

HURRICANE



TOP
*Hurricanes from
73 Squadron
over France,
circa early 1940.*
(KEY COLLECTION)

ABOVE
*Hurricane pilot
and ace, Edgar
James Kain.*
(VIA AUTHOR)

Edgar James Kain, known throughout his RAF career as 'Cobber' due to his Antipodean roots, was born in June 1918 in Hastings, New Zealand, and educated in Wellington. Keen on military aviation, he joined the Wellington Aero Club in 1936 where he showed aptitude as a pilot. He made his first solo in a Moth after seven hours of dual flying and went on to gain his 'A' licence.

In December 1936 he joined the RAF and completed his basic

training at the civilian flying school at Brough near Hull, flying the Blackburn B.2. On 26 March 1937 he was gazetted as an acting pilot officer and granted a short service commission. Kain gained his wings while flying Hawker Harts and Furies and in November he was posted to 73 Squadron based at Digby near Lincoln. He showed great flair as an aerobatic pilot and gave a display in one of the unit's Gloster Gladiators at the Empire Air Day of 1938. ►

TOP GUN

NEW ZEALANDER 'COBBER' KAIN ACHIEVED ACE STATUS DURING THE BATTLE OF FRANCE IN 1940, FLYING A HAWKER HURRICANE.

GRAHAM PITCHFORK EXAMINES HIS COMBAT CAREER AND UNTIMELY DEMISE AT JUST 21 YEARS OF AGE.





ABOVE
Personnel of 73 Squadron (air and ground crew) at Digby on 20 January, 1938.
(KEY COLLECTION)

RIGHT
Gloster Gladiators of 73 Squadron at Digby on 20 January, 1938.
(KEY COLLECTION)

During the summer of 1938 the squadron re-equipped with Hawker Hurricanes. It was operational when war broke out, by which time Kain had been promoted to flying officer. On 9 September the unit moved to the area around Le Havre, France, with 1 Squadron to form the Hurricane Wing of the Advanced Air Striking Force under the control of 67 Fighter Wing. A month later the squadron moved to Rouvres in the Calvados region of Normandy in Northern France.

In the first few weeks of the deployment, the Hurricanes flew around France to allow the French air force and the anti-aircraft gunners to recognise the new fighter. On 29 September Kain displayed his aircraft over Calais to demonstrate it to the anti-aircraft company but this did not stop the battery opening fire and damaging the Hurricane's wooden propeller. Cobber had to make a forced landing on a nearby beach.

FIRST BLOOD TO KAIN

At a conference at 67 Wing HQ at Reims, the two squadron commanders were briefed that their units' primary tasks in the event of an invasion was to escort RAF bombers and fly patrols to counter enemy raids. No.73 Squadron was given the area from Thionville to Verdun to protect.

During the morning of 8 November, Kain was on patrol at 15,000ft (4,600m) when he saw bursts of anti-aircraft fire in the distance and he climbed towards the area. Soon identifying a Dornier

“HE OPENED FIRE WITH HIS EIGHT MACHINE GUNS AND SAW STRIKES ON THE PORT ENGINE OF THE GERMAN AIRCRAFT, WHICH WAS ON A RECONNAISSANCE FLIGHT”





17P, he began pursuit and opened fire with his eight machine guns and saw strikes on the port engine of the German aircraft, which was on a reconnaissance flight. Kain manoeuvred into position for a second attack as the Dornier started to climb. As he opened fire at 250 yards, his Hurricane was hit by the French anti-aircraft gunners and it fell away smoking, but Kain had delivered a lethal blow to the Dornier, which dived into the ground near Metz. He landed safely and claimed his first victory. Later in the day he drove to the crash site and recovered one of the Dornier's machine guns as a souvenir.

Fifteen days later he returned to the squadron mess with a further machine gun, a trophy from his second success. He had intercepted another reconnaissance Dornier 17P flying high above Rouvres and shot it down. The German crew baled out. Kain's victory was the first of a number that followed later in the day, with the pilots of 1 and 73 Squadrons sharing in seven more successes.

CLASHING WITH THE MESSERSCHMITTS

The bitterly cold winter of 1939-1940 saw little aerial activity in northern France and it was not until early March that the six Hurricane squadrons based on the continent began to see more action. On 2 March 1940, four Hurricanes of 73 Squadron, including one flown by Cobber, took off in the late morning to escort a French Potez 63 bomber. Kain saw a formation of Messerschmitt Bf 109Es and manoeuvred to attack. Led by the future ace Oblt Werner Mölders of III/JG 53, the Bf 109s engaged the Hurricanes. In the resulting aerial battle, Cobber opened fire on two of the enemy aircraft and claimed to have shot one down. However, another Bf 109 attacked him from the rear and the engine of his Hurricane was damaged and caught fire. Worryingly, he was flying at 20,000ft and was well inside German territory. Despite the smoke and fumes, he could see the compass ►

LEFT

The wreckage of the Do 17P of 3(F)/33 shot down by Kain on 23 November 1939.

(CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)



LEFT

The smoldering remains of the Do 17P of 1(F)/123 downed by Kain on 8 November 1939.

(CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)



RIGHT

Thomas Pyne of 73 Squadron about to start his Hurricane's engine in France, circa late 1939. He was shot down while flying in Kain's section on 23 April 1940.

(CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)

and he managed to steer west and glide 30 miles (48km) to reach allied lines where he crash-landed near Metz.

Three weeks after this action, it was announced Kain had been awarded the DFC, the first to an RAF fighter pilot in World War Two. The citation for the award referred to his 'fine fighting spirit'.

Kain was clashing with the Germans again on 26 March. Three squadron aircraft had been in action during the morning when they had accounted for two Messerschmitt Bf 110s. In the early afternoon, Cobber led a trio of Hurricanes on a patrol at 20,000ft when four Bf 109Es were engaged over Saarlautern, just over the French border with Germany. He claimed one shot down in flames, but a second section appeared and Kain accounted for one of these before his Hurricane was hit and set on fire. He explained what happened: "There was a crash, the top of the hood was shot away, and my machine caught fire. I passed out for a moment. When I came to, the Hurricane was in a steep dive and flaming". Suffering minor burns to his face and hands, and shrapnel

BELOW

Kain, in roll-neck jumper, chats with fellow pilots of 73 Squadron having just landed at Reims-Champagne.

(VIA AUTHOR)





wounds in his leg, he regained control and baled out into no-man's land where he was picked up by a French patrol.

The action of 26 March made him an 'ace', the RAF's first in the Second World War. As a result he became popular with the national newspapers, and an international celebrity. His rugged good looks and ebullient and friendly nature soon made him a firm favourite with the press who were hungry for 'a story' during this Phoney War. Kain confessed to wondering what all the fuss was about. In his own eyes he was only doing his job, as were all his colleagues.

EVER POPULAR

Cobber was popular in his squadron, and although he was affectionately known as a 'mad devil', his ability as a fighter pilot was never challenged. He was not afraid to admit he had been 'scared stiff' when faced with having to use his parachute and had only done so when there was no alternative. He would not fly without a large greenstone Maori charm, which had been given to him before leaving New Zealand. He also named



all his aircraft *Paddy*. Altogether three different fighters carried the name at various times.

In April he spent some time in England on leave and became engaged to actress Joyce Phillips, which added to his popularity and generated more publicity. On the 23rd of that month he led a section to patrol the front line. He spotted a Bf 110 and attacked it, claiming it as damaged. However, the rest of the formation was bounced, with Sgt Colin Campbell wounded and having to bale out and Sgt Thomas Pyne, who was also injured, making a force-landing.

ON THE MOVE

No.73 Squadron had just moved to Reims-Champagne, the first of a number of new locations over the next four weeks, when German forces launched their Blitzkrieg against the Low Countries and France during the early morning of 10 May 1940. This heralded a period of intense activity for the RAF squadrons based in France, and Kain was in constant action as his claims mounted rapidly. ▶

TOP

Another view of the 3(F)/33 Do 17P shot down by Kain on 23 November 1939.

(CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)

ABOVE

A 73 Squadron Hurricane Mk.I wearing its pre-war codes.

(CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)

LEFT

Air Commodore Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Air Officer Commanding 12 Group, taking the salute from 46 and 73 Squadrons at Digby in 1938.

(KEY COLLECTION)



RIGHT

Thomas Pyne's
73 Squadron
Hurricane being
rearmed.
(CHRIS GOSS
COLLECTION)



At 6am on the morning of 10 May he was patrolling at 20,000ft over Metz when he met nine Dornier 17Zs, which he engaged. He overshot the first but attacked a second; he saw his bullets hit the engines and fuselage and the enemy bomber began to burn, followed it down and saw it crash. At the end of this first day of intense fighting, the Hurricane squadrons claimed to have destroyed 44 enemy bombers and the RAF lost 15 Hurricanes in force-landings.

During the afternoon of the 11th, 73 Squadron launched ten aircraft to intercept a bomber force. Five were claimed as destroyed with Cobber claiming a Dornier 17 and a Bf 110. During the engagement, his aircraft was badly shot up and cannon strikes tore a large hole in the fabric, but he returned to base safely.

For most of the 12th the squadron was stood down but in the late afternoon Kain was on patrol when he came across a Hs 126 observation aircraft spotting for the army near Bouillon and shot it down.

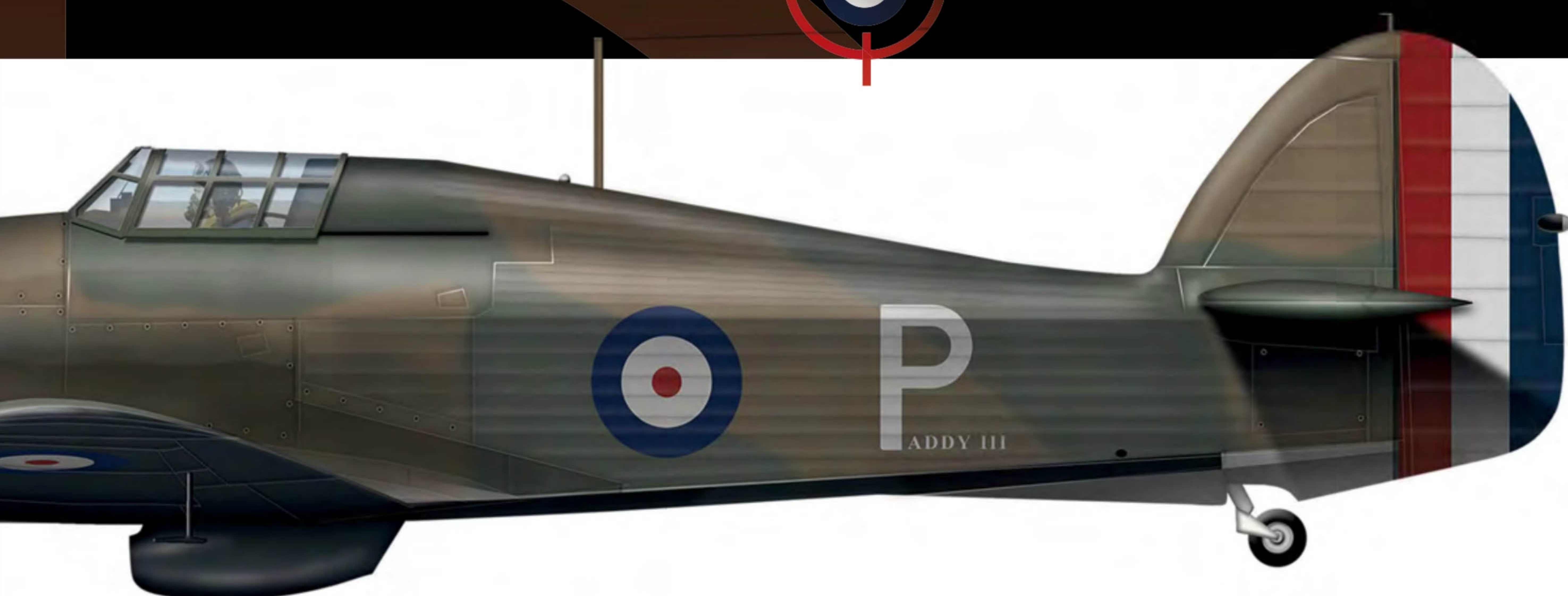
Five 73 Squadron Hurricanes were scrambled during the afternoon of the 14th led by the squadron commander, Sqn Ldr James More. Four Bf 109s had been reported attacking a convoy on the Givet-Namur road. The Hurricanes intercepted the enemy fighters and Kain was able to latch on to one and keep on its tail as it banked steeply. He managed to keep with it as it dived before getting in a long burst which sent the enemy aircraft crashing into a field.

“AT THE END OF THIS FIRST DAY OF INTENSE FIGHTING, THE HURRICANE SQUADRONS CLAIMED TO HAVE DESTROYED 44 ENEMY BOMBERS”

RIGHT

Edgar Kain
standing with
Hurricane 'Paddy
III' at Rouvres.
(VIA AUTHOR)





On the 15th, German Panzer formations made major thrusts through the Ardennes before swinging north while supported by bomber forces escorted by Bf 109s. The RAF squadrons of Fairy Battles had suffered huge losses in the first five days of war and some of the Hurricane units had to move to safer airfields to the west.

At 1.20pm, six Hurricanes of 73 Squadron engaged a formation of Bf 110s and the war correspondent Charles Gardner wrote in his newspaper despatch that Kain had probably destroyed one, although it does not appear to have been confirmed.

BATTLING AGAINST THE ODDS

Fighting was intense by the 17th and Allied ground forces were being pushed westward as others became trapped in the Pas de Calais region. Although some Hurricane units, reinforced by squadrons from 11 (Fighter) Group, were in constant action, it was a quiet day for No.73 until early evening. Two sections led by Kain took off and encountered a formation of Bf 110s, which he attacked, seriously damaging one. He then spotted a lone Junkers 88 and was about to strike when ten Bf 109s engaged him from out of the sun. Kain managed to escape after destroying one.

On 19 May major elements of the German armies continued their rapid advance towards the English Channel. Cobber and his colleague Fg Off 'Ginger' Paul were on a dawn patrol when they sighted two Dornier 17Zs, which they pursued, damaged and forced down near Metz. ▶

ABOVE

'Cobber' Kain's Hurricane Mk.I 'Paddy III'.

(ANDY HAY)

LEFT

Ever a popular member of the unit, 'Cobber' (right) is seen chatting with Sgt Don Sewell.

(VIA AUTHOR)



LEFT

No.73 Squadron airmen gathered around one of their Hurricanes. From L to R: Flt Lt Henry Hall (Adj), Sgt Leon Dibden, Sgt Syd Stuckey, Fg Off George Brothie, Plt Off Aidan 'Tommy' Tucker, Cobber Kain, Plt Off G S O Holliday, Sgt G H Phillips, Flt Lt Reg Lovett, Sgt Colin Campbell, Sgt T J W Humphrey and Plt Off James G Perry. (CHRIS GOSS COLLECTION)





RIGHT

Flying Officer
'Fanny' Orton – a
pilot who scored
15 victories in
France – with
Cobber at Reims-
Champagne.
(VIA AUTHOR)



As the day progressed, the air fighting intensified as the Luftwaffe supported the advance of the Panzers. No.73 Squadron launched a dozen Hurricanes, with Kain leading one flight to hit a large mixed force of German bombers and escorting Bf 110s. He attacked a Junkers 88 head on and shot it down before he engaged a lone Bf 110. His fire set an engine alight and it was seen to go down out of control. Three of the squadron's aircraft were damaged and had to force-land but the pilots were safe.

By the 20th, just ten days after the Nazi Blitzkrieg, the situation in France was dire for the Allies and the German advance from the south had reached the French coast near Abbeville, effectively cutting off the British Expeditionary Force as it

withdrew into what became known as the 'Dunkirk Pocket'.

The squadron had been forced to move southwards as the enemy advanced and at this stage, the Hurricanes and Spitfires of 11 Group, operating from airfields in southeast England, bore the brunt of the air activity in northern France. Nevertheless, where it could 73 Squadron continued to provide support although engagements became less frequent as fuel and spares grew increasingly scarce.

On the 25th Kain shot down a Dornier 17 near Rouen when his aircraft was damaged by return fire. The following day Kain found another Henschel 126 on army observation duties and shot it down.

His final success came on the 27th when he destroyed another Dornier 17. It is generally thought this was his 17th confirmed victory. A fellow fighter pilot in France was reported saying the New Zealander's score was "anything between 15 and 20".

TRAGIC LOSS OF A BRAVE MAN

By early June Kain and the surviving pilots of 73 Squadron were exhausted and due for a rest. He was the only one of the original pilots who had left for France who was still flying operations. On 6 June he was ordered home to take up an appointment as an instructor.

The following morning he took off in *Paddy III* from a landing strip at Description Échemines before turning to make a farewell flypast. He had completed two slow rolls at low level when he crashed and was killed. Not yet 22, he was buried in Troyes and later his remains were transferred to Choloy Military Cemetery in France, many miles from his native New Zealand. At the time of his death, Kain was the RAF's most successful fighter pilot. It was tragic, and ironic, that he should die in such a manner having survived crash landings, a bale out and injury.

In April he had cabled his mother in New Zealand to travel to England for his wedding. She was en route when he was killed and, instead of seeing him married, travelled to Buckingham Palace to receive his DFC from The King. ☺

BELOW

A Hurricane
Mk.I showing
its white and
black underside
camouflage.
(KEY COLLECTION)

