

The Gossip

HORNTON

Issue Number 39



AUTUMN 2000

ONLY BIRDS AND FOOLS FLY, AND BIRDS DON'T FLY AT NIGHT

(A shortened version of the address given by Lord Tweedsmuir at THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN SERVICE held at the Parish Church on September 17th).

What were they like, those pilots who flew all the long summer days against enemy forces which must have seemed numberless: who, when shot up, crash-landed or parachuted down, very often found another aircraft and went up to fight again?

They were very young men for the most part, some scarcely out of school - cheerful, boisterous, easygoing, happy to be allowed to fly, something which many of them, since childhood, had longed to do. I don't think they bothered their heads much about the larger aspects of war and world politics, or the reasons why they were required to pit their skill and courage against the German air force. They simply knew that their country was in danger and that they were charged with its defence. There were also a number of them who, if they were not killed, ended up highly decorated. Such men enjoyed every aspect of aerial combat, whilst others were often terrified yet carried out their orders just the same.

Those young men, by today's standards, were extremely innocent. Loving to play games, many of them had travelled for miles of a Saturday with a bag full of football kit, to play at remote small clubs. It was there, at after match parties, that they learned to sing very shocking songs, the burden of which bore no earthly resemblance to their emotional lives. Most had little or no experience of the opposite sex, mothers and sisters apart, and were at first inclined to be shy with women.

Taken together those pilots were a remarkable cross section, for the extrovert majority was diversified with poets and scholars - some whose university careers had been interrupted by war - athletes, musicians, writers-to-be, and some scions of well-known families.

I may not have had a part in the air-fighting of 1940 but I was immensely lucky that my first posting to an operational unit was to 32 Squadron, which had so distinguished itself flying from its base at Biggin Hill in Kent. Thus I spent my days among seasoned fighters. I listened to their stories and came to admire their spirit as I relished their particular sense of humour. More than this, since I had always been specially attracted to foreigners, I was happy to have as colleagues Poles, Czechs and Free French, who quite outnumbered the British element among the officers.

These men had found their way to England to continue fighting an enemy whom they had every reason to hate. Each one of them had lost family and friends, homes and possessions and, at last, a beloved country. They were single-minded in their hatred, to a point where those of us who had not suffered as they had, felt hopelessly inadequate. A Squadron was a kind of family, close-knit and self-sufficient. We were impatient of any authority other than that of our Squadron Leader and the two flight-commanders. We thought poorly of staff-officers, even when they were pilots. When I came back from the East in late 1944 I became one myself and, of course, found that staff-officers were really splendid people, hard-working, honourable and sadly misunderstood!

Sixty years is a long, long time over which to stretch one's memory. Even so, certain things come back with surprising immediacy: the laughter, the friendship, the drinking sessions when we sang those deplorable songs, and to memory's nose the scent of warm grass mixed with high octane exhaust: to memory's ear the sound of engines running up, the telephone orderly's bellowed - "Scramble!" which got us into the air.

I have touched on things which will occupy writers and broadcasters for many years yet, of the courage and devotion of those young men who so selflessly hazarded their futures, and too often lost their lives in that far-away summer sixty years ago.

German bombers caused great devastation to our cities. Night after night they dropped their bombs onto London. Many Londoners lost their homes and all their possessions. Many children were evacuated to the country to escape the bombs.

Approximately 60 children from London were taken in by Hornton people and spent the war years here.

Charlie Evans was one such youngster who came from the East End. He was taken in by Mr. & Mrs. Price, a middle aged couple who had no children of their own. They treated him as a son. Mrs Price was a staunch Methodist and went to Chapel every Sunday. She took Charlie with her and he has been going ever since! Mr. & Mrs. Price died several years ago but Charlie still keeps in contact with Hornton and visits every year.

The BBC are planning to commemorate the Battle of Britain and Blitz by screening two Songs of Praise programmes from Plaistow, in the East End of London. They will be screened on Remembrance Sunday (Nov 12th) and the following Sunday. One of them is planned to include an interview in Hornton Methodist Chapel with Charlie.

HORNTON CHAPEL ON SONGS OF PRAISE!

