

bomber and Coastal commands, which bombed German targets throughout the Battle of Britain. Hundreds more served as air mechanics, navigators, wireless operators, and air observers. These 'other' Canadians made an invaluable contribution to the British war effort. But the Battle of Britain was above all a battle for fighter pilots. Before the battle started, the German Luftwaffe seemed invincible. It had helped Hitler crush Poland in less than three weeks; it led the way through Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France in less than three months. With the fall of France, it stood poised a scant 22 miles from the shores of Britain.

Hitler needed the Luftwaffe to eliminate Britain's air defences before a full scale invasion could begin. To many people on both sides of the war, it seemed likely to do so, quickly. The Luftwaffe easily outnumbered the British forces three to one. Their leader, Reichsmarshal Hermann Goring, boasted that his forces would crush the RAF in four days.

In fact, the battle that ensued lasted 114 days, while the outcome of World War II and the future of the civilised world hung in the balance. When it was all over, Hitler had met his first decisive defeat of the war; his total strategy had failed. He abandoned plans to invade Britain.

But those 114 days took their toll. The Battle of Britain was unlike anything the world had ever seen. Day after day, hundreds of German aircraft crossed the Channel. Day after day, a handful of fighter pilots scrambled to meet them. For Steve Haley, a pilot with RAF 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron, the numbers were staggering.

Haley, whose father was an 'oil man' from Petrolia, Ontario, was just starting university in Cambridge when war broke out. At 19, he found himself in control of a Spitfire in RAF 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron. On August 24 his squadron was sent to Hornchurch in the south of England.

'I can remember first getting to the base,' Haley said recently from his home in London, Ontario. 'I arrived about 2 1/2 hours after the first pilots, and they had already flown in their first combat flights. One of them said "Good God, you don't have to look for the bastards - you've got to find a way out of them!"'

'The enemy formations always looked immense,' Haley added, 'and sometimes they really were immense. You'd find perhaps 200 bombers, with about 150 fighters packed around them. You'd pick a target, and it was every man for himself.'



No 1 Squadron, September 1940.

FRONT ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT):
Flying Officer O J Peterson,
Flying Officer W P Sprenger,
Sqn Ldr E A McNab,
Flying Officer E W Beardmore,

Flying Officer A D Nesbitt,
Flying Officer B E Christmas
BACK ROW:
Flt Lt W R Pollock,
Flying Officer C W Trevena,
Flying Officer E C Briese,
Flying Officer P B Pitcher,

Flying Officer P W Lochman,
Flt Lt E M Reyno,
Flying Officer S T Blaiklock,
Flying Officer R W Norris,
Flying Officer A M Yuile,
Capt W D Rankin (RCAMC).
PHOTO: DND PL 908

'Once you got airborne you were busy - the sweat was pouring down your face, and your neck was on a swivel, your brain was working as fast as it could. And of course, we were learning as we flew. We didn't have time to be afraid.'

Haley's squadron lost two thirds of its original pilots that summer, and Haley himself was shot down twice. The second time he was burned and required plastic surgery. When he recovered the Battle of Britain was over and he went on to fly missions in the Middle East.

Nineteen seems a very young age for someone to take on such heavy responsibilities. But during the Battle of Britain, anyone who survived past the age of 25 was called 'pops'. On that scale, many members of RCAF No 1 Squadron were decidedly ancient. Paul Pitcher, a Montreal lawyer, was 27; Hartland Molson,

who later became Senator Molson, was 33. 'We called ourselves the Tired Businessmen's Squadron', Molson recalls.

Pitcher says that fatigue - and fear - are what he remembers most about the battle. 'We were old, untrained, and frightened,' he says. 'Fatigue set in quickly. We were at it all the time, sometimes engaged four times a day. We didn't think about winning or losing in the long run. We just tried to make it through the next day.'

'The worst part was the apprehension, waiting for the call to scramble. Sometimes we would get a preliminary call putting us on five minutes alert. We all tried to act casual, but that part was bad. Once you were in the air, you didn't have time to be frightened.'

Pitcher had been to Austria in 1935, and was sure even then that war was

inevitable. He didn't want to be in the trenches, so he joined the RCAF Auxiliary Squadron in Montreal. That squadron amalgamated with No 1 Squadron and set out for Britain in May 1940.

He says he didn't really know what he was sailing into. France fell while the squadron was en route, and no one realized how heavily outnumbered the British would be in the air. 'But,' he adds, 'we learned that soon enough when we went up and took a look.'

'It was something we all sort of fell into,' Pitcher says. 'The decision to get involved was simple in those days. Today there may be good reasons for not getting involved in a war. But there were no good reasons for not getting involved in World War II. And once we were in it, we realised that what we were doing was important.'

Hartland Molson flew 62 missions in the Battle of Britain before he was wounded and had to bail out of his plane. But he talks more readily about the hardships endured by the British people than his own combat experiences. 'The living conditions in London were intolerable,' he says. 'There were burst water lines, so water was always a problem. There were burst gas lines, so fire was a problem. And there were thousands of people crowded into the underground for shelter.' Reminded recently that the summer weather in Britain this year was much the same as in 1940 Senator Molson replied 'you are probably praying for rain, as we were, but for a much different reason!'

In a letter home to his wife, now published in *The Molson Saga* by Shirley Woods, Molson wrote that

Everyone is calm and doing his job, and will continue to do so, but there is no longer a front where the war is going on and a place away from it for leave or relaxation in the old sense. Every person in London or in a factory or in a big town is in the lines, because the war is here. ...The police, the fire services, and thousands of volunteers in the auxiliary services are on the job at all times doing their work with an earnest will, coolness and cheerful bravery that makes your heart ache.

After recovering from his wounds, Molson was posted in various capacities in Canada, and served as an honorary aide-de-camp to Canada's Governor-General. He was later made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for his war service.

No 1 Squadron's Commanding Officer was Ernest McNab, from Regina. He wrote an article for the winter 1973 issue of the *Canadian Military Journal*, describing his group's 'biggest show', the decisive battle of September 15. 'There were so many aircraft in the sky there was as much danger of colliding with another fellow as there was of being shot down,' he wrote. 'There were more than 1000 planes in the sky south of London. I counted nine aircraft falling at one time, and there were parachutes everywhere.'

'The battle broke into dogfights and we returned home singly. We all felt that we had broken up Jerry's whole show, and that he would never come back again in such numbers. He never did.'

The Luftwaffe raids did continue after that day and into October, but the tide had changed. September 15 convinced even the Luftwaffe that Hitler and Goring had vastly underestimated the resources, talent, and sheer determination available to the British Fighter Command.

No 1 Squadron was later renamed 401 Squadron. McNab is dead now, and there are only 4 members left from the original group - Dal Russell, Arthur Yuile, along with Pitcher and Senator Molson. They see each other occasionally, but when they do the Battle of Britain is not often discussed.

As Paul Pitcher says, 'those are not really the good old days - it was just a job that had to be done: I don't think any of us wants to bathe in a sea of nostalgia over something we didn't really enjoy in the first place.'

It was a terrifying job, but one that the Canadian pilots of No 1 Squadron, RAF 242 (Canadian) Squadron, and 46 other



No 154 Hurricane taxiing: RCAF No 1 Squadron, Northolt, October 1940.

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