual commemoration, which has by now become, not only a valuable source of publicity, but a recognisable tradition of the Royal Air Force.

It may be argued that as the R.A.F.'s sphere of activities is in the air it would be considered strange if the R.A.F. did not show itself in the air by way of a fly-past during Battle of Britain Week – the one week in the year when the R.A.F. is undoubtedly in the minds of the public.⁵²⁴



Figure 19. Battle of Britain Display Rehearsal August 1950

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

What was not considered strange, not yet, was the complete absence of the Spitfire in the fly-pasts that accompanied Battle of Britain Week. In the first Battle of Britain flypast, authorised by Sir John Slessor in 1945, Douglas Bader led in a Spitfire which was not his usual mount and his fellow aces had accompanied him in Spitfires too. This may simply have been a matter of availability, a lack of airworthy Hurricanes. Eight months later, for the Victory Day Celebration, things had changed. The flypast was led 'by the unknown warrior of the air, in his Battle of Britain Hurricane.'⁵²⁵ Who suggested this change is unclear. The Air Ministry files are full of signed objections to participation in the Victory Day flypast but give no hint as to the provenance of the idea of using a single Hurricane to lead.

Whoever's idea it was, it was a good one. There was no 'lone Hurricane' leading the 1946 Battle of Britain flypast but there it was again in 1947. 'The loneliness of a single Hawker Hurricane of Fighter Command in London's sunny afternoon sky yesterday was symbolic of the nation's need at the time of the Battle of Britain.'⁵²⁶ By 1949, it had become tradition. 'Out of the murk of the sky to the east yesterday afternoon a speck resolved itself into that solitary Hurricane fighter which always leads the flight of the stately squadrons of military aircraft across the south of England on Battle of Britain Day.'⁵²⁷ Owing to bad weather there were no flypasts in 1950 and 1951 but in 1952, this new tradition seemed set to run and run. 'There lay the aptness of the lone Hurricane which, as usual, flew from an unnamed aerodrome with an unnamed Battle of Britain pilot at the controls.'⁵²⁸

Sometimes, something that turns out to be culturally significant occurs as a result of a single casual decision.

I think it is time we substituted a 'Spitfire' rather than a 'Hurricane' in the lead for a change. Both are now obsolete and the 'Spitfire' was even more the traditional battle-winner of the period.⁵²⁹

Air Chief Marshal Sir John Baker was a friend of the Spitfire. He had finished the war as Air Officer Commanding, No 12 Group, and had used a Spitfire as his personal transport. In the

⁵²⁵ 'Secret of Fly-Past', *Daily Mail*, 10 June 1946, p. 3.

⁵²⁶ 'Fly-Past Led By Old Fighter', *The Times*, 16 Sept. 1947, p. 2.

⁵²⁷ 'The Battle of Britain', *The Times*, 16 Sept. 1949, p. 4.

⁵²⁸ 'R.A.F. Homage to The Few', *The Times*, 16 Sept. 1952, p. 3.

⁵²⁹ TNA, AIR 20/7550, Sir James Baker to Sir William Dickson, 9 July 1953.

summer of 1953, he was now Vice-Chief of the Air Staff. We must remember that by 1953 there was little reason to preserve airworthy Spitfires. Operationally, they were obsolete and there was very little in the way of a safety net for any aircraft considered by the Air Historical Branch worthy of preservation. In 1931 the Air Council had approved a proposal for the establishment of an RAF Aeronautical Museum. Nothing had been done. In 1940, the Air Council mindful of its responsibilities had approved a proposal that material of historical significance should be selected and preserved for the sake of such a future establishment but in 1940, naturally, its attention was elsewhere. At the beginning of the 1950s, the Air Ministry's small collection of historical aircraft, twenty three plus a wreck or two, was stored at RAF Wroughton in Wiltshire in the care of No. 15 Maintenance Unit. In 1954, 1955 and again in 1956 a five plane Battle of Britain display made up of a Hurricane, a Spitfire, an ME 109, a Junkers 88 and a Heinkel 111 left Wroughton every September for Horse Guards Parade and the inspection of the public. By the third year, 1956, their increasing state of dilapidation had not gone unnoticed.

I have the honour to bring to notice that during this year's Battle of Britain Display of Historical aircraft, comments are alleged to have been made regarding the tawdry appearance of both British and German aircraft, and of the incompleteness of their equipment.

It is agreed that the general condition and appearance of these old aircraft leaves much to be desired, and considerable refurbishing would be necessary to bring them up to a satisfactory standard for future exhibition purposes. This work could not be done except at the expense of the normal commitments of No. 15 M.U., Wroughton at which the aircraft are stored. Moreover, so far as concerns restoration of aircraft of foreign origin it would not be possible to refurbish them to anything approaching their original condition, nor is it considered that the cost of the work involved in making even some improvement is warranted.⁵³⁰

The fact that even its choice display aircraft were being allowed to deteriorate is symptomatic of the Air Staff's attitude towards its heritage in the 1950s. How fortunate then was it that Sir John Baker had made his seemingly casual decision to substitute the

⁵³⁰ TNA, AIR 2/14352, Historical Aircraft Policy, 20 Oct. 1956.

Hurricane for a Spitfire. An airworthy Spitfire did have to be maintained. The task fell upon Fighter Command who between 1953 and 1959 kept one Hurricane and a small shifting roster of Spitfires. It was never more than six. It is fair to say that the reappearance of the Spitfire at the head of the flypast column for Battle of Britain Week in 1953 made very little impact on the press and public however. Admiration that year was reserved for the modern jets. ‘Flying in perfect formation, Meteors, Sea Hawks, and Canberras were followed by Sabres.’⁵³¹

In 1951, when the impact of the ceremonial flypast had first come up for review, enthusiasm was at its zenith that is enthusiasm for the Battle of Britain flypast in particular.

From 1947 onwards plans have, wherever possible, provided for subsidiary fly-pasts over a number of provincial towns by components of the main fly-past over London. During recent years the Participation Committee has arranged that the fly-past is, within practical limitations, a full scale representative effort by all Royal Air Force Commands at Home, and includes token contingents of the Royal Navy and United States Air Force...In 1948 the Secretary of State directed that the fly-past should be on “the most impressive scale possible.”⁵³²

The problem was that ‘the most impressive scale’ was an intolerable drain on resources. It did not take long for enthusiasm amongst the Commands to begin to wane. Reserve Command which boasted the RAF’s last remaining operational Spitfire squadrons stopped taking part in the Battle of Britain flypast as early as 1949. Transport Command stopped in the same year too. Flying Training Command gave up in 1952, Coastal Command in 1953 and Bomber Command in 1954. It meant that by 1955, the vintage Hurricane and Spitfire were followed by 48 Hunters of Fighter Command, 12 Seahawks of the Fleet Air Arm and 12 Sabres of the United States Air Force. There was no more talk of a representative effort. In 1954, the year after the Spitfire had returned to the head of the Battle of Britain flypast, the burden placed upon the Commands weighed heavily.

Current Approved Policy for the Mounting of R.A.F. Fly-Pasts on Ceremonial and Public Occasions

⁵³¹ ‘190 Jet Aircraft in Flypast’, *The Times*, 16 July 1954, p. 6.

⁵³² TNA, AIR/7750, DCAS to the Air Council Standing Committee, 28 Nov. 1951.

- (a) Royal Occasions
- (b) Battle of Britain Day
- (c) State Occasions
- (d) Miscellaneous
 - (i) Important Service Events (e.g. R.A.F. Display Farnborough, 1950; Coronation Review of the R.A.F. by Her Majesty The Queen, Odiham, 1953)
 - (ii) Important International Events (e.g. 10th Anniversary of the Liberation of France, 1954; N.A.T.O. Air Displays, etc.⁵³³)

Such an immense effort was unsustainable. It led to another policy review which reported to the Air Council in December 1954. It raised a number of problematic practical issues, many of which Sanders back in 1951 had chosen to ignore.

- (a) Fundamental changes in operational techniques and, in particular, the waning importance of formation flying.
- (b) The increase of operational speeds and heights
- (c) The increase in interference with civil air traffic, particularly in the London area, caused by flypasts
- (d) Noise and nuisance factors.
- (e) Need to keep the new bomber force rigidly on its training programme if it is to reach full operational capability within the minimum time.⁵³⁴

The Air Council wanted to cut back. After all the Air Council had done to secure royal authority there was even a suggestion to ignore Her Majesty's birthday. Just as in 1947 when the Air Council was in danger of falling out with Lambeth Palace, it was warned against any precipitous action. The Secretary of State for Air, William Sidney, 1st Viscount De L'Isle, reminded everyone of the publicity value of the flypast, its psychological importance as he understood it 'should be balanced against the views of Commander-in-Chief regarding the disturbance factor in the operational commands'.⁵³⁵ Nevertheless,

⁵³³ TNA, AIR 2/13313, 'Current Approved Policy for the Mounting of RAF Fly-Pasts on Ceremonial and Public Occasions', 5 Sept. 1954.

⁵³⁴ TNA, AIR 2/13313, 'RAF Fly-Pasts on Ceremonial Occasions', 13 Dec. 1954.

⁵³⁵ TNA, AIR 2/13313, 'Matters Arising from the Conclusions of Air Council Standing Committee', 16 Dec. 1954.

flypasts on a grand scale were at the beginning of a long slow diminuendo. But there was one particular flypast whose scale was immediately compromised.

Ostensibly it was a great success that now threatened the Battle of Britain flypast and therefore any good reason to maintain airworthy Spitfires and the ‘lone Hurricane’. ‘The Air Council should have in mind the ever-increasing public interest in Battle of Britain Week which would seem to show that we are gradually becoming less dependent upon spectacular flights over London as a means of keeping our name in front of the public.’⁵³⁶ The decision was taken to reduce the aircraft involved in the Battle of Britain flypast from over a hundred to about thirty. All would be provided by Fighter Command. The Hurricane and Spitfire would still lead the parade. The scene was set to trial this new arrangement in 1956, yet unfortunately it rained. The flypast over central London did not take place but it did not stop the public attending the ‘at homes’. Figures were up once again, 24,100 more than the previous year. The biggest attendance was at Biggin Hill where it exceeded the 200,000 mark.⁵³⁷ This increasing footfall encouraged the Air Council to take even more drastic action the following year. The fact that Battle of Britain Day in 1957 fell on a Sunday offered the perfect excuse. The plan was to use a single Hurricane and Spitfire timed to pass over Westminster Abbey during the Thanksgiving Service. It would be explained publicly by reference to Battle of Britain Day falling on a Sunday and ‘the fly past in future years should be reviewed in the light of the reactions to the 1957 change’.⁵³⁸

Why did Fighter Command not object to this diminution? It appears the reason was that Fighter Command was driving the bus. ‘In August 1954, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, suggested that the fly-past on Battle of Britain Day be discontinued and substituted by a small fly-past over Westminster Abbey during the Thanksgiving service.’⁵³⁹ The reason, as with the other Commands that had dropped out one by one, was overstretch. ‘In laying on this salute we have always looked to the public prestige angle by making it as spectacular as possible. This latter point has had its influence on the size of the formation; moreover, if we allow the “spectacle” element to continue we shall in future years have to go on increasing the size of the stream since, with increasing speeds, the time

⁵³⁶ TNA, AIR 2/13313, ‘RAF Fly-Pasts on Ceremonial Occasions’, 13 Dec. 1954.

⁵³⁷ See ‘Moral Battle of Britain’, *The Times*, 17 Sept. 1956, p. 5.

⁵³⁸ TNA, AIR 2/13313, Standing Committee Meeting 25(56), 15 Oct. 1956.

⁵³⁹ TNA, AIR 2/13313, Standing Committee Meeting 25(56), 15 Oct. 1956.

to pass a given spot tends to become momentary.⁵⁴⁰ Here was a problem specific to the jet age but there was also one looming with regard to the piston engines of the Spitfire and Hurricane.

George Ward, the Secretary of State for Air, was unhappy about continuing to fly single-engined vintage aircraft over London because of the risk of engine failure and ‘the adverse publicity which any untoward incident would create’.⁵⁴¹ Ministerial unease however was not enough to stop the flypast altogether. In 1957, a severely denuded flypast took place and the Air Ministry waited upon the consequence. Only the *Daily Express* seemed to notice. ‘Do those in authority want to wipe out this ceremony? They mistake the feelings of the British people who will never forget the debt they owe.’⁵⁴² Was the *Daily Express* right? The Air Staff decided to do a little better in 1958 when nine Javelins accompanied the two ‘vintage’ aircraft. But 1958 would be remembered by air enthusiasts not for this modest increase but for a disaster. On 20 September a Vulcan jet bomber crashed and burst into flames at a Battle of Britain anniversary display at Syerston, Nottinghamshire. Seven men were killed.⁵⁴³

The Memorial Flight

This disaster concentrated minds. The question of safety now became paramount. It threw into sharp relief the organisation, or rather the lack of it, behind the maintenance of the lone Hurricane and the few remaining airworthy Spitfires. Difficult decisions were going to have to be made. In May 1959, Sir Dermot Boyle, formally of Fighter Command, and now Chief of the Air Staff, received this memorandum from Sir Edmund Hudleston, Vice Chief of the Air Staff.

As you know the annual fly past of Battle of Britain Sunday is led by a Hurricane and a Spitfire. These aircraft have been maintained up to now in Fighter Command by a ‘Battle of Britain’ Flight drawn from personnel held on existing establishments. The

⁵⁴⁰ TNA, AIR 2/13313, ‘RAF Flypasts on Ceremonial and Public Occasions’, 13 Dec. 1954.

⁵⁴¹ TNA, AIR 2/13320, ‘Battle of Britain Parade. 1957’, 18 July 1957.

⁵⁴² ‘Remember the Few’, *Daily Express*, 2 Sept. 1957, p. 4.

⁵⁴³ ‘And the RAF Dance went on’, *Daily Mail*, 22 Sept. 1958, p. 1.

rundown of Fighter Command and an increasing maintenance problem has led them to ask for a formal establishment of the Flight to look after these aircraft.⁵⁴⁴



Peter Thompson proudly posing in a Spitfire XVF, probably TE330. (Courtesy Mimi Thompson)

Figure 20. Wing Commander Peter Thompson

Boyle, previously Air Officer Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command, would have known all about the increasing maintenance problems of the ‘vintage’ Hurricane and Spitfire. He would have understood better than almost anyone else the precarious hand to mouth existence of this ad hoc Battle of Britain Flight. *Air Clues*, a respected in-house RAF house magazine, described the foundation of this flight in its November 1958 edition. ‘At about this time [1957] the famous RAF Fighter Command station at Biggin Hill, Kent, was given the task of maintaining a small Battle of Britain Flight, composed of a Hurricane and several Spitfires which could be flown on ceremonial and historic occasions.’⁵⁴⁵ What *Air Clues* does not mention is a name. It all appears to have been the idea of Biggin Hill’s Station Commander at the time, Wing Commander Peter Thompson, as his widow Mimi Thompson recalls. ‘I knew that it was a strong feeling that he had to do this thing, to get the aircraft as

⁵⁴⁴ TNA, AIR 2/15690, Sir E. Huddlestone to Sir D. Boyle, 20 May 1959.

⁵⁴⁵ Cited in Cotter, *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight*, p. 42.

a Memorial Flight. He always used to refer to it as the Battle of Britain Flight. To him I think it was a very deep feeling. He never liked to discuss too much the war years, I think he lost too many wonderful people, good friends.⁵⁴⁶ Thompson had fought in the Battle of Britain as a Hurricane pilot.⁵⁴⁷

The last three Spitfires in flying service, operated by the THUM Flight for meteorological work, were about to be stood down. It was agreed that these three Spitfires would be handed over to Thompson at Biggin Hill. 'At 11:00 hours on the 11th of July 1957, three Spitfire aircraft were flown into Biggin Hill as the first move towards the formation of a "Battle of Britain" Flight. The event, which was treated with some ceremony, was given much publicity and aroused considerable public interest.'⁵⁴⁸

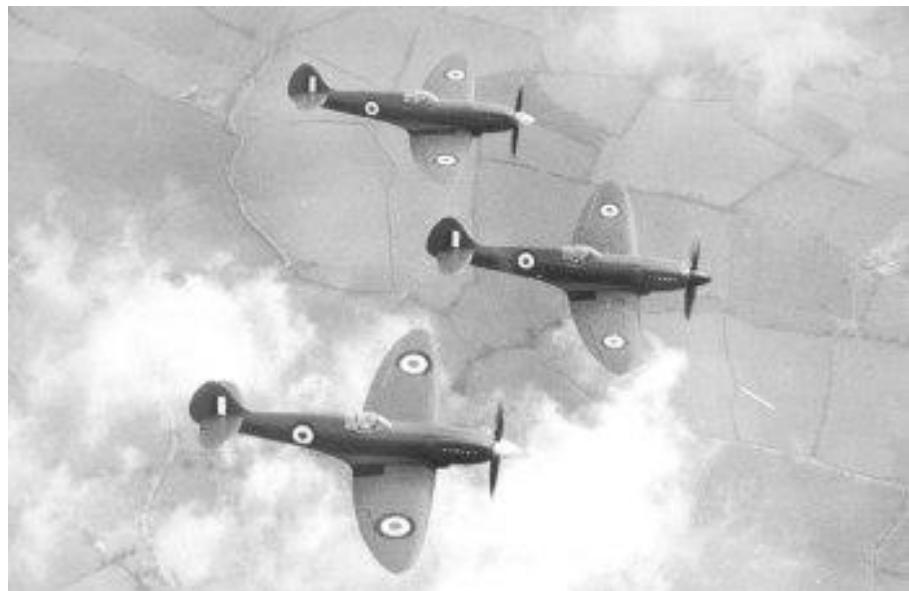


Figure 20. 1957, the three remaining airworthy Spitfires available to the RAF being flown by the Temperature and Humidity Monitoring (THUM) Flight at RAF Woodvale

Public interest was all well and good but it did not pay the bills. Thompson had his three Spitfires but no funds for maintenance and fuel, and as for manpower that would have to be engaged on a voluntary basis only. What was a frugal existence very soon became a peripatetic one as Fighter Command continued to contract. Biggin Hill was closed only

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

⁵⁴⁷ See Cotter, *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight*, p. 38.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

months after the three Spitfires had flown in. In January 1958 the new and informal 'Battle of Britain Flight' was moved to North Weald. In May it moved again, this time to Martlesham Heath, gaining the more familiar name of the 'Battle of Britain Memorial Flight' in the process. But this peripatetic existence as well as a crippling lack of funds took its toll. In an effort to boost numbers three static display Spitfires had been acquired in 1957 but efforts to make them airworthy were not entirely successful. 'The Spitfire XVI gave a lot of trouble, two having crashed since joining the Flight.'⁵⁴⁹

It was an unhappy safety record, and no doubt a major reason why in May 1959 there was a call for the formal establishment of the flight 'to look after these aircraft'.⁵⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the timing of this call could hardly have been worse. The Air Staffs commitment to the Battle of Britain anniversary flypast, the very *raison d'être* for establishing a Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, was faltering. All that seems to have been required was a good reason to stop. It appears the request for formal establishment, a request for money, was that reason.

The fact is that these aircraft can be regarded as having reached the end of their practical flying life. Spares are increasingly difficult to obtain and the aircraft require more and more work to keep them in safe flying condition. There is little doubt that they could be kept flying a year or two longer, but the time is rapidly approaching – if it is not already with us – when a decision must be taken to abandon the traditional leaders of the Fly Past formation.

I do not consider the formal establishment of a 'Battle of Britain' Flight can resolve the difficulties we are now encountering. I therefore recommend that this year should be the last formal appearance of the Hurricane and Spitfire.⁵⁵¹

So wrote Sir Edmund Hudleston to all the members of the Air Council. As bad luck would have it, on 28 May just as the fate of Wing Commander Peter Thompson's Memorial Flight was being decided, one of its Spitfires, SL574, suffered a serious flying accident at Martlesham Heath. This was an ill-timed incident.

⁵⁴⁹ TNA, AIR 2/17456, Royal Air Force Coltishall Historic Aircraft Flight, 30 Jan. 1968.

⁵⁵⁰ TNA, AIR 2/15690, Sir E. Huddlestane to Sir D. Boyle, 20 May 1959.

⁵⁵¹ TNA, AIR 2/15690, Sir E. Huddlestane to Sir D. Boyle CAS, 20 May 1959.

The Air Council's decision was to be officially announced on 11 August 1959. There was a certain amount of nervousness over its likely reception.

I have consulted C.I.O [Chief Information Officer] who...say[s] there will inevitably be comments on sentimental grounds following an announcement to discontinue the Hurricane and Spitfire in the Fly Past...If it is possible for the announcement to include something about the cost in money and manpower of continuing to maintain these aircraft in flying condition, and that at a time when Fighter Command is running down, that would, C.I.O thinks, help to shield us from criticism; and, of course, we should make the point that these aircraft will continue to be seen on the ground.⁵⁵²

In the end it was decided to be brief, and to the point, thus avoiding any potential hostages to fortune.

The Hurricane and Spitfire, which traditionally lead the Fly-past will make their last flight in the Battle of Britain ceremonies this year. Both aircraft are now nearly 20 years old, and the Air Council have concluded with great regret that it will not be practicable to maintain them in a sufficiently high state of serviceability to permit their continued inclusion in future years in a fly-past over London.⁵⁵³

How was this news received? The *Daily Express* was unimpressed.

On Sunday a Hurricane and a Spitfire will lead the Battle of Britain fly-past over London. And that this is the last the people of London will see of the planes that saved their city – and Britain. For this is to be the final fly-past. And no arrangements have been made for a permanent public memorial of a Hurricane or a Spitfire in London. This idea was put forward last month. The Air Ministry has not even considered it. The Few who won the Battle of Britain were possessed of spirit and imagination. Not so the Many at the Air Ministry today.⁵⁵⁴

The Air Ministry must have feared the worst, but come the day and the reaction on Fleet Street, even in the offices of the *Daily Express*, was muted, and a little distracted. What

⁵⁵² TNA, AIR 2/15690, Mr Jenkins S.4 to Mr Roberts S.6, 22 May 1959.

⁵⁵³ TNA, AIR 2/15690, Air Ministry News Service, 11 Aug. 1959.

⁵⁵⁴ 'Forgotten Few?', *Daily Express*, 18 Sept. 1959, p. 1.

actually happened on the day was a gift of a story for feature writers up and down Fleet Street. The last flight of Spitfire SL574, just as George Ward, Secretary of State for Air, had feared, was subject to engine failure. Spitfire SL574 was something of a Jonah. It was SL574 that had suffered the untimely flying accident at Martlesham Heath just as the fate of the 'Battle of Britain Flight' was being decided. After that accident it had been sent to 71 Maintenance Unit at Bicester, Oxfordshire, for repair. It had returned to Martlesham Heath on 1 July. It now took to the air on 20 September with its partnering Hurricane, LF363, to lead the Battle of Britain anniversary Flypast for the last time. Both vintage aircraft successfully completed their mission, flying over Horse Guards Parade as Prime Minister Harold Macmillan watched on. It was when Spitfire SL574 turned for home that its trouble began. Its pilot, Air Vice-Marshal Harold Maguire, explained.

I was near the Crystal Palace when my engine suddenly cut out. I was dropping down at the rate of more than 500ft. a minute and had little time to do anything. I realised I could not reach Biggin Hill when suddenly I saw a cricket pitch in front of me. It was deserted and by the grace of God the players were in the pavilion. I narrowly missed houses and an oak tree before pulling up just short of a garden.⁵⁵⁵

It was a gift of a story.

Sugar Love was pushed over the boundary the propeller, undercarriage, and one wing broken. Its last Battle of Britain mission was over. So was the tea interval on the Bromley ground. One British tradition may have been broken. But in accordance with another older tradition play was resumed between Oxo and the Old Hollingtonians. Round the boundary now were the fire engines, some police cars, and several hundred extra spectators whom the cricket had failed to attract. The wicket, thanks to the impact of Sugar Love's last landing, was taking spin.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁵ 'Crash-Landing by Spitfire', *Guardian*, 21 Sept. 1959, p. 1.

⁵⁵⁶ 'The Last Spitfire Prangs', *Daily Express*, 21 Sept. 1959, p. 5.

This reporter from the *Daily Express* was perhaps offering a gentle pastiche of Neville Cardus. Cardus was famous for his nostalgic accounts of a by-gone English age as seen from the side of a cricket pitch.⁵⁵⁷



Figure 22 Crashed Spitfire, Bromley Cricket Ground, 1959

This was not of course the end. We know that airworthy Spitfires and the odd Hurricane continued to be maintained by the RAF. We know too that in 1969 The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight would be officially established. Nevertheless, between 1959 and 1969, the fate of the very few airworthy Spitfires and that lone Hurricane hung by a thread. As early as July 1959 plans were being made to ground and disperse the flight. Here is Air-Vice Marshall R.B. Lees writing from Bentley Priory the headquarters of Fighter Command, to Air-Vice Marshall A. Foord-Kelsey at Martlesham Heath, from where the flight would take off for its last mission.

No decision has yet been made on the ultimate disposal of these aircraft, and this is my purpose of writing to you as I should like to have your bids. I know there are

⁵⁵⁷ See Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (eds.), *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 152.

several stations in the Command with no positive reminder of the Battle of Britain, and this might give them the opportunity to have such a reminder should they so wish.⁵⁵⁸

There were those outside of the service who saw this as an opportunity, as the RAF's lack of regard for its own heritage was well known. Air Chief Marshal Sir Walter Merton, Air Member for Supply and Organisation (AMSO) was feeling the pressure.

Since the war and particularly since the decision to withdraw the Spitfire from the annual Battle of Britain Fly-Past was publicised, members of the public and the authorities connected with museums and collections have displayed an increasing interest in measures which are being taken to preserve those Spitfires still in existence. We regularly receive enquiries from all kinds of people ranging from ex-RAF personnel to representatives of Institutions with international reputations, all of whom are anxious that the few remaining aircraft should not be allowed to disappear on the scrap heap. The numbers of these aircraft still available are limited and we need to ensure their continued preservation.

For those Spitfires which are at present held for display purposes on Stations in your command, it would be helpful therefore if you were to follow a policy of allocating them to long-term fighter stations wherever this possible. As you will appreciate every move of one of these aircraft gives rise to undue wear and tear and furthermore sparks off a spate of enquiries from local bodies and would-be 'preservers' elsewhere wishing to acquire the aircraft, to whom we have to send discouraging replies.⁵⁵⁹

Merton was at least one member of the Air Council taking the RAF's material heritage seriously. The problem was that there was still no safe haven, still no RAF Museum. Merton's successor as AMSO, Sir John Davis, had his own problems with 'would-be preservers'.

⁵⁵⁸ TNA, AIR 20/9737, AVM Lees to AVM Foord-Kelsey, 29 July 1959.

⁵⁵⁹ TNA, AIR 20/10593, ACM Merton to AM Kyle, 29 Nov. 1961.

A wide interest continues to be displayed by official bodies, private organisations and individuals in the acquisition of surplus Spitfire aircraft, and there has been a renewal of enquiries concerning the prospect of their presentation loan or sale.

There is a total of 41 Spitfires held in the Royal Air Force. This includes three aircraft in flying condition and twelve categorised as 'historical'. Two aircraft are on indefinite loan to the Imperial War Museum and the Science Museum respectively. The remaining aircraft are held as display pieces at RAF stations.⁵⁶⁰

What Sir John Davis does not mention is the condition of his 41 Spitfires. 'Historical' meant those aircraft selected for preservation under the almost moribund preservation scheme of 1931 and display pieces were those aircraft saved from the scrapheap on an ad hoc basis by individual RAF stations. In 1965, J. A. Millson head of S4, part of the Air Ministry secretariat, visited RAF Henlow where a number of the historical aircraft were looked after. What had prompted his visit was the fact that the four technicians who did that looking after were coming up for retirement. Millson's report to the Air Council was a sad indictment of the RAF's approach to its heritage.

In 1957 a Working Party was set up to make recommendations about historic aircraft. The only significant decision which resulted from this was one to distribute the historic aircraft which had been collected to various RAF units. Commands were told that responsibility for care, maintenance and display would rest with the stations concerned and that no additional manpower could be provided for the purpose.

On the 4th Jan. 1963 Sir Dermot Boyle wrote to the then PUS, Air Ministry (Sir Maurice Dean) suggesting that a start should be made with the formation of a Historic Aircraft Museum (as a separate project from the Royal Air Force museum which is not itself intended to display complete aircraft) by collecting certain historic aircraft together at Henlow.

⁵⁶⁰ TNA, AIR 2/15669, 'Disposal of Spitfires', [no day] March 1966.

No precise directions seem to have been issued as to exactly what the scope and size of this collection should be.⁵⁶¹

The situation was a mess. Languishing on RAF stations up and down the country were vintage aircraft in various states of dilapidation. The majority were Spitfires because of that ad hoc station by station method of collecting. Essentially, at the end of the war the only aircraft with a Battle of Britain pedigree available for parade duty was a Spitfire. The Air Council digested Millson's report and did nothing. 'Spitfires issued to RAF units remain undisturbed until they are either declared surplus to the Unit's requirements, or become available on the closure of the unit...As and when further Spitfires become available, consideration should be given to presenting them to suitable public organisations who ask for them, but not to private individuals or unofficial organisations unless very exceptional circumstances arise.'⁵⁶² At least there was going to be no unseemly giveaway to 'private individuals or unofficial organisations'. This was a response to an increasing clamour from collectors who were keen to cash in on the public appetite for the Spitfire by opening private museums.

It took yet another three and a half years after Millson's visit to RAF Henlow, and his negative report, for the Air Council to do something. The 41 surviving Spitfires then in the RAF's possession fell into three categories with each category a clue to a particular state of preservation. These categories were airworthy, display and historic. The four airworthy Spitfires and those classified as historic, about fifteen altogether, were in a reasonable to good state of repair while the rest, the display Spitfires were not. Things were now about to change and all for the better.

A small committee chaired by E38 (RAF) with representatives from S4 (AIR), the RAF Museum, Inspector of Recruiting (Publicity) and the Air Historical Branch has discussed the future disposition of these aircraft. They suggest that the various claims can be divided into five categories and priorities as follows.

Priority 1 – RAF Memorial Flight

⁵⁶¹ TNA, AIR 20/10593, 'Historical Aircraft at Henlow', 8 March 65.

⁵⁶² TNA, AIR 2/15669, Disposal of Spitfires, [no day] March 1966.

The committee considered the RAF Memorial Flight at RAF Coltishall is of prime importance and recommends that all four Spitfires in flying condition should be allocated to the Flight.

Priority 2 – RAF Museum

The RAF Museum has asked for 13 aircraft – although it seems likely they will be able to display only four at a time.

Priority 3 – RAF Exhibition Flight

There is a continuing need for two aircraft for general exhibition purposes under the direction of the Inspector of Recruiting (Publicity).

Priority 4

There are three prime claimants to whom allocation of an aircraft has in the past been agreed by the Air Force Board.

Priority 5 – RAF Stations

The rotation arrangement with the RAF Museum would provide aircraft for seven stations in the immediate future and ultimately for nine stations when two of the RAF Memorial Flight aircraft are withdrawn.⁵⁶³

This life saving document, a preservation plan designed specifically for the Spitfire, is dated 1 October 1968. How had it come about? First and foremost the establishment of an RAF Museum was at last going ahead. Back in 1954, the Royal Aeronautical Society had approached the RAF with plans to set up National Air Museum at Hendon. The approach was unceremoniously batted away. Air-Vice Marshal Richard Jordan, Director General of RAF Organisation, was one influential voice who took a dim view. ‘A hangar in the winter, unless enormous expense is involved, is a cold, damp and draughty place, and I cannot see crowds of people trooping out to this type of hangar at Hendon to view a National Aeronautical Collection of Historical Aircraft.’⁵⁶⁴ But what he could not see back then others could now. A committee under the chairmanship of Sir Dermot Boyle had been set up by

⁵⁶³ TNA, AIR 2/17456, ‘Spitfires – Report to Air council Standing Committee’, 1 Oct. 1968.

⁵⁶⁴ TNA, AIR 2/14352, Memorandum from AVM R. Jordan, 29 Oct. 1954.

the Air Force Board in 1962 to make recommendations on the establishment of such a National Aeronautical Collection of Historical Aircraft. Millson, sitting in his S4 office may have been fuming over what he had discovered at RAF Henlow in March 1965, but it was in 1965 that the RAF had begun acquiring rather than disposing of objects of interest to a putative RAF Museum.⁵⁶⁵ Cold, damp and draughty a hangar at Hendon might be, but the RAF Museum was opened at Hendon by the Queen, wearing a thick coat and gloves, on 15 November 1972.

The RAF's historic collection was now guaranteed to be conserved but of much more interest here is that 'priority 1'. Airworthy Spitfires, nine years after the interrupted cricket match, were back on the Air Council's radar. The man who deserves much of the credit for that was not on the Air Council in fact he was not in the RAF at all. He was not even British; he was Canadian. Harry Saltzman had started his career in the circus, worked as a talent scout, a casting agent and finally had made his fortune as a film producer. It was he, along with his partner Cubby Broccoli, who had brought James Bond to the big screen. In October 1968, just as Gooding's report was set before the Air Council, Saltzman was putting the finishing touches to his latest and most expensive side project, the epic *Battle of Britain*. This film will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Suffice to say now that it had used an armada of aircraft so great that in the summer of 1968 this armada was 'rated in size as the world's 35th largest air fleet.'⁵⁶⁶ Whether it was or was not, what was certainly true was that in preparation for the film the world had been scoured for airworthy Spitfires, and not only Spitfires but Hurricanes, Messerschmitts and Heinkels too. Group Captain Hamish Mahaddie was the man tasked by Saltzman with recruiting this air armada, and one of the first call he put through had been to the Air Ministry. The Air Ministry could not have been more co-operative, offering its facilities at RAF Henlow for repair and restoration as well as the use of its modest vintage airworthy fleet. 'The Battle of Britain film will take approximately 6 weeks in April – June. It will consume up to 50 hrs life on Hurricane and

⁵⁶⁵ For an account of the establishment of the RAF Museum see Andrew Renwick, *RAF Hendon: The Birthplace of Aerial Power* (Manchester: Crecy, 2012).

⁵⁶⁶ Peter Tipthorp, *Battle of Britain: Pressbook* (Manchester: Sackville, 1969), p. 24.

Spitfire V AB 910, and 25 hours on each Spitfire PR XIX.⁵⁶⁷ This was virtually the RAF's entire airworthy vintage aircraft fleet.

It does beg a question. The last Battle of Britain Flypast by the RAF's Spitfire and Hurricane had taken place in September 1959. We know that even before that final flypast moves were afoot to disband the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. Its aircraft were destined for various RAF stations up and down the country after a bidding process. We also know that each successful RAF station would not have been expected to keep its new prize vintage aircraft airworthy. The bidding was for a 'positive reminder of the Battle of Britain' which was code for low maintenance, probably no maintenance static display. But whatever the intention of the Air Council in the summer of 1959, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight survived, just. From almost the moment the fate of the Battle of Britain Flypast had been decided in the summer of 1959, there were those in Fighter Command who had striven to save what could be saved. In June 1960, the New Zealander Sir Hector McGregor, head of Fighter Command appealed directly to Sir Edmund Hudleston. It was Hudleston who had overseen the withdrawal of the vintage aircraft from the Battle of Britain anniversary flypast the previous year.

You will remember our earlier correspondence about the Spitfires and Hurricane we have which are still in a flyable condition, (Spitfires Mk.19 PM631 and PS853 and Hurricane Mk.2c LF 363).

The problem of the ultimate disposal of these aircraft has been shuttling back and forth between Air Ministry and my Headquarters for a long time, and recently I have been under pressure to send them to 41 Group for dismantling.

I have looked once more at the sorties flown by these aircraft in the last few months and the servicing effort and maintenance costs we have expended to keep them serviceable. The salient points that have emerged from this investigation are as follows:-

⁵⁶⁷ TNA, AIR 2/17456, 'Commitment for 1968', 30 Jan. 1968.

- A. The utilisation rate of these aircraft is very low as it has purposely been kept to a minimum and, in consequence, they have some years of safe flyable life left in them.
- B. Under the present arrangements the servicing and maintenance costs are almost negligible.
- C. Removal and dismantling by 41 Group would almost certainly mean that the aircraft would never fly again.
- D. There is a continuing demand for these historic aircraft to be flown before the public. The occasions on which these aircraft are flown are always carefully supervised. Such flights as are made are restricted to accord with the spirit of the Air Council ruling that they were not to be flown in future Battle of Britain fly pasts and the aircraft are not now flown over large densely populated areas such as London.

A great deal of public interest and publicity can still be gained from the display of these historic aircraft, and I am sure you would agree that the decision to scrap them now would result in the complete wastage of a still valuable asset.⁵⁶⁸

It was a good case and the Air Council gave Fighter Command permission but it gave nothing else. There would be no material help beyond the absolutely necessary and no guarantee that the Air Council's decision would not be rescinded. 'Permission should be for a period of one year in the first instance and that the position should then be reviewed. They agreed that costs would have to be watched carefully and, needless to say, we could not spare any extra manpower to look after the aircraft.'⁵⁶⁹ The next five years were difficult ones for what was now known as the Historic Aircraft Flight. It had almost no funds, no permanent staff, no guarantee of survival, and because of the ongoing contraction of Fighter Command, no permanent base. In December 1960 the flight moved from Martlesham Heath to Horsham St Faith near Norwich. In 1963, another move proved necessary this time to RAF Coltishall. The flight's peripatetic existence was not conducive to the care and maintenance

⁵⁶⁸ TNA, AIR 20/7770, Sir H. McGregor to Sir E. Hudleston, 16 June 1960.

⁵⁶⁹ TNA, AIR 20/7770, Air Council Memorandum, 20 Oct. 1960.

especially on a virtually non-existent budget. The Flight was soon down to one airworthy Spitfire and one Hurricane. It was one accident away from oblivion.

The move to Coltishall, however, signalled a change in fortune for the Flight. Its last airworthy Spitfire was joined by others including a Spitfire which had actually seen war service, a gift from Vickers Armstrongs in 1965. Peter Thompson's original idea had always been to use combat veterans, all the better to commemorate the lives of the pilots lost. The flight had been given a warm welcome at RAF Coltishall. 'A tremendous spirit exists amongst the ground crew, all of whom have great pride in their work. The job entails a lot of weekend work in the summer.'⁵⁷⁰ It was not about to stop. 'The appeal of the Flight seems to have increased, particularly in the last three years, with increasing numbers of requests for displays and enquiries from enthusiasts.'⁵⁷¹ Wing Commander C.H.T. Pennal's enthusiastic note, whether he knew or not, was all part of the case building for the formal establishment of the Flight. In October 1968, as we have already seen, came the report that settled the fate of the forty one Spitfires in the RAF's care. It gave the Flight at RAF Coltishall its number one priority. That report had landed on the desk of the newly appointed Air Member for Supply and Organisation, Air Chief Marshall Sir Thomas O. Prickett. Two months later, on 30 of December, Prickett circulated a paper to his colleagues on the Air Force Board Standing Committee.

Battle of Britain Memorial Flight

1. In February, 1968, I obtained your agreement to the retention of the Hurricane and three Spitfire aircraft of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight in flying condition for a further year.
2. From its inception, in its present form in 1960, the demand on the Memorial Flight has steadily increased and the number of displays undertaken by the Flight has averaged 58, involving about 90 hours total flying per year. During 1968, the Flight flew 220 hours, excluding 205 hours devoted to flying for the Battle of Britain Film.

⁵⁷⁰ TNA, Air 2/17456, 'Royal Air Force Coltishall Historic Aircraft Flight', 30 Jan. 1968.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

3. Because of the many displays performed by the Flight during 1968, and the wide publicity given to the production of the Battle of Britain film, it is possible that the total flying hours during 1969 would be as much as 130 hours, if all requests for the Flight's appearance are agreed.
4. When the Standing Committee gave permission for the formation of the Flight in 1960, it was the understanding that extra manpower should not be provided for the aircraft. RAF Coltishall has maintained these historic aircraft in flying condition by diversion of manpower and considerable extra work beyond normal duty which has only been made possible by the keen interest and good will of the servicing personnel. The Air Officer Commanding in Chief, Strike Command considers that if we wish to continue to derive the publicity and recruiting benefits from the Flight in the future, we should establish the necessary servicing man power and accept the costs as a charge against MOD funds...
5. To date we have relied on the goodwill of industry to support the aircraft by the free provision of spares...It is doubtful that we can continue to rely on this free support from industry. Engine overhauls for the Spitfires will become due in the near future and assuming, in the worst case, that we receive no free support from industry each engine overhaul might cost up to £10,000
6. I support both the proposals for the future of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and for the Lancaster aircraft. Whilst it is not possible to quantify the recruiting value of this type of publicity, recent experience gained during the 50th Anniversary year clearly indicates that the more we keep the RAF in the front line of the public the better our recruiting achievements. With the 50th Anniversary year behind us we need to maintain the impetus on publicity in every possible way.I should be grateful for your agreement that:-
 - a. The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight should be added to the policy statement for RAF Coltishall, and that the necessary servicing personnel should be established.
 - b. The Flight should consist of one Hurricane and four Spitfire aircraft, subject to a possible case being made for an additional Spitfire.
 - c. The estimated average annual cost of £11,500 for the Flight (one Hurricane and four Spitfires) are accepted as a charge to Air Votes.

The Flight need no longer be authorised each year but should continue in existence until circumstances warrant a review.⁵⁷²

It was a compelling case. Prickett understood his audience perfectly. He begins by personalising the request. For the Air Board, which had replaced the Air Council in 1964, to deny it would be to snub one of its own members. Prickett wants to accentuate the positive. The Flight is struggling to manage the volume of requests for appearances. The Air Board would want to be associated with success. Prickett then links that success to ‘the wide publicity given to the production of the Battle of Britain film.’ With one eye always on recruitment, publicity was a currency the Air Board liked to deal in. Prickett then states that ‘the Standing Committee gave permission for the formation of the Flight in 1960’. This was untrue. All it did do was confirm that Peter Thompson’s Historic Aircraft Flight should not be scrapped. Prickett is intent on his own agenda. What he is in fact doing is asking the Air Board not to undo the work of its predecessor the Air Council. This was clever. Service careers, especially at this stratospheric level, were made or thwarted on personal recommendation. Air Board members would have been chary of upsetting distinguished and no doubt still highly influential predecessors.

Prickett is also at pains to stress a positive decision would be a popular decision. He notes ‘the keen interest and good will of the servicing personnel’ at Coltishall. Servicing personnel would have represented a large constituency in the mind of any service member of the Air Board. Every RAF station had servicing personnel. When Prickett finally calls upon an endorsement, his is a clever choice. He has the support of Sir Denis Spotswood. Spotswood was the RAF’s coming man. He had just been appointed Air Officer Commanding in Chief, Strike Command, and promoted to Air Chief Marshall. It was unlikely to be his last promotion either. The Air Board was not willing to upset such a rising star.

The Air Force Board Standing Committee has agreed that the Memorial Flight should be added to the Policy Statement for RAF Coltishall, that the necessary servicing personnel should be established, and that the Flight should continue in existence as a charge to Air Votes until circumstances warrant a review.⁵⁷³

⁵⁷² TNA, AIR 2/17456, ‘Battle of Britain Memorial Flight’, 30 Dec. 1968.

⁵⁷³ TNA, AIR 2/28575, Air Council Memorandum, 10 April 1969.

There was one more crisis to be faced. In February 1974, the Heath government had been defeated at a general election called in face of a national coal strike. Wilson's new Labour government was confronted with a rapidly deteriorating economic situation which had begun with the decision by the OPEC countries to start raising oil prices in the autumn of 1973. In the spring and summer of 1976 came the sterling crisis when financial markets lost confidence in the pound. As the economic crisis accelerated a Defence Review was launched in December 1974 and a Defence White Paper followed in March 1975. Savings of £4.75 billion were anticipated over a ten year period.⁵⁷⁴ The navy was to bear the brunt of the cuts in terms of equipment and the army in terms of manpower. The RAF however would not escape entirely.

I have just seen a copy of US of S. (RAF) dated 14 Jan 77 and have learned only this morning, that the Air Force Board Standing Committee is to debate the possible early disbandment of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight at tomorrow's meeting. I am very surprised that, as Chairman of the Participation Committee, I have not been consulted but I also understand that the matter has not been staffed in the usual manner. Although I have not been asked to provide a brief, AMP may wish to take note of my views.⁵⁷⁵

Air Commodore J.F. Langer, Chairman of the Participation Committee, was clearly very angry. It was his job to match RAF resources to requests made for RAF participation in events over the course of the year. His two prime assets were the Red Arrows, formed in 1964 when the RAF amalgamated its display teams into one, and the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. He was not minded to lose either one. His timely intervention had the required effect. The Air Force Board Standing Committee did not take an immediate decision to disband the Flight at their next January meeting. The decision was deferred until May. This gave Langer and other like minded officers time to prepare their defence which was duly delivered to the Air Force Board in May by Air Marshal Sir Alisdair Steedman, Air Member for Supply and Organization. In his paper he resurrected all the arguments that had saved airworthy vintage aircraft in the past. He said the general public needed to be constantly reminded of the service and its achievements. He said that the Battle of Britain

⁵⁷⁴ See Michael Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 99-110.

⁵⁷⁵ TNA, DEFE 71/353, AC J. Langer to ACM Sir J. Aiken, 19 Jan. 1977.

was one of the RAF's greatest battle honours, if not the greatest. He pointed out that 'the BBMF is a crowd-puller second only to the Red Arrows and in 1976 it was estimated that the total audience watching BBMF displays was 2.5-3 million.'⁵⁷⁶ But of course all the while the financial markets played with the pound, it was the financial implications that mattered above all else.

The BBMF provides a cheap and extremely effective form of RAF presence with the least detriment to front-line operations. The direct operating cost of the Spitfire is only £100 per hour, if the agreed hours (295) were flown by a Phantom instead, the cost of fuel alone would exceed the total cost of the BBMF.⁵⁷⁷

It was an unanswerable financial case and one the Air Board accepted. Langer's intervention in January, causing the deferral of any decision until May, which gave time for a defence to be mustered, had saved the Battle of Britain Flight once again.

Pounds shillings and pence was one thing, vital even to the Air Force Board Standing Committee in 1977, but for a man like Air Commodore J.F. Langer it was the wrong measure of value for the BBMF. 'I have no wish to liken the BBMF to the ravens of the Tower of London, but so long as a single Spitfire remains flying there is some hope that the old Battle of Britain Spirit and tradition will continue.'⁵⁷⁸ Air Commodore J.F. Langer, perhaps unknowingly, was referring to the Spitfire in the air as performance, a cultural production, a means of making meaning. Langer spoke of his hope of continuity, but what that spirit and tradition looked like moving forward, encouraged by the Spitfire in performance, may well have surprised him and will be discussed in the next chapter.

The RAF very nearly grounded the Spitfire for good after the war. It was Lambeth Palace that turned the celebration/commemoration of the Battle of Britain into a state occasion. It was the Air Council who wanted to downgrade it to a brief wreath laying ceremony on a London street. It was also the Air Council that engineered the successful introduction of the flypast into the RAF's ceremonial repertoire, which guaranteed the continuation of the Battle of Britain annual flypast into the 1950s, even if they were not thinking primarily in

⁵⁷⁶ TNA, DEFE 71/353, 'The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight', 11 May, 1977.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ TNA, DEFE 71/353, AC J. Langer to ACM Sir J. Aiken, 19 Jan. 1977.

terms of the Spitfire or the commemoration of the Battle of Britain at the time. As for the Air Council's concern for the welfare of its heritage, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, it was grudging at best. We might remember the 'tawdry appearance' of its Battle of Britain survivors on Horse Guards Parade in 1956. It is fair to say that right up until 1969 and the establishment of the BBMF, Spitfires were kept airworthy by interested service volunteers in spite of the Air Council.

What was at the root of this lack of official enthusiasm? After the war, there were those senior commanders schooled in the offensive spirit of Lord Trenchard who would very likely have agreed with what ACM Sir W. R. Freeman said of the Battle of Britain back in 1942. 'The so-called Battle of Britain consisted of a series of successful defensive operations by Fighter Command... Victories are only won by offensive action; and deliverance must be permanent to give much cause for junketing.⁵⁷⁹ Worse, the offensive action the RAF did take, the bombing campaigns over Germany, were not to be celebrated.⁵⁸⁰ Recognition for those that had served in Bomber Command came only in 2013, and then in the form of a clasp not a medal. This meant that senior commanders like Sir John Slessor showed a distinct lack of interest in the Battle of Britain after the war, with consequences for the preservation of airworthy Spitfires.

Fortunately, this lack of interest was not shared by all senior commanders and certainly not by junior commanders and many in the rank and file. The survival of the airworthy authentic Spitfire owed much to the persistence of men like Biggin Hill's Station Commander Wing Commander Peter Thompson, and Sir Hector McGregor, head of Fighter Command in 1960, both of whom fought not just to save the Spitfire but specifically to save airworthy examples of the Spitfire. It was the Spitfire in action, in the air, in performance that motivated men like Thompson, McGregor and of course Air Commodore J.F. Langer. Langer, Thompson and McGregor may not have fully appreciated the impact even a single Spitfire flying would have on the old Battle of Britain Spirit and tradition post-war.

⁵⁷⁹ TNA, AIR 20/4200, Memorandum by ACM Sir W. R. Freeman, 14 July 1942.

⁵⁸⁰ Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 143.

Chapter 4 – The War-Made Myth: From War Stories to Toy Stories

In his introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Material Culture* in 2011 on identity, Christopher Tilley outlined the impact of the ‘memory boom’ and the rise of identity politics on his own discipline of anthropology.⁵⁸¹ Beginning in the late 1980s, attention amongst anthropologists and ethnographers turned to the practices and politics of cultural heritage and museums. What happened in the first wave of criticism, was a rejection of what was seen as a shallow portrayal of a commodified past. The heritage industry was accused of an act of vandalism, of disconnecting the past from the present, of making the past irrelevant.⁵⁸² Soon, however, according to Tilley, a different approach emerged, a perception of heritage as possessing an ontological and moral significance, even of having agency.⁵⁸³ What objects were able to do was construct and reproduce individual and social identities.⁵⁸⁴ It was only certain objects, however, ‘all material things, like all material people, are not equal’.⁵⁸⁵

One such certain object, this thesis suggests, has been the Spitfire. Air Commodore J.F. Langer hoped that ‘so long as a single Spitfire remains flying ...the old Battle of Britain spirit and tradition will continue.’⁵⁸⁶ What Langer was referring to in terms of spirit and tradition was the myth of the Battle of Britain represented by the Spitfire in performance. The myth meant something quite specific to Langer but what it meant to him was not necessarily what it was required to mean to others post-war. What Langer hoped for above all was a stable mythological reading, continuity. Perhaps the fact that he merely expressed a hope, rather than a certainty, meant that he realised that myths evolve. What he perhaps did not realise was that the Spitfire itself would be part of that process.

⁵⁸¹ Christopher Tilley, ‘Materializing Identities: An Introduction’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 16 (2011), pp. 347-357.

⁵⁸² See Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987); Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London, Routledge, 1992).

⁵⁸³ Tilley, ‘Materializing Identities’, p. 349.

⁵⁸⁴ See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994); Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁸⁵ Tilley, ‘Materializing Identities’, p. 350.

⁵⁸⁶ TNA, DEFE 71/353, AC J. Langer to ACM Sir J. Aiken, 19 Jan. 1977.

Identity formation has been central to the role the Spitfire in helping the myth of the Battle of Britain to evolve post-war. Tilley's recognition of a heightened period of anthropological interest in the link between heritage and identity formation beginning in the late 1980s does in fact coincide with the re-emergence of the Spitfire into the air, which it had been missing from for almost twenty-five years. As we will discover, this was the beginning of the second major episode in the evolution of the myth of the Battle of Britain, assisted by the Spitfire. But why had it been missing from the air? These were the years of underfunding and of wandering, the BBMF's home base disappearing more than once from under its feet as Fighter Command contracted then disappeared altogether. It meant that during the 1960s and 1970s, BBMF operations were low-key, and the Spitfire's appearances before the public were typically 50-60 appearances per season.⁵⁸⁷ Contrast that with the summer of 2016 when the BBMF, with its fleet of six Spitfires, two Hurricanes and a solitary Lancaster, took part in almost a thousand events across Britain, performing before an estimated seven million people.⁵⁸⁸



Figure 23. Battle of Britain Memorial Flight over Buckingham Palace, July 2005

⁵⁸⁷ Royal Air Force BBMF 'About Us', <www.raf.mod.uk/bbmf/aboutus.com> [accessed 24 August 2017].

⁵⁸⁸ 'New Boss at the BBMF', *Aeroplane*, March 2016, p. 27.

These were numbers unimaginable to those looking after the RAF's flying heritage in the 1960s, 1970s and on into the early 1980s, which brings us to the first episode in the Spitfire's post-war performance career. If the Spitfire virtually disappeared from the air after its withdrawal from the annual Battle of Britain flypast in 1959, how did it continue to perform? How did the first episode in the Spitfire's post-war career actually take place? The answer lies in the hands of thousands upon thousands of twelve-year old boys.⁵⁸⁹ Thanks to a company that made plastic model kits, and their chosen marketing strategy, there was in fact no performance void left by the disappearance of the Spitfire from the British skies for almost twenty-five years.

The Spitfire Remodelled

In 2012 Ralph Ehrmann, the former chairman of Airfix Industries, was interviewed on behalf of the Museum of Childhood. Near the end of a wide ranging interview he told a story from his time as chairman of Airfix in the mid 1970s.⁵⁹⁰ This was a golden time for Airfix, when the company could barely keep up with demand for its products.

There was a youngster who sent us a half a crown or something like that, and said he's had such a wonderful time with the thing [unspecified] and this is to help you build more kits and so on. And so we immediately sent him a large parcel of kits and so he obviously started this correspondence a bit further. And at a Toy Fair, probably Nuremberg, sitting there drinking late at night with other people, I told the story about this young boy who'd sent his pocket money to us and everybody started laughing, because he'd done it to everybody else and they'd all sent him freebies.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁹ For 'generation' and 'generational consciousness' as a cultural construct see Mark Roseman (ed.), *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵⁹⁰ It is a good story, but the usual caveats associated with Oral History and the literal accuracy of evidence applies. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), p. 55.

⁵⁹¹ Museum of Childhood, MOC/AIRF, Ralph Ehrmann interview with Juliana Vandegrift, June 2012. Important reminiscences such as this must be treated with caution. See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 150-165.

That boy was called James May, a self-appointed construction-kit connoisseur, who would grow up to become a chronicler of British toys. He would even go on to make a television documentary about the Airfix Spitfire in 2009 with the co-operation of the Royal Air Force Museum, Cosford.⁵⁹² ‘It had to be a Spitfire because...the Spitfire was the first plane that Airfix modelled and it is still the best-selling Airfix kit of all time.’⁵⁹³ May was correct.⁵⁹⁴ At its sales peak in the late 1960s and early to mid 1970s, Airfix sold approximately 350,000 model Spitfire kits a year, a colossal figure put into perspective when today a successful kit is counted in four not six figures.⁵⁹⁵ It was a golden period for British toy manufacturers and Airfix was at the forefront of this success, driven by the man who had received May’s canny adolescent letter, Ralph Ehrmann.⁵⁹⁶

Ralph Ehrmann was born in Leipzig in 1925 into a moderately well-to-do Jewish household. His father was a businessman who had worked apparently in the German secret service during the First World War and it was contacts made in that secret service world that saw his father bring his family over to England in 1932. Ehrmann attended school in London followed by college in Leeds. After his war service he joined the newly constituted merchant bank, S. G. Warburg & Co., as a management trainee. Siegmund Warburg, his new employer, farmed him out to a number of businesses the bank held interests in, both to aid his business education and to watch over and report back on that interest. It was while on secondment to the British Division of the famous German toy train manufacturer Bing that the twenty-five year old Ehrmann was appointed assistant manager to Nicholas Kove,

⁵⁹² ‘Airfix’, Plum Pictures, 27 October 2009.

⁵⁹³ ‘James May’s Airfix Spitfire: Back by Popular Demand’, www.rafmuseum.org.uk/documents/pressrelease/cosford.com [accessed 23 Aug. 2016].

⁵⁹⁴ Arthur Ward is Airfix’s historian. He has interviewed almost all the major players in the Airfix story apart from Nicholas Kove. According to Sarah Frame, Brand Manager Hornby Hobbies Ltd, the Airfix archive is incomplete and what remains is presently closed to scholars. This does not mean there are no archives to view. As a listed company Airfix’s annual accounts were published and it was also subject to third party sales and marketing reports. Of particular note is a cache of internal reports from the 1970s held at the Surrey History Centre (SHC).

⁵⁹⁵ Arthur Ward, *The Boys’ Book of Airfix: Who Says You Ever Have To Grow Up* (London: Ebury, 2009), p. 7.

⁵⁹⁶ Airfix in the early 1970s had the largest share of the UK construction kit market. See Beamish & O’Kelly, *Review of the United Kingdom Toy Industry* (London: Beamish & O’Kelly, 1971), p. 28. The best single volume study of the British toy industry remains Kenneth Brown, *The British Toy Business: A History since 1700* (London: Hamledon, 1996).

owner of a small plastics company called Airfix. Warburg's investment in Airfix was proving problematic and Siegmund Warburg suspected bad management.⁵⁹⁷

Kove had set up premises in Hampstead Road, London NW1, acquired a moulding machine on credit and had begun stamping out plastic injection moulded combs. Combs were soon followed by another useful item for the pocket, cigarette lighters. Kove prospered and more injection moulding machines were acquired. When Ralph Ehrmann arrived as Kove's assistant in 1950, Airfix were still stamping out combs and lighters but was increasingly turning to toys such as baby soothers, tricycles and a new line, plastic toy soldiers. In 1950 these new lines were beginning to turn a useful profit but not yet useful enough to replace the faltering performance of old lines, specifically, the plastic comb.⁵⁹⁸

On joining the company, Ehrmann found it had seven moulding machines but only two were actually working. The other five were being cannibalised to keep the two running as there was no money for spares. What was urgently needed was new product, something to generate cash flow. Jim Russon, a Woolworths' buyer, suggested to Ehrmann that Airfix should produce something in kit form which could be sold at a Woolworths' price which was a bargain not a premium price. Russon suggested a miniature ship. He knew that Woolworths' US stores were doing good business with a ship-in-a-bottle version of Sir Francis Drake's flagship the *Golden Hind*. Why not have Airfix manufacture this, minus the bottle, as a kit?

Designing the product was straightforward compared to agreeing upon a suitable retail price. It took lateral thinking on behalf of Kove, John Gray, Airfix's chief buyer and Ehrmann to satisfy Russon and Woolworths. 'Instead of having a box around it with a polythene bag inside, we thought of a polythene bag with a coloured header which also had the drawings of the assembly in it. And that allowed us to reduce it to about three shillings or three and eleven, I think.'⁵⁹⁹ It was still not low enough. The retail price had to be set at two shillings.

⁵⁹⁷ The competence of management in the UK toy industry would be a constant source of concern to industry watchers even when profits were good. See Beamish & O'Kelly, *Review of the United Kingdom Toy Industry* (London: Beamish & O'Kelly, 1972), p. 21.

⁵⁹⁸ See Arthur Ward, *The Other Side of Airfix: Sixty Years of Toys, Games and Crafts* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2013), p. 5.

⁵⁹⁹ Ehrmann, Interview with Juliana Vandegrift, p. 16.

'By the time Woolworths had finished there was no profit in it. In fact, we had to write off the tool practically and no amortisation on our tooling and we really had no money.'⁶⁰⁰

What saved Ehrmann was a combination of three factors. Firstly, the new kit was popular, which meant re-orders. Secondly, the polystyrene powder they were using to make the kit suddenly switched turned from shortage to surplus with a commensurate impact on its wholesale price. Finally, there was John Gray's eye for a good deal, he 'negotiated very well on printing, on the paper headers and so on, and suddenly we had a real profit which I didn't tell Woolworths, and we ended up with a net profit of thirty per cent and that is a real life change for a bankrupt company.'⁶⁰¹ Very soon the Airfix Collectors Fleet of Classic Ships had set sail. Production batches which had begun at 10,000 units rose to a 100,000 units, which now made economic sense of the small margins Woolworth's insisted its suppliers worked to. The question soon became what to do next? The answer was not another ship but a fighter plane, the Spitfire.

The origin of the very first Spitfire kit released in 1953 is shrouded in mystery but the fact of its poor quality is not. What appears to have happened is that this first Spitfire kit was a direct copy, errors and all, of a Spitfire kit already being produced by American firm Aurora. Neither John Gray, when interviewed in the 1990s by the company's historian Arthur Ward, nor Ralph Ehrmann, when interviewed in 2012 by Juliana Vandegrift for the Museum of Childhood, remembered any specific deal having been struck, no licence drawn up. The inference is clear and all but confirmed by John Gray. 'Plagiarism was not uncommon in the 1940s and 50s. Rival manufacturers regularly copied the hard work of competitors by simply reducing each other's kits in size (scale) and cutting a mould tool for a smaller, though identical model.'⁶⁰² The upshot of this first flawed model was a flood of complaints including several from ex-RAF fitters who had worked on the Spitfire during the war.⁶⁰³ It was both embarrassing and damaging to a company trying to establish itself in a new market.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² Ward, *Boys' Book of Airfix*, p. 48.

⁶⁰³ Arthur Ward, *Celebrating 50 Years of the Greatest Plastic Kits in the World* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 28.

What Airfix required was a team of skilled draughtsman of their own. The man they turned to was twenty two year old John Edwards. Edwards was a passionate modeller. He had been employed as an engineering draughtsman at the Crittal Metal window Company before being called up for national service. Edwards was to command Airfix's design office until his untimely death in 1970. One of his first tasks was to address the problem of the flawed Spitfire. This he now did with a thoroughly convincing design. It was so convincing in fact that it would remain in the Airfix catalogue for the next fifty years. This 1955 Spitfire design established his reputation and it was another Spitfire design he masterminded that sealed it. In 1970 Airfix released its 1:24 scale Spitfire Mk 1A, an ambitious project, the first 1:24 scale model to be produced by any manufacturer in the world. It set a new benchmark for kit manufacturers.⁶⁰⁴

Before the *Golden Hind* kit was released by Airfix in 1952, models on the British market were almost invariably made from acetate. It was not a satisfactory material for the purpose. Acetate is hygroscopic which means it attracts water. Over time components made of acetate will twist which is incompatible with a product whose very *raison d'être*, as a kit, was components fitting together accurately. Airfix were not offering kits made of acetate but of polystyrene which is not hygroscopic. Polystyrene, was a new consumer material after the war, and would benefit from constant development throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁰⁵ The level of accuracy afforded by the new material was very attractive to John Edwards and his team. 'We became, quite quickly, very pernickety about it...as John built up the design teams behind us, the designers themselves who were half mad about construction kits kept on finding higher quality for us to go for.'⁶⁰⁶ This culture of relentless self-improvement at Airfix, is well illustrated by its Spitfire kits. In 1960, Airfix released a modified version of John Edwards's first Spitfire Mk IX. It did not have to. The original design was still very popular.

Quality alone, however, was not enough to generate, let alone guarantee, sales for Airfix. It was but one link in a chain. The next link was distribution. 'Our kits, in the years that they were successful, were in universal high streets. They would have toys in Woolworths, in W.

⁶⁰⁴ James May, *The Airfix Handbook* (London: Conway, 2010), p. 32.

⁶⁰⁵ Brown, *British Toy Business*, p. 159.

⁶⁰⁶ Ward, *Celebrating 50 Years*, p. 29.

H. Smith – not toys, kits. W. H. Smith, Boots, British Home Stores...where you could buy a fairly good range of kits.⁶⁰⁷ It was even possible to buy an Airfix kit in the local Post Office. The reason why was explained by sales director Peter Mason in 1980. It speaks volumes about the scale and sophistication of the Airfix sales and marketing operation in its pomp.

In times of economic recession, people do not tend to wander into a toyshop in case they feel obliged to purchase an item – therefore the consumer traffic flow through 3,000 of our accounts is restricted perhaps nine months of the year. So we have to have our merchandise on sale in outlets where there is a virtually guaranteed consumer flow.⁶⁰⁸

Such availability was of course complemented by an attractive price. Airfix kits were not targeted at the children's gift market, birthdays and Christmas', but at the repeat market. This demanded pocket-money prices. The first Spitfire model sold for just two shillings like the *Golden Hind*. But whose pocket money was it? Airfix knew precisely who their customer was. 'There are half a million boys a year who move into the 9-14 year age group which gives a potential market size of 3 million consumers, excluding girls.'⁶⁰⁹ They also understood that an Airfix kit was not an essential purchase. Schoolboys had to be persuaded to part with their pocket money; a need had to be created.⁶¹⁰ To do that showed more lateral thinking on behalf of Ehrmann and Gray. With so many individual products to promote, they eschewed expensive national advertising and decided to let the product advertise itself.

At its most prosaic box art, which began in Airfix's case with the label header, is an illustration of the constructed kit whose component parts the customer is holding in his or her hands. In the early 1980s, after Palitoy had taken over Airfix, US legislators insisted that this concept had to be taken literally, that is, box art had to be a photographic record of a finished model, nothing more nothing less. 'Enthusiasts generally hated the packaging from

⁶⁰⁷ Ehrmann, Interview with Juliana Vandegrift, p. 33.

⁶⁰⁸ Surrey History Centre (SHC), 8842/2/2, P. F. Mason to K. Askwith, 17 July 1980.

⁶⁰⁹ SHC, 8842/2/2, P.F. Mason to K. Askwith, 8 July 1980.

⁶¹⁰ See David Machin and Theo Van Leeuwin, 'Toys as Discourse: Children's War Toys and the War on Terror', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 6 (2009), pp. 51-63. For the gendered nature of toy modelling see Nick Pollard and Neil Carver, 'Building Model Trains and Planes: An Auto-ethnographic Investigation of a Human Occupation', *Journal of Occupational Science*, 23 (2016), pp. 168-180.

this period.⁶¹¹ The reason why is that good box art aspires to be so much more than mere record.

The doyen of Airfix box art was Roy Cross. Between 1964 and 1974, when kit sales were at their peak, he painted over 200 illustrations for Airfix, not least those for the Airfix Spitfire. Cross was born on London in 1924, the son of a plumber. After the war he joined a commercial studio where his training to become a commercial illustrator really began. Throughout the 1950s, he worked as a freelance but he was always drawn towards illustrating aircraft. He was commissioned by *The Air Training Corps Gazette*, the industry journals *Flight* and *Aeroplane* and illustrated a set of album cards for Brooke-Bond on the history of aviation. In 1964, Cross, always on the look-out for new work, spotted an opportunity. ‘Looking in Woolworths one day, I espied the Airfix plastic kits, packed in transparent bags with an illustrated titled header, mostly of aircraft models. The headers had coloured line artwork. I knew I could do better and wrote to Airfix to tell them so.’⁶¹² His first commission was for a Dornier DO 217.



Figure 24. Roy Cross, Box Art Illustrator

⁶¹¹ Ward, *Celebrating 50 Years*, p. 166.

⁶¹² Roy Cross, *More Vintage Years of Airfix Box Art* (Marlborough: Crowood, 2014), p. 13.

What are the technical demands box art places upon the artist? Roy Cross himself explains. ‘Painting aircraft has certain similarities with portraiture and deciding on the most attractive attitude for an aircraft in flight has parallels with showing off a sitter’s best features.’⁶¹³ Recording the finer features of an Airfix kit accurately was, however, mandatory. There would have been few commissions for the illustrator who forgot that Airfix’s reputation rested upon scrupulous attention to detail. Roy Cross was under no illusions, ‘if John Gray wanted even the tiniest detail changed, amendments there would be.’⁶¹⁴ This imperative to be precise, made demands of the medium as much as the artist. Cross’s own favourite, and one much favoured by commercial artists of the time, was Gouache, a form of watercolour but thicker and opaque rather than transparent. One of its key attributes is that light does not bleed through from the white paper ground but is provided instead by the white pigment in the paint instead. As a result Gouache offers a much more brilliant and intense light than can be achieved with traditional watercolour. Like any watercolour Gouache accepts detail and just as important, bearing in mind a client like John Gray, allows it to be removed with a little dampening of the surface. When these qualities were combined in the hands of a master like Roy Cross box art took on a sense not of record, of something approaching Photorealism but of Hyperrealism. Textures, surfaces, lighting effects and shadows all appeared that much clearer than was possible in any photograph.

We now come to the reason why it didn’t matter that the Spitfire virtually disappeared from the air for twenty-five years after its withdrawal from the annual Battle of Britain flypast in 1959. It was because of the outstanding performance characteristics of the Spitfire in the hands of our notional twelve year old boy. It will be useful to examine these in three ways. First, where does play stop and performance begin? How do we separate the two? Second, performance is defined by an examination and re-configuration of a ‘memory’ of the past, for our purposes, the myth of the Battle of Britain. Can we see it taking place? Finally, and perhaps most intriguingly, how can a plastic toy possibly be an authentic airworthy Spitfire? How might it possess the ‘authority of the object’?

⁶¹³ Arthur Ward, *Celebration of Flight: The Aviation Art of Roy Cross* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 2002), p. 26.

⁶¹⁴ Ward, *Boys’ Book of Airfix*, p. 107.

We begin with the boy himself. What is he doing? According to Richard Schechner, ‘play and playing are fundamentally performative’.⁶¹⁵ What Schechner means is that play and performance share a common base. Play like performance, is defined in action.⁶¹⁶ ‘Play is often an orderly sequence of actions performed in specified places for known durations of time.’⁶¹⁷ This might be a description of a Spitfire flypast, a rehearsed sequence along a defined flight line over a set time. Play like performance is also a form of instruction, a way of making meaning. Play ‘often serves as a crucible in which the material we utilize in the “real” world of “responsible” action is found, developed, and cast into significant new forms’.⁶¹⁸ This is a familiar trope too. Roger Caillois illustrates how closely related play and performance are. ‘A game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society’s moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities.’⁶¹⁹

It is when Caillois identifies another property common to play and performance that a dividing line appears. Play and performance each takes the participant somewhere else from his or her everyday reality. Where they go, however, is a mark of difference between play and performance. Caillois describes play as taking place in an imaginary, illusory, make-believe world.⁶²⁰ This is not the world of performance. On the contrary, it is not a conjured world, but an alternative space, ‘a reality that exists on a different plane’.⁶²¹ A successful performance has nothing to do with the world of make-believe. It is real. We might remember the hushed crowd at the sight and sound of a Spitfire flypast. What they were experiencing was not born of an illusion.

Play and performance share a common base and our notional twelve year old is clearly playing but is he also engaged in a performance? Consider the boy’s mental landscape. Is it possible to perceive an act of re-negotiation with the ‘memory’ of 1940 in his interaction with his Spitfire Airfix model? It cannot be his actual memory of course, not for a twelve year old boy in 1953 when the first Airfix Spitfire was introduced. To help us reveal that

⁶¹⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 121.

⁶¹⁶ See Amy Ogata, ‘Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 2/3 (2004), pp. 129-156.

⁶¹⁷ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 121.

⁶¹⁸ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 48.

⁶¹⁹ Cited in Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 94.

⁶²⁰ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 94.

⁶²¹ Carlson, *Performance*, p. 47.

mental landscape we can turn to the work of cultural historians Graham Dawson and Michael Paris.

Graham Dawson would probably be more interested in the mind of the boy than the model of the Spitfire. In his *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (1994), Dawson wants to understand the ‘intense fascination and excitement generated for men and boys by the military side of war’.⁶²² His is a gendered approach. He is interested in the appeal of the ‘soldier hero’ as personified by the likes of Sir Henry Havelock and T. E. Lawrence. It is a thought-provoking choice given Dawson’s approach and conclusions. ‘Identification with these heroes meets the wish to fix one’s own place within the social world...It offers the assurance of a clearly recognizable gender identity’.⁶²³ Such a conclusion applies to our notional young man too as he ‘flies’ his plastic Spitfire. Dawson’s central argument, the relationship between hero and acolyte, finds its corroboration in Martin Francis’ *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (2008).⁶²⁴ But Dawson’s central argument tells us little about any re-negotiation of ‘memory’. It is his suggestive phrase for that ‘intense fascination and excitement’, what he describes as a ‘masculine pleasure-culture of war’ which points us in the right direction.⁶²⁵

This is where the work of Michael Paris begins. Paris is not interested specifically in gender. In fact, Paris deliberately unhitches the masculine from Dawson’s suggestive phrase. Paris wants to work only within the parameters of what he now describes as an un-hyphenated ‘pleasure culture of war’.⁶²⁶ According to Paris this is a culture that has transformed war into entertaining spectacle, an exciting adventure narrative fit for popular mass entertainment.⁶²⁷ Paris ranges from the age of Victoria to the turn of the millennium but it is what he has to say about the Second World War which is of direct relevance here.

Paris explains that it was not until the early to mid-1950s that the events of 1939-45 were finally considered a suitable vehicle for popular entertainment. A lingering war-weariness

⁶²² Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

⁶²³ Ibid., p. 282.

⁶²⁴ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶²⁵ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 4.

⁶²⁶ Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 8.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

had seen to that.⁶²⁸ It was in the 1950s, according to Paris, that a fading ‘memory’ of the horrific events of the war left a residue of ‘finest hour nostalgia’ which collided with the formation of a lucrative new market for leisure and entertainment tailored towards the nation’s youth.⁶²⁹ What exactly was this ‘finest hour nostalgia’ which proved so appealing to the young? According to Paris, it was a war that had been depoliticized and sanitised.⁶³⁰ Gone was any discussion of the causes of the war. Gone too were the uncomfortable realities of war, the evils of Nazism and what it had taken to destroy it. What was also missing from this ‘finest hour nostalgia’ was any idea of a ‘People’s War’.⁶³¹ This general shift of emphasis was most obvious at the cinema. War films in the 1950s were very different from war films in the 1940s. Gone was the united nation in the fight against Nazism, and back was the middle class ‘soldier hero’ last seen in the 1930s.⁶³² In films like *The Dam Busters* (1955), *Reach for the Sky* (1956), and *I’ll Met by Moonlight* (1957), our impressionable young boy would have watched Richard Todd, Kenneth More and Dirk Bogarde winning the war in well-modulated tones.

How do we link this new pleasure culture of war in the 1950s directly to the Airfix Spitfire? Specifically, how do we tell the difference between a performance act and an act of play? There is a common base supporting play and performance but the biggest difference between the two is one of perception, of awareness. Play exists in a world of make-believe, performance does not. It inhabits a ‘reality that exists on a different plane from “everyday” existence’.⁶³³ Is this ‘alternative reality’ where our Airfix Spitfire takes our young man?

To find out we need to think about the Airfix Spitfire in terms of what it signifies. These messages are sent as signs. Signs are made up of two components, the signifier, an image, sound or word, our clothes for instance and the signified, the concept or meaning it embodies, such as our wealth and prestige. ‘Semiology reconstructs the systems of conventions and distinctions that enable a group of objects to have particular meanings for

⁶²⁸ Ibid., p. 222.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., p. 224.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ The first generation of historians to examine the legacy of the ‘People’s War’ was led by Angus Calder in his seminal but critically divisive account of the Home Front in 1969. See Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

⁶³² See *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *Beau Geste* (1939), *Gunga Din* (1939).

⁶³³ Carlson, *Performance*, p. 47.

social members – as signs.⁶³⁴ Signs always have a referent, in our example above, the coat or jacket we put on in the morning. It was Jean Baudrillard who suggested a radical shift in semiology. This was the disappearance of the referent. According to Baudrillard, such is the dominance of signs in his modern world of 1981, that they no longer refer to an original. Baudrillard insisted we live in a world of simulation, ‘the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal’.⁶³⁵

The hyperreal world is not one of copy and imitation. In his famous example, an illness imitated can be detected. An illness simulated, a psychosomatic illness for instance, will have genuine symptoms. Baudrillard argues that an illness with symptoms must be ‘real’, whether the result of simulation or a pathological condition. Baudrillard takes us into a world of artificial intelligence and synthetic biology, of cloning and virtual reality. It is a world where the original, the referent, has become obsolete. Not everyone agrees. Baudrillard’s vision, in particular its all embracing nature, does have its critics. Cultural theorist Sally Banes is one. ‘Not everyone who analyzes culture today—including myself—may go as far as Baudrillard in declaring all experience nothing more than a form of hyperreality generated by a forest of signs. After all, my passport photos do have a referent, even if photos of Mickey Mouse do not.’⁶³⁶

Banes’ reference to a photograph of Mickey Mouse is apposite because the hyperreal does mainly find its representation today as an image. We are beginning our journey back to the box art of Roy Cross. Hyperrealism as a term of reference for a work of art was probably first coined as late as 1973 by Isy Brachot.⁶³⁷ He chose it as the title of a major exhibition at his gallery in Brussels which was actually an exhibition dominated by American Photorealists like Chuck Close, Robert Bechtle, Ralph Gorings and Don Eddy. Nevertheless, he had identified, and labelled, something new. What was new was the addition of elements of narrative and emotion to the strictly imitative approach of the Photorealists. Hyperrealist art sought to describe a wholly new reality, one, as suggested by Baudrillard, without referents.

⁶³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), p. 21.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶³⁶ Sally Banes, ‘Will the Real...Please Stand up?: An Introduction to the Issue’, *Drama Review*, 34 (1990), p. 21.

⁶³⁷ Bob Lansroth, ‘Hyperrealism in Art: Ultimately, is it Art or Skill’, <www.widewalls.ch/hyperrealismart-style.com> [accessed 12 August 2017].

We do not have to study ‘high’ art to step into this world of simulation nor do we have to wait until 1973. All we have to do is study the box art of Roy Cross. An outstanding example is his 1970 painting of a Spitfire for Airfix’s new super kit. To see it as our notional twelve-year old boy saw it, as a simulation, not an imitation of a Spitfire, is to begin with its textures, surfaces, shadows and lighting effects. Such is their sharpness that together they offer a level of definition impossible to capture in any photograph. In 1970, the BBMF certainly had no Spitfire that looked quite like this. In fact, there never had been a Spitfire that looked like this. Roy Cross has also added that element of emotion and drama that takes his representation beyond imitation and copy. In Roy Cross’ picture there is a story unfolding which is being offered up to the viewer. Art historian, Theodore Schenk, explains that the viewer of a hyperreal painting is being asked not to interpret the image, but to experience it. ‘Focus is on the surface, not on what may be implied.’⁶³⁸ There is no requirement for interpretation. Adam Tooby, a modern master of the genre, underscores the point. ‘It lets my mind wander off and be part of the action that’s caught in the scene in front of me.’⁶³⁹

Is this Hyperreal painting by Roy Cross (Figure 25) an image of an alternative reality? It might just be for an imaginative twelve-year old boy. It was deliberately designed to confound him. In this alternative space, we also find that re-negotiation of ‘memory’ so necessary for a successful performance act. The new ‘pleasure culture of war’ which saw the ‘memory’ of the Second World War transformed in the 1950s, put our young man into uniform. It was to be his war, his heroics, his adventure and of course his Spitfire. Roy Cross in his box art made this act of transference very easy.

⁶³⁸ Theodore Schenk, ‘California Cool’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 4 (1980), p. 73.

⁶³⁹ Cited in Steve White (ed.), *Warbirds: The Aviation Art of Adam Tooby* (London: Titan, 2014), p. 14.



Figure 25. Box Art for the Airfix 1:24 scale Spitfire 'Superkit'

Box art as hyperreal painting is a narrative art form but it was one born out of a representational genre.⁶⁴⁰ Roy Cross was always ready to cite the influence upon him of war artist Frank Wootton.⁶⁴¹ Wootton, a commercial artist before the war, was never employed or commissioned by the WAAC. Official recognition only came in 1944, when he was created a Special Duties Officer by Air Chief Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, with a roving commission. Wootton, like Cross, understood the requirements of his paymaster. He depicted 'the Royal Air Force as it wished to be seen, with real life accuracy untainted by the personal intellectual views of the Official War Artists'. Wootton was a master of the representational genre, but unlike Cross, he painted specific events with identifiable actors. In 1978, for instance, he painted a picture of Douglas Bader called *Bader Bale Out*. Paul Brickhill, Bader's biographer, describes the exact moment Wootton captures on canvas. 'He

⁶⁴⁰ See Luther Gore, 'The Winged Paintbrush: Aviation Genre Art', *Leonardo*, 21 (1988), pp. 71-75.

⁶⁴¹ Cross, *More Vintage Years*, p. 10.

struggled madly to get his head above the windscreen and suddenly felt he was being sucked out as the tearing wind caught him. Top half out. He was out! No, something had him by the leg, holding him. Then the nightmare took his exposed body and beat him and screamed and roared in his ears as the broken fighter dragging him by the leg plunged down and spun and battered him.⁶⁴² What Wootton made of this moment is emotive, dramatic, but Roy Cross could never have painted it for Airfix. It would have been rejected by Ehrmann and Gray. They understood just as Roy Cross understood that a small boy did not want to imagine Douglas Bader struggling to escape from his stricken Spitfire. He wanted to imagine himself. Box art, in all its deliberate anonymity, gave him that opportunity.

There is one more point to consider about that hyperreal Spitfire as depicted by Roy Cross. As our notional boy perceived it to be ‘real’, so it was authentic. It had the ‘authority of the object’. It stood testimony to the history it experienced. What that testimony was, was the suitably re-adjusted myth of 1940, an adjustment now finding its place in a 1950s ‘pleasure culture of war’ as described for us by Graham Dawson and Michael Paris. Box art in the hands of a master like Roy Cross did offer a ride in an authentic Spitfire in a world fit for heroes. Perhaps one of the greatest public compliments paid to Roy Cross’ skill as a hyperreal painter was by the toy chronicler and film-maker James May. May was commissioned by the BBC in 2009 to make a series of films on the history of post-war toys. ‘The first thing I proposed for the *Toy Stories* series was to build an Airfix model the size of a real aeroplane, because that’s what I’d always imagined doing as a child.’⁶⁴³ What the viewers saw on 27 October 2009 was a film about the construction of a Spitfire kit, a fibreglass model Spitfire to a scale of 1:1. James May, in an act of intellectual bravado, had created an imitation, a copy, of a Baudrillard simulacrum.

In 1969, Airfix was at the start of what was to be a golden period in its short independent history. Turnover and pre-tax profit for the year 1968-69 were £6,418,000 and £725,000 respectively.⁶⁴⁴ Five years later and the figures for 1973-74 were an impressive £17,756,000 and £2,059,000.⁶⁴⁵ In 1974, Ralph Ehrmann, presenting his Chairman’s report, could barely conceal his delight. ‘I find it hard not to be enthusiastic about the group’s future. In all

⁶⁴² Paul Brickhill, *Reach for the Sky: The Story of Douglas Bader* (London: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 221.

⁶⁴³ May, *The Airfix Handbook*, p. 6.

⁶⁴⁴ ‘Airfix Industries Limited’, *The Times*, 8 July 1970, p. 22.

⁶⁴⁵ ‘Airfix Profit Up £123,000’, *Financial Times*, 12 July 1974, p. 26.

sections of the business, new products are creating exciting prospects and mounting order books.⁶⁴⁶ It was not a new product that was leading the way however. Between 1969 and 1974 sales of the Spitfire kit were at their absolute peak. Ehrmann's bullish Chairman's report would soon come back to haunt him.

The Christmas selling season of 1977 was not a good one for the British toy industry. Ehrmann described it as a disaster and for Airfix it was; profits fell from £4.03 million to £2.69 million.⁶⁴⁷ These were difficult trading conditions for everyone. High interest rates had dramatically increased the cost of borrowing. The strength of sterling meant that British exports were as expensive as imports were cheap. The British toy industry simply couldn't compete on price and, worse, it was struggling to compete on new products too.⁶⁴⁸ Even Airfix's Series One kits, the pocket money purchase which had built the company, were not selling anymore. 'The serious decline of all Series One kits is the most important area of concern...particularly aircraft and military vehicles over the three year period with an overall drop of 57%.'⁶⁴⁹ The cheap imports now flooding in from Asia were in fact harbingers of a new electronic age in the world of toys, and British manufacturers were being left behind. It did not end well for Airfix. At Christmas 1980, Ehrmann went to the banks with a proposal. 'If Airfix was to survive it is understood that the banks had to be convinced that they should buy directly into the company by converting some of its debt to equity – e.g. swapping their loans for shares. They were asked, in effect, to take an even bigger stake in Airfix's future. What future, they asked? And they refused.'⁶⁵⁰

The banks were, as it turned out, justifiably concerned about the future. In 1978 a new video arcade game was released by Taito Corporation of Japan. Three years later it arrived in Britain. Writing in the *Observer* only a week after the collapse of Airfix, journalist Jane McLoughlin looked forward to the toy fair which was about to open at London's Earls Court. 'One sad forecast for the Toy Fair is that the Toy of Year is unlikely to be home-produced:

⁶⁴⁶ 'Airfix Industries Ltd.', *The Times*, 19 Sept. 1974, p. 22.

⁶⁴⁷ 'Poor Last Quarter for Airfix', *The Times*, 20 July 1978, p. 22.

⁶⁴⁸ See Kenneth Brown, 'The Collapse of the British Toy Industry, 1979-1984', *Economic History Review*, 46 (1993), pp. 592-606.

⁶⁴⁹ SHC, 8842/2/2, 'Kit Analysis for the Period 1976 – 1978', n.d.

⁶⁵⁰ 'Trouble in Toytown as Airfix Dies', *Guardian*, 30 Jan. 1981, p. 23.

the Japanese-made “Space Invaders” is tipped to win.⁶⁵¹ The toy market was on the move in the late 1970s and Airfix had been left behind.

The Airfix Spitfire did crash land on the eve of 1981 but there was another Spitfire in performance ready to take its place. An important strand to the Airfix marketing strategy in the 1960s was *Airfix Magazine*. It was established in 1960 and was subsidised by the company throughout its life. At its peak, in the early 1970s, it sold a healthy 100,000 copies a month.⁶⁵² In its February 1969 edition, features writer Michael Bowyer previewed the making of a new film for his young readers. ‘September, 1969, should see the premiere of what may well be the most exciting aviation film of them all, *The Battle of Britain*. For enthusiast and modeller alike it will certainly be a star attraction. Its subject is such that the film will doubtless be one of the most eagerly attended for many a day.’⁶⁵³ He was quite wrong about that but in terms of the next Spitfire performance it hardly mattered.

The Fighter Redisplayed

It was almost exactly a year before Michael Bowyer’s article appeared in *Airfix Magazine* that the press got confirmation that a film about the Battle of Britain was going to go ahead.

The Battle of Britain Begins on Sunday

The Battle of Britain is on. After the postponement of the £4,000,000 epic last year – and with United Artists now releasing the film-producer Harry Saltzman will set the cameras turning in Spain on Sunday.

S. Benjamin Fisz will be the co-producer and Guy Hamilton will direct. Freddie Young, twice Academy Award winner, will photograph the film.

⁶⁵¹ ‘Airfix Comes Unstuck’, *Observer*, 1 Feb. 1981, p. 18.

⁶⁵² Ward, *Boys’ Book of Airfix*, p. 114.

⁶⁵³ ‘The Battle of Britain’, *Airfix Magazine*, Feb. 1969, p. 265.

‘The Battle of Britain’ will be one of the biggest films ever made. ‘Logistically it is bigger even than Bond,’ says Canadian-born Saltzman, co-producer of the James Bond spectaculars.⁶⁵⁴

During the weeks of summer shooting in 1968, as Christopher Plummer, Robert Shaw and Michael Caine climbed in and out of their Spitfires and Hurricanes, a strange phenomenon could be observed. ‘Guard dogs had to be called in to protect the planes assembled at Duxford airfield for location shooting of *The Battle of Britain*. Protection was needed because at weekends hundreds of sightseers trampled nearby cornfields to get a look at the planes.’⁶⁵⁵ Michael Bowyer, writing his article on the film production for his young *Airfix Magazine* readers, understood exactly what those sightseers were hoping to see. ‘Seven Spitfires repeatedly peeling off for the cameraman in the helicopter one afternoon was a sight to behold and treasure in this day and age.’⁶⁵⁶

For the aviation enthusiast, multiple Spitfires in the air were indeed a sight to treasure. This especially after twelve years in which the BBMF had struggled to fly even one. Peter Arnold, Spitfire researcher and air photographer, explains the significance of the film in terms of his own developing interest as well as that of a nascent warbird community.

By the mid-1950s the aircraft of World War Two were my main interest and I was first in line to buy the new Airfix Spitfire for a couple of shillings (10p) at Woolworths in 1955. Move the clock forward to 2009 and I joined the team compiling the new *Spitfire Survivors – Then and Now* book. This major reference work details the Spitfires, Seafires or substantial parts thereof that had made it past January 1, 1970...The 1970 date was set as it was shortly after the London premiere of the film *Battle of Britain*, a seminal point for the UK ‘warbird’ movement which went on to flourish after this potent stimulus.⁶⁵⁷

What exactly is a warbird? A warbird is a vintage military aircraft, jet or piston. The warbird movement, to which Peter Arnold refers to, is a self-regulating community which grew out of recognition by three disparate groups that self interest was better served together. This

⁶⁵⁴ ‘Battle of Britain’, *Daily Cinema*, 6 Mar. 1968, p. 13.

⁶⁵⁵ BFI, PBM 22548, *Battle of Britain*: Pressbook, p. 25.

⁶⁵⁶ ‘The Battle of Britain’, *Airfix Magazine*, Feb. 1969, p. 268.

⁶⁵⁷ ‘Ones That Got Away’, *Flypast*, 13 Sept. 2013, p. 102.

mutually supportive coalition today consists of the Historic Aircraft Association, private owners and operators and the RAF, specifically the BBMF. What they did better together, was and remains the organisation and regulation of airshows.

Peter Teichman, the owner of the Hangar 11 Collection which today operates a Spitfire, a Hurri Bomber (the bomber version of a Hurricane), a Kittyhawk and a Mustang likes to make this proud boast. ‘Air shows are the second largest spectator sport in the UK after football.’⁶⁵⁸ Certainly air shows today attract crowds that would fill all but the largest Premier League grounds and while precise figures are elusive the Civil Aviation Authority counts spectator numbers in the millions. The BBMF itself estimates that today it performs before over seven million people annually.⁶⁵⁹ As we have already seen air displays in Britain have had a long and distinguished history.



Figure 26. Flying Legends Air Show 2015

⁶⁵⁸ Hanger 11 Collection. <www.hangar11.co.uk/aboutus.html> [accessed 5 March 2016].

⁶⁵⁹ RAF BBMF. <www.raf.mod.uk/bbmf.com> [accessed 9 March 2016].

It was at the Empire Air Day displays up and down the country in May 1939, as discussed in chapter 1, that the Spitfire met its public for the first time. Before the war, major air displays were usually run by or with the full co-operation of the RAF and immediately after the war the RAF did re-enter the display arena in style. Its Farnborough show in July 1950 was ‘one of the most ambitious and enterprising aerial occasions ever presented to the public.’⁶⁶⁰ This was the very cusp of the jet age when Spitfires in reserve flew in displays with frontline Meteor and Vampire jets. But such grand affairs soon became the exception rather than the norm. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the RAFs diminishing peacetime resources were soon stretched far too thin to accommodate the display season in any style. There were always exceptions, however. The summer of 1968 was one such exception, it being the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the RAF. As spectators strode through the cornfields at Duxford to catch a glimpse of Fisz and Saltzman’s vintage air force, at Abingdon in Oxfordshire the RAF put on a jet age celebration. It was not a success. The flying display was as perfunctory as the ground offer. ‘Apart from the inevitable continuity drill, gymnastics and police dog display, that was it.’⁶⁶¹ The retreat of the RAF from the display arena was an opportunity but it had to be grasped which was why the film *Battle of Britain* was a ‘seminal point for the UK ‘warbird’ movement’.⁶⁶²

This new cinematic epic had its genesis in an untimely disappointment suffered by film producer S. Benjamin Fisz. Fisz had been born and brought up in Poland before coming to Britain. He was only seventeen years old at the outbreak of war. Demobbed in 1945, Fisz decided to stay in Britain, excited by the prospect of working in the British film industry. His progress was steady, and unspectacular but always upward. By 1965, he was a fully fledged British film producer, but he was not yet an ‘A’ league film producer with a reputation in Hollywood. He was, for instance, in no position to command the financial resources that would eventually be consumed by the film *Battle of Britain*.

⁶⁶⁰ David Ogilvy, *Flying Displays* (Shrewsbury: Airlife, 1984), p. 33.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁶² ‘Ones That Got Away’, *Flypast*, 13 Sept. 2013, p. 102.

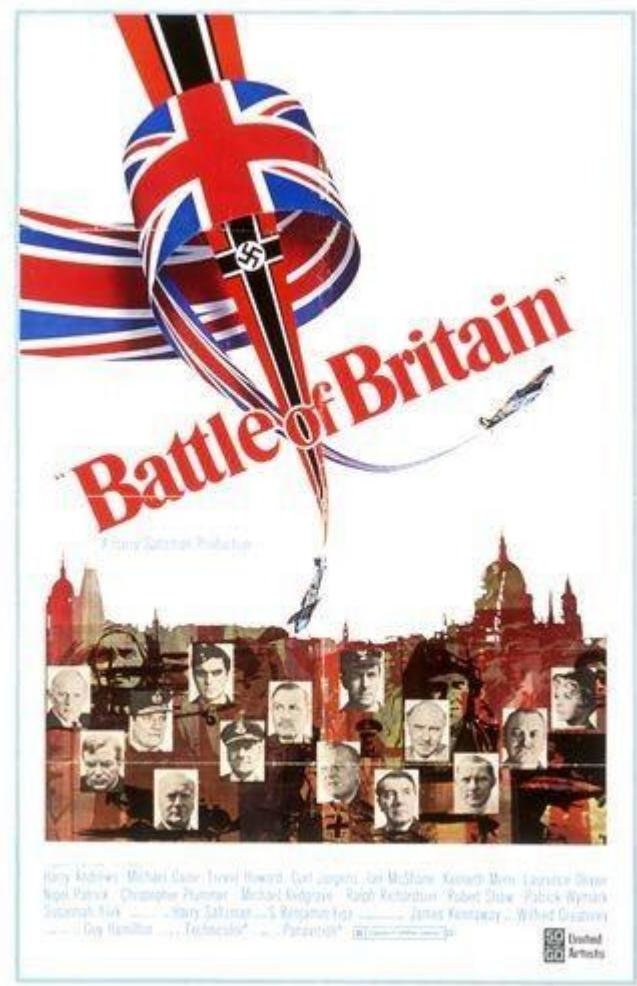


Figure 27. Battle of Britain Film Poster, 1969

In September 1965, Fisz had just finished the production of *The Heroes of Telemark*, a story of resistance fighters in German occupied Norway. His next project was to be a long cherished one, a film about the life of General Orde Wingate. Fisz already held the rights to two major works on Wingate and all he needed before going ahead was the consent of Wingate's surviving relatives. Wingate had died in an air crash in 1944. It was on 13 September 1965 that he found out that that consent would not be forthcoming. It was a blow not least because *The Heroes of Telemark* was showing signs of a box-office success. It meant that Fisz needed a new project quickly. Timing is critical in any creative industry where the light of success shines brightly but not for long. As told by Leonard Mosley, author of the authorised and therefore sanitised history of the making of the film *Battle of Britain*, it was after Fisz took the phone call that all but killed his Wingate project that he

stepped out of his Mayfair office for a consoling walk in Hyde Park. ‘It was then that he heard the drone of engines flying overhead – piston engines, not jets – and looked up at a sound which was only too familiar. A Spitfire and a Hurricane fighter were flying over the park. He noticed that other people were looking up too, and the younger ones among them were puzzled. “What kind of planes are those?” they were asking.’⁶⁶³

It is a fine story and, apocryphal or not, Fisz did take his new idea to Freddy Thomas, head of the production division of the Rank Organisation. His pitch to Thomas was a simple one. It was based upon the idea behind the film the *Longest Day* which had been a notable box office success only three years before. The premise was ‘both sides given fair play in the story.’⁶⁶⁴ Thomas was interested in the project but not, bearing in mind the financial risk, Fisz as its producer. ‘You are trying to take over my project. At the risk of parting company with you on this project, I refuse to be treated as a B picture producer.’⁶⁶⁵ The stalemate was only broken when Fisz was asked to lunch by Harry Saltzman. Saltzman was everything Fisz wanted to be, an ‘A’ league producer.

A new deal was struck but not as it turned out with Rank. Initially enthusiastic on hearing of Saltzman’s involvement, Freddy Thomas and his Rank board eventually backed away. Industry suspicion, which surfaced after the film was released, was that Rank was intimidated by the size of the project.⁶⁶⁶ Saltzman eventually sold the film to United Artists. Integrity was the watchword for both Fisz and Saltzman. ‘We brought in...a lot of faith and tried through three long years to keep the basic integrity of our idea intact. We wanted to be truthful about that time in 1940 because it is a time that deserves the truth.’⁶⁶⁷ This was not quite the vision of Guy Hamilton, however, the film’s newly appointed director.

We are going to keep to the facts of the Battle...and show it the way it was – really was, I mean, with real human beings flying those machines instead of starry-eyed knights of the air doing daring deeds to the sound of soulful music...But we are also going to have people with whom audiences, particularly young audiences, can

⁶⁶³ Leonard Mosley, *Battle of Britain* (London: Pan Books, 1969), p. 13.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁶⁶ For the decline of the British Film industry in the 1970s, see Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶⁶⁷ BFI, PBM 22548, *Battle of Britain*: Pressbook, p. 24.

communicate and connect – fliers, airmen, their girlfriends and wives – and they have got to give the emotion to our film. The audience, most of whom don't care a damn about the Battle of Britain as such, will have to ache, yearn, love, and be scared out of their pants and miniskirts by what they see these people doing. And that ain't documentary, its drama, and it's what we've got to get into our script.⁶⁶⁸

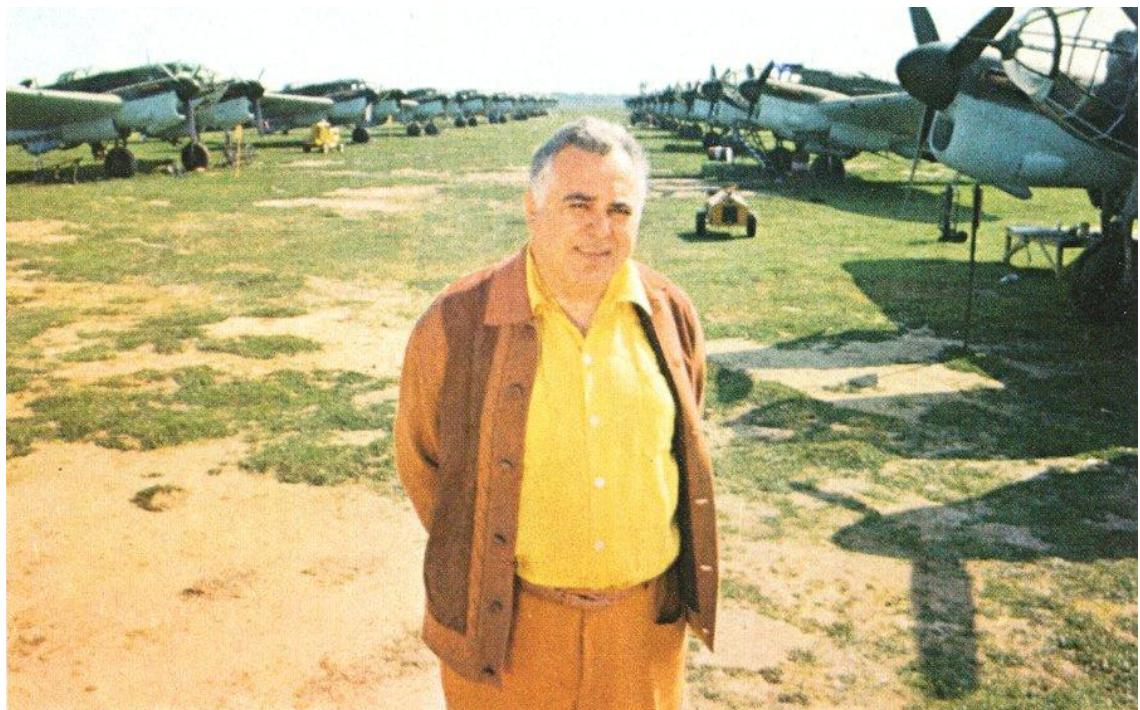


Figure 28. Harry Saltzman on the set of *Battle of Britain*, 1968

Hamilton perhaps understood something that Fisz and Saltzman did not, how to portray a factual war story as mass entertainment. Some 3,000 people would eventually be involved in the making of *Battle of Britain*.⁶⁶⁹ Such an army was necessary because this was a time before digital effects. Five separate film units worked quite often simultaneously in Spain, England and France. ‘Houses really do tumble down in *Battle of Britain*; hangers are destroyed, and great infernos do devastate part of London’s dockland.’⁶⁷⁰ John Palmer, who had worked as production supervisor on such epics as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor*

⁶⁶⁸ Cited in Mosley, *Battle of Britain*, p. 33.

⁶⁶⁹ Peter Tiphorn, *Battle of Britain: Souvenir Programme* (Manchester: Sackville, 1969), p. 24.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

Zhvago, was as surprised as he was impressed by the project. ‘Authenticity was the key word. Everything had to be done right. It was the most astonishing film I have worked on.’⁶⁷¹ Fisz and Saltzman shooting in the summer of 1968 were fortunate in their timing. The Greater London Council was in the middle of a slum clearance scheme in the docklands. It did not matter to them who pulled down the old warehouses or how.



Figure 29. Director Guy Hamilton and co-producer Ben Fisz, at Hawkinge Airfield, 1968

Large fires and dramatic explosions on the docks were all very well, but the heart of the film was always going to be the depiction of the air battles. Leonard Mosley, the film’s chronicler, wanted to be absolutely sure his reader understood the movie’s unique selling point.

Since *Battle of Britain* was to be a widescreen production shot in colour, clips from the actual Battle of Britain were unusable, a fact which did not, however, trouble

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., p. 25.

Saltzman or Fisz. From the start they had planned to ‘re-create’ completely the 40 minutes of air battles which would be the spectacular offered high-point of the film, using the same planes and simulating the same clashes which had once fought over the English Channel and the Thames Estuary.⁶⁷²

Right back at the beginning of the project, as Fisz wooed Freddy Thomas at Rank, he was already in negotiation with the RAF. ‘The Air Ministry will cooperate and will provide us with nine Spitfires. They will also provide a number of German aircraft up to the amount we will need, and will put pilots and crew at our disposal to fly them. They will also put Duxford airfield at our disposal, as this airfield has not changed since the war.’⁶⁷³ Fisz’s main contact at the Air Ministry, now part of the Ministry of Defence, was Air Commodore James Wallace, the RAF’s Director of Public Relations. Wallace’s commitment to the film was absolute. Hamilton’s five film units were made welcome at a number of old Fighter Command bases including Duxford, Hawkinge, North Weald, and Northolt and Debden. Wallace also made sure that the film’s engineering crews had the use of the RAF’s comprehensive repair and maintenance facilities at RAF Henlow.

Fisz had been assured of full RAF co-operation, but it was always intended to be something of a reciprocal affair. In the early 1960s, as we know, what was to become the BBMF was in dire straits. This memorandum from Wing Commander H. H. Dent to Fighter Command’s senior engineer Wing Commander G. Dunphy, in late 1965, makes it all too clear. ‘We would have been unable to have flown our Spitfire in the last Battle of Britain display but for the generosity of Rolls-Royce Ltd in making us a present of a newly overhauled engine.’⁶⁷⁴ Service eyes and ears were therefore alert to any opportunity to acquire urgently needed vintage kit.

A request has now been received through the liaison officer appointed for the Battle of Britain Film for authority to bring Spitfire Mark 1A K9942 and Hurricane Mark 1 P2617 to flying condition and to fly them. Maintenance of the memorial Flight aircraft is becoming increasingly more difficult due to the lack of engine life and the scarcity of spares, the only source of supply being the remaining Mark 2s held for

⁶⁷² Mosley, *Battle of Britain*, p. 44.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶⁷⁴ TNA, AIR 2/17546, H. H. Dent to G. Dunphy, 4 Nov. 1965.

display. Clearly if we are to maintain the Memorial Flight in the long term it would be to our advantage to accede to the Spitfire Productions proposal.⁶⁷⁵

Spitfire Productions agreed to re-engine two of the flight's grounded Spitfires and to pass on all the spares the production had gathered together from all corners of the globe. This immediately increased the complement of airworthy Spitfires available to the Flight from three to five in addition to its single airworthy Hurricane. 11 Group, which continued to look after the flight on an unfunded ad hoc basis and was therefore naturally at the forefront of lobbying for its establishment made sure its new parent, Strike Command, understood precisely what this would mean.

A Flight of this size would certainly present RAF Coltishall with an unacceptable servicing load if no establishment were created and an attempt were made to keep all aircraft in a fully flyable condition all the time. The latter is not considered a practicable aim in the absence of a formal establishment but it would be sensible, nevertheless, to acquire the aircraft now, while the opportunity exists, in order to provide a suitable reserve for future years.

The need to decide now on the acquisition of additional flyable aircraft as reserves for the Flight does highlight the importance of resolving the question of the permanent establishment of manpower to support the activities of the Flight. Formal recognition by MOD of the Flight's existence and useful purpose is now required.⁶⁷⁶

Permanent establishment happened only two months after this missive was sent. The bounty offered up by Spitfire Productions after the film was completed was not the sole reason for the establishment of the BBMF, an act which guaranteed its survival, but it was a factor.

Fisz had successfully negotiated for the full co-operation of the RAF but it was not enough to satisfy the vision of either Saltzman or Guy Hamilton. This meant a call upon the services of ex-bomber pilot Group Captain Hamish Mahaddie. Mahaddie was a consultant to the film industry who had already worked for Saltzman on the Bond films, as well *633 Squadron* and

⁶⁷⁵ TNA, AIR 2/18163, 'Release of Historic Spitfire and Hurricane for the Battle of Britain Film', n.d.

⁶⁷⁶ TNA, AIR 2/18575, 'The Battle of Britain Film – Memorial Flight Involvement', 23 Oct. 1968.

Operation Crossbow. It was to be *Battle of Britain* which was to prove his greatest procurement triumph. Mahaddie found out that there were in total 109 Spitfires in existence in Britain in 1966. He acquired thirty six of them. ‘I decided I could make twelve of them fly, and another twelve taxi...the remainder would be used for props on airfields.’⁶⁷⁷ Next he needed Hurricanes. This was an altogether different order of difficulty. He traced seven worldwide, so rare had they become, of which he managed to acquire three. As for the Luftwaffe, it was Adolf Galland, now employed as a consultant to Spitfire Productions, who suggested the way forward. He pointed out that the Spanish government still operated a fleet of Heinkel bombers and were only now in the process of decommissioning its fleet of Spanish made Messerschmitt fighters which had formed the backbone of its fighter force throughout the 1950s.⁶⁷⁸

Mahaddie did not have the necessary contacts in Spain but, fortunately, Air Commodore Wallace did. He contacted the Foreign Office who in turn contacted British air attaché, Group Captain R.L.S Coulson, in Madrid. Coulson confirmed both the existence of the fighters and their imminent disposal. Mahaddie had to move quickly. In March 1966 he flew to Tablada, a Spanish air force base just outside Seville. What he found there were eight fighters still in a flyable condition but he knew there had to be more even if they were no longer air worthy. ‘There was this enormous pile of scrap. I had a Spanish Air Officer with me and some Spanish non-coms, and we picked around among the rubbish. By the time I had gone through it all, I was astonished. There was the material for a small air force lying around.’⁶⁷⁹ On behalf of Spitfire Productions he secured twenty eight Spanish-built Messerschmitts. As for the Heinkel bombers, the only purchase required on behalf of Spitfire Productions was that of a good lunch. This was held at the British Embassy in the presence of the British Ambassador, Sir Alan Williams, and the Spanish Minister for Air, his assistant Juan Jose Sanchez Cabal and Mahaddie. Mahaddie made his pitch. A week later came the reply.

I am pleased to be able to tell you that approval has been given by the higher authority for the film company to take photographs of Heinkel aircraft in the air and

⁶⁷⁷ Tipthorp, *Battle of Britain: Souvenir Programme*, p. 26.

⁶⁷⁸ See Mark Ashley, *Flying Film Stars: The Directory of Aircraft in British World War Two Films* (Walton-on-Thames: Red Kite, 2014), p. 233.

⁶⁷⁹ Cited in Mosley, *Battle of Britain*, p. 47.

on the ground. At the same time, I am happy to inform you that all the expenses incurred in the filming of the aircraft, i.e. the cost of flying, the cost of fuel and the maintenance of the aircraft will be completely free with the exception of the painting or changing of the markings on the aircraft.⁶⁸⁰

It was quite a coup for Mahaddie, access and subsidised access too. Fisz and Saltzman later calculated it probably saved the production £150,000.



Figure 30. Actors and extras ready to shoot the film's opening credit sequence at Tablada Airfield in Spain on 13 March, 1968

At the beginning of January 1968 construction crews flew out to Seville soon followed by the production crew. What was called the 'final-final' script was ready by March 1968 and filming began at Tablada airfield. Hamilton and his first unit crew spent March and most of April shooting in Spain. In early May he was in London's Bermondsey, filming scenes for the Blitz sequences. At the end of May he began shuttling between Home County RAF stations.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

The production was now based at RAF Duxford. It was not until late September that filming was eventually completed with the aerial unit searching for some late summer sun in the south of France. Post-production, including the commissioning and then hurried re-commissioning of the music score, would take another year.

The film had its world premiere at the Dominion Theatre, London, on 15 September 1969, Battle of Britain Day, in the presence of the Lord Mayor of London and more than 350 members of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association. On 20 October there followed a Royal Gala Performance attended by the Queen in aid of the RAF Association and the RAF Benevolent Fund. The publicity campaign, taking its cue from the film itself, had tremendous scale. ‘Promotion plans for *Battle of Britain* are almost like battle strategy in themselves.’⁶⁸¹ It all amounted to a great sense of expectation within the film industry itself.

UA’s ‘Battle of Britain’ got away to a spectacular start with the World premiere at the Dominion on Monday. We shall have to wait until next week before we can really measure its strength at the box-office but in the first two days it took £5,360 in four performances – absolute capacity – and already had collected £18,700 in advance bookings.⁶⁸²

Unfortunately, absolute capacity proved ephemeral. The next week was disappointing and the film would prove ultimately to be a box office failure. It never recovered its production costs through ticket sales. The Treasury was left with an outstanding debt of £35,000 owed to it by Spitfire Productions, presumably care of the ever obliging Air Commodore Wallace. After months of solicitors’ letters and cancelled meetings, a settlement was finally agreed. It was a lesson learnt at the MOD. ‘I have warned my navy department friends that Mr. Ben Fisz is now thinking of a film about the Battle of Trafalgar – I suspect, however, that our charges for re-commissioning HMS Victory may prove to be rather high.’⁶⁸³

Why did the audience stay away in 1969? Guy Hamilton, the film’s director, was well aware of the tenuous grip the Battle of Britain held on the popular imagination. Unlike Fisz and

⁶⁸¹ ‘Promotion Strategy in UK’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 13 Sept. 1969, p. 21.

⁶⁸² ‘Battle Opens to Capacity’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 Sept. 1969, p. 12.

⁶⁸³ TNA, TS 66/17, A. Heskett to W. H. Godwin, 26 Feb. 1971.

Saltzman, he had always been concerned about relying upon the story alone to carry the film. Bill Altria from *Kinematograph Weekly* watched the premiere at the Dominion Theatre and took a straw poll amongst those who had sat beside him. ‘Critical reaction to the production generally conceded that the subject had been treated with integrity and sincerity and that technically it was a great achievement but that it lacked emotional depth in depicting the behind the scenes conflicts in the conduct of the battle and the human drama of the pilots and those involved in the blitz.’⁶⁸⁴ David Austen in *Films and Filming* was more damning. ‘The film never stops jumping from location to location in an attempt to give a full account, but the story is told from so many different sides that it ends up having no point of view at all. No single character is on the screen long enough to register any real sympathy or respect.’⁶⁸⁵ What the film critics pointed out at the time, film historians have largely agreed with. ‘The problem with *Battle of Britain* was that it tried to be too many things to too many people’, Simon Mackenzie has noted.⁶⁸⁶

There was one survivor from the reported wreckage. Even the severest critics at the time were sure about that. It is ‘the aeroplanes that are the real stars of the picture.’⁶⁸⁷ So said Graham Clarke in *Kine Weekly*, and the anonymous reporter in *Variety* agreed. ‘The aeroplanes are the “pull-stars” of this \$12,000,000 plus film. Director Guy Hamilton and his array of technical advisors, production staff, flying stunt men, special effects boys and second unit aerial lensers have done a masterly logistical job.’⁶⁸⁸ Perhaps the most famous sequence was the four minute ‘big aerial ballet’ that came at the climax of the film.⁶⁸⁹ Set against William Walton’s atmospheric score, with the only other sounds heard by the audience being those of combat, what followed was a montage of images with no obvious continuity. What linked the images together instead was an emotional narrative, specifically, a narrative of fear. It was a montage designed to show how terrifying and random combat could be. Its authority, its sense of authenticity, was intensified by the fact that few models were used. The second unit aerial lensers, those who had filmed the

⁶⁸⁴ ‘Long Shots’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 Sept. 1969, p. 32.

⁶⁸⁵ ‘Battle of Britain’, *Films and Filming*, Nov. 1969, p. 41.

⁶⁸⁶ Simon Mackenzie, *The Battle of Britain on Screen: ‘The Few’ in British Film and Television Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 91.

⁶⁸⁷ ‘Battle of Britain’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 Sept. 1969, p. 37.

⁶⁸⁸ ‘Battle of Britain’, *Variety*, 25, Sept. 1969, p. 13.

⁶⁸⁹ The quality of the aerial combat scenes is still recognised today. See ‘The Battle of Britain: The Mother of all Air Battles’, <www.Telegraph.co.uk> [accessed 15 Oct. 2017].

sequences, had taken great risks and the results were on screen. ‘When you see an aircraft up close all you see is a shot that’s so wide that its the propeller, the nose, and half the wing on either side, that’s him twelve feet away from the back of our aircraft, doing 300 mph.’⁶⁹⁰

Hamilton’s portrayal of the air battles was un-heroic and bloody. We might remember his stated intentions at the beginning of the production. ‘We are going to keep to the facts of the Battle,’ he said, ‘and show it the way it was – really was, I mean, with real human beings flying those machines instead of starry-eyed knights of the air doing daring deeds to the sound of soulful music.’⁶⁹¹ What he had actually managed to do, seemingly counterintuitively, was make the experience attractive to the viewer. ‘The paradox of antiwar films is that the closer they come to “actual” battle and its (for many often exciting) horrors, the less effective they are in evoking antiwar sentiments’, historian Omer Bartov has suggested.⁶⁹² A ‘pleasure culture of war’ did demand a sanitised experience and what was more sanitised than watching ‘horrors’ while eating popcorn in an air conditioned cinema?

The release of *Battle of Britain* alone would have ensured that 1969 would be remembered as a significant year for the warbird movement but of course it was also the year the BBMF was established. It would be sometime, though, approximately another fifteen years, before the BBMF’s contribution to the air display summer circuit could be described as anything other than modest. We must therefore return to Peter Arnold’s view that the London premiere of the film *Battle of Britain* was ‘a seminal point for the UK ‘warbird’ movement’.⁶⁹³ It was such for two reasons, one practical, and the other inspirational. First it was material proof that piston engine fighters from the Battle of Britain era could be restored and flown again. It is estimated that well over a hundred aircraft were patched up and returned for duty on *Battle of Britain*.⁶⁹⁴ Here was a resource ready to be exploited. Second, the film’s greatest triumph, its forty minutes of authentic aerial combat presented in widescreen Technicolor, proved inspirational to a small number of determined, well funded and well qualified enthusiasts.

⁶⁹⁰ *Battle of Britain*, dir. Guy Hamilton (GB, 1969), Audio Commentary DVD Special Edition (GB, 2006).

⁶⁹¹ Cited in Mosley, *Battle of Britain*, p. 33.

⁶⁹² Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 157.

⁶⁹³ ‘Ones That Got Away’, *Flypast*, 13 Sept. 2013, p. 102.

⁶⁹⁴ Ashley, *Flying Film Stars*, p. 223.

A good example of what happened next is offered by the story of Spitfire MH434.⁶⁹⁵ This particular MK IX example first took to the air in August 1943 and was soon in action over northern France, whose skies it would continue to patrol right up until the end of the war. Having flown over eighty operational sorties and recorded four ‘kills’, it was stood down in March 1945. It was not scrapped however; instead in 1947 it was bought by the Royal Netherlands Air Force for ground strafing and light bombing missions. It was then sold on to the Belgian air force for use in their pilot training programme. It eventually returned to Britain in 1956, repatriated by airline pilot, Tim Davis, for his own personal use which included occasional and lucrative film work. It was in 1956 that the film biography of Douglas Bader, *Reach for the Sky*, had topped the list of British box-office attractions.⁶⁹⁶ It might have been thought that more British film productions that focused on the RAF were about to take off after this success but it was not to be. In 1962 MH434 did appear in *The Longest Day* and in 1964 in *Operation Crossbow* but these were meagre pickings for a Spitfire owner with less than deep pockets. As we already know, the aircraft consultant on *Operation Crossbow* was Group Captain Hamish Mahaddie. It should come as no surprise to discover that in November 1967, Spitfire MH434 joined the air force of Ben Fisz and Harry Saltzman. At the end of filming of *Battle of Britain* in September 1968, as Fisz and Saltzman sold off their air fleet to appease their creditors, MH434 began a new life in the ownership of Adrian Swire, scion of the great Hong Kong trading house John Swire & Sons Ltd.⁶⁹⁷

Swire’s purchase was an early indication of what would turn out to be a lifelong fascination. He would, in due course, become a trustee of the RAF Museum, chairman of the RAF Benevolent Fund and President of the Spitfire Society. He was knighted in 1982. He would even christen his first born son Merlin, the name of the Spitfire’s engine throughout the Battle of Britain. In the spirit of a nascent warbird movement, Swire had no intention of putting his new purchase on display in a museum. Instead, he approached one of the finest display pilots of the time, Ray Hanna. It was good timing because Squadron Leader Hanna was on the verge of leaving the RAF after what had been a highly successful career as a display pilot. Hanna was a member of the team that had established the Red Arrows and was its leader for an unprecedented four years. He accepted Swire’s offer and began

⁶⁹⁵ Old Machine Flying Company. <www.mh434.com/history/index.com> [accessed 15 March 2016].

⁶⁹⁶ Paris, *Warrior Nation*, p. 225.

⁶⁹⁷ See ‘Business Diary Profile: Adrian Swire and British Shipping’, *Times*, 27 May 1980, p. 20.

something of a new career. ‘To this day the name of Hanna seems virtually synonymous with excellence in flying historic aircraft at air shows.’⁶⁹⁸ Hanna, like many of the pilots displaying vintage aircraft in the 1970s, did it in their spare time; his day job was as a commercial airline pilot. In 1981, however, he founded the Old Flying Machine Company at last turning his hobby into his profession. It was a decision confirmed two years later when he actually bought Spitfire MH434. The timing was propitious.

Hanna’s display expertise in Spitfire MH434 was highly regarded by all who saw it. ‘Spectators would watch in total silence, with tears in many an eye, as Ray in his Spitfire performed the most graceful aerial ballet against the setting sun.’⁶⁹⁹ Hanna’s skills, though, were not shared by all who flew historic aircraft at this time. Display flying of vintage aircraft in the 1970s had something of a poor reputation; these were ‘barnstorming’ days. ‘There was always a little devil that climbed on to the shoulder at an air display, tempting a pilot on an ego trip.’⁷⁰⁰ This had its inevitable consequences. ‘Insufficient experience, seduction by the limelight, poor timing, lack of properly shaped and practised routine, unawareness of local hazards, negligent attention to local traffic, aerobatics too low, mishandling of aeroplanes with a maximum speed only about twice stalling speed resulted in stall/spin from low altitudes – all had taken their toll.’⁷⁰¹ In 1978 the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued what amounted to an ultimatum. Either the warbird community put its house in order or the CAA would do it for them.

The threat was noted and on the 1 April 1978, the Historic Aircraft Association (HAA) was launched, a club welcoming only the most distinguished members of what was now a burgeoning warbird movement. An invitation was of course sent to Ray Hanna. The HAA’s remit was to promote professional standards right across the board, from the servicing of old aero engines to the catering necessary to put on a successful air show. It had one much more specific task to perform however. With a weather eye on the CAA, it decided to set up a register of display pilots. In an act of self-policing, it registered only those who in their

⁶⁹⁸ ‘Wings of Duxford’, *Airshow 2015*, 2015, p. 4.

⁶⁹⁹ Ray Hanna AFC. <www.pprune.org/aviation-history-nostalgia/200715-sqd-ldr-ray-hanna-afc-12.com> [accessed 5 March 2016].

⁷⁰⁰ Historic Aircraft Association. <www.haa-uk.aero/history.com> [accessed 12 March 2016].

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

opinion could display both satisfactorily and safely. It was time to weed out those with that ‘little devil’ on their shoulders.⁷⁰²

It was in the 1980s that many of the names now synonymous with the warbird movement first made their appearance. In 1981 Ray Hanna started the Old Flying Machine Company. In 1985 Guy Black and Angus Spencer-Naim set up Historic Aircraft Limited as a vehicle to restore and operate Spitfire Mk. IX TE566. At about the same time, Historic Flying Limited was established by Dutch industrialist Karel Bos. Its first task was to restore five Spitfires from the RAF’s own stock of gate guardians. Another future significant player emerged on the scene about this time too. Ex-RAF pilot Stephen Grey first registered his company the Fighter Collection to bid for or at least lease ‘three Spitfires so we could cream the airshow circuit.’⁷⁰³ He didn’t succeed immediately, but Grey’s ambition would see his new company grow into one of the country’s largest owner operators of warbirds.

Moving forward into the 1990s and we meet once again Peter Teichman. His Hangar 11 Collection began with a Beechcraft Staggerwing and then a North American P51D Mustang but it did not stop there. ‘What else did every British pilot dream of? Well it just had to be a Spitfire.’⁷⁰⁴ Teichman’s dream encapsulates two major themes that have driven the growth of the British warbird community. The first is that it has relied overwhelmingly upon the effort and enthusiasm of individual entrepreneurs, men like Teichman, Grey and Ray Hanna. The second has been the desire to own and fly one particular aircraft, a Spitfire. Peter Teichman got his Spitfire eventually. ‘Well there I was flying wonderful aerobatics north of Aylesbury, loops and half Cubans and barrel rolls whilst singing out loud “I remember you” by Frank Ifield, wonderful moments.’⁷⁰⁵ Even today, the warbird fleet is dominated by Spitfires. The warbird community, by the early 1990s, had reached a level of self-sustainability. But to turn the movement from an enthusiast’s hobby into a nationwide phenomenon required it to reach out beyond the likes of those weekend sightseers who in

⁷⁰² Historic Aircraft Association. <www.haa-uk.aero/history.com> [accessed 12 March 2016].

⁷⁰³ ‘Gladiator Fulfilling a Dream’, *Aeroplane*, June 2015, p. 51.

⁷⁰⁴ Hanger 11 Collection. <www.hangar11.co.uk/aboutus.com> [accessed 5 March 2016].

⁷⁰⁵ Hanger 11 Collection. <www.hangar11.co.uk/aboutus.com> [accessed 5 March 2016].

1969 had travelled out to Duxford and ‘trampled nearby cornfields to get a look at the planes.’⁷⁰⁶

The metamorphosis of an enthusiast’s hobby into a nationwide phenomenon began in the late 1980s. It certainly did for Ben Dunnell, future editor of *Aeroplane*. Asked where his love of historic aeroplanes stemmed from, he replied, ‘for me, more than anything, it was Duxford and its warbird pilots. The late 1980s and early 1990s represent the formative period of my enthusiasm, a time of great displays at Duxford and elsewhere. The number of airworthy warbirds on the British circuit had steadily increased, and oh, the flying.’⁷⁰⁷ Dunnell was presumably witness to the birth of the more considered, professional approach to display flying which was replacing the barnstorming shows characteristic of the 1970s. The epitome of the great vintage air display was and remains the *Flying Legends* airshow held annually at Duxford. It first flew in 1993. ‘Flying Legends has outlasted the revered Fighter meet and Great Warbirds airshows of the ‘80s and ‘90s, subtly evolving over the years but never losing its unique appeal.’⁷⁰⁸ That unique appeal is rooted in the telling of stories. ‘Flying Legends has always been different to other UK airshows-rather than a succession of solos, the programme is built around a series of themed multi-aircraft set pieces.’⁷⁰⁹ What lies behind that theme explains the exponential growth in audience attendance for airshows nationwide in the 1990s, and brings us back to the Spitfire in performance.

It was all a question of identity, what it was to be English/British, fortunately a core text for the Spitfire as a palimpsest.⁷¹⁰ It was the link between collective ‘memory’, real or imagined, and identity, collective or personal, which was at the root of what Jay Winter described as an ‘efflorescence of interest in the subject of memory inside the academy and beyond it.’⁷¹¹ It was a ‘memory boom’ which began in the 1990s and is still reverberating

⁷⁰⁶ BFI, PBM 22548, *Battle of Britain*: Pressbook, p. 25.

⁷⁰⁷ ‘From the Editor’, *Aeroplane*, August 2017, p. 4.

⁷⁰⁸ ‘Flying Legends 25’. <www.vintageaviationecho.com> [accessed 12 Sept. 2017].

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ We need to remember that in 1942 Leslie Howard had made a film in *The First of the Few* about what it was to be English. Those watching it were more concerned with what it was to be British.

⁷¹¹ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 1.

today.⁷¹² The seeds of this ‘memory boom’ were planted in the 1960s. It was twenty years since the end of the war, time enough for the narratives of resistance to the Nazis, which had been so necessary for national reconstruction, to be called to account. What began as an examination of narratives of resistance became a ‘memory boom’ when the question of identity slipped the leash of patriotism and nationalism. A search for identity, personal and collective, now embraced ethnicity, multiculturalism, gender, and globalisation. The search for identity had strayed beyond national borders remade after the Second World War.

In Britain, however, the ‘memory boom’ remained firmly where it had begun, rooted in the legacy of war. ‘Few historical events have resonated as fully in British modern culture as the Second World War.’⁷¹³ The force of the explosion of identity politics in Britain in the mid 1990’s, and its symbiotic relationship with the ‘memory’ of the Second World War, meant that temporarily the Spitfire had no need to take to the air at all. Its practical assistance in the re-alignment of the myth of the Battle of Britain to suit this new priority was measured not in aviation fuel but beer. It was all a consequence of a football match and an alert advertising agency keen for new business. The football match in question took place on 26 June 1996. It was between England and Germany in the semi-final of the 1996 UEFA European Football Championship. England lost the game on penalties in front of a television audience of 26.2 million people, at the time the highest ever for a British sports broadcast.⁷¹⁴ What all those millions saw apart from a gripping football match, was a sea of St George’s Crosses and red-and-white painted faces. It was a mark of identity contained within a strictly English identity.⁷¹⁵ Richard Weight in his book *Patriots* (2002) has argued that the Second World War is a patriotic legend for the English, not the British. Nevertheless, he saw no patriotic mark of identity only xenophobia that Wednesday evening.⁷¹⁶ ‘The semi-final clash against Germany seemed to prove that the new Englishness was little more than a new vehicle for old hatreds’.⁷¹⁷ The Sociologist Peter

⁷¹² Jay Winter, ‘The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies’, *Raritan*, 21 (2001), pp. 52-66.

⁷¹³ Lucy Noakes & Juliette Pattinson, ‘Introduction: Keep Calm and Carry on’, in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 2.

⁷¹⁴ Patrick Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain* (London: Pan, 2002), p. 710.

⁷¹⁵ For a discussion of sport and in particular football and nationalism see Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 142-143.

⁷¹⁶ Weight, *Patriots*, p. 56.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., p. 709.

Beck who later wrote about the match from a German perspective agreed with Weight. 'Clearly, a British-German problem exists and needs to be addressed on the British side.'⁷¹⁸

A bout of xenophobia seemed to be confirmed by the outpourings of the tabloid press in the days leading up to the game. 'LET'S BLITZ FRITZ!'⁷¹⁹ said the *Sun*, but it was the *Daily Mirror* that enjoyed itself the most. Alongside pictures of Paul Gascoigne and Stuart Pearce in tin helmets, it anticipated an English victory. 'ACHTUNG! SURRENDER! FOR YOU FRITZ, ZE 1996 EURO CHAMPIONSHIP IS OVER!'⁷²⁰ Piers Morgan editor of the *Daily Mirror* thought what his paper had printed was simple harmless fun, not xenophobia.⁷²¹ Most commentators at the time agreed with the views of Weight and Beck not the hapless Piers Morgan. As opprobrium rained down upon Morgan's head, Bryan Appleyard at the *Independent* was one of the few who recognised the difference between simple harmless fun, xenophobia and a new cultural phenomenon. 'It may be the sound of a real change in national sentiment, a change inspired in the English by a sudden impatience and weariness with the recent past...Perhaps the English are deciding to be English.'⁷²²

There was one advertising agency that, like Bryan Appleyard, had correctly identified the significance of that sea of St George's Crosses and red-and-white painted faces. In May 1990, the regional brewer Shepherd Neame launched its new Spitfire Premium Kentish Ale at RAF Northolt. It was a modest affair, a photo opportunity was organised as television presenter and former RAF fighter pilot Raymond Baxter took to the air in a Spitfire, but then ambitions for the new premium ale were modest too, sales of 500 barrels were hoped for by the end of the year. Shepherd Neame's decision to launch a new beer was a calculated move, however. The Monopolies and Mergers Commission had recently proposed, and the government had accepted, a shake-up of the brewing industry which amongst other things required the introduction of traditional cask-conditioned beers as guest beers in national brewers' houses, beers like the new Spitfire Premium Ale.⁷²³

⁷¹⁸ Peter Beck, 'The Relevance of the Irrelevant: Football as a Missing Dimension in the Study of British Relations with Germany', *International Affairs*, 79 (2003), p. 410.

⁷¹⁹ 'LET'S BLITZ FRITZ', *Sun*, 24 June 1996, p. 1.

⁷²⁰ 'ACHTUNG! SURRENDER!', *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1996, p. 1.

⁷²¹ Piers Morgan, *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade* (London: Ebury, 2005), p. 127.

⁷²² 'Yes, I am an Englishman', *Independent*, 27 June 1996, p. 17.

⁷²³ See Theo Barker, *Shepherd Neame: A Story That's Been Brewing for 300 Years* (Cambridge: Granta, 1998), p. 98.

In 1993, a new advertising agency, RPM3, was established in central London. In 1997, it approached Shepherd Neame with an idea.⁷²⁴ What that initial idea was, the foundation of a long and profitable association, was later described by RPM3's creative director Russell Wailes. 'Really quick-almost immediately-the Bottle of Britain came out as the end line. It just grew from there. "No Fokker Comes Close" was the ad that started it all in an initial burst of creativity that included 'Goering, Goering, Gone' and 'Downed All Over Kent, Just Like the Luftwaffe.'⁷²⁵ The advertisements that followed would go on to win the *Campaign* magazine readers award, a Kent Business Award, and the New York Festivals Award for Advertising. They also sold beer. In 1999, Shepherd Neame was awarded a lucrative contract to supply Spitfire ale to JD Wetherspoons, the managed pub group.⁷²⁶



Figure 31. Advertisement for Spitfire Ale, 1997

⁷²⁴ Connelly, *We Can Take It*, p. 292; Stefan Goebel, 'The Bottle of Britain: Krieg, Konsum und Kulturelles Gedächtnis', in Gerhard Schneider (ed.), *Meine Quelle: Ein Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau, 2008), pp. 229-241; Clemens Wischermann and Elliot Shore, *Advertising and the European City: Historical Perspectives (Historical Urban Studies Series)* (London: Routledge, 2000); Kevin Lane Keller, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998).

⁷²⁵ Edward Harvey, *Bottle of Britain Campaign* (Maidstone: Edward Harvey, n.d.), pp. 1-3.

⁷²⁶ 'Spitfire Sales Double at Shepherd Neame', *Financial Times*, 1 Oct. 1999, p. 24.

The inspiration behind Russell Wailes' initial idea, 'the bottle of Britain', is not hard to spot even if both advertising agency and brewer remain a little coy on the point.⁷²⁷ It was the lexis of the comic strip in the employ of a 'new Englishness', as used principally by Piers Morgan at the *Daily Mirror*, which we can reasonably assume inspired RPM3. The evidence is circumstantial but suggestive. RPM3 approached Shepherd Neame only months after the Euro 96 semi-final between England and Germany and both Piers Morgan and Russell Wailes were targeting exactly the same audience, 18-35 year old males. Tabloid headlines like 'LET'S BLITZ FRITZ!', and 'ACHTUNG! SURRENDER! FOR YOU FRITZ, ZE 1996 EURO CHAMPIONSHIP IS OVER!' became 'No Fokker Comes Close' and 'Goering, Goering, Gone'.

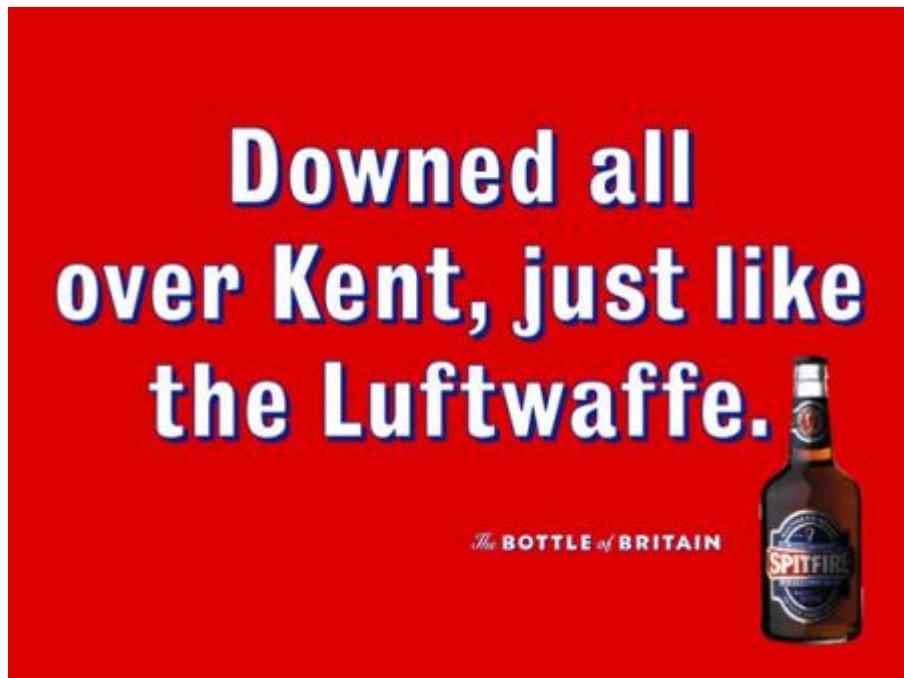


Figure 32. Advertisement for Spitfire Ale, 1997

Inspiration there was, but there was even a direct link between the two, although it may not have been apparent to those concerned at the time. Piers Morgan's bombastic campaign was to have been fronted by a Spitfire flypast. On the day before the Euro 96 semi-final between England and Germany, Morgan had hired a Spitfire to dive-bomb the German

⁷²⁷ In an email exchange with Shepherd Neame's Spitfire beer brand manager Will Upfield in July 2016, he did not directly answer this question.

training camp. When the day dawned, however, perhaps aware of the rumblings of discontent emerging in the more considered pages of the national press, and also after receiving a phone call from Kelvin MacKenzie, editor of the *Sun*, he thought better of it. ‘This urgent encouragement from the world’s most dangerous journalist worried me more than anything else.’⁷²⁸ Whatever the exact reason, Morgan at least had the savvy to recognise a publicity stunt going wrong.

This was knowledge denied to the British National Party (BNP) in 2009 when they seized upon the Spitfire as a symbol of national identity. They were ridiculed for fronting an anti-immigration campaign in the European Elections with a picture of a Spitfire which had in fact been flown by Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain.⁷²⁹ Attempts to offer the Spitfire as a symbolic answer to the question of British identity have not stopped. On 9 May 2016 Prime Minister David Cameron stood up at the British Museum to give a speech on the forthcoming referendum on whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union. He spoke about the Spitfire. ‘When I fly to European summits in Brussels from RAF Northolt, I pass a Spitfire just outside the airfield, a vital base for brave RAF and Polish pilots during the Battle of Britain. I think of the Few who saved this country in its hour of mortal danger, and who made it possible for us to go on and help liberate Europe. Like any Brit, my heart swells with pride at the sight of that aircraft, or wherever I hear the tell-tale roar of those Merlin engines over our skies in the summer. Defiant, brave, indefatigable.’⁷³⁰ The details of Cameron’s argument that day are unimportant here, what matters is the link, the fact that he was addressing a British audience and his speech was about identity, sovereignty and the nation state. It should be noted he was not talking strictly about the English. He did lose the argument.

These three episodes in the Spitfire’s post-war career are instructive because of the fact that none involve the Spitfire in action, in the air, in performance. In 1997, the Spitfire found itself at the epicentre of a cultural storm. Because of the resonance in British modern culture of the Second World War and in the eye of that storm, there was no need for the extra emotional charge of a performance for the Spitfire to effect the necessary re-

⁷²⁸ Piers Morgan, *The Insider*, p. 128.

⁷²⁹ ‘BNP uses Polish Spitfire in anti-immigration poster’, <www.telegraph.co.uk> [accessed 12 Sept. 2017].

⁷³⁰ ‘PM Speech on the UK’s Strength and Security in the EU: 9 May 2016’.

<www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street> [accessed 12 May 2016]

configuration of the myth of the Battle of Britain to include this new priority. Twelve years later, however, and with the storm subsided, the BNP found out to their cost that that charge was now necessary. It was necessary once again in 2016 when David Cameron called upon the Spitfire. Under normal circumstances, it is only in performance, with that extra emotional charge, that the Spitfire has had influence upon the myth of the Battle of Britain, to make it mean what contemporary audiences require of it.

What has continued to be required of it has been to answer this question of identity. In performance the Spitfire has had the answer. We have already noted the establishment of the annual airshow *Flying Legends* in 1993. Such has been its success that it has been joined over the years by a host of others. It is fair to say that the star of almost every one of these airshows has been a Spitfire; such has been its ubiquity. Let us concentrate on one particular year, 2015, the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. It was a year of particularly spectacular crowds. *Flying Legends* itself, blessed with fine July weather, attracted a crowd of 20,000.⁷³¹ Its opening sequence was a mass take-off of ten Spitfires which formed up into four-ship and three-ship groups for flypasts and tail chasing. The show's climax was a Battle of Britain sequence featuring swooping weaving Spitfires. It was a stunning show, according to the later reviews, but it was to be outshone that summer.

Biggin Hill chose 18 August for its celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. 'A pivotal moment in European history was commemorated in unique fashion at Biggin Hill...as groups of Spitfires and Hurricanes re-created the sights seen at this most famous of all RAF fighter stations during the 'hardest day' of the Battle of Britain.'⁷³² The recreation began at exactly 12:45 hours, the same time as Biggin Hill's fighters were scrambled seventy five years before. 'It was about...telling the story of 18 August, with Spitfires and Hurricanes flying the courses they did while intercepting the Luftwaffe, and passing over many of the Fighter Command airfields that were operational in the south-east during the summer of 1940.'⁷³³ On their return they maintained a standing patrol over Biggin Hill and then broke off in defence of the airfield against simulated attacks. Spitfire pilot Stephen Stead was impressed. 'I was struck by the simplicity of the event, yet how much emotion it stirred in

⁷³¹ 'Warbird heaven', *Flypast*, Sept. 2015, p. 90.

⁷³² 'Saluting the Hardest Day', *Aeroplane*, Nov. 2015, p. 22.

⁷³³ Ibid., p. 23.

the pilots, ground crews, organisers and the public. I loved the crowd at the end of runway 03 Union waving their flags, and the feeling of pride I had at being a participant in such a momentous occasion.⁷³⁴ What he was describing of course was not simply a recreation but a performance, with the question of identity at its heart.

A momentous occasion was certainly an appropriate description of Goodwood's *Battle of Britain Day* on 15 September. A 32,000 capacity crowd enjoyed the largest gathering of airworthy Spitfires and Hurricanes seen since the war. 'The idea was to give as many people as possible a chance to see the aircraft in their individual formations, looking much as they did back in the summer of 1940.'⁷³⁵ At Duxford four days later the plan was to re-create the Duxford 'Big Wing' for its *Battle of Britain Anniversary Air Show*. Jeanne Frazer, Flying Display Director on the day, looked on as the 'Big Wing' assembled. 'All other activity on the airfield ceased as the 17 Spitfires started engines, taxied, lined up and took off in stream to the west. This in itself was a spectacle, but as the formation later re-approached from the east and flew along the crowdline, a 'Mexican wave' of appreciative applause followed it.'⁷³⁶ Watching on was an un-credited reporter from *Aeroplane*. He was overwhelmed by what he saw. 'Duxford's 'Big Wing' was an emotive, soul-stirring triumph. The sight of this mass formation bearing down on Duxford was unforgettable...for me, this was one of the most outstanding and memorable airshow moments ever.'⁷³⁷

The sight and sound of so many Spitfires, and it was overwhelmingly Spitfires in attendance across all four airshows, was a spectacle but it was more than that. That un-credited *Aeroplane* reporter wrote of 'an emotive, soul-stirring triumph'.⁷³⁸ Here is one clue that that reporter was watching a performance, where emotional content is always to the fore. Using simple narratives, storytelling, such as starting at 12:45 sharp at Biggin Hill, copycat formation flying at Goodwood, the 'Big Wing' at Duxford, all were trying to create that privileged space, a 'reality that exists on a different plane from "everyday" existence'.⁷³⁹ Successful performances are also signified by 'a consciousness of doubleness'.⁷⁴⁰ The crowd

⁷³⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷³⁵ 'Day of Days', *Aeroplane*, Dec. 2015, p. 22.

⁷³⁶ 'Duxford's Big Show', *Aeroplane*, Dec. 2015, p. 29.

⁷³⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, p. 47.

⁷⁴⁰ Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader*, p. 73.

at the end of Biggin Hill's runway 03 were waving their Union flags. Those flags had as much to do with present concerns, the politics of identity, as they had to do with the fact of a battle seventy five years before.

Geoff Eley argues that “remembering” World War II requires no immediate experience of those years.⁷⁴¹ Memory is about the past in the present. Myth too is about the past in the present if it is to be continued to be believed. For the many thousands of boys who ‘flew’ their Airfix Spitfires in the 1960s and 1970s, the Battle of Britain took its place in a pleasure culture of war. In terms of the Airfix Spitfire, it was all the more exciting for its sense of authenticity. ‘It’s a real aeroplane and you’re flying it and there really are bandits at three o’clock trying to shoot you down.’⁷⁴² If they did manage to shoot you down, of course, there was no harm done. Forty-five years later, and for many members of the warbird flying community, the agenda was much the same. ‘Our ethos is to honour the past and celebrate these wonders of engineering; flying in a manner that closely and safely emulates the role for which they were designed and built.’⁷⁴³ There is more than a hint of a pleasure culture in such an ethos.

The warbird audience, however, which today is counted in millions, has had a very different agenda. At all the summer shows in 2015 celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain they paid close attention to the Spitfire. ‘Predictably, although other Battle of Britain types also flew on most of these occasions, it was the Spitfires which once again attracted the glory.’⁷⁴⁴ The reason why is explained by the crowd at the end of Biggin Hill’s runway 03 waving their Union flags. They were expressing a collective identity. Thanks to the Spitfire in performance, the myth of the Battle of Britain now accommodated that idea, just as, again thanks to the Spitfire in performance, forty five years before the myth also comfortably accommodated the concerns of twelve year old boys intent on the thrill of ‘bandits at three o’clock trying to shoot you down’.⁷⁴⁵

⁷⁴¹ Geoff Eley, ‘Finding the People’s War: Film, Collective Memory, and World War 2’, *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), p. 818.

⁷⁴² May, *Airfix Handbook*, p. 7.

⁷⁴³ ‘Wings of Duxford’, *Airshow 2015*, 2015, p. 6.

⁷⁴⁴ ‘Duxford’s Big Show’, *Aeroplane*, Dec. 2015, p. 26.

⁷⁴⁵ May, *Airfix Handbook*, p. 7.

Conclusion

Angus Calder was inspired to work on his *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991) when he began to reconsider his original thesis of Britain at war, as presented in his seminal account of the Home Front, *The People's War* (1969), in terms of myth. As Paul Addison noted in his obituary of Calder, he became his own revisionist.⁷⁴⁶ This was revisionism with a gentle touch, however. Calder turned his original thesis inside out. His original interpretation of a war fought in a ferment of participatory democracy, what he believed to be true, now became what was believed to be true by the wartime generation itself, a myth. His re-interpretation did not meet with universal critical acclaim; nevertheless, it had far-reaching consequences for the historiography of wartime Britain in 1940.⁷⁴⁷ Calder was interested in who duped who, 'a powerful critique in which the entire political culture of the period...is taken to task'.⁷⁴⁸ But those historians who have followed in his footsteps, thematically as well as methodologically, have been more interested in the logical consequences of his new approach.⁷⁴⁹

Those consequences are a function of how modern scholarship approaches myth. A myth is 'not a lie or a false statement to be contrasted with truth or reality or fact or history...a myth is above all a story that is believed, believed to be true'.⁷⁵⁰ Myths are sustained; they continue to be culturally relevant by reflecting contemporary cultural priorities.⁷⁵¹ These do change. In fact, the moment a myth becomes inert is the moment it turns into a narrative relic. What this has meant for historians following in the footsteps of Calder and coming

⁷⁴⁶ Paul Addison, 'Angus Calder (1942-2008)', *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), p. 303.

⁷⁴⁷ As an example see Bill Schwarz, review of Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Cape, 1991), in *History Workshop*, 33 (1992), pp. 281-283.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁷⁴⁹ See Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000); Geoff Eley, 'Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp. 818-838; Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (London: Pearson, 2004); Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷⁵⁰ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁷⁵¹ Bruce Lincoln describes myths as ideological narratives. See Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 216.

anew to the mythic narrative of 1940 is a decision has to be made about beginnings and endings, about construction and re-construction of the mythic narrative.

Sometimes that decision appears a little arbitrary. Gary Campion, the most recent historian of the myth of the Battle of Britain, halts his enquiry on the death of Winston Churchill in 1965.⁷⁵² He gives two reasons for this. The first is that in his opinion official support for the valorisation of the Battle comes to an end on the establishment of the Ministry of Defence in 1964. His second reason is that the death of Churchill the following year marks the end of an age. Both points are debatable. Campion does not tell us anything else about this age, but of more moment here is his view that official support for the valorisation of the Battle came to an end in 1964. This was a time when plans for a Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon were accelerating, and the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight was soon to be established. The valorisation of the Battle of Britain, the promotion of the idea that victory in the Battle was fundamental to the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany, both officially and unofficially, continues to this day.

Belief in all the myths of 1940 Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz is in fact as strong today as it has ever been in Britain. There is a good reason for this. Since the ‘memory boom’ of the 1990s, the myth-history of 1940 has become politically charged. It has become embroiled in the politics of identity. Who speaks on behalf of the wartime myths matters when what is ‘remembered’ has become a claim upon citizenship, ‘a political demand for recognition’.⁷⁵³ This is the place of the myths in contemporary British culture. It may change and thanks to the diachronic nature of myth, what is believed of the wartime myths will change accordingly too. Such change does require an engine, however. What this thesis has argued, and where it finds its place in the historiography of the myth of the Battle of Britain, is that the Spitfire has been one such engine of change, and that the evolution of that myth can be identified in performance.

In chapter one, we discovered how the Spitfire acquired the necessary flexibility to carry out this task. Almost from the day of its public debut it has been able to behave as a palimpsest,

⁷⁵² Garry Campion, *The Good Fight*; Garry Campion, *The Battle of Britain, 1945-1965: The Air Ministry and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

⁷⁵³ Geoff Eley, ‘The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), p. 558.

'a thing...having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multi-layered record.'⁷⁵⁴ The creation of this multi-layered record began almost a year before the Battle of Britain. We can even put a date on it, 20 May 1939, Empire Air Day. This was the occasion of the Spitfire's first major public engagement, not its public debut, but the first time a major audience, invited by the RAF and amounting to over a million people countrywide, first saw it in action. It was a coming of age party for the RAF, the service had been established on 1 April 1918, but the occasion also had a more practical purpose, to boost recruitment after five years of accelerated RAF expansion. Its chief recruiter on the day was its brand new fighter, the Spitfire. The Hurricane had had its moment in the spotlight over a year before. Press reports suggest that the RAF succeeded in showing off the Spitfire to its best advantage. It was greeted with an unprecedented reception which was all to do with timing. In May 1939 war clouds were gathering. What the public was cheering at was a potential war-winning weapon, a champion. This was the first layer of what would become a multi-layered record.

The second layer was gained in the summer of 1940, during the Battle of Britain itself. It was a result of an idea first mooted in a Jamaican newspaper the *Gleaner*. That idea was for a fund to buy a fighter plane for the RAF as a replacement for those being shot down by the Luftwaffe over the beaches of Dunkirk and the Channel. It was an idea that quickly gained purchase in Jamaica and beyond. In Britain, the Spitfire Funds, as they soon came to be known, became a nationwide phenomenon. They offered a unique opportunity. They gave the civilian population, in a time of national crisis, the opportunity to fight back. This sense of empowerment now became the second layer.

The third and final layer of the Spitfire's multi-layered record was gained almost two years after the Battle of Britain was fought. It was the occasion of the nationwide release of the film *The First of the Few* in the autumn of 1942. The film starred Leslie Howard and David Niven and told the story of R. J. Mitchell's development of the Spitfire. It was a big box office hit and what audiences saw and enjoyed, was not a factual account of the development of the Spitfire. It was instead a fable, a story of good triumphing over evil. Leslie Howard, the film's creative force was more than a patriot, however. He was an

⁷⁵⁴ 'Palimpsestic', in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn. 2005, online edn. 2017).

ardent nationalist. What he had achieved in his tribute to Mitchell and the Spitfire was to stamp both with a makers-mark, that of the English. Leslie Howard's nationalism was rooted in his sense of English ethnicity. The cinema-going British public may not have agreed with him on the question of the Spitfire's ethnicity, but going forward the Spitfire was now a vehicle for a conversation about identity.

By the end of 1942 the Spitfire as a symbol was a multi-layered text, a palimpsest. To be put to good use post-war demanded one more special feature of the Spitfire. It could not be bound to one dominant cultural construction, specifically, the mores and strictures of the wartime generation. It had to be free from any such entanglements. In chapter two we discovered the reasons behind that useful lack of provenance. The Spitfire was developed in the early to mid 1930s away from the public gaze. The critical phase, between May and November 1934, was even out of sight of those who were in charge of its development both at the Air Ministry and at Vickers Aviation. In terms of the Spitfire's provenance, this mattered because R. J. Mitchell died in 1937 aged only 42, leaving no written account of the Spitfire's development behind. In fact thanks to an industry wide design office culture in the 1930s of poor record keeping, there is very little surviving evidence that can help us trace the development of the Spitfire from drawing board to prototype.⁷⁵⁵

What this all meant was that when the matter of the Spitfire's provenance came before the court of public opinion in the summer of 1957, nothing was settled. It was the occasion of the publication of Basil Collier's biography of Lord Dowding and its serialisation in the *Sunday Times*. One interested reader was the ex-chairman of Vickers Aviation, Sir Robert McLean. McLean's own career at Vickers Aviation had ended ignominiously in October 1938, a year after Mitchell died, when he was forced to resign following pressure on the Vickers Board from the Air Ministry. What McLean now read in his copy of the *Sunday Times* in August 1957 opened old wounds. He entered into correspondence with *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, and the more incendiary extracts were duly published.

The claim and counter claim that the public now read, through the month of August, drew a veil over the origins of the Spitfire. McLean disputed any idea that the Air Ministry or

⁷⁵⁵ See Kenneth Agnew, 'The Spitfire: Legend or History? An Argument for a New Research Culture in Design', *Journal of Design History*, 6 (1993), pp. 121-130.

Dowding personally, should receive credit for developing the Spitfire. When *The Times* asked the Air Ministry to adjudicate on the matter, they declined. Why did the Air Ministry refuse to comment? The answer is in two parts. First, any official endorsement of either side would have caused offense to parties the Air Ministry might not have wished to offend. If they had endorsed Dowding's claims, as promoted by Collier his biographer, then in disavowing McLean they would have been seen to be casting aspersions on the reputation of Mitchell, now a national hero thanks to Leslie Howard's biopic in 1942. If they had chosen to endorse McLean then this would have been seen as another slight upon Dowding's reputation by an institution with a poor track record on the matter. The second reason why the Air Ministry chose silence in 1957 is still visible in the Air Ministry archives. They didn't have a cogent answer to give. In particular, those critical four months in the summer and early autumn of 1934 are all but blank in the Ministry archives. The verdict from all this epistolary obfuscation was provenance not proven. The legacy of the Spitfire was confirmed as free from entanglements, it belonged to no-one and so it belonged to everyone.

The value of this legacy lay in what it could do. It could sustain the myth of the Battle of Britain so as to be credible to contemporary audiences. These audiences turned out to have very different requirements of the myth than the wartime generation. How this value was to be realised brings us to chapter three. It was done in action, in the air, specifically in performance. This is performance not as theatre but as a cultural production, a means of making meaning 'from a place other than the written word'.⁷⁵⁶ A Spitfire flypast for instance, is for those watching on a moment of comparison, the past in the present. In that moment, one is subjectively re-aligned to better match the other. What was required to make this performance a success was authentic airworthy Spitfires. The past appears all the more clearly if it is considered authentic. Keeping original Spitfires airworthy, right up until the 1980s, was almost the sole responsibility of the RAF and the RAF's enthusiasm for such a task seemed most unlikely when it began to scrap its Spitfire fleet after the war. In chapter three we discovered what changed its mind, and saved a bare handful of airworthy Spitfires

⁷⁵⁶ Diana Taylor, cited in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 13.

along with the knowledge and resources to keep them flying. It was a belated recognition of the power of advocacy the past has in the present, in a suitably appropriate narrative form.

In chapter three we discovered the Spitfire in performance; in chapter four we watched as those performances helped the war-made myth of the Battle of Britain to evolve post-war. Beginning in the mid 1950s, there was a new generation drawn to the myth, boys born after 1940. The palimpsestic nature of the Spitfire's legacy, that multi-layered text, now came to the fore. This new young audience wanted to experience the Battle as entertainment. In Graham Dawson's striking phrase, they wanted to indulge in a 'pleasure-culture of war'.⁷⁵⁷ The Spitfire was able to satisfy this desire in the guise of the champion that flew on Empire Air Day in May 1939, the fighter that was *prima inter pares* during the Battle itself. There is a certain irony here considering the endeavours of the RAF to keep Spitfires flying. The Spitfire in the hands of small boys was a plastic one, an Airfix kit. Its ability to perform, however, was not impaired. This was performance dependent not on an authentic Spitfire flying, but on authenticity itself, the sense of a real Spitfire flying. From the boy's point of view, his Airfix kit construction was a 'real' Spitfire. It was the message on the box it came in, thanks to the skills of graphic artists like Roy Cross.

The work of the RAF as trustees of the material legacy of the Spitfire had its reward at the beginning of the 1990s with the birth of the warbird movement. Civilian interest in flying restored original Spitfires had been smouldering since the 1960s, sparked not least by the flying sequences in the 1969 film *Battle of Britain*, but it only truly burst into flame twenty years later. It was then that the warbird movement, by now a small community of owner operators of historic aircraft, but mainly Spitfires, found a paying audience. That audience was now prepared to come because the 1990s saw the beginning of the 'memory boom'. The myth was now sustained by the politics of identity. The Spitfire with that mark of Englishness already stamped upon it by Leslie Howard in 1942 was perfectly placed to answer the questions about citizenship addressed to the myth.

⁷⁵⁷ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 3. See also Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 8.

The Spitfire, with its ability to behave as palimpsest, flies in performance to this day in response to the diachronic nature of the myth of the Battle of Britain. The nature of myth will not change. This can only mean the Spitfire will not be grounded any time soon.

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