

THE MANY: RAF GROUND CREW

The 'Forgotten' Casualties

THE FIRST recorded casualties of the 'official' Battle of Britain period were Coastal and Bomber Command related and not connected with enemy action, occurring on 10 July at RAF Silloth, Cumbria when, whilst refuelling Avro Anson K5316 of 1 Coastal Operational Training Unit, AC2s Bill McNall, Len Ralph, George Roach and Syd Slater were all injured as a result of an accident. The following day it was RAF Bomber Command's turn when, whilst loading bombs to Vickers Wellington P9236 of 115 Sqn at RAF Marham, a bomb exploded injuring Flt Sgt Tom Allen and four

other ground crew. However, it would be another 16 days before the next casualties occurred. Yet again, it was an accident to a Bomber Command aircraft but this time seven would lose their lives, when, whilst loading bombs to Fairey Battle L5528 of 150 Sqn at RAF Newton in Nottinghamshire, one of the bombs fell off and began to burn. >>



Marking the end of the 75th anniversary year of the Battle of Britain, **Chris Goss** pays tribute to the 'forgotten' casualties of the battle – the RAF ground crew personnel who paid the ultimate price or else were wounded during the summer and autumn of 1940.

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RAF GROUND CREW IN THE BATTLE

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OF BRITAIN

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TOP RIGHT:

Armourers hurriedly re-arm a 19 Sqn Spitfire during the Battle of Britain as a re-fuelling bowser stands by to replenish the tanks.



RIGHT:

Apart from being bombed and attacked, RAF ground crew often lived in miserable conditions. Here, a trailer pump is employed to pump away rainwater from a tented accommodation area.



Despite an heroic effort from the aircrew and ground crew to put out the flames, the bomber exploded killing six men from 150 Sqn, with another man killed and one other injured from the RAF Newton station establishment. One of those who died was Flt Lt Walter Blom DFC. Blom had been awarded the DFC on 10 May 1940, the first day of the German Blitzkrieg. Despite his Battle being badly damaged and being drenched and almost blinded by fuel, he carried out his attack during which his bomber was further damaged. Nevertheless, he flew back 90 miles to Ecury-sur-Cooles where the Battle was classed as a write-off. Another who died in the same

accident was experienced ground crew Flt Sgt Bill Franklin, holder of the British Empire Medal. Sadly, there would be three more deaths before the month was over when three 'unauthorised passengers' were killed when Bristol Blenheim L6722 of 29 Sqn crashed off Worm Head in South Wales. These were the first ground-crew casualties directly associated with RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain period.

THE BATTLE STARTS

August 1940 started relatively quietly, but saw the first recorded RAF ground casualty to enemy action when Sgt Norman Dougal of 30 Maintenance Unit was injured in an air attack on RAF Sealand on 4 August. 8 August 1940 would then see the only Marine Branch fatalities of the Battle of Britain when AC1 Ray Wheeler was killed and Sgt Wilf Vosper killed as High Speed Launch HSL 116, based at RAF Calshot, was attacked by German aircraft off the Isle of Wight.

12 August 1940 saw the first major air attack on mainland Britain, and the days that followed would see corresponding increases in casualties on the ground. On this day, casualties were recorded at RAFs Lympne, Manston and Hawkinge in Kent and Gosport in Hampshire when it is believed that a total of 14 were killed and 10 wounded. The worst casualties occurred to personnel of 912, 930 and 933 (Balloon) Sqns based in and around Gosport as a result of a major attack on Portsmouth Harbour by Junkers 88s. The following day, 'Eagle Day' to the Luftwaffe, would be an even darker one for the RAF. Unopposed,

RIGHT:

Each RAF fighter was allocated a Fitter, Rigger and Armourer. Here, the three-man team help 'their' pilot into his parachute, 1940. The Spitfire is a machine of 609 Squadron.



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Junkers 87 Stuka dive bombers attacked the Coastal Command airfield at RAF Detling, Kent, killing 24 personnel from the Station and from 53 and 500 Sqns as well as the Station Commander, Gp Capt Edward Davis AFC. A further 42 personnel were wounded. Air attacks were also carried out against RAF Eastchurch in Kent (11 killed and 15 wounded, including a number of ground crew from the Spitfire-equipped 266 Sqn) and at RAF Andover in Hampshire where two were killed and one injured. As proof of the Luftwaffe's intent for this last attack, German records state that 12 Junkers 88s from III Gruppe/Lehrgeschwader 1 attacked Andover around 1700 hrs and scored six to eight hits on hangars to the south of the airfield and damaged eight to twelve aircraft outside the hangars

THREE TRAGIC CASUALTIES

14 August then saw a reduction in major German activity due to poor weather, but the Luftwaffe took the opportunity of sending



LEFT:
RAF Armourers re-arm a 73 Squadron Hurricane, early 1940.

individual aircraft against airfields, recorded as Abingdon, Little Rissington, Upavon, Brize Norton, Hullavington, Netheravon, Boscombe Down, Bicester, Worthy Down, Whitchurch, Cardiff, Old Sarum and Hamble to name but few. Attacks, and the inevitable casualties, were recorded at RAF Colerne near Bath with two

killed and seven wounded from 39 Maintenance Unit, at RAF Hullavington where four were killed and seven wounded and at Sealand with one killed and eight wounded. However, three tragic casualties occurred at about 1715 hrs at RAF Middle Wallop in Hampshire. Caught by surprise, the first the airfield knew was when a Junker 88 appeared overhead; a pilot from 609 Sqn relates what happened next:

'When the alarm sounded, a maintenance party under Cpl Bob Smith was ordered to close the huge steel-plated doors of one of the hangars. They were desperately winding on the big hand cranks when the bomb entered through the roof. The blast blew the doors off the upper guide rails'

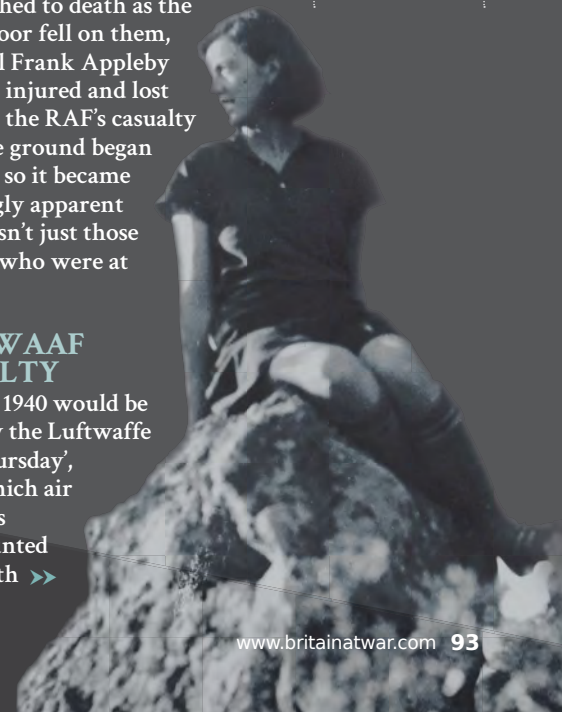
Bob Smith, together with LACs Harry Thornley and Ken Wilson, were crushed to death as the massive door fell on them, whilst Cpl Frank Appleby was badly injured and lost an eye. As the RAF's casualty toll on the ground began to mount, so it became increasingly apparent that it wasn't just those in the air who were at risk.

FIRST WAAF CASUALTY

15 August 1940 would be dubbed by the Luftwaffe 'Black Thursday', during which air operations were mounted as far north >>

BELOW LEFT
WAAF Groundcrew also served, including many who worked in Command, Group and Sector Operations Rooms. Remarkably, only three WAAFs were killed on the ground during the Battle of Britain.

BELOW:
WAAF Carol Lawry was one of very few WAAFs killed on the ground during the Battle of Britain.



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RIGHT:

One of the Ops Room 'watches' at RAF Biggin Hill, 1940. The station suffered a heavy toll of casualties during the Battle of Britain.

TOP RIGHT:

Corporal Josephine Robbins won the Military Medal during the Junkers 87 'Stuka' attack on RAF Detling on 13 August 1940. This painting, in oils, is by Dame Laura Knight.



as Montrose in Scotland and as far west as Portland in Dorset. As a result, RAF casualties on the ground saw a wide geographical spread. The worse hit airfield was RAF Driffield in Yorkshire, the home of 4 Group Towing Flight, 77 and 102 Sqs. Seven station and flying squadron personnel would be killed, or mortally wounded, with another 10 wounded. It would also see the first WAAF casualty when 19 year old ACW2 Marguerite Hudson was killed. Coming from Wadsley near Sheffield, she was later buried at Sheffield's Wisewood Cemetery.

15 August also saw attacks on RAF West Malling in Kent and Martlesham Heath in Suffolk but the attack which was to eventually lead to a shift in bombing to London occurred that evening when Croydon was attacked by German fighter-bombers. Casualties were inflicted on 111 Sqn ground crew (four killed and three wounded) and 1 Sqn RCAF (two wounded).

16 August would see attacks on airfields to the south predominantly in the Portsmouth area when Stukas attacked airfields at Tangmere, Gosport and Lee-on-Solent, causing

a significant casualty toll. However, there were a number of audacious attacks by either single raiders or small numbers aircraft against airfields in Oxfordshire, the most daring being against RAF Brize Norton at 1740 hrs which resulted in the destruction of around 46 training aircraft. Remarkably, and despite the destruction caused, just two airmen, AC1s John Orr and John Price, were recorded as being wounded.

A PARTICULARLY BAD ATTACK

After a day's respite, the Luftwaffe returned to the skies over Britain on 18 August-known since as 'The Hardest Day'. Major attacks occurred against RAF Kenley, Manston, Hornchurch, Biggin Hill and Ford with 15 RAF ground personnel killed or mortally wounded and another 26 wounded, although at Ford another 12 Fleet Air Arm personnel were killed, along with 8 civilians and 2 other service personnel. Ground crew casualties were suffered by 64 & 615 Sqs at Kenley, as well as highly popular 32 year old Flt Lt Robert Cromie, the Station and 615 Sqn's Medical Officer was also killed. He



was buried in his home town of Ballymoney, Country Antrim.

The days that followed saw another respite in attacks with the Luftwaffe carrying out lone or low number attacks. New on the list of airfields bombed was Bibury, just north of Cirencester in

BELOW

Carol Lawry's grave at Eastbourne's Ocklynge Cemetery, the headstone also remembering her husband, Kenwyn, killed just over a year later as a RAF Catalina crewman.





Gloucester where 92 Sqn (Spitfires) and 87 Sqn (Hurricanes) would be based in rotation. The Junkers 88 that bombed Bibury on 19 August 1940 was briefed to attack Little Rissington just to the north but attacked Bibury instead and was later shot down but the attack resulted in the death of AC2 Arfon Jones. A particularly bad attack that day was against Honington in East Anglia when 13 ground personnel from the Station, 9 and 311 Sqn were wounded but seven were killed. One of the injured was the first Czech ground crew casualty of the Battle-AC2 Miroslav Svitorka.

21 August 1940 would see a series of attacks to the west of England and Wales notably St Eval in Cornwall and Porthcawl in Wales. Porthcawl was the home to 3 General Armament School and 7 Bombing & Gunnery Schools, vital for training air gunners, whilst St Eval was a Coastal Command airfield. Eight

members of the Blenheim fighter 236 Sqn were wounded at St Eval and two killed and 12 wounded at Porthcawl.

HEAVY CASUALTIES AT BIGGIN HILL

The airfield attack phase of the Battle of Britain had about two weeks to run, but casualties began to mount. For example, five were killed and 13 wounded at Manston on 24 August and four 257 Sqn ground crew killed at Debden on 26 August. There would be only one casualty on 27 August. Following an air raid on Biggin Hill, 46 year old Sqn Ldr Eric Moxey took it upon himself to remove two unexploded bombs which were hampering operations. Sadly, at 2215 hrs, one of the bombs he was moving exploded killing him instantly;

his actions resulted in a posthumous award of the George Cross on 17 December 1940.

The last two days of the month would see heavy casualties at RAF Biggin Hill (30 killed and 13 wounded on 30 August) and Hornchurch and Debden (six killed, 12 wounded on 31 August). Clearly, the attack on Biggin Hill was severe and all but put the airfield out of action. It would also see two more female deaths-ACW1 Edna Button and NAAFI lady Mary Cremin. 39 year old Edna came from Tasmania and is buried in Cray in Kent whilst 24 year-old Mary came from Cork, Ireland, and is buried at Orpington.

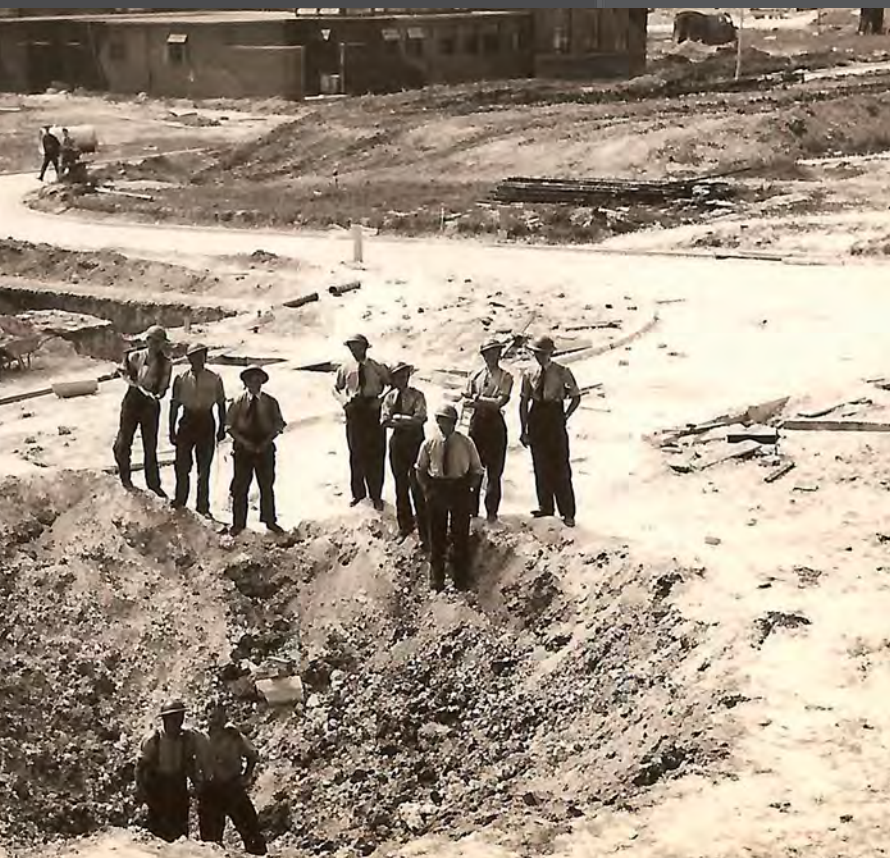
Another RAF Marine Craft casualty occurred in the English Channel off Newhaven on 4 September, when High Speed Launch HSL 121 was shot-up by two German aircraft wounding its master, Plt Off G L Bateman. Early September 1940 also saw the Luftwaffe continuing its major attacks against airfields as that part of its campaign drew to a close. The last airfield attack which saw casualties was again on the long-suffering Biggin Hill, >>>



TOP LEFT: Aircrew and ground crew of 609 Squadron gather around the NAAFI wagon between sorties.

TOP RIGHT: The hangar doors which were blown off their mountings at Middle Wallop on 15 August 1940, killing LACs Thornley and Wilson.

ABOVE LEFT: 'Take Cover!' RAF ground crew of 609 Squadron crouch in a shelter slit-trench.



LEFT: RAF ground personnel inspect a bomb crater at RAF Middle Wallop.

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ABOVE:

It wasn't only Fighter Command airfields that were hit during the Battle of Britain. These are battered Whitley bombers at RAF Driffield were hit on 15 August 1940 in a raid which also killed seven on the ground.

TOP RIGHT:

Ground personnel of 609 Squadron pose gleefully with trophies gathered from downed aircraft, 1940.

MIDDLE RIGHT:

Ground personnel work on an 87 Squadron Hurricane, 1940.

RIGHT:

The waiting game. Once aircraft were off the ground on a sortie, the ground crews had a tense waiting game before their aircraft hopefully returned.

when, at 1130 hrs on 5 September it was again bombed, resulting in one dead and four wounded. However, on 7 September 1940, the Luftwaffe switched its attacks to London, the first two casualties of this phase being AC2 Tony Haining and LAC Norman Low (both of whom were wounded) and were on the strength of RAF Halton. Both must have been in London when the bombing started. RAF ground casualties in 1940 were, from now on, fairly infrequent and even on 15 September 1940, regarded as Battle of Britain Day, just three RAF personnel were recorded as casualties on the ground, with one killed and one wounded in Southampton and one wounded in London. Attacks away from London did still occur, though, and on 26 September four members of 13 Maintenance Unit, RAF Henlow, were killed and four injured in just such an attack.

TRAGIC DEATH OF WAAF

October 1940 would see fewer casualties in London and other major cities but more to accidents as a result of the increase in RAF bombing

activities. There were a still number of notable days. 1 October saw a low-level attack on RAF Carew Cheriton in Pembrokeshire by five Dornier 17s which resulted in the first Dutch ground crew casualty with Leading Engineer C Barthen of 321 Sqn wounded and then on 6 October, Biggin Hill was attacked again with three killed and six wounded. A most unfortunate casualty occurred on 8 October 1940. Three Heinkel He 111s had been briefed to carry out nuisance attacks along the

south coast towards Southampton; just outside Eastleigh, two of them attacked 924 (Balloon) Sqn killing three and wounding five. However, just before this, one of the Heinkels had been hit by light anti-aircraft fire, collided with a tree and crashed on the lawns in front of Stansted House near Rowlands Castle on the Hampshire/Sussex border. Plt Off Gilbert Elliot was staying with Lord and Lady Bessborough and on seeing the bomber crash, rushed towards it only to be mortally wounded when it exploded, killing the five German



crew at the same.

For the remainder of the month, RAF casualties would occur across the UK, including, on 9 October, the last WAAF death of the Battle of Britain, ACW1 Carol Lawry. A survivor of the devastating attack on Kenley of 18 August, Lawry was caught in an air raid on Eastbourne whilst out shopping with her mother-in-law. As the bombs fell, she threw herself across Mrs Lawry senior, saving her life, but sadly suffering fatal injuries herself. A post-mortem revealed to her husband, Sgt Ken Lawry, RAF, that she was pregnant with their child at the time of her

death. At the time, Ken Lawry was under training at 9 Bombing & Gunnery School. (Sadly, Ken Lawry lost his life on his first operational flight with 413 Sqn just over a year later on 22 October 1941 when Catalina AH566 went down in the North Sea with the loss of all nine crew). Further north, Scotland wasn't spared when an attack on RAF Lossiemouth took place on 26 October 1940, not only resulting in a Heinkel 111 being shot down but causing five ground crew from 21 Sqn to be wounded and one killed when a direct hit by a bomb blew up Blenheim T2233, damaging another two Blenheims.

THE RAF'S YOUNGEST CASUALTY

No story of RAF ground crew killed during the Battle of Britain would be complete without mentioning AC1 Harry William Clack of 54 Maintenance Unit, the youngest RAF casualty of the Battle of Britain and almost certainly the youngest RAF casualty of the war. Aged just 16, and from the 39th (Boy) Apprentice Entry, RAF Halton, he was involved in recovering the remains of a Dornier 215 which had been shot down by fighters at Eaton Socon in Bedfordshire on 24 October 1940. During the recovery process the following day, the crane the unit were using touched overhead power lines and Harry was electrocuted, dying shortly afterwards. Son of Harry and Winfred Clack of South Norwood, he now lies buried in

Cambridge City Cemetery.

By 27 October the Battle of Britain was drawing to its close, but not before the Luftwaffe commenced Operation Opernball (Opera Ball) with attacks against Bomber Command airfields such as RAF Mildenhall, Lindholme, Honington, Great Massingham, Newmarket and Wattisham. The final airfield attacked, Wattisham, was hit on 30 October and saw the use of SD2 butterfly anti-personnel bombs resulting in Flt Lt Fred Berry and AC1 Frank Hamilton being wounded and with Sgt George Birkhead and Flt Sgt William Fisher killed. The four men are believed to

be the last RAF ground casualties of the Battle of Britain.

In total, some 312 RAF personnel were killed on the ground during the Battle of Britain and another 467 injured. When considered against the toll of some 535 RAF aircrew killed during the battle, it will be seen that the loss of life and of injury on the ground was indeed significant. To the aircrew went the glory. Of the ground crew, however, it should always be remembered: they also served. ☺



ABOVE: A fag and tea break. RAF ground crew take a breather as their aircraft wait in the dispersal pens.



LEFT: The shooting down of this Dornier 215 at Eaton Scoton resulted in the RAF's youngest casualty of the war when 16 year-old AC1 Harry William Clack was killed in an accident as a recovery crew cleared away the wreckage.

BELOW: At Ford, West Sussex, there was a mixture of RAF and FAA casualties in an attack on 18 August 1940. This memorial was raised in their memory, with the grave of RAF Corporal H D Starck just to the right of the memorial.



THIS MEMORIAL IS ERECTED BY THE CAPTAIN, OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION, FORD. IN MEMORY OF THOSE WHO LOST THEIR LIVES AS A RESULT OF ENEMY ACTION ON THE 18TH AUGUST 1940.

BURIED HERE ARE
 LIEUT. COMDR. WALTER J. MCC SPENS.
 AIR MECHANIC HENRY W. S. COOK.
 AIR MECHANIC ARTHUR T. W. TREVITHICK.
 AIR MECHANIC JOHN I. ASHTON.
 LEADING SUPPLY ASSISTANT FREDERICK A. STANTON.
 CORPORAL HENRY D. STARCK, R.A.F.
 CIVILIAN MOTOR DRIVER JOHN W. DIMENT.
 CIVILIAN MOTOR DRIVER STANLEY J. LARKINSON.
 CIVILIAN MOTOR DRIVER C. A. VILTON BERRY.

BURIED ELSEWHERE ARE
 LIEUT. COMDR. MALCOLM H. C. YOUNG.
 LIEUT. COMDR. THE HON. MICHAEL J. R. DE EDINREY.
 LEADING AIR FITTER IOWERTH L. DAVIES.
 AIR MECHANIC ARTHUR H. BAYNCTON.
 AIR MECHANIC JOSEPH HEALD.
 AIR MECHANIC CHARLES T. CONNOR.
 AIR MECHANIC JOHN R. COVILL.
 AIRCRAFTMAN J. G. HUYVELT, R.A.F.
 AIRCRAFTSMAN S. WOODHALL, R.A.F.
 CONSTABLE ARTHUR J. CUNNINGHAM, R.M.P.
 CIVILIAN STOKER HERBERT J. PERRING.
 CIVILIAN MOTOR DRIVER ERNEST B. BALLANTYNE.
 CIVILIAN WIRELESS OPERATOR THOMAS E. HILL.

