

AQUARIUS

The Man Who Holds The Watering Pot

A flying memoir 1928 – 1945
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CHAPTER SIX

BATTLE OF BRITAIN II

'Once more into the breach'

Stuart Walch was lost over the convoys a few days later and, with C.O. disabled and both Flight Commanders killed, the squadron was pulled out of the front line and moved to St. Eval in Cornwall for the time being. Minnie (Minden) Blake was drafted in to hold the fort pending my return. This he did admirably until I rejoined on 12th September, the squadron having just been moved back to Middle Wallop. Minnie stayed with us for a short time until given a squadron of his own where he continued to give distinguished service.

The Battle was still very much at its height and, after a medical I was quickly back in the old routine. We were becoming short of pilots but the Poles and Czechs began to arrive and were like manna in the wilderness. What they lacked in English, they more than made up in experience and spirit and it is amazing how quickly we all became firm friends. The only snag was that, after an engagement, and not being much good on the R/T, they were liable to land at various other airfields in southern England so I could never be sure of what casualties I had until it had been sorted out. Most of them were regulars in their own Services and more experienced than our crowd.

Vernon Simmonds had usually flown as my

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No.2 but now led a section himself so I drafted in Sgt Marrion Domagala, a Pole into the position and found it reassuring to have a man of his determination and ability on my wingtip. I remember an incident a month or two later. We were together trying to intercept a German 'Recce'. There were huge thunderstorms and inside one my airspeed indicator iced up and failed as the heater was on the blink. I could keep straight but went up and down violently. All this time Domagala stuck to my wingtip like glue!

Casualties were horribly high. In the Battle 238 had eighteen killed and others wounded - a dreadful toll, bearing in mind that a full complement in the air was twelve. We spent time in the South London area reinforcing 11 Group but most of our action was in our own territory. There was an enormous raid on Bristol, Filton and also Southampton and Weymouth. There was a raid on the Supermarine factory near Weymouth when we had little warning and therefore were scrambled late. We had not had time to climb before we intercepted. The raid was over target when we appeared on the scene and I ordered the squadron to open fire as we approached although we were still climbing. There was then a melee on the way down and I found myself doing a head-on on a ME 110 right on top of my own home at Hamble. We were firing simultaneously - I stuck it a little longer than he did but his cannon had knocked great lumps out of my Hurricane with oil coming out everywhere!

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The engine was barely responding and I managed to glide down to a 'dead-stick' landing at Lee-on-Solent there to be met by my oldest friend and recent neighbour, Jack Keene-Miller, then serving in the Fleet Air Arm.

The Navy entertained me royally and then sent me back to Wallop by car. I got there about 9 p.m. and found that through casualties in the engagement we could only muster five serviceable aeroplanes. I decided to cut the corners and rang direct to Fighter Command and spoke to W/Cdr Rich, the Chief Supply Officer, and told him my problem. He said "Promise you have sent your signals"; I replied "Cross my heart" and he said "I will do my best for you." By lunchtime the next day, no less than eight Hurricanes had been delivered to us. To this day, I think this was quite remarkable at the very height of the Battle.

I think that a note here about Command and Direction may be of interest. Dowding (Stuffy) was C.in C. To us he was something of a remote figure and I never even met him until after the War. He must have been able and imaginative but out of the run of senior officers in the RAF. He appeared shy and serious with no visible trace of sense of humour and was a convinced Spiritualist. However there seemed no lack of strength of character and he was fully able to stand up even to Churchill in support of what he considered right for his Command and for the country.

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He was ably supported at Stanmore by Sir Douglas Evill and the others, a little nearer common humanity but probably the key man engaged in directing operations was AVM Keith Park of 11 Group. Park was another strong personality - much liked by his staff and a legend to us pilots but not easy with his peers. He was not a man to suffer fools gladly and possibly not an able 'politician'. His conflicts with his neighbour to the North, Leigh Mallory of No.12 Group have been written up at length.

I served under each of them at different times. Park really understood fighter operations and had an abundance of charm when he wanted to use it. Leigh Mallory was friendly and goodhearted but spoiled it a little by a somewhat pompous manner - not a characteristic which went down well in the RAF.

Sholto Douglas had been Vice Chief of Air Staff and took over from Dowding that winter. Park must have got up against him at some time. He was shuffled off to Training Command and Mallory moved to 11 Group.

Much has been made more recently about the employment of Wings of two or three Squadrons as argued between Mallory and Park, but as far as we were concerned, it was not an issue. There never would have been enough time to assemble and move off a whole Wing, a manoeuvre which took many minutes. Two and a half minutes was par to get a single squadron airborne. Also there was no time to train in Wing tactics, whatever they may have been

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able to do in 12 Group.

A typical instance was the raid on Supermarine works at Woolston already mentioned. We took off from Chilbolton, the first squadron scrambled. We climbed directly for Southampton only twenty miles away but could see the raid as we approached and were still on the climb. Similar conditions applied over Bristol and in neither of these sorties would it have been feasible to use a whole Wing under one leader. I led Wings frequently later on in the Desert but they were always pre-planned and not in response to enemy raids as was the case in the Battle of Britain.

In late 1942 I was passing through Malta on my way to join Tedder at Algiers. Park heard I was there and sent for me to come to his HQ where I was privileged to spend the whole afternoon and evening with him in his office. Much to the horror of the senior people in the other Services, who were desperately concerned to preserve their limited resources, Park had gone over to the offensive. Once more, against intense opposition, he was proved right. I remember talking to a Gunner General who was horrified at Park's, in his view, wild gamble - but it worked!

In 1940 my own chief, the AOC 10 Group was Sir Quintin Brand whom I liked and respected and gave me every support. When I was shot down and on sick leave in August and September, he kept the squadron open for me which was unusual. He was still AOC when I

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took 238 to Egypt in '41 but I lost touch with him after that. He was, I believe, retired in '43 and returned to South Africa to live.

In the North, R.E. Saul was AOC 13 Group. In '43 Saul was in charge of an operation in the Dodecanese which went badly wrong. From then on poor Saul was known as the Wizard of Cos!

In late September '40 238 was moved to Chilbolton which was a satellite of Wallop and a few miles to the east. We stayed there for the autumn and most of that winter. The day battle gradually died away and the night blitz began. We continued with varying ops. The final phase of the Battle was , for us, most unpleasant. The Germans started sending in pure fighter sweeps of ME109's and 110's. We had not had the opportunity of developing tactics to cope, as we were able to do later in the Western Desert, and we suffered casualties without, at that stage, inflicting much damage in return.

A really bad day was 29th September when we had three of our best killed over the Isle of Wight - Sgts. Bann and Little and F/O Harrison.

Fortunately this phase did not last long. The night raids had begun in a big way with Coventry and the London Blitz. Our neighbours at Wallop, 604 Squadron with their Beaufighters came into their own. John Cunningham was their most successful pilot while Brown, a tough and amiable Scot, made his name as the leading radar controller in

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the newly opened Interceptor Station.

Brown came with me on the Invasion and was killed at Arnhem.

We continued to do a fair amount of flying but, during the winter, most of the scrambles were in small numbers. Group tended to choose Spitfires from 609 Squadron to intercept the few reconnaissance aircraft coming over as the Spits had the edge on the Hurricanes in performance. I remember writing an indignant letter to the senior controller at Group on the subject - it worked!

There were no living quarters at Chilbolton. We had our messes at the aerodrome but were billeted in the village. I was landed on Mrs Disraeli who had a delightful house and garden on the banks of the river Test. There I was looked after like a favourite son and, when I went down with 'flu, the attention was beyond belief. We fed of course at the airfield, at first in a marquee but, after a short time, I managed to scrounge an old wooden army hut which was converted and furnished to a fair degree of comfort. It was promptly named "Fenton's Folly" by the boys and a large sign in Gothic script painted to hang outside the door. Fighter Command rather liked this and it became the official code for Chilbolton.

For the time being, the routine became easier and it was even possible to take the odd day off. However, the war was still on and in February young Charles Davis was killed. He became iced up and out of control in a thunderstorm. In the earlier part of the

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Battle there was little time to get to know people. Sometimes I would say hello to a new arrival, tell him he would fly with me that day - a day or two later he would be gone. However, Charles had become a real friend and his loss hit me hard. A young Welshman, trained at Cranwell and one of our leading scorers, he was obviously destined to go ahead and would have been leading a wing in a year or two.

My strange and unusual task was to scatter his ashes from the air, on a sunny morning from a Magister high over Hampshire.

In March '41, 238 was sent to Pembrey in South Wales to patrol shipping in the Bristol Channel and round the corner in the Irish Sea. We shared this task with 79 Squadron whose CO, Harvey Heyworth was afterwards a test pilot for Rolls Royce. Harvey and I spent much of our time trying to unload the less pleasant jobs on each other and generally trying to be one up! Flying up and down the ships, often in rain and poor visibility was not enjoyable and I considered it an important part of my duty to make sure that 79 took its fair share. I never saw an enemy while we were there but Harvey managed to intercept a torpedo bomber on its final run on a ship and shot it down smartly before it could do any damage.

After a few weeks of this, we were suddenly recalled to Chilbolton to prepare for a move overseas. I was told our destination in strictest confidence but not allowed to pass it on to the others. Colin Dixon, then

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adjutant, took the ground party by train and we were back at readiness the following day.

In 238 I had as pilots English, Irish Scots, Welsh, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Czech, Polish, French and an Argentine (myself). Withal we managed to be an integrated and reasonably contented bunch. Obviously the national authorities wanted to have their own squadrons so, in the spring, the Poles, Czechs and French were posted away. This was inevitable, I suppose, but we lost much comradeship as a result. I really believe that most of ours wanted to stay in what, to them, had become their own squadron.

For some months I flew with Domagala (Polish) and Bernard (Czech) on each side and reckoned I had the finest Section in the Command.