



The Second World War Experience Centre  
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Issue No. 10: War in the Air  
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## The Battle of Britain: an Anthem for Youth.

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R P Beamont's Hurricane of 609 Squadron, showing five victories and just fitted with glaze shields for night fighting - October 1940.

[R P Beamont]

Imagine two nations drawn up to do battle.

On one side, a country with an economy working at full-steam, out producing the other in key weaponry at the rate of two to one; fielding a force led by hard-bitten professionals working to a carefully prepared strategic and tactical plan developed with the help of first-rate intelligence; a weapons-system which not only brilliantly exploited the latest applied technology but was also extraordinarily robust; and troops who fought as disciplined teams, and displayed ruthless determination.

On the other side, a country with an economy so inefficient that despite spending almost twice as much as its opponent it failed to match its output; fielding a force led by a romantic amateur who instigated a chaotic planning process, improvised tactics and was completely misled by faulty intelligence; a weapons-system which had some very potent elements but neglected modern communications technology and lacked depth of reserves; and troops who fought as gifted individuals, guided by an aristocratic old-world ethos which was sporting and chivalrous.

That, in a nutshell, was the Battle of Britain.

The first side won, of course - the British. Given all the above, the second side - the Germans - had the odds stacked heavily against them from the outset, and indeed they never came close to achieving any of their muddled goals.

None of this is in the least surprising. It is, however, quite extraordinary that the British should subsequently convince themselves that they could have won by doing the opposite.

Extraordinary, but understandable given the circumstances.

After winning a shattering victory in France, Hitler very reasonably expected Britain to make peace. Churchill was determined to defeat the peace lobby and continue belligerence, but he needed victory in the air, or his precarious hold on the reins of government could fail. He announced on June 18th that the Battle of Britain was about to begin, and so gave it its name before it started in earnest. He then began deliberate myth-making to turn the young fighter pilots into heroes. The country needed the myth then. It worked.



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The Germans were already heavily committed to mythology. Nazi ideology fostered the cult of the warrior-hero who could overcome all foes through his prowess in battle. The use of the fighter pilot as a hero had its roots in the air fighting of the 1914-18 war. Revolted by the anonymity of the arbitrary slaughter in the trenches, every belligerent country seized on the exploits of its fighter pilots to create heroes for the public to worship. Drawn at first mainly from the cavalry, the pilots too liked to think of themselves as Knights of the Air, nobly jousting man-to-man in fair fights. For them, it made the war just about bearable. The whole ethos was symbolised by Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.

The metaphor of the Knights of the Air sits uneasily with the one more commonly used by the Baron himself - that of hunting. A hunter does not fight another armed man on equal terms: he creeps up on an animal and shoots it unseen. So it was with air fighting. Most kills were achieved by diving on an opponent out of the sun, getting close and pumping bullets into the cockpit. It was an aerial ambush, called a 'bounce'. The best way to become a great ace was to follow the Richthofen method: creep up on your enemy, shoot him in the back, and then run for home before his friends spot you. This worked equally well in 1940.

The young bloods of the *Luftwaffe* fighter arm all wanted to be Red Barons themselves. It got them some very high personal scores, but it did not win battles. That required a lot more professionalism. The British pilots were not a superior breed to their opposite numbers over the Channel. The difference which made the difference was in the leadership.

Goering was a fighter pilot in the First World War, and actually ended up commanding von Richthofen's unit. It made good headlines to make a one-time ace the head of the *Luftwaffe*, but Goering had no understanding of or interest in modern technology, air strategy or running large organisations. Helped by Ernst Udet, the second highest scoring German pilot after von Richthofen, these two 'practical men' introduced romantic amateurism at the top of Germany's new Air Force. Aircraft production raced ahead to create enough front-line strength to add credence to the propaganda claims, but unlike the RAF, the *Luftwaffe* did not build up reserves. In Britain, the Air Ministry and private industry worked together to solve the enormous problems of mass-producing Hurricanes and Spitfires, and adopted innovative measures such as dispersal and the building of shadow factories. In Germany, the Nazis intimidated entrepreneurs like Hugo Junkers and with their 'divide and rule' philosophy failed to exploit the advantages of production scale. In 1940, the *Luftwaffe* ran short of both new aircraft and spare parts. Fighter Command had plenty of both.

Unlike Goering, Dowding was not just an airman, but an organiser with a deep understanding of technology. He was the builder of a battle-winning weapon. The man who laid the ground-plan was the now-forgotten Major General Ashmore, who took over London's air defences in 1917 and created the plotting system, gun lines, barrage balloons and the Observer Corps. Without his work, Dowding could not have been ready in time.

When he took on the new job of C-in-C Fighter Command in 1936, Dowding spent four years creating the most formidable air defence system in the world. At its centre was a unique command, control and communications system featuring the world's first large-scale intranet, using analogue technology, as well as radar. At its cutting edge were the only fighters in the world to match the *Messerschmitt 109*. The system acted as a force-multiplier, enabling Dowding to deploy his 6-700 fighters with the effectiveness of many more. It was so good that its principles are unchanged today. It had a lot of in-built redundancy and was extremely hard to destroy. The Germans never even understood which bits of it mattered and which did not. Even if they had, hitting them often enough to cripple rather than just impair the system would have taken more time than they had and a lot of luck.



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Dowding's right-hand man was a New Zealander, Keith Park, who helped him to work up the system and then took over the forces covering the vital south-east. He performed with such brilliance that the Germans christened him 'the defender of London'. The Battle of Britain and the Battle of Malta are the only two air battles ever won by the defence. Both were won by Park.

With his profound understanding of the unique nature of air fighting, Park used small formations to hack bleeding chunks out of the *Luftwaffe's* bomber fleets, like groups of Indians ambushing Redcoats in a Fenimore Cooper novel. This has added to the impression that 'the few' were hopelessly outnumbered. In fact, although the Germans had some 1,500 bombers which Fighter Command also had to face - though never all at once - they only had about 100 more single-seater fighters than the British and their numbers steadily declined whilst Fighter Command's rose. Large formations of German aircraft would be attacked successively by small groups of British fighters, which maximised German losses and minimised the risks to themselves by each making one pass and away to re-arm and re-fuel. In the course of a raid by 100 aircraft the Germans might well be attacked by over 100 British planes.

The irony is that of all the fighting forces in history, none have themselves eschewed heroics more than Fighter Command. Some of them have got quite sick of the adulation. One of the pilots, Brian Kingcome, wrote in 1990: 'I think it quite wrong that, because the Battle of Britain turned out to be quite an important event in retrospect, the participants should be automatically classed as 'heroes'... it denigrates all those others whose contribution and sacrifice were just as great, but whose exploits hadn't been pushed into the public eye by Churchill's splendid oratory.' 'The hero-worship ought to stop', he wrote, 'otherwise we'll start wearing our medals on our pyjamas'.

All the veterans I have met are genuinely modest men who say they were just doing their job. One of them has said he thinks the bomber crews were far braver - they had to fly on and take whatever was thrown at them. It does indeed seem to have been forgotten that during the Battle of Britain, the RAF also deployed the 1,000 or so aircraft of Bomber and Coastal Commands to thwart the invasion preparations.

During the four months of the Battle, Bomber Command alone lost 801 aircrew killed or missing, almost 50% more than Fighter Command. In some ways fighter pilots had a great time: no NCOs screaming at them, no sleeping in cold, wet trenches, no snipers, no being mortared in the middle of the night. They had a clean bed, good food, a wonderful machine to fly and marvellous company.

One of those who espoused those views, but who waited nearly 60 years before telling his tale, despite being in the thick of it all the way through, was James 'Sandy' Sanders. Having been born in 1914, he was older than most, but he had a sense of fun and a hatred of pomposity which marked him out as typical Fighter Command material. Having joined 111 Squadron in 1936, he became only the third operational RAF pilot to fly the new Hurricane, which was being trialed by 111. Regular officers like him made up just half of Fighter Command's pilot strength in 1940. Nearly 40% of the British pilots were Sergeant Pilots of the RAFVR, the RAF's 'demographic reserve' drawn from all walks of life, and the balance from Auxiliary Air Force, the weekend flyers who included the 'millionaires' of 601 Squadron. Naturally enough, the regulars looked down on the auxiliaries and the auxiliaries looked down on the regulars - at least



Flight Lieutenant James 'Sandy' Sanders DFC in 1940.  
[Author].



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until the fighting started.

Sandy was fortunate to have an early start so that he was a highly experienced pilot when war broke out. This probably saved his life. He was also unusual in the path which took him to the air force. He was brought up in Italy at a time when Fascism was gaining its grip. He went to school in Genoa and remembers an occasion when he was nine years old when he and his classmates had to sing the slave song from Verdi's 'Nabucco' for Mussolini's arrival at Staglieno sports arena. He deeply resented it and felt the dictator looked silly with his melodramatic poses. It was in Italy that he first got into trouble with the authorities. When he was in his late teens he faced a judicial hearing. The toilet paper in his school consisted of sheets of newspaper and at the time Mussolini was on almost every page. James was overheard to remark that he wiped his bottom with Mussolini. That was enough to get arrested. They let him off because he argued that if he was given newspaper for that purpose he had no choice but to use the Duce's image in that way. There was no answer to that. He left Italy because he was convinced there would be a war and he wanted to join up. Challenging authority had become natural to him so, ultimately, did fighting dictatorships. By 1940 the whole country had joined in.

However, Sandy took challenging authority further than most. He had spent his childhood fighting for his rights against four beautiful sisters and his mother, all of whom he considered prima donnas, so fighting prima donnas had become a bit of a habit. He believed he detected some again in the RAF.

In early 1939, the celebrated Harry Broadhurst had taken over 111 Squadron from John Gillan. In common with most of the Squadron, 'Sandy' Sanders took a dislike to his new C/O, whom he regarded as a prima donna. Broadhurst was an extremely good pilot, but his men disliked the way he would talk about his aerobatic skills, especially by doing a roll off the top of the loop on take-off, as he had done at the 1938 Hendon air display, in a machine with the guns removed to make it lighter. So one grey Sunday morning in September, Sandy took off in a Gauntlet with the guns still in it to do the same thing, just to show that anyone could do it.

Unfortunately, the war had just started and a number of senior officers were arriving at Northolt for an important conference just as Sandy was carrying out his stunt. Being by now a very experienced pilot, he completed an immaculate roll off the top of his loop in the unmodified aeroplane. When he landed, in recognition of his skill and sense of timing, Broadhurst put him under arrest. He took him to the then AOC 11 Group, Air Vice- Marshal Gossage, to decide what to do with him. Gossage knew Sanders' mother, so he just asked the young man what he would like to do. Sandy replied that he would like to go to France. 'Off you go then,' the AOC replied. So he was posted to 615 Squadron, which was earmarked for duty in France.

His punishment was what he had asked for, but it was in fact a double insult. Though an RAF regular, he had been posted to fly with Auxiliaries. And despite his being one of the most experienced Hurricane pilots in the RAF, this meant he had to fly Gladiators. However, he did go to France, for on 15th November 1939, 615 lined up at Croydon along with 607 Squadron to head for Merville. There was an official inspection before they left, and appropriately enough 615's Honorary Air Commodore, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, turned up with his wife to see his boys safely off.

Gladiators were armed with two machine guns at the sides of the cockpit and one under each wing, at about waist height. These guns could only be cocked for action on the ground. The pneumatic system which operated them was unreliable and even rocking the wings could set them off. As 615 were escorting their ground crews in two Ensign aircraft, and were expecting to fly into action, they had their guns cocked.



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Sandy was leading the flight, so Churchill and Clementine naturally chose his machine for a close inspection. Churchill being Churchill showed a particular interest in the guns. His wife being a woman<sup>1</sup> she sat in the cockpit asking 'What is this?' and 'What is that?', and as Churchill was bending over in front of the machine gun under the wing, she started fiddling with the firing mechanism. Fighter pilots need to have fast reactions, and Sandy was a very good fighter pilot. So it was that he may have saved the future Prime Minister from a premature demise at the hands of his spouse, and thereby changed the course of World History. The Squadron took off and landed at Merville without further incident.

Incidents remained sparse over the next few months, but on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1939, in what proved to be the RAF's last combat of the year, Sandy chased a *Heinkel 111* in his Gladiator, firing a lot of ammunition at it, but found he could not catch it up. Despite the obvious inadequacy of these biplanes as interceptors, 615 continued to operate them until being re-equipped with Hurricanes in the latter half of April.

This was just as well, for on 10<sup>th</sup> May, the *Wehrmacht* launched its offensive in the West. In the ensuing chaos, a lot of aircraft and equipment were abandoned as airfields were hurriedly evacuated. 615 Squadron operated from four aerodromes in eleven days, and as the BEF withdrew to Dunkirk Sandy only just made it back to England. On a patrol near the Franco-Belgian border he shot down a *Dornier Do 17* but was hit by return fire and crash-landed near Valenciennes, suffering a severe blow to the head which almost knocked him out. Despite being half concussed, he made for the station and got a train, but it was attacked near Béthune, so he got out and walked into the town with his parachute on his back. He met a German tank coming the other way, so he left his parachute in a doorway and hitched a lift to Abbeville in an RAF lorry. There at about 2 o'clock in the morning he found a long-nosed Blenheim bomber parked on the edge of the aerodrome. He had never flown a Blenheim or any other twin-engined aircraft before, but he nevertheless decided to use it to try to get back to England. The night was pitch black. There were no lights in the aircraft, there was no flare-path, he could not see the instrument panel and he did not know where the starter buttons were. While Sandy was fumbling around in the dark, a number of other people had hopped on board the three-man Blenheim before he managed to find what he was after and take off. He was in fine pitch, the undercarriage was locked down, and he could not do more than 110 mph or get above 700 feet.

He did not know how much petrol he had, but he made for his old station at Northolt, came in over the Western Avenue and landed safely in semi-darkness just short of the mess at about a quarter past three. As his grateful passengers got out, he went to find the duty officer. There was nobody there. The whole airfield was deserted. So he got on the phone and a WAAF answered. He asked for the Station Commander, only to be told that he was not to be woken before 8 o'clock. After all he had just experienced, and with his head still throbbing, Sandy became quite vociferous and told her to put him through. When the Station Commander answered, Sandy went for him. 'How dare you!' he said. 'Do you realise that I've just landed and there's not a soul around and we could have been the Germans?' 'Do you realise who you are talking to?' asked the Station Commander. 'I don't care,' came the reply. 'What do you mean by saying you are not to be disturbed till 8 o'clock? Do you think the Germans are going to wait till you're out of bed?' So Sandy was put under arrest again for showing a lack of respect and insubordination.

As before, he was sent to see the AOC the same morning. He ordered a car and sent Sandy down to join up with a few



A Hurricane Squadron (No 87)  
battle climbs in 1940.  
[R P Beamont]



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Gladiators based at Manston. After re-joining his Squadron, he flew continuously during what remained of the Battle of France and the Dunkirk evacuation. He had a close call on 22nd June when after an eventful sweep over northern France he landed on a farmer's field on the cifftops near Ventnor on the Isle of Wight after a wave-top flight across the Channel in thick fog. He took off again with the assistance of some locals who helped him to re-fuel with car petrol and then held the tail of his Hurricane down while he opened the throttle. When they let go he went up like a lift and flew to Kenley. This second escape from France called for all the experience he had gained on Hurricanes from his days at 111. A novice would never have managed it. It was a sign of what was to become brutally clear over the weeks to come: that flying and fighting experience meant the difference between life and death. After getting back from France, Sandy became engaged in further intensive conflict with the *Luftwaffe* and his superiors. During most of the days in early August 615 Squadron operated from Hawkinge in separate Flights. On 5th August, when Sandy was flying back he suspected he had a mechanical problem, so when he got to Kenley he did a slow roll at the edge of the airfield to test his aircraft. From the airfield it looked as if he was below tree-top height, but in fact he was at a safe altitude above the Caterham Valley. His Station Commander called him in to rebuke him for 'endangering His Majesty's aeroplane', whereupon Sandy told him that it was perfectly safe, and in any case he ought to get into an aeroplane himself and do some fighting. He was sent to his room under arrest and told to fly to Hawkinge again at 07:00 the next morning.

He damaged some *Heinkels* off Brighton on the 16<sup>th</sup>, but the 17<sup>th</sup> August was quiet, so being fully aware of what had happened just three miles up the road at Croydon, he called up 11 Group operations and told them that the Germans would be hitting Kenley next, so would they request that 12 Group send some fighters to patrol their airfield when they were scrambled? He was therefore not very surprised when just before 13:00 on the 18<sup>th</sup> he was scrambled and ordered to climb to the right, towards Biggin Hill, which was just six miles away.

He was at about 6,000 feet, followed by P/O Douglas Hone, when a string of bombs came down between them, just feet away from his Hurricane. Alerted in this way to an enemy presence, he looked up and saw some *Dorniers* above him. He pushed the throttle through the gate, climbed up more steeply and opened fire. His aircraft stalled on its back and spun down. A parachute floated down next to him whilst he was still inverted, and he pulled out. As he did so, he saw a *Dornier Do 17*, and gave chase towards Biggin Hill. As the *Dornier* turned, a *Junkers Ju 88* banked steeply in front of him, giving him an excellent full-deflection opportunity. He let rip, aiming for the cockpit to kill the pilot - which in his view was the only way to get a bomber down - and the *Junkers* went straight in and blew up in some woods at Ide Hill, which was a few miles south of Biggin Hill and close to Churchill's private residence at Chartwell.

James Sanders stayed in the battle zone in a variety of flying roles until the Battle of Britain petered out and turned into the Blitz. When 615 Squadron moved north, he lobbied to remain in the dangerous southern skies because he had met a girl who lived in nearby Westerham. He managed to stay in Kenley, then flew *Defiant* night fighters, became Station Commander at three airfields and ended the war at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force) in Brussels. He left the RAF in 1947, became an executive at an insurance company, and after retirement concentrated on enjoying his own large family and cultivating his love of music.

James often mentioned the names of the men he flew with then who died when cruelly young. All in all he had a wonderful time in the Air Force enjoying the company of some delightful people who were witty and outrageous, talented and amusing, adventurous and brave. There is a sense of the irretrievable loss of some of the best of a generation, remembered with great fondness. The odds of surviving the war seemed to him to be so small, that he felt the years he lived beyond the war were a



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gift. Having tricked death so often he finally succumbed to the last enemy in August 2002, at his home in south London, aged 88.

Part of the reason why 'the few' became so celebrated is that their world was so attractive and they themselves were a charismatic and delightful group of young men. One of their great achievements was to have created a unique corporate culture. Based on a student life-style, it was very un-military. Few of them had in fact been to a university. Although their image has been dominated by figures like the Oxford graduate, Richard Hillary, he was unusual.

The feature of their culture most commonly commented upon was the ironic humour which contrasted with the self-important hubris of the *Luftwaffe*. You could never be caught showing off or 'shooting a line'. The lack of self-importance manifested by their laughter fostered team-work and co-operation. It entranced all who met it, and enabled Fighter Command rapidly to integrate the newcomers vitally needed to supplement its strength after Dunkirk. 80% of the pilots were British, but 10% came from the Commonwealth and the other 10% from Europe, most notably from Poland. One Polish pilot has said that the most cherished time of his whole life was when he was on a British squadron in 1940, and speaks emotionally about his English comrades - 'I never had such relationships again in my life... it is impossible to say how charming they were, how kind'. His view is not unusual. Many companies in today's global economy face the problem of creating a cohesive culture across national boundaries. Fighter Command achieved that in 1940.

If it were their leaders who enabled them to triumph, the 'few' still had to find the courage and resilience to keep on going up despite the losses and their exhaustion and meet the demands Park made on them. 'We were young', they will tell you. 'You can do anything when you are young.' Perhaps - but what drove them? Were they fanatical democrats?

It would be more true to say that they hated fanaticism itself. As Owen Dudley Edwards has pointed out, they had learned their ethics from Frank Richards' stories about Greyfriars School in the *Gem* and the *Magnet* which both enjoyed an enormous circulation when they were boys. Harry Wharton and his chums distrusted authority and knew that even prefects could be bastards. Billy Bunter may have been an ass, but he still deserved justice. They knew that they had to stick up for one another and stand up to bullies. Foreigners were ridiculous precisely because they took themselves so seriously. Hitler was ridiculous, but also a bounder and a bully. The sight of aircraft with black crosses on them flying uninvited over England proved it, and produced feelings of rage. Most pilots threw away the Queensbury rules and just went for them. The Poles fought with a hatred more vibrant still - they had seen Warsaw burn.

Perhaps it is not a bad rule-of-thumb when considering the moral ambiguities of military engagement that you should fight only when the issues can be satisfactorily reduced to the simple ethics of the playground. The victory was created by a few men behind the scenes, but most of the fighting was done by youths who had scarcely left boyhood behind. So it was that to the public across the world their achievement seemed to be against all the odds. It was not really against the odds at all, but perhaps we can nevertheless join with the French novelist Georges Bernanos who wrote in his *Letters to the English* in December 1940 that Britain's stand was 'a fairy-tale, a tale that no serious adult, no man of ability or experience, could possibly understand - a children's tale', and then cried: 'Hurrah for the children of England!'

#### Endnote

1 Political correctness had not been invented in 1939, and this story is told as I heard it.