

THE SELMESTON 'RED DEVIL'



The Battle of Britain is the first decisive battle fought entirely in the air, mainly over London and the South Coast of England, and became a dramatic turning point in the early stages of World War Two.

Current residents of Selmeston are reminded of this great Battle as a Spitfire (or two) can be heard and seen flying over the village almost daily, ferrying aviation enthusiasts from Biggin Hill and around Beachy Head on a return trip, a flight mimicking the young '*Fighter Boys*' of 1940.

During the summer of 1940, the *Luftwaffe's* main objective was to eliminate the RAF both in the air and on the ground in order to gain air superiority by the Germans for a seaborne invasion of these Isles, known as *Operation Sealion*.

The Battle took place between the 10th of July and the 31st of October 1940, reaching a climax on the 15th September when the *Luftwaffe* flew more than a 1,000 sorties over England during the day, and losing 56 aircraft. There were five phases to the whole Battle, *Phase 1* was to attack shipping in the Channel, drawing the RAF into defending them. *Phase 2* took place between the 8th and 18th August when coastal radar stations and airfields were attacked, followed by attacks on just the fighter airfields, along with increased attacks on the cities at night.

The *4th Phase* was the nightly attacks on London commencing on the 7th September, lasting most of that month (and into the New Year) which became known as *The Blitz*. Although serious, it came as a bit of a respite for the RAF, and vital relief for the fighter airfields, who were, up till then, under extreme pressure, with ground crews often having to work a 16 hour day in order to repair and keep aircraft airworthy.

The final *Phase* took place during October when there was a decline in daylight attacks, with an increase in bombing of the major ports and industrial centres. The Battle finally drew to a close by winter with Hitler and Reich Marshal Goering realising an invasion would be impossible without air superiority, and turned their sights instead, on invading Russia in the new year.

Fighter Command lost over 1000 aircraft, in the Battle, with the Luftwaffe losing nearly 1900, along with 2,500 of its aircrew. There were fewer than 3000 aircrew from Britain, the Commonwealth and Allied nations that took part, sadly 544 were killed during the Battle, with a further 791 killed before the end of the war.

Winston Churchill went on to say; *“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”*



Around 12.30 on Monday 12th August, Selmeston's resident Police Constable, Frederick Finley was just sitting down to lunch with his wife in the Police House (now known as *East View*) when they became aware of yet another daily air battle going on overhead. Not an uncommon event in this village to hear the rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns and screaming engines of two combatant aircraft. On this occasion, the aircraft sounded very close and low, drawing the Finley's away from their table to examine the sky. It soon became clear that this battle was taking place between a British Hurricane and a German Messerschmitt 109E, which was damaged, and rapidly losing height in this combat, eventually crashing into a nearby field. Quickly on the scene was a local farmer who saw the pilot attempting to walk away from the crash, (*Margaret Hughes recounts her father telling her that the farmer *'liberated'* the pilots flying boots, then disappearing, before the arrival of others).

PC Finley thought it must be in the area of *Mays Farm* and requested his wife to phone the Divisional HQ at Bexhill Police Station, and make them aware of the days events, whilst he cycled towards the crash site.



Police House - Selmeston now named *East View*

Bexhill Police in turn, informed the Hailsham Control Room and RAF Biggin Hill. Mr and Mrs Finley were not the only ones aware of the 'dogfight' taking place overhead, along with the other Selmeston villagers. Sergeant Major Moule of D Troop 326 Battery Royal (Coastal) Artillery operating from Alfriston, was watching the action in the air through his binoculars, and had already alerted two armed guards, to accompany him to Selmeston. On arrival they took the pilot into custody, laying him down amongst the haystacks, waiting for an ambulance to arrive, and also seizing his official papers.



These papers revealed him to be, Unteroffizer (*Sergeant*) Leo Zaunbrecher born 14.2.1917, (official number L 37120), who had suffered a bullet wound in his left shoulder blade, along with other minor injuries.



PC Finley stayed at the scene until the ambulance arrived, taking the wounded pilot with two armed guards to the Princess Alice Hospital in Eastbourne.



Further armed guards were placed around the aircraft, with instructions not to allow any of the residents (who by now, had gathered to watch events) anywhere near the downed aircraft.

Inspector Morris at Bexhill Police Station had already dispatched PC's Heard and Ashby along with Detective Constable Taylor to the scene, all who arrived at 1.25 pm (obviously no traffic on the A27 in those times!).



Site of Crash at Mays Farm - Stonery Farm Can Be Seen in the Background

Flying Officer Eals from RAF Biggin Hill had also been dispatched, arriving at the scene later that afternoon with other officials. He noted that the Me 109 had a large red number 14 painted on both sides of its fuselage, and painted on its tail were 2 small black oblongs (German code for 2 enemy aircraft destroyed) along with the number 3367. On the left hand side of the cowling in front of the cockpit was an image of a little *Red Devil* with a bow and arrow, within a circle, the aircraft had a red propellor spinner. It was later identified as an aircraft from *No 5 Staffel* (Squadron) of *Jagdgeschwader 52* (Fighter Wing), based in Northern France. Unusually, the aircraft was fitted with a rear view mirror fitted above the windscreen frame. That fixture apparently didn't help Zaunbrecher to see the British Hurricane behind him, firing a hail of .303 bullets towards him, which would bring him down amongst the haystacks in a Sussex field.



[Note the bullet holes around the black cross](#)

**Post war information revealed that the intention of the Luftwaffe on this day was to knock out the radar stations at key points, Dover, Pevensey, Rye, and Ventnor in the Isle of Wight. In doing so, the RAF would not have 'the eyes' to see that more German bombers were on their way to destroy the RAF airfields.

It would mean that these bombers could only be detected by visual means, making it too late for RAF Squadrons to get airborne. This was in readiness for a major assault the following day known as *Adler Tag* (Eagle Day).

On the 12th August, 31 German aircraft of all types were shot down, with 22 RAF fighters destroyed, along with 11 pilots losing their lives.

At 1220 hrs on this day, 615 Squadron were 'scrambled' from RAF Kenley to fly towards Southampton where a large force of German bombers had appeared on the still working RAF radar screens. En route they were vectored to intercept another large force around Beachy Head and ran into 5 Me 109's defending the bombers.

Red Section immediately went into the attack, with Flight Lieutenant Gaunce shooting down one in flames, whilst another blew up, with Pilot Officer Hugo shooting down another, which crashed into the sea, the German pilot seen waving to him. Meanwhile, Pilot Officer McClintock (on his first combat mission) was chasing another Me 109. His Combat Report brings some colour to his attack;

At 1250 hrs I was No 2 in Red Section (A Flight) between Brighton and Beachy Head when we met a number of Me 109's at about 15,000 feet. After circling I attacked a single 109 from the beam. I was diving and he was climbing. As I closed he throttled back. By the time I was in range his speed appeared to be Nil, and I fired one long burst closing to within 50 feet. Almost hitting him I turned hard left and down, and he disappeared turning right, when I pulled out he was not in sight, but I am sure he was hit.

FORM F

COMBAT REPORT.

Sector Serial No. _____ (A) _____

Serial No. of Order detailing Flight or Squadron to _____
Patrol _____ (B) _____

Date _____ (C) 12.8.40.

Flight, Squadron _____ (D) Flight: "A" Sqn.: 615.

Number of Enemy Aircraft _____ (E) 5.

Type of Enemy Aircraft _____ (F) ME.109.

Time Attack was delivered _____ (G) 12.50 hours.

Place Attack was delivered _____ (H) Between Brighton & Beachy Hd

Height of Enemy _____ (J) 4000'.

Enemy Casualties _____ (K) 1 ME.109 Damaged.

Our Casualties Aircraft _____ (L) Nil.

Personnel _____ (M) Nil.

GENERAL REPORT _____ (N) Nil.

_____ (P) _____

GENERAL REPORT. _____ (R) I was No. 2 In Red Section
We split up when we met a number of ME.109's at about 15000'. After
circling I attacked a single 109 from the beam. I was diving and he
climbing. As I closed he throttled back. By the time I was in range
his speed appeared to be NIL and I fired one long burst closing to
within 50'. Almost hitting him I turned hard left and down and he
disappeared turning right, when I pulled out he was not in sight, but
I am sure he was hit.

Signature *P. McClintock*
O.O. Section Red. Flight "A" *A/10*



** John Arthur Peter McClintock was just 20 years old during this combat, the son of Ronald and Mary McClintock of South Kensington. After leaving Wellington College he went to work in London flying with the Royal Auxiliary Air Force in his spare time, and called up with a Commission in August 1939, joining 615



Squadron flying Hurricanes.

On the 24th August 1940 he shared in the destruction of a He 111 German bomber, but was himself shot down into the sea two days later off Sheerness and rescued by the Navy. On November 25th 1940 his luck ran out when he was a passenger in a Magister aircraft when one of the wings came off at 200 feet, crashing at Sunningdale. He was cremated at St John's Crematorium, Woking.

On the 13th August, service personnel from No 49 Maintenance Unit from RAF Faygate came to the crash site to remove the damaged aircraft. Probably because it was in such a good state of repair along with the novel logo painted on its cowling, the Ministry for War decided to use it on a fund raising exercise around the country. Further propaganda photos were taken, one in particular showed an airman trying to cut away the *Red Devil* logo.



The Red Devil was taken to all parts of the UK, raising funds for further fighter aircraft to be built for the RAF, this photo shows it proudly displayed in Leeds.
*Obviously not by RAF personnel, as the wings have been positioned back to front!



The Selmeston Red Devil is well known in aviation circles, and has been fully researched, both in print, and the internet, and appears in many publications about The Battle of Britain.

It's fame still lives on in the north of England due to the famous war artist Paul Nash (who must have been in the area of Selmeston at that time) depicting the crash site in a watercolour, titled '*Encounter in the Afternoon*', and now on permanent display in the *Manchester Art Gallery*.

This clearly shows the *Red Devil* grounded, with McClintock's Hurricane flying off in the distance. Nash has used a certain artistic licence in the painting, as it shows Mount Caburn in the near distance.



Encounter in The Afternoon (Manchester Art Gallery)

Paul Nash





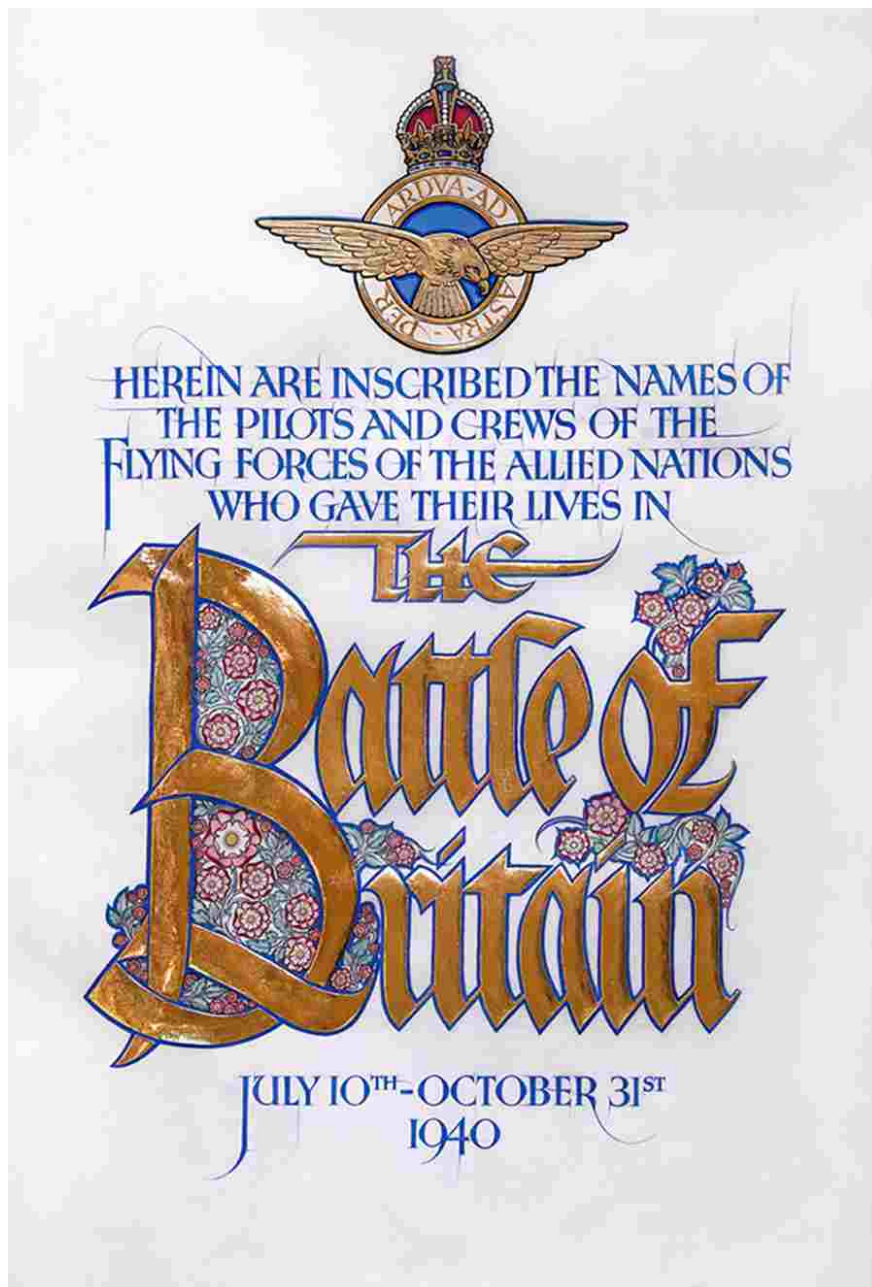
The Selmeston Red Devil can now even be bought in a model kit form

Rather strangely, another Me 109 was shot down over Selmeston within a few weeks from the Red Devil. This other Messerschmitt 109 came to rest at Lower Mays Farm on September 27th 1940.

On this day Hans-Dieter John was the 21 year old pilot of a Me 109 marked as Black 11 (3369) from 3 /JG27 . His mission was to protect a group of Luftwaffe bombers that had been detailed to fly around the South Coast for an hour trying to entice the RAF to engage them, exhausting their ammunition and fuel, whilst a heavier force was dispatched to bomb London unhindered. The German pilots luck ran out over Lewes when one of the anti-aircraft gun emplacements managed to hit his radiator, also setting his aircraft alight. He managed to take to his parachute, landing in the fields of Lower Mays Farm, he was quickly captured, probably by the same Home Guard that had kept watch on the Red Devil!



His Me 109 smashed into the ground some 250 yards away, a complete write-off (no triumphant tour of the UK for this one). © **Simon Muggleton**



With grateful thanks to:-

DB Colour

National Archives

AirCrew Remembered Website

Manchester Art Gallery

Battle of Britain Memorial Website (Westminster) - Ted McManus

Battle Over Britain - Francis Mason