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THE MAN IN ACTION

by Flight Lieutenant H. E. BATES

Superiority of the RAF over the enemy is due partly to superior aircraft, but largely to its manpower—among the finest in the world.

ON a bright December afternoon a *Stirling* returning from a raid on the docks at Brest came into its aerodrome to land. Its pilot, an Australian, touched down with an exactitude that seemed to indicate that nothing extraordinary was wrong. He was within a day or two of his 23rd birthday. His second pilot, contrary to the popular supposition that the pilots of bombers are for some reason middle-aged men, was a boy of 19. Among the crew was a young engineer, who was badly wounded. The floor of the plane was greasy with oil and blood and from the port outer engine a stream of petrol was pouring out like a bright fan in the wind. As the plane touched down it began to disintegrate. First the port outer propeller fell away; then the whole of the port inner engine. Then the complete port wing fell off and, falling, caught fire. The huge tyres of the *Stirling* were punctured and flat, and finally the whole aircraft tilted violently to port, flinging the starboard wing high into the air. The task of carrying a dying man from a plane which seemed at any moment about to blow up would, in civilian life, have been front page news; complete with pictures, personal interview and possibly framed certificates. Fortunately the plane did not blow up. Half an hour later its crew with the exception of the wounded engineer, now safely in hospital, were having tea, and of that extraordinary episode, and of the earlier episode in which the *Stirling* had beaten off the violent attacks of 10 Messerschmitts, there was nothing in the next morning's newspapers.

In this story and behind it, in ten thousand others of which the public will never see a record because there are so many



A typical man of action is Squadron Leader A. C. Deere, who was shot down three times during fighting at Dunkirk, had a bomb explode beside his plane on an aerodrome, ran into a Messerschmitt in a 700 m.p.h. air collision, then had his own plane cut in two in still another unexpected meeting in the air. Before promotion to present rank, he was presented with the DFC by H. M. King George (below).



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Pilots of Westland "Whirlwinds" on "stand by" duty congregate at dispersal hut as they await orders to take their twin-engined single-seater fighters aloft to intercept foe or escort RAF bombers.

of them, there is to be found a fraction of the picture that is being made, every day, every night, over sea and land and in all latitudes, of the men of the RAF in action. The title of these pictures is not heroism, since the RAF, with its vital genius for the rejection of normal speech and the coinage of new, does not know the word. Nor are they ever likely to occupy the place in popular literature and art long held by "The Charge of the Light Brigade." On the contrary they are, and will probably continue to be, taken very much for granted. For since the day when the British made the incredible and ghastly heroic blunder in the Crimea and somehow got it immortalized as a national epic, the standards of heroism, like the standards of speed and science and plain inhumanity, have undergone great changes. They have changed so far that they have, in some cases, ceased to mean anything. This has become very true of flying in general and, within the last three years, of the RAF in particular. One simple result of this is that the work of the RAF, which an earlier age would certainly have immortalized in verse, even if it was bad verse, is today recorded in language as plain, matter-of-fact and perishable as a cardboard box. The work of the RAF—words like deeds, exploits, feats of valour and so on have no place in its vocabulary—lies hidden too often behind colourless communiques and factual broadcasts that we now take as much for granted as the kitchen stove.

For this flatness, the lack of the heroic touch in the history of its action achievement, the RAF is itself partly responsible. The men of the RAF are largely inarticulate; they would prefer anonymity; and perhaps the worst of all sins in the RAF is the process known as "shooting a line." The now immortal father of all line-shooters was a fighter pilot who was heard to declaim, with fine pomposity, in one of those unfortunate silences that sometimes fall on general conversation "There was I, flying upside down." This remark has since become the standard by which any personal flying achievement in the RAF, whether heroic or not, has come to be judged. To shoot a line is now embarrassing, boring, comic, or in plain bad taste. In this way the RAF has elected to speak even of its most exceptional achievements in terms of understatement. To find the pilot who will tell you the story of a combat with simplicity, directness and lack of embarrassment is in consequence a rare thing.



A one-armed fighter pilot commemorates his misfortune with an appropriate insigne on the fuselage of his "Hurricane."

To fly and to be inarticulate, even to pretend to be inarticulate, have become, with rare exceptions, inseparable qualities. To treat the daily association with danger as if it were nothing more than a game of cricket has become almost a rule. Laconic, nonchalant, dry, indifferent, the RAF passes a common verdict even on the most glorious of its moments of action with a couple of words. "Good show," it says. "Good show."

But what the RAF does and what the RAF says about what it does are necessarily different things. The fact that the

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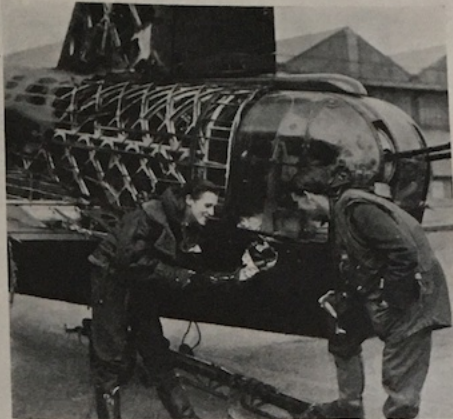
made two before breakfast. In a few days his squadron lost six pilots; and soon Deere, although only a pilot-officer, had become its leader. His adventures began to be fantastic. When he pursued a Dornier from Dunkirk to Ostend and both the Dornier and his own machine crash-landed, Deere was knocked out and his machine began to burn. As he scrambled clear, half conscious, his machine exploded. Two days later he collided with an Me-109 in mid-air. Each pilot seems to have thought that the other would give way. They passed each other once, turned and came together again. Deere lost a little height in the second turn and the belly of the Me tore along the fuselage of his plane, running the plane in a 100 m.p.h. glide which took him gradually over the English coast. There his craft hit a concrete anti-invasion post, ripped off a wing, skidded through two cornfields and finally burnt up.

A week or two later he chased a Heinkel over the Channel towards Calais. Shooting down the Heinkel, he was immediately "jumped on by a swarm of other fighters." A bullet ripped the watch from his wrist; another scorched an eyebrow. His aircraft was full of holes, and over Ashford, 20 miles inland and at 800 feet, it began to fall to pieces. Those were the days when shoppers in that market town in the heart of the Kentish sheep and hop and orchard country would look up 20 times a day—I myself among them—and watch the battles in the blue summer air. They must have watched with horror that day as Deere baled out of his disintegrating plane, his parachute not opening until he was perilously close to the earth. Yet Deere was flying again next day.

Two days later he had his oil tank shot away and had to force-land without his air speed indicator; soon afterwards his rudder was shot away and his engine set on fire. He bailed out again and landed in a plum-tree. Next morning his aerodrome was dive-bombed. A bomb fell immediately in front of him as he sat in his plane, blew the engine of the Spitfire out and sent the plane itself hurtling upside down with Deere in it, for 150 yards. He was helped out by a fellow pilot and ran for shelter. Afterwards he was put to bed and was still in bed, next day, when another raid began. He got up from his bed immediately, went up in his Spitfire and shot down a Dornier.

Shortly afterwards he was teaching tactics to a pupil. Something went wrong; the pupil collided with the teacher, cutting the Spitfire in half. Deere was caught in the wreckage of his plane and could not jump. The plane fell for several thousand feet before he could get clear. Half of his parachute harness had been torn off; the rip cord dangled out of his reach. Deere closed his eyes and waited, knowing there was nothing he could do. Suddenly his shoulders were violently

Equipped with "Mae Wests" for possible ducking in the English Channel, pilots of Fighter Command study the target of impending daylight sweep.



This "Wellington" caught fire during battle, was saved when rear gunner (left) beat out flames with parachute.

jerked by the parachute opening of its own accord. That day Deere was in hospital for the third time.

A large part of these adventures cannot be called heroic; they are examples of fantastic misfortunes which may and do happen to any pilot, any day, anywhere. Deere's career is remarkable because he brings to such a succession of events, any one of which might have been his death, an indomitable stoicism; the spirit of apparently careless fatalism which is an important part of the fighter pilot's make-up. Above all he brings to them, as almost every pilot does, a passion for flying. This passion, which in the lives of young pilots who have often known no other life than flying is a dominant quality, is well illustrated by the experience of a Hurricane pilot, Sq. Ldr. J. A. F. MacLachlan, D.F.C. and bar. MacLachlan is a young, exuberant, magnificent personality. In France he shot down six dive bombers in four days; over Malta he destroyed several Italians. He himself was finally shot down over Malta by an Me-109: a type for which the Hurricane of that day was far too slow. In that action MacLachlan lost his left arm and spent most of his time in hospital not only in an agony of physical pain but in an agony of mental pain—the agony

simply of fearing he would never fly again. Yet in 15 days from the time his arm was amputated MacLachlan was flying solo again; an enterprise most people would have been extremely chary of undertaking in 15 weeks. His joy at being able to fly again was precisely the joy of the ordinary man at being alive at all: not to have flown would have been synonymous, for him, with not being alive. Today MacLachlan flies with great skill, daring and success as a night-fighter, using a specially constructed intricate artificial arm in place of the arm he lost. He is an exceptional example of the fighter pilot in action: of the supreme individualism which even such physical disability as the loss of an arm (in the case of the famous Bader the loss of both legs) will not crush. It is this individualism, enabling them to undertake extreme risks because they know that failure can affect no one but themselves, that set fighter pilots apart from all the rest.

This individualism is not dominant, on the other hand, in the pilots of bombers and coastal aircraft. In planes carrying crews the attitude of the pilot is very different from that of the pilot flying alone; his position becomes much more like that of the captain of a ship. His word is, in fact, law; he is in absolute command. He must also not only think of the safety of others; he

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is aware that he depends on them—his navigator, his radio operator, his engineer, his gunner, his observer—not only for his own safety but for the success of his operation. They too are aware of the same thing. In consequence their outlook becomes much more like that of sailors; they are all in the same boat; they depend on the conduct and discipline of each other for the safety and success of their enterprises. Unlike the attitude of the fighter pilot, which is in the finest sense of the word autocratic, theirs is a superbly democratic attitude.

The successes of these men are not individual; they are the successes of units in which individuality is sunk. For this reason, and also because the flights of bombers and coastal planes are often long, dull and uneventful, they are much less publicized than those of fighters. It is only on such dramatic occasions as the sinking of the *Bismarck* and the pursuit of the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* that the work of Coastal Command suddenly lights up the headlines. But even in such a magnificent feat as the *Beaufort* torpedo attack by Flying Officer Kenneth Campbell V. C. on a battleship at Brest it is significant that the crew, all of them sergeants, are officially given the very greatest commendation. All of them died in that attack, and there are no medals to their names solely because the V. C. is the only British award which may be given posthumously. From this it is not wrong to assume, perhaps, that all of them share in that award.

Flying Officer Campbell, a Scot from Ayrshire, came to the RAF from the University Air Squadron at Cambridge. Flying a torpedo-carrying *Beaufort*, he began to distinguish himself very early: so that he was once pointed out to the Air Officer Commanding by his station commander as "a young man who before long is going to win the V. C." He was very successful and tenacious in attacking shipping; he sank a 3,000 ton supply ship in moonlight, made a direct torpedo hit on the port beam of a 6,000 ton vessel off the Dutch coast. He once attacked strong gun positions on the Dutch coast and was very much shot about in consequence, by two Me's. His wireless operator was wounded, the hydraulics shot away, the gun turret put out of action. He himself was wounded and lost a good deal of blood. He crashed on return to base, his aircraft very badly damaged. But he was very soon out on operations again.

These attacks were examples of the splendid tenacity which finally so astounded the Nazis in the attack on Brest that they could only conceive it as "being due to large quantities of whisky." The concentration of defences at Brest is undoubtedly one of the largest in the world. To attempt an attack there with torpedo-carrying aircraft was an extremely dangerous enterprise. It was almost certain that Campbell would never return. He did not return. It would be more accurate to say that "they did not

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return." Sergeant Scott, a Canadian boy of 19, Sergeant Mullis, a Somerset farmer, and Sergeant Hillman, a London chauffeur, shared in the fury and glory of an attack they never lived to describe but of which the success has never been in doubt. It is typical of German mentality that the tenacity of those four men should have struck them as being artificially created.

The whole attitude of the bomber pilot in action is very similar. Long journeys in darkness, intense cold, frost-bite, flak that has been described by one of them as filling the sky like the paper streamers of a ballroom, the difficulties of taking-off and landing in darkness: those are a few of the routine problems of the job. There is a popular notion that the pilots of fighters are all very young, wild and volatile, and that the pilots of bombers are older men, dour, cautious, steady. This is not true. There are plenty of instances where the pilots of *Stirlings*, for example, are boys of 19 and 20. Moreover it is not the bomber pilot but the fighter pilot who, in the periods of preparation for action at least, strikes one as being cautious. It is the bomber pilot who, off duty, strikes one as being volatile. The reasons are again quite simple. The fighter pilot must always be ready; his orders to fly may give him less than five minutes to reach his plane. His recreations must be sober, rather limited, never excessive. The bomber pilot, on the other hand, is briefed some hours before he flies. Once his trip is over it is unlikely that he will fly again, except in an emergency, for a day or even two days. And since his trip has occupied six, eight or even more hours, he has accomplished, in one night, the equivalent of three, four or more fighter operations. He is entitled to an equivalent rest. The cold, the vigilance, the danger, the nervous tension of those hours all produce a considerable and sometimes violent reaction. In consequence the bomber pilot, off duty, tends to behave something like a hilarious schoolboy released from unpleasant detention. His life, on operations, is one of violent extremes.

The strain of this violent way of living can be seen in the bomber pilot's eyes. They give the impression of not being correctly focussed. Strain and cold make them rather old and glassy. The eyes of the fighter pilot never give the same impression. Theirs is much more an expression of exhilaration. Their triumph when it comes, is a personal one. But in a bomber there is far less likelihood of a personal triumph. A pilot relies very much on the skill of his navigator; their co-operation is extremely and necessarily close. He relies on his rear-gunner for protection, for information about hostile aircraft and for warning of ascending flak; it is through this information that he can take evasive action. He relies equally on his radio operator. He relies on his engineer. There have been many cases where these men have accomplished outstanding performances, even cases where a navigator, when his pilot has been wounded or killed, has piloted and successfully brought home a plane. But the greatest performances on bombers are probably all collective; the

crew are indivisible; their comradeship, morale and unselfish tenacity are not equalled in the world.

It is in fact hardship rather than heroism which, in a survey of bomber exploit, seems more remarkable. The story of a *Wellington* crew composed of a pilot officer and five sergeants who spent 57 hours in a dinghy before being rescued is astonishing but not, as an example of fortitude and discipline, unique. The objective of this *Wellington* was Berlin; the cloud over England thickened into impenetrable masses over Germany. It was a night of great difficulties: so that in all we lost 37 bombers. Thirty miles from Berlin the *Wellington* was hit—"we heard a crack and everything in the aircraft shook"—but the flying capacity of the bomber was unaffected. The captain, Pilot Officer L. B. Ergeland, took the plane on over the capital, dropped all his bombs except his incendiaries and then turned back. On the way home the bomber was hit again and almost simultaneously the second pilot, Sergeant D. A. S. Hamilton, and the rear gunner, Sergeant A. V. N. Fry, reported that the plane was on fire. The captain, opening the door behind him, saw an appalling sight. The fuselage was full of smoke: flames were rising through the floor and creeping up the sides of the plane. The racks of incendiaries, not dropped over Berlin because of bad visibility, were burning furiously along the whole length of the plane.

The fight against that fire went on for a long time. From the ground every ack-ack battery in its course fired at the blazing bomber. The pilot tried to jettison the burning incendiaries but the electrical switch would not work. The wireless operator sent out repeated messages. The front gunner carried the orders of the captain to the rest of the crew. The second pilot beat at the fire with the burning window curtains which he had ripped down and extinguished with his hands.

While the crew were fighting the fire in the interior of the bomber, flames had spread along one wing, burning part of it away. The plane had all this time been losing height. It crossed the coast finally at 1,000 feet. And because he liked the chances of the sea rather than the chances of enemy territory, the pilot flew on. Twenty-five minutes after that decision the petrol ran out. The flaming aircraft had been flying for nearly three hours. The cases of the incendiaries were still burning.

When the bomber came down into the sea its back was broken. It sank almost immediately; the flotation gear which keeps an aircraft on the surface for a few precious minutes had been burnt away. The crew scrambled into the dinghy. The pilot had an injured leg, a face badly cut by being thrown forward against the instrument panel. The rest were unhurt.

They waited for dawn and it was a lovely day. The sea was very calm and the sun very warm and about 10 in the morning *Hurricanes* flew over the sea in the distance, not seeing them at all. A plane came over and dropped Very lights, but it was too high for them to

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identify. They paddled all that day and then, taking turns, two at a time, all the following night. The next day the weather was very bad. The dinghy, though always seaworthy, shipped plenty of water, and they baled with tins and their hands. It was colder too and they rationed their food, which was biscuits and chocolate, and their drink, which was rum and water—enough for six days.

That night the wind came up even more strongly. But when the sun came up they saw a buoy go floating past them at "a devil of a speed with the tide." That buoy encouraged them enormously. They saw the coast too in the distance and began to paddle frantically, "like ding bats," for fear of being carried away from it again. They began to be taken ashore very fast and finally they could see people. They waved and the people ashore waved back. They paddled to within 20 feet of the shore and then the seas finally drove them in to the outstretched hands of the rescuers.

The files of bomber operations are full of such stories. The individual details change from story to story. The effect remains the same. These stories are rarely publicized; yet they are the solid foundation which make the great spectacular raids on Augsburg and Brest, Lubeck and Rostock, Skoda and Trondheim, Cologne and the Ruhr, possible. Behind the courageous who are decorated stand the courageous who are undecorated. Who is to choose between them? The whole world has heard of the great exploit at Augsburg of the crew of a *Lancaster*; only a little group of people has ever heard of the Australian pilot with whose story this article began. But between the crew of a triumphant *Lancaster* and the crew of a disintegrating *Stirling* there is really, in the final assessment, no difference at all. Their status is one with that of all fighter pilots sweeping the coast of France and of all *Beaufort* crews torpedoing ships; one with all night fighters intruding over France and all *Swordfish* piling themselves up in the decks of battleships. They have a common and in the end an anonymous name. They are the men in action.

END

Malta, G.C.

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aerodromes on the island," wrote an observer. "At some periods today the air was filled with battling aircraft, while at others hundreds of cotton wool puffs of bursting shells floated across the sky." Squadrons of Junkers and Messerschmitts released from the Russian front were increasing the tempo. Life was a dangerous business; though by this time there were more than 6,000 shelters hewn out of the island rock, with nearly treble that number under hasty construction. Most were equipped with electric light and wireless; there was also provision for

On the afternoon of Wednesday, March 26, *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes* shot out of the sky a formation of 30 Junkers Ju-88's flying in pairs, the usual protecting Messerschmitts stepped above them. At least half the enemy did not get back, but within a short while a second formation raided the Grand Harbour. This time it was the turn of the anti-aircraft gunners, whose barrage was so intense and so accurate that many of the raiders failed to get through, their bombs falling harmlessly in the water.

The next day came the heaviest attack so far. For six hours wave after wave of Stukas and Junkers Ju-88's showered down high explosive on the defenders. The first wave, 15 Ju-88's, came in at noon on a southeasterly course, swerving suddenly to attack the Grand Harbour; a few minutes later came a similar wave, and then a third. For 20 minutes all hell was loose. Naval ordnance, Bofors and other anti-aircraft units put up a "steel curtain" across the harbour mouth. *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes* ripped wide open the enemy formations. Nevertheless, the damage was considerable.

During the first week in April Malta was facing some 500 aircraft, half of them bombers. On Tuesday, April 7, more than 300 bomber sorties were flown against the island, hostile fighter sorties numbering over 50 more. Hardly a single Italian bomber was seen. The Luftwaffe had taken over.

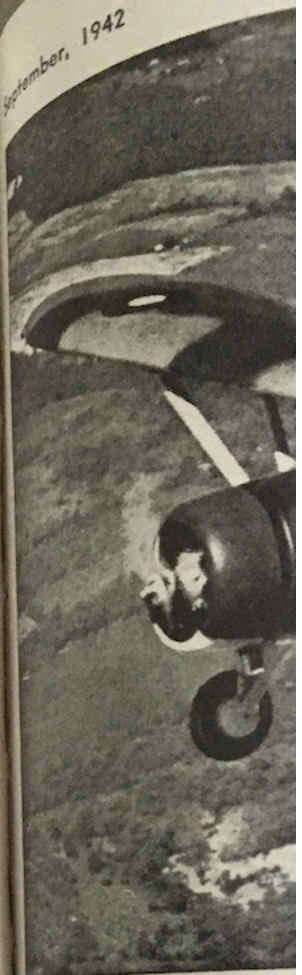
Then came a lull—that is, the bomber sorties dropped to a mere daily hundred. Kesselring's grand slam was still to come. The Nazi air chiefs were impatient—they were badly behind schedule. On Hitler's birthday, starting with a breakfast time raid, they struck again: then for two days, in full strength, they blasted the island. But the *Spitfires* did some blasting too. Incidentally, an American pilot officer, still celebrating the Fuehrer's birthday the day after, got a trifle rough with a Ju-88 and Me-109, both "probables" being shot up in little more than a matter of seconds.

That typifies the speed of combat. Pilots who were in the Battle of Britain said that the Malta show was fought at a quicker pace. The target was small, the vital area being at most five miles by three, and often much less than that when attacks were concentrated on the harbour. So thick was the traffic that air collision was a constant danger. As for the aerodromes, they were so pockmarked with craters that a fighter taking off had to pick its way and could never be sure of finding comfortable space to land. Ground staffs slept in snatches. When not servicing they were filling up craters; and both jobs had to be done under constant pounding from the air.

Two American pilot officers, one from Norwich, Conn., and the other from Berkeley, Calif., once had the luck to meet the enemy on equal terms. While on patrol they saw two Messerschmitts several thousand feet below them. The Californian took the one on the right. swooping down he let go with all he had,

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