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The Secret Life of Fighter Command

Written by Sinclair McKay

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The Secret Life of Fighter Command

The men and women who beat the Luftwaffe

By Sinclair McKay

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Chapter One

The Celestial Ballet

'Be calm,' Hitler had told the Berlin crowds. 'He is coming. He is coming.'

Late on the afternoon of 7 September 1940, the warmth of summer lingered in the hazy air over England; and the graceful whorls and curls of white in the blue sky above the South Downs might either have been innocent clouds or the last traces of a distant aerial fight. On the chalk ridges and green slopes below, and in the bustling lanes of south coast towns from Portsmouth to Dover, civilians were making the most of the temporary lull and were tensed for the next attack. For the past few weeks, huge numbers of people had watched with guileless fascination as, high above, planes had swooped and swerved, describing wide circles as they chased one another. From that distance, even an exploding fuel tank hit by gunfire – a split second of glittering gold and orange, followed by the plane simply falling out of the sky – was hypnotic rather than frightening.

It was almost a different war. Across the grey waters of the Channel, on the continent and deep in the darkness of Europe, the conflict had been lumbering, ugly, brutally functional. Vast tanks that jerked and manoeuvred in unnatural lines, vast guns roaring beyond human reason; and everywhere the mortal wreckage of red, glistening

viscera. But here, high above in the blue, no one could look away from the Spitfires and the Messerschmitts. Every fleet movement, from climbs to dives, had an innate elegance, a geometrical beauty – even as the pilots were flying for their lives.

British pilots had been fighting continuously in these skies for days and weeks; physically and mentally, they had been taken to the edge. The fear that kept them focused during sorties left them exhausted in the aftermath, with the result that many of these men were working by pure instinct. That summer, their squadrons had faced an enemy that seemed not only relentless but also apparently limitless in number. No matter how many German planes they shot out of the sky, the next day brought fresh formations. Perhaps a few RAF pilots sensed just how heavily the odds were stacked against them. Yet, paradoxically, even if they had not been required to risk their lives on an hourly basis, these men would still have been desperate to fly. (By contrast, think of the soldiers who drove tanks; imagine if they yearned to drive a tank for the love of it.) The nature of this war in the air was technologically new, yet as old as Arthurian legend. The RAF pilots were not just warriors. Flying, for them, was a metaphysical pleasure.

But that Saturday, this 'celestial ballet', as one mesmerised onlooker had described it, took on a different character. There were specially trained plane-spotters at Dover, at Folkestone, at Lympne, and dotted around the north Kent coast. The job of these volunteers – many of whom, proud men, had served in the First World War – was to report, instantly, the type and the numbers of enemy bombers flying in overhead. On that Saturday, the Observer Corps heard the storm before they saw it; at first a pervasive note, a deep unearthly hum, like some distant male choir. In their small dugouts – often not much more than rudimentary wooden

huts – the bells of their telephones had started ringing a little while beforehand. 'He' was coming; Hitler, characterising the German air force and its massed bombers as the physical projection of his will, had announced his intentions in a speech to hundreds in Berlin.

A few days before this, the British had launched a bomber assault on Germany; on the night of 25 August 1940, the pilots had flown their planes to the very limit that fuel would allow. Their targets were Berlin's airport and other strategic sites. As with all bombing raids, there were imprecise hits, collateral damage.

Compared with what was to follow years later, the destruction was not great. But the response to that August raid was incandescent; the Führer's aim was changed. Forget the RAF airfields and the convoys and the neat tactical targets. Instead: pour hellfire down upon the civilians of London.

The intelligence gathered from Y Service operatives (the 'Y' short for 'wireless'), who were listening in to Luftwaffe messages had confirmed that 'he was coming.' The operatives of the coastal radar stations had looked into the cathode ray tubes and seen the assembling force represented as an electronic echo. The number of blips was unprecedented. That afternoon, stations in Dover and Rye picked up the same readings.

The low unearthly hum deepened, acquiring a new timbre or vibration. The Observer Corps volunteers would have been among the first to see them, at 4.15 p.m., through their binoculars. Rows of black dots that grew larger, resolved, drawing closer to the White Cliffs, perfectly unstoppable. These men were not there merely to report on the appalling spectacle. From their small posts on hills high above the sea, on the edges of fields, with instruments like astrolabes set out on tables before them, they started telephoning their observations to the local Observer Corps headquarters in

Maidstone, Kent. They reported the numbers of enemy bombers that were flying towards and over them, along with the height at which they were flying (calculated by means of that specially designed instrument). The Observer Corps – like the coastal radar operatives – were among the first to feel the horrified thrill of atavistic awe; rather than the usual enemy formations, these disciplined rows of aeroplanes, black in the sunlight, seemed to be coming line after line. First, about 100 were seen; then 200. Then yet more were reported, coming from different angles, different aerodromes, but heading for one target. An estimated 1,100 German aeroplanes flew in over the south coast that Saturday afternoon. On previous occasions, large formations had fragmented, broken off in varying directions, feinted, lured British pilots into redundant battles while others snaked towards their bombing targets. At tea-time that warm day, these hundreds of German planes were making their way high across the orchards of Kent towards the brown industrial air of the nation's capital. Waiting until the last possible moment, in order to conserve fuel, RAF pilots, based at aerodromes ringing the capital and dotted throughout the swards of Kent and Sussex, awaited their orders to intercept.

Before any orders went out, the aerodromes needed – very quickly – an idea of where pilots were to fly to, and how many would be needed. They needed to be able to comprehend the scale and purpose of this gargantuan raid. Such intelligence was secretly gathered beneath a property on the northwestern edge of London, in the heart of what poet John Betjeman called 'Metroland'. In the gardens of Bentley Priory – a grand eighteenth-century house that had once hosted poets and princes – was a large chamber buried some thirty feet beneath the earth. It was to this room that the calculations of the Observer Corps volunteers, together with the readings from the new radar stations, were

phoned through, to be instantly received and analysed by volunteers from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in what was called the Filter Room; their calculations – translated into vectors and co-ordinates – were then passed to the Operations Room.

There, on a large map, coloured counters were deployed to represent the forces that were flying in. From here, the intelligence radiated outwards again on telephone lines, to aerodromes up and down the land. The secret bunker and the grand house formed the headquarters of Fighter Command. Bentley Priory was, throughout that summer, the crucible in which the course of the war was shaped.

This cat's cradle network of intelligence – the bluff old Observer Corps men, the dedicated and intelligent women, and the eager young civilian scientists looking after the brand-new radar technology – had been painstakingly devised by a commander who was misunderstood and treated with cold contempt by his superiors. Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding was an austere figure who had throughout his life in the RAF seen the science of flying turn from a rare miracle of daring and aeronautic skill to a new, modern branch of warfare. His Fighter Command system was designed with tremendous skill and care, the armourer's science and guile supporting the knights of the air.

Despite the availability of some intelligence, none of the women or men who worked in this futuristic control room – with its dials, its headsets, its different coloured lights and colour-coded clocks marked out in red, blue and yellow – would have known earlier on that Saturday precisely when or where the enemy would decide to strike, and with what sort of force. That lunchtime, some of the women, in their uniforms, had taken advantage of the good weather during their breaks; they had lain outside on the grass behind the grand house, smoking cigarettes, listening to the thoughtful

hum of bees investigating local wildflowers. Underground, the women on duty were doing what they normally did on quiet days: knitting, writing; though they always had their specially designed telephone headgear at the ready for an alert. Young Gladys Eva, then nineteen, was playing bridge with some of the more senior men; her knack for the game was one of the attributes that had smoothed her recruitment to this top secret establishment.

By 4.30 p.m., the day had been so pleasant that there was a slight haze rising even above the streets of central London. To the east and the north of the capital, the air had a thicker, almost orange quality; though this was not the season of domestic coal burning, the great industries of the East End and the vast docklands kept going with their larger concerns. Fighter Command was about 24 kilometres (fifteen miles) west of here, sitting on the ridge of green hills that enclose the city like a bowl. It would have a grandstand view.

This was the day which would end with many in London convinced that their world was being torn apart. And yet, paradoxically, this was also the day – 7 September 1940 – which would prove that Fighter Command had triumphed.

That afternoon, the young WAAFs who were about to start their watch hurried around the side of the handsome Italianate house (complete with an imposing bell tower that had, for the purposes of the conflict, been painted a dull green and black by means of camouflage). On the west of the house was the concrete entrance to what was called The Hole.

Down hard concrete steps, the young women would descend some thirty-five feet into a world of artificial light, an hermetic chamber of maps and markers, sharp-eyed observations and focused tension. The Operations Room was bursting with techniques so new that the enemy had not fathomed the extent of them. *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Goering had, before the war, happily boasted to the likes of

American ambassador Joseph Kennedy that his air force, the Luftwaffe, was unquestionably the best in the world. The lethal skill of Goering's pilots was, by the summer of 1940, perfectly obvious; yet the urgent question of how one successfully could fight off such skill – so central to Dowding's system – came to dominate the conflict.

Equally, this was an enemy fighting a kind of war so novel that Dowding's forces were still learning on their feet. And on this day, the Nazi strategy changed dramatically. Before, it had striven to disable Fighter Command. Now, thwarted, it appeared to be set on mindless, murderous vengeance.

At around 4.35 p.m., anyone living near the banks of the Thames on the estuary – the people of Essex and north Kent – would have heard the low yet piercing drone louder than ever before; and they would have seen the first wave of some 350 German aircraft, an almost Wagnerian spectacle. No matter how fast the defending pilots could be alerted and sent into the sky to try and intercept them, this vast force – the mightiest enemy to have made such an incursion into British territory for almost a thousand years – were within minutes of their targets.

Back in the Filter Room, the young women and their commanders, receiving the information from so many observation and radar stations, understood the sickeningly relentless progress of the aggressors. This was the city in which their families still lived. For WAAF officers like Patricia Clark, there were fresh memories of having watched recent air battles with her parents on the fringes of London. The women triangulated the areas over which the Luftwaffe was heading, the lives under the deadliest threat. Very shortly, the working-class populations of East Ham, Poplar, Plaistow and Beckton – and on the south side of the river, Woolwich – felt the ground beneath them undulating, the unsure foundations of their homes shifting, as the first bombs fell.

From the Filter and Operations Rooms, the women had been able to furnish the squadrons at Uxbridge to the west, and North Weald to the east, and Biggin Hill and Kenley to the south, with vectors and altitudes. Young pilots, with not a great deal of training but a huge amount of courage, were thousands of feet up in the air, swooping down to engage against this outrage. As the German bombers got the great East End docks in their sights, the hugely outnumbered Spitfires and Hurricanes did astonishingly well in the circumstances; seventy-four enemy aircraft were annihilated. A further seventy-odd were reckoned damaged. In other words, a disproportionate percentage of the attacking forces sustained lethal or serious injury. And yet the outrage continued.

The daytime raid had merely been the first act. At 8.10 p.m., with the last traces of hazy crimson gone from the sky, another lethal black wave of bombers materialised from the thickening darkness of the east. The Thames beneath the Germans was now a dully luminous serpent, twisting, rippling, betraying the city. The targets, many already burning fiercely, were hit more intensively. At Purfleet, the Anglo-American Oil Works went up in a lurid blaze.

Upriver, Woolwich Arsenal – that great historic citadel of gunpowder, explosives and fissile material – bellowed black and molten yellow as stores detonated. There were fires at the Siemens Bros works. Damage was done to the southern outfall sewer that stretched out to Crossness. The vast gasworks by the claggy, thickly flowing Thames at Gallions Reach nearby were also hit, and orange and blue flames rose high into the indigo sky. The percussive waves of noise that could be felt as well as heard were described by one East End resident as being like the mighty footsteps of an enraged giant.

That giant seemed to be stamping everywhere; every bomb that did not hit an industrial objective would instead

find a domestic target. South and east London were very densely populated, with houses bunched in terraces around a vast expanse of factories, docks and processing plants. As the blue twilight settled into the total darkness of London blackout, the German bombers mocked the cover of night before turning back by illuminating the city in blazing oranges and scarlets. Houses were sliced in two in a fraction of a second, their occupants instantly dismembered; roads and railway lines were bisected. Midnight came and yet more waves of bombers flew over. Against daytime raids there was some semblance of a chance of engaging the enemy properly. At night, in 1940, pilots were still largely flying blind and into a disorientating pandemonium. 'Has a Blitz begun?' wrote pilot George Barclay of 249 Squadron of that night. 'The Wing Commander's coolness is amazing and he does a lot to keep up our morale – very necessary tonight.'[1]

Meanwhile, the personnel emerging from the Bentley Priory 'Hole' at midnight, at the end of an eight-hour shift, saw the unnatural sunset of flame in the east. For WAAF officer Gladys Eva, taking a quick break from the relentless underground duties, the horror was immediate. 'God, I cannot tell you,' she says now. 'We'd been working downstairs, so we knew what they were doing to London, once they started to bomb. You would go out of the Hole and the whole of the sky would be lit. You could see London easily from Stanmore. And we had been plotting them all the while, so we knew they were over in vast numbers.'

There were other elements to the armoury of Fighter Command: the plump silvery barrage balloons floating on ropes in the air, a spectacle that Londoners had taken a while to get used to; the huge wheeling guns and the piercingly bright lights of Anti-Aircraft Command. But with a determined enemy thrusting through, they could offer only limited protection that night.

Yet this is assuredly not a story of failure. Completely the reverse. The Blitz, terrifying and deadly though it was, was Hitler's tacit admission of failure to gain mastery in the Battle of Britain. This is the story of how an institution – part military, part civilian – carefully built up and yet very often improvised, found a completely new way of waging a war, projecting it into the skies throughout the hard years to come.

The headquarters of Fighter Command had seen many pivotal days and nights already, and would see many more before the war was finally played out. The later years would bring V-1 and V-2 missiles, as well as the extraordinary tension of D-Day in 1944. Bentley Priory saw many huge successes, as well as harrowing disasters, right the way through to the end.

The story of the Second World War's fighter pilots, men such as Alan Deere, Richard Hillary, Roger Bushell and Douglas Bader, is clearly one that cannot be celebrated enough; indeed, their story seemed to have been imprinted in the national consciousness even before the Battle of Britain began. The images are so familiar as to seem like clichés from innumerable John Mills films: the absurd cheerfulness of the pilots in the face of death or mutilating injury; the aerodromes with their concrete hangars; the young fighters running for their fighter planes, taking to the skies in small metal constructions that now look as if they could barely survive collision with a flock of geese.

Then there are those battles in the skies above, now pressed into national folk memory as seen from the ground – skies swirling with curling contrails, moments of mad exhilaration when German pilots swoop in so low that they can be seen in their cockpits; and then the moments when these young men are shot out of the sky, planes spiralling down, distant explosions in far-off fields.

Added to this is the folk-memory of the individualistic nature of the courageous RAF squadrons; the lightning-fast decisions taken at stations like Hornchurch and Debden and Northolt and Duxford; then, after the fighting, the accounting of the dead, and the swift, deliberate insouciance of the surviving fighting men. As such, the images convey a sense of cohesion and assurance; it is startling to think now that so much of this was extemporised.

And even the flashing lights of the Fighter Command Operations Room – the special clocks with the differently coloured sectors, the futuristic looking, brightly illuminated panels, the WAAFs spending hours leaning across the table map like croupiers, moving the tiny markers that signified the different sorts of enemy waves and their positions – was a system that had to be adapted constantly to new emergencies.

It doesn't take much now to imagine the asphyxiating weight of anxiety on Hugh Dowding, the architect of a system for which he was to receive next to no thanks. He was remembered by all who knew him as a reserved man; and during these days of national crisis, this grave figure would be found in his office in Bentley Priory, the windows facing out west towards Harrow, his desk sparse, save for the in-trays of seemingly illimitable paperwork that had to be done even in emergencies. Even at the height of the Battle of Britain, Dowding faced poisonous office politics; superiors who wanted to get rid of him at any cost.

In May and June 1940, the people of Britain had been galvanised by the unnerving rout of the British Expeditionary Force in France that had led to the evacuation of Dunkirk. The brave voyages of the Little Ships were instantly mythologised by press and public alike. The returning soldiers – half-starved, almost hallucinating with tiredness – were greeted at railway stations as though they were film stars. But after a long Phoney War (or 'Bore War') in which

public and military alike had seemed perfectly confident of Britain's ability to hold back the Nazis, the next few weeks were to be marked with a mass cognitive dissonance. Hitler's invasion was widely anticipated, yet the public and the returned soldiers contrived somehow to press on with a kind of black good humour.

In Parliament, Winston Churchill – who had been Prime Minister for barely a month – made reference to the pilots of the RAF. 'The battle of France is over,' he proclaimed on 4 June 1940. 'The Battle of Britain is about to begin.' And so the coming conflict had been named before it had even started. Churchill too referred to RAF pilots in Arthurian terms; the new chivalrous knights, brave men of the airy realms, who would now be doing battle to protect the honour of the nation. His words might have been a response to the fury among so many ordinary British soldiers about the RAF's perceived lack of help during the Dunkirk crisis. The soldiers were wrong; the pilots had been fighting, all right. And behind the scenes Dowding too had been bitterly fighting to preserve the forces that he needed for the confrontations to come.

But the story and the life of Bentley Priory extends much further out and further back. It begins in another age, another reign, as dreams of flying took on corporeal life. And it also encompasses that point at the outbreak of war when a nation was jolted into modernity; not just in technological terms, but also in terms of meritocracy, the dissolution of old class structures, and in the ability of a younger generation of women to find a voice in this new world.

It is a story that extends across Britain too; not just to take in all the pilots in all the squadrons in those strategic positions, but also the personnel keeping up with events on the ground. From the ever vigilant Observer Corps,

dotted around the country in their little exposed huts; to the anti-aircraft gunners, posted on hills and in parks, doing what they could in the hours of darkness to beat back an enemy that was all but invisible; to the dedicated young women from Bath to Suffolk, in underground control rooms, who were overseeing the very earliest days of radar. At these far-flung bases, young women recruits found a strong taste of independence that they might not otherwise have had; the responsibility and the skilled work brought commissions for some, like Eileen Younghusband, and the eye-opening experience of entering formerly male strongholds.

But what they all found was a life of needle-sharp intensity. Not merely in terms of duty, but also in off-duty hours: the romances, the dances and even the unauthorised pet dogs on base. Looking back now, we tend not only to imagine the war in black and white, but also to assume that it was conducted very much on one note. The veterans, by contrast, recall the vivid range and depths of emotion that the period inspired. It is worth repeating that in an age before computing, Fighter Command's accuracy in the plotting and interception of enemy planes was genuinely astonishing. Above all it is a story about a group of young men and women thrown together in extreme circumstances and immediately growing both in maturity and experience.

There is a sharp difference between the lives of the fighter pilots and those of the bomber crews, who belonged to a separate RAF branch of command. The work of the bombers, the cruel precariousness of their existence and the crushing weight of their function, was by its nature unrelentingly haunting, especially in the later stages of the conflict. By contrast, even though the sacrifices made by the fighter pilots were vast, there was something perhaps less philosophically burdensome about their war; right from the

start, there was even a sort of purity about these duels in the sky. Which is why, despite the mortality rates, despite the hideous injuries and disfigurements, such battles still now tend to be associated with the cleanness of blue skies and white clouds.

The story is also in some ways a portrait of a younger generation in microcosm; or at least of everything that the younger generation wanted itself to be. Long before American GIs came over with their irresistible music and attitude, the pilots and the women of RAF Fighter Command embodied a certain style and cool. They were sharp, sophisticated, amusing, attractive. Like their opposite numbers in the Luftwaffe, it is true that many were, at least initially, drawn from the more rarefied levels of society. But where the Prussian princes and minor noblemen of Germany were noted both for exquisite social manners and high seriousness, the RAF fighter pilot was – at least for the consumption of an eager public – an indomitably cheery, even slightly raffish young man. At the time of the Battle of Britain, the average age of a fighter pilot was twenty. They were not even old enough to vote (the age of majority then was twenty-one); yet anyone halfway sensible would have understood the depths beneath that studied insouciance. The memories one hears now – either from those long gone or those wonderfully still with us – are tinged with an unusual amount of humour, as well as of poignancy; surprisingly, some of their stories are very funny. There is also an unusual lyricism, and a lingering sense of spirituality too. It makes their achievements all the more breathtaking.

Bentley Priory was at the heart of the sort of war which will never be fought again. Those pilots achieved a victory that it will be given to no one else to win. All the control rooms, all the aerodromes, all the exquisitely designed aircraft, all the

airmen with poetry in their souls, came together in one unique national moment: an island fighting to ensure that its soul remained intact.