



FlyPast Spotlight

Fairey Battle

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90 Survivors



Main picture
Fairey Battle I L5343 at St Athan in 1990. This aircraft is now on display at RAF Museum Hendon. KEY-DAVE ALLPORT

Spotlight this month focuses on the Fairey Battle – a type that suffered grievous losses in the early stages of World War Two.



Spotlight

Fairey Battle

FlyPast

Scrutinizes the history of...

The Fairey Battle

A look back at the history of the ill-fated British light bomber

Right
Battle TT.I L5664
'JQ-O' of No.2
Anti-Aircraft Co-
operation Unit
based at Gosport,
Hampshire.

Sadly, the Fairey Battle is regarded by most historians as being among the RAF's least successful World War Two aircraft. Although clearly superior to the biplanes it succeeded, and fitted with the soon-to-be-legendary Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, units equipped with the type in the Battle of France in 1940 were decimated by the enemy.

The design of the Battle – a sleek, single-engined monoplane – certainly reflected the latest in aviation technology, and during tests it was quicker and more capable than the light bombers it was intended to replace. But once equipped with a three-man crew and weaponry, the Battle proved slow, cumbersome and immensely vulnerable. After a catastrophic campaign in France, it was rapidly

taken out of frontline service – though it did have a useful second life as a trainer (see pages 80 to 81), with some equipped with rear turrets for gunnery training, while others were adapted to fly as target tugs.

Flattering to deceive

The Battle was drawn up by Fairey's chief designer Marcel Lobelle, a Belgian aeronautical engineer working in Britain, during the mid-1930s. It was intended to replace the ageing Hawker Hart and Hind biplane bombers. A single-engine, all-metal, low-wing monoplane, it was equipped with retractable landing gear and a glazed canopy, all attributes of what was, at the time, a promisingly modern-looking military aircraft.

It was designed to accommodate three crew but, unlike other

contemporary light bombers such as the Bristol Blenheim, the Battle only had one engine and was significantly underpowered. Its payload of four 250lb bombs was carried in cells beneath the wings and an additional 500lb of ordnance could be deployed on underwing racks. While similar to the amount the Blenheim could carry, the combination of this extra 1,000lb with that of the three-man crew contributed to the Battle's comparatively poor performance.

The first prototype flew on March 10, 1936, and with the RAF focusing on a pre-war expansion programme the Fairey machine became a priority. The first production aircraft was completed at Hayes, Middlesex, in June 1937, but afterwards manufacture switched to Fairey's new factory at Heaton Chapel, Stockport. Demand was such that shadow



factories were established, Austin Motors at Longbridge alone building more than 1,000 machines. All production models were powered by the Rolls-Royce Merlin I, II, III or V.

False dawn

While it undoubtedly looked modern compared to the machines it had replaced, units flying the Battle on 'ops' soon discovered that it was desperately inadequate. The speed and firepower of contemporary enemy fighters, such as the Messerschmitt Bf 109, far exceeded its defensive capability. The Battle was armed with only a single forward-firing Browning machine-gun in the starboard wing and one trainable Vickers K gun mounted in the rear cockpit. It also lacked an armoured cockpit and self-sealing fuel tanks. The combination of these factors resulted in it being hopelessly outclassed by Luftwaffe machines.

Despite the odds, its combat debut had a surprising result. On September 20, 1939, Battle gunner Sgt F Letchard shot down a Bf 109 near Aachen, achieving a somewhat improbable first aerial victory for the RAF in World War Two. Letchard's machine was among ten Battle units deployed to France that month as part of the Advanced Air Striking Force. This early success was, sadly, a false dawn.

When Battle of France 'ops' began in May 1940, Fairey units were required to carry out low-level tactical attacks against the advancing German army and targets of strategic importance such as bridges. In almost every instance, they encountered stiff opposition and achieved little. Conducted from as low as 250ft (76m), Battle attacks had little impact. On May 10, three out of eight were lost. In a second sortie that day a further ten out of 24 failed to return.

These grievous losses quickly became all too common. The very next day, six out of nine Battles of the Belgian Air Force were shot down when they attempted to bomb bridges over the Albert Canal. Five aircraft from the RAF's 12 Squadron then attacked the bridges on May 12 in another catastrophic operation – four were destroyed with a fifth crash-landing back at its base. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded posthumously after the crew of Battle P2204, flown by Fg Off Garland, succeeded in destroying one span of the bridge before being brought down.

A large-scale strike on German positions at Sedan on May 14, involving 63 Battles, turned into a disaster. More than half of the aircraft did not return. From this point, the type's role was switched to night attacks. After withdrawing from

Battle in Africa

Among the Fairey Battle's less well known roles was with the South African Air Force. In August 1940, No.11 Squadron acquired several aircraft and flew them against the Italians in East Africa on bombing and reconnaissance operations. The opposing Fiat CR.32 and CR.42 biplane fighters were less potent than the Messerschmitt Bf 109s encountered by the RAF in France, enabling South African crews to hit their targets more effectively.

The Italians eventually learned to deal with the Battles by diving at them from above as they made their low, slow, bombing runs.

France, the RAF had no choice but to rely on the light bomber for a short period, but Battles were relegated to other duties as quickly as possible. In six weeks, almost 200 had been lost.

Its most valuable training role was in Canada, where more than 700 were used as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and as target tugs. The Battle's benign handling characteristics also made it a suitable platform for testing engines. It was retired from use in Canada in 1945, but was retained by the RAF in secondary roles until 1949. ●





Spotlight

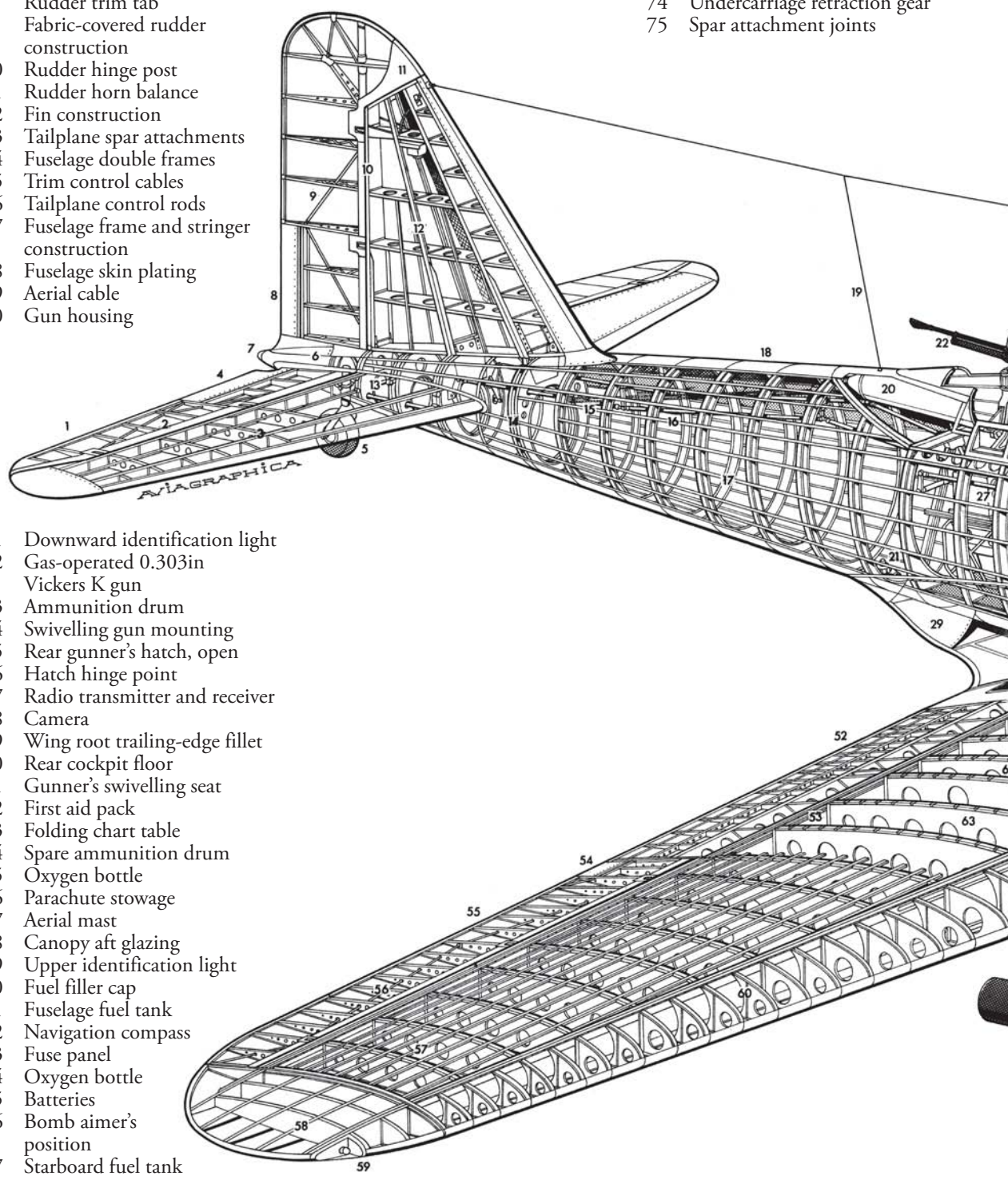
Fairey Battle

Fairey Battle Mk.I

- 1 Starboard elevator
- 2 Fabric-covered elevator construction
- 3 Starboard tailplane construction
- 4 Elevator trim tab
- 5 Non-retracting tailwheel
- 6 Tailcone
- 7 Tail navigation light
- 8 Rudder trim tab
- 9 Fabric-covered rudder construction
- 10 Rudder hinge post
- 11 Rudder horn balance
- 12 Fin construction
- 13 Tailplane spar attachments
- 14 Fuselage double frames
- 15 Trim control cables
- 16 Tailplane control rods
- 17 Fuselage frame and stringer construction
- 18 Fuselage skin plating
- 19 Aerial cable
- 20 Gun housing

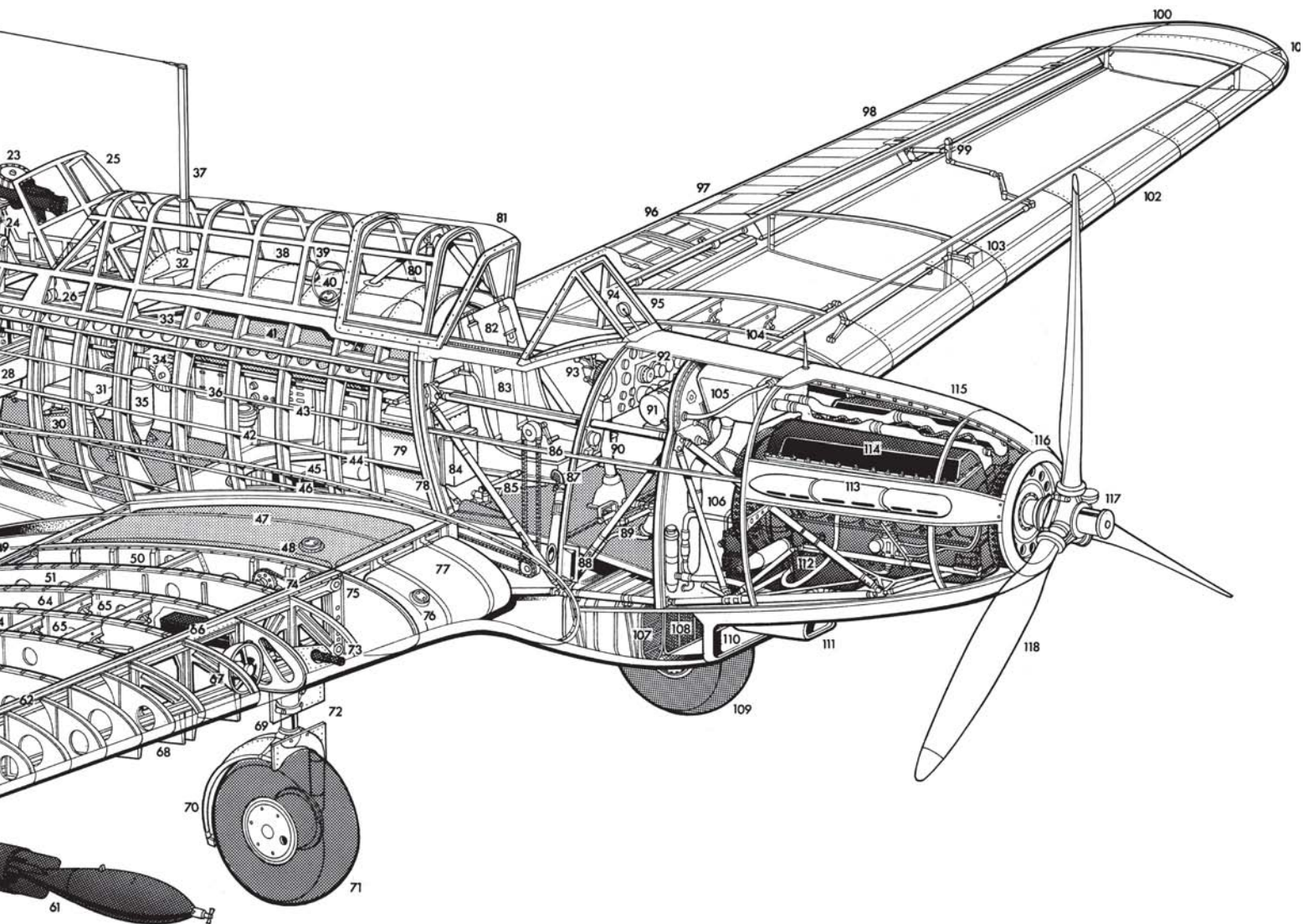
- 48 Fuel tank filler cap
- 49 Trailing-edge boarding step
- 50 Main undercarriage wheel bay
- 51 Flare launching compartment
- 52 Flap shroud construction
- 53 Rear spar
- 54 Aileron trim tab
- 55 Starboard aileron
- 56 Fabric-covered aileron construction
- 57 Wing panel stringers
- 58 Wing tip construction
- 59 Starboard navigation light
- 60 Leading edge nose ribs

- 61 250lb HE bomb
- 62 Front spar
- 63 Wing ribs
- 64 Starboard wing bomb bays
- 65 Bomb carriers
- 66 Fixed 0.303in Browning machine gun
- 67 Landing lamp
- 68 Bomb doors
- 69 Main undercarriage leg
- 70 Mudguard
- 71 Starboard mainwheel
- 72 Undercarriage leg doors
- 73 Machine gun muzzle
- 74 Undercarriage retraction gear
- 75 Spar attachment joints



- 21 Downward identification light
- 22 Gas-operated 0.303in Vickers K gun
- 23 Ammunition drum
- 24 Swivelling gun mounting
- 25 Rear gunner's hatch, open
- 26 Hatch hinge point
- 27 Radio transmitter and receiver
- 28 Camera
- 29 Wing root trailing-edge fillet
- 30 Rear cockpit floor
- 31 Gunner's swivelling seat
- 32 First aid pack
- 33 Folding chart table
- 34 Spare ammunition drum
- 35 Oxygen bottle
- 36 Parachute stowage
- 37 Aerial mast
- 38 Canopy aft glazing
- 39 Upper identification light
- 40 Fuel filler cap
- 41 Fuselage fuel tank
- 42 Navigation compass
- 43 Fuse panel
- 44 Oxygen bottle
- 45 Batteries
- 46 Bomb aimer's position
- 47 Starboard fuel tank

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 76 Oil tank filler cap | 90 Control column | 106 Fireproof engine bulkhead |
| 77 Oil tank | 91 Hydraulic reservoir | 107 Oil cooler |
| 78 Fuselage double frame | 92 Back of instrument panel | 108 Coolant radiator |
| 79 Autopilot controller | 93 Engine throttle controls | 109 Port mainwheel |
| 80 Crash pylon | 94 Pilot's gunsight | 110 Oil/coolant air intake |
| 81 Pilot's sliding canopy cover, open | 95 Windscreen panels | 111 Carburettor air intake |
| 82 Safety harness | 96 Port split trailing edge flap | 112 Engine bearer struts |
| 83 Pilot's seat | 97 Aileron tab | 113 Exhaust ejectors |
| 84 Map case | 98 Port aileron | 114 Rolls-Royce Merlin I 12-cylinder liquid-cooled engine |
| 85 Seat adjusting handle | 99 Aileron hinge control | 115 Engine cowlings |
| 86 Undercarriage emergency lowering handle | 100 Port wing tip | 116 Cowling front ring |
| 87 Very pistol | 101 Port navigation light | 117 Propeller hub mechanism |
| 88 Cockpit ventilator intake | 102 Leading edge panels | 118 Three-bladed de Havilland propeller |
| 89 Rudder pedals | 103 Aileron control rods | |
| | 104 Port wing bomb bays | |
| | 105 Coolant header tank | |





Spotlight

Fairey Battle

Remembering the

Third Man

Air Cdre Graham Pitchfork recounts 12 Squadron's gallant attack on the Veldwezelt bridge

In Spite of Heavy Losses



The joint citation for the award of the Victoria Cross to Garland and Gray concluded: "Much of the success of this vital operation must be attributed to the formation leader, Fg Off Garland, and to the coolness and resource of Sgt Gray, who in most difficult conditions navigated Fg Off Garland's aircraft in such a manner that the whole formation was able successfully to attack the target in spite of subsequent heavy losses."



Ten squadrons of Fairey Battles formed the spearhead of the RAF's Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF), deployed to France in September 1939. Among them was 12 Squadron with the appropriate motto 'Leads the Field'. Over the next few months of the so-called 'Phoney War' there was little air activity other than a few reconnaissance sorties.

By the spring of 1940, the unit had moved to Amifontaine south of St Quentin, in northern France. One of the more senior pilots was Fg Off Donald Garland, the fourth son of Doctor Garland and his wife Renee. Born in County Wicklow, Ireland, on June 28, 1918, he was accepted for a short service commission in July 1937. After completing his pilot training, he joined 12 Squadron.

Aged 21, Garland's first

significant war sortie was on the night of April 21/22 when the squadron launched four Battles on 'Nickel' (propaganda leaflets) raids. Garland was tasked to drop his over Koblenz, Germany, and to carry out a reconnaissance of the Rhine Valley, completing both tasks successfully.

The observer in the fourth aircraft on that sortie was Sgt Tom Gray who also came from a large family. He was the fourth of seven brothers, five of whom joined the RAF.

Gray enlisted as an aircraft apprentice in August 1929 and spent the next three years as one of 'Trenchard's Brats' at Halton learning the trade of aero engine fitter II(E). He served on 40 Squadron operating Fairey Gordon biplanes when he volunteered for flying duties as an 'airman gunner'. After a number of postings he arrived on 12 in February 1938 and was trained as an observer.

At all costs

On May 10, the Germans launched a blitzkrieg through the Low Countries and into France. The squadrons of the AASF, and those of Bomber Command, were soon in action but the Luftwaffe and ground defences inflicted heavy casualties. By the 12th it was already evident that the Germans were making great advances.

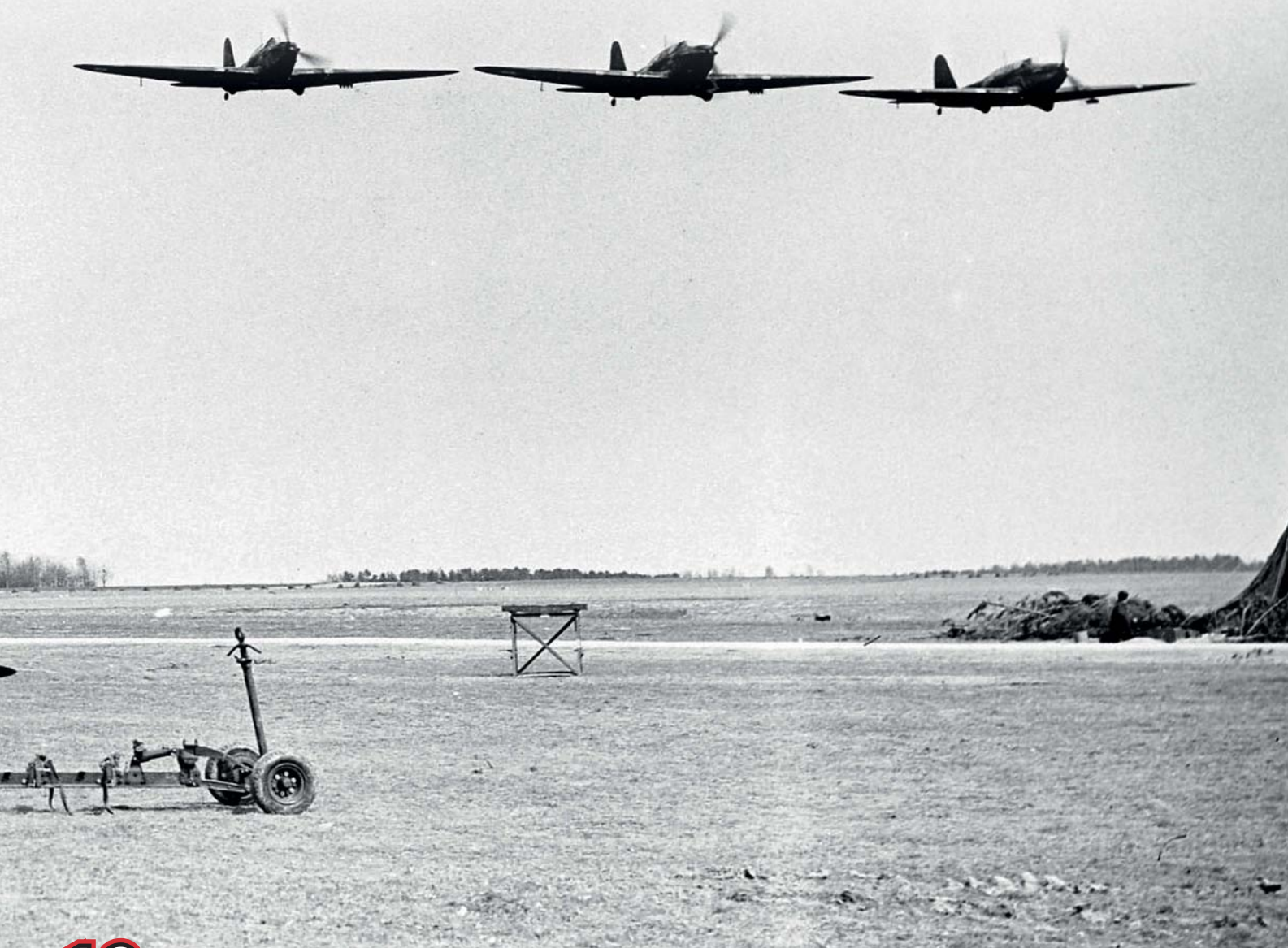
No.12 came to readiness at 04:00 hours and, three hours later, received orders to attack and destroy two bridges over the Albert Canal. These orders stated that the bridges had to be "destroyed at all costs".

Six aircraft were required and when the CO called for volunteers, *all* the crews stepped forward. He decided to send those who had been placed on standby.

Garland had just been appointed to command 'B' Flight following the loss of its commander the

Below

A Battle patrol coming into land. The aircraft being serviced is K9408, an airframe that was transferred to the RCAF in late 1940.



SPOT FACT No.63 Squadron was the first unit to be equipped with Battles



Above
An artist's impression of Battle P2204, as flown by Fg Off Donald Garland on May 12, 1940. AIRFIX

Below
A flight of RAF Fairey Battles.

day before. He was tasked to lead the second section of three Battles. His observer was Tom Gray and manning the single 0.303in Vickers gas-operated machine-gun was LAC Lawrence Reynolds.

On start-up, one of the Battles was unserviceable and the remaining five got airborne just before 09:00. Eight Hurricanes of 1 Squadron took off ahead to provide protection from any





Failed to Return - 12 Squadron Battles May 12, 1940

Pilot	Observer	Gunner	Aircraft	Outcome
Sgt F Marland	Sgt K D Footner	LAC J L Perrin	L5227 'J'	All killed
Plt Off I A McIntosh	Sgt N T W Harper	LAC R P MacNaughton	L5439 'N'	All PoW
Fg Off D E Garland	Sgt T Gray	LAC L R Reynolds	P2204 'K'	All killed
Plt Off T D H Davey	Sgt G D Mansell	AC1 G N Patterson	L5241 'G'	See below
Fg Off N M Thomas	Sgt B T P Carey	Cpl T S Campion	P2332 'F'	All PoW

Notes: Marland, McIntosh and Garland attacked the metal bridge at Veldwezelt; Davey and Thomas the concrete Vroenhoven bridge. Plt Off Davey told the crew of L5241 *G-for-George* to abandon the aircraft; while he force-landed. Mansell successfully parachuted; Patterson was injured on landing and became a PoW. Both Davey and Mansell eventually re-joined the unit.



Above
The harsh conditions endured by the Battle units during the winter 1939-1940 made flight operations extremely difficult.

German fighters, but they were heavily engaged over the target and powerless to help the Battles.

Murderous fire

The leader of the first section, Fg Off Norman Thomas, elected to carry out a dive-bombing attack from 9,000ft. Garland chose to strike from low level. Light anti-aircraft batteries ringed the two bridges at Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven and the Battles soon

started to fall to the murderous fire.

Flying at very low level, Garland led his formation to the metal bridge at Veldwezelt before pulling up to 1,000ft to carry out a shallow dive attack. His No.2 was shot down by flak and the third of the trio dropped its bombs before crashing.

Garland pressed home his attack and released his four 250lb bombs despite P2204 being hit repeatedly. The Battle dived into the ground, killing the three men.

The bridge was damaged and some reports suggested that Garland's aircraft may have hit it and exploded. Some of the Hurricane pilots claimed to have seen bombs bursting near the target and later accounts stated that the western truss of the bridge had been destroyed.

All five Battles were lost (see the above panel) – two crews perished and two were captured. The pilot of the fifth aircraft was taken prisoner following a forced landing. ➔

RAF Battle Squadrons 1937 to 1941

Although its time in front line service with the RAF was relatively brief, the Battle did serve with 21 units. These were: 12, 15, 35, 40, 52, 63, 88, 98, 103, 105, 106, 142, 150, 185, 207, 218, 226, 300, 301, 304 and 305. Small numbers of Battles – thought to be less than six – were briefly operated by 616 Auxiliary Squadron for training.



SPOT FACT Its last RAF combat sortie was on the night of October 15/16, 1940



Above
A 218 Squadron Battle being prepared for action by groundcrew in France.

Far right
Fg Off Donald Garland.

Below right
Sgt Tom Gray. ALL VIA AUTHOR UNLESS NOTED

Fairey Battle I

Construction:	Approximately 2,200 Fairey Battles were built in total - 1,156 by Fairey and 1,029 by the Austin Motor Company. A further 18 were built under licence by Avions Fairey at Gosselies, Belgium, for service with the Belgian Air Force.
First Flight:	Prototype K4303 first flew on March 10, 1936, in the hands of Fairey test pilot Christopher Staniland.
Powerplants:	One 1,030hp (768kW) Rolls-Royce Merlin I; later Merlin II, III and V.
Dimension:	Span 54ft 0in (16.46m). Length 42ft 4in. Height 15ft 6in. Wing area 422sq ft (39.2m ²).
Weight:	Empty 6,647lb (3,015kg). Maximum loaded 10,792lb.
Performance:	Max speed 257mph (413km/h) at 15,000ft (4,600m). Range 1,000 miles at 200mph cruising speed. Service ceiling 23,500ft. Climb to 10,000ft in 8 min 24 sec.
Armament:	One 7.7mm Browning machine-gun in starboard wing, one 7.7mm Vickers K in rear cabin. Four 250lb bombs carried internally, with 500lbs of bombs externally.
Crew:	Three - pilot, navigator and gunner.

against Germany. All three of Garland's brothers died serving in the RAF and two of Gray's brothers also made the ultimate sacrifice.

Tom Gray was only the second airman to receive the Victoria Cross (Flt Sgt Thomas Mottershead was awarded the VC posthumously on February 12, 1917) and he was the only Halton apprentice to receive the award.

Local people buried Garland and his two colleagues and, after the war, they were re-interred in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Heverlee, Belgium.

Family sacrifice

On June 11, it was announced that Garland and Gray had been posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the first two airmen to receive the supreme award during World War Two. The third member of the crew, gunner LAC Reynolds, received no award because he was not in a 'decision making' position. Many people at the time, and since, have questioned the failure to recognise Reynolds.

The families of Garland and Gray paid a heavy price for the victory



To mark its 90th anniversary in 2005, the names of Donald Garland and Tom Gray were painted under the cockpit of a 12 Squadron Tornado GR.4 in tribute to their valour.

Few people remember the name of Lawrence Reynolds, the third man in the crew, and this article is dedicated to his gallantry and his memory. ●

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Aviation 72's striking 1/72 die-cast model of the Scottish Aviation Bulldog basic trainer that enabled a large number of RAF rookies to achieve their 'wings'! The prototype first flew in 1969. (AV72-25001)

rapide to the rescue

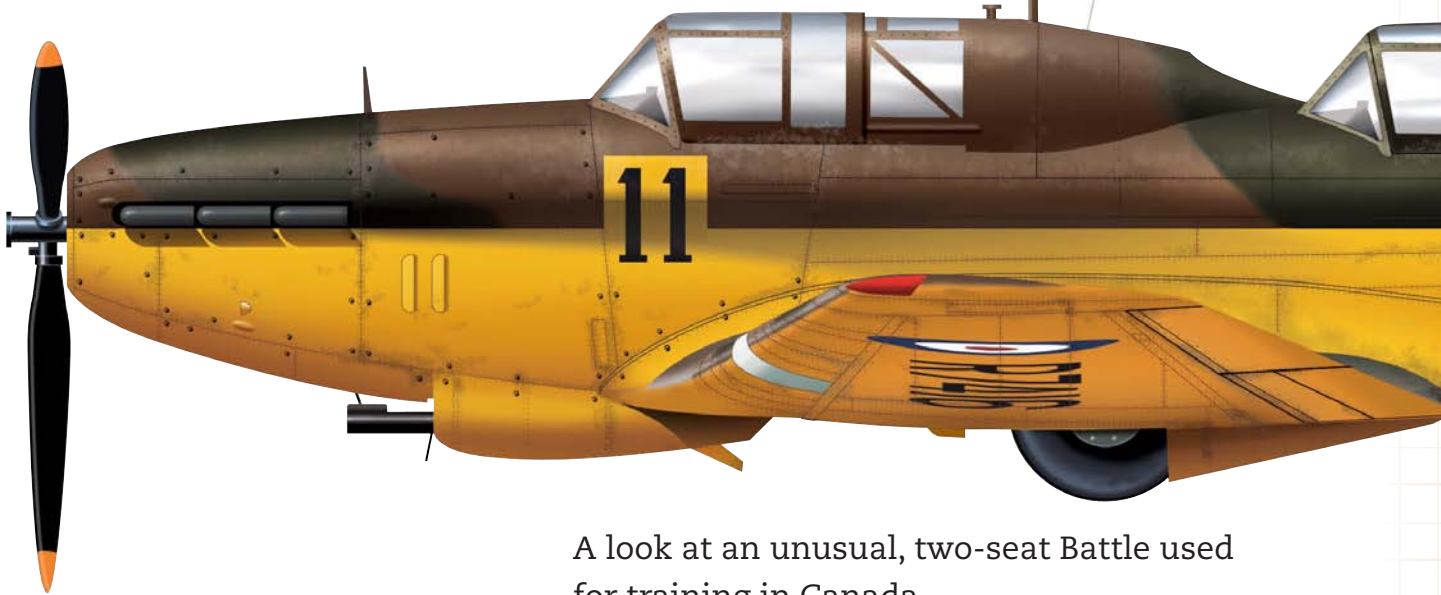
£32.95



Oxford Die-cast's 1/72 cheerful model of the AA's Dragon Rapide is a great piece of die-cast. The aircraft was of course used for traffic spotting and acquired in 1957 but performed rescue work in the guise of an air ambulance (72DR004)

antics
model shops and online stores

Training



A look at an unusual, two-seat Battle used for training in Canada

Right
Fairey Battle T.1
R7416 '11' of 31 SFTS,
based at Kingston,
Ontario, featuring
tandem training
cockpits prior to
turret modification
in July 1941. PETE
WEST-2014

While the Fairey Battle was an unsuccessful combat aircraft, it proved far more useful in the training role. Several variants were developed, all adapted from the original design. The aircraft may have been slow and cumbersome in battle, but it was relatively easy and straightforward to fly, making it an ideal candidate for training. Many of those modified had the long, single cockpit adapted into two smaller, tandem versions, while others had the second substituted for a gun turret.

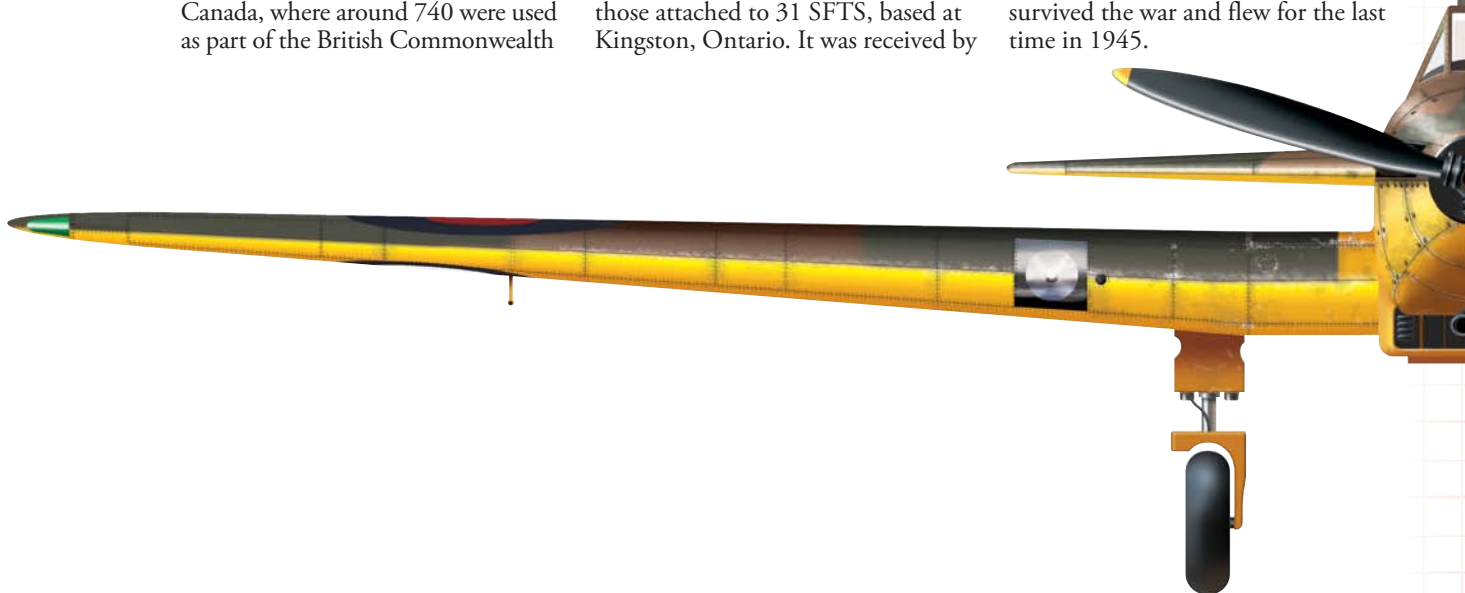
From 1940, trainer versions of the Battle were especially prevalent in Canada, where around 740 were used as part of the British Commonwealth

Air Training Plan (BCATP), a joint military aircrew training programme. Over 131,000 Allied airmen were trained in Canada – 72,835 of them Canadian.

Included among the Battles despatched to Canada were some that were intended for RAF-manned units, 31 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) and 31 Bombing and Gunnery School (B&GS). These retained their original serial numbers. Many of the incoming aircraft were transported to civilian factories in Canada for assembly, including Fleet Aircraft at Fort Erie, Ontario.

Fairey Battle T.1 R7416 was one of those attached to 31 SFTS, based at Kingston, Ontario. It was received by

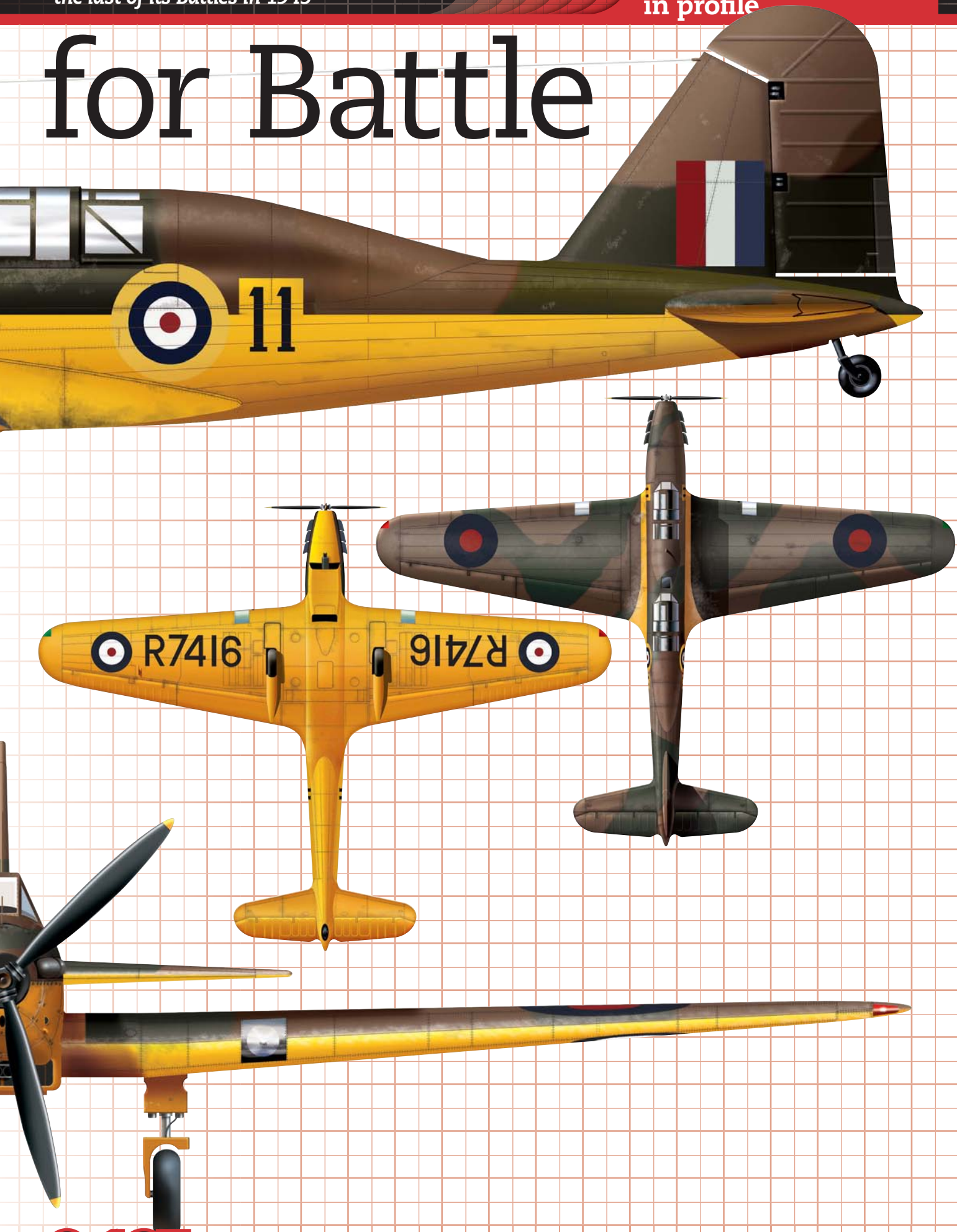
Fleet Aircraft on November 6, 1940, and arrived with its unit before the end of the year. Carrying the number '11', it flew with the training school throughout 1941. On May 1, 1942, it was sent to the Canadian Car & Foundry company to have a turret fitted, and was subsequently used by 9 B&GS, based at Mont Joli, Quebec. The aircraft was involved in three minor accidents during 1943, all while taxiing. (A brake failure caused it to roll into a Northrop A-17 Nomad in July, and it collided with two other Battles, P6724 and R7373, in separate incidents later that year.) Despite these scrapes, it survived the war and flew for the last time in 1945.



SPOT FACT Canada retired
the last of its Battles in 1945

Battle
in profile

for Battle



2,185 of all variants were made



Charge of the Light Brigade

As the German blitzkrieg rolled into France in 1940, the RAF found its Battles totally outclassed.

Pat Otter describes the type's baptism of fire

“It was very much like the RAF's own Charge of the Light Brigade”, one of the survivors recalled.

Like the misguided assault on superior Russian forces during the Battle of Balaclava in 1854, there would be nothing glorious about the defeat suffered by the RAF's Fairey Battles in 1940.

The light bombers formed part of the Advanced Air Striking Force, Britain's response to the defence of France. The AASF consisted of ten Battle squadrons (two later

re-equipped with the marginally better Blenheim) and a couple of Hurricane units. In the late spring and early summer of 1940, AASF endured 39 days of madness as Germany unleashed its blitzkrieg [lightning war].

The disaster of the Battle of France had been waiting half a decade to happen. Long before war had been declared plans had been drawn up between the French and British on how to tackle the threat of a German invasion.

The British Expeditionary Force





(BEF) was already a paper force and its air element would be divided into two sections: light bombers and army support. France absolutely refused to allow the RAF to station anything other than light bombers on its soil. Its leadership was terrified that RAF heavy bombers stationed on forward airfields might provoke the Luftwaffe to attack French cities.

Serious reservations

Senior RAF figures had serious reservations about the Battle even

before it started to filter through to squadron service. First flown in March 1936, it certainly looked good, resembling a stretched Spitfire complete with Merlin engine.

There comparisons ended. The crew of two or three shared a cramped 'greenhouse'-style cockpit. Two-up gave more room, but led to the observer/bomb-aimer/wireless operator/air gunner being terribly overworked. With three on board, there was much less room and performance was even worse.

The Battle had a top speed of



238mph. Sgt Rex Wheeldon, a pilot with 12 Squadron, told the author he once achieved 300mph in a dive, but added: "It was an experience I didn't wish to repeat".

With little armour plating and no self-sealing fuel tanks, it was also very vulnerable. German fighters found blind spots below and behind, making Battles easy meat in the summer of 1940. This resulted in them being flown at tree top height, leaving them exposed to small-arms fire.

Defensive armament was

Above left
Repairs under way on a 142 Squadron Battle in the midst of the cruel winter of 1939-1940. Note the bent port wingtip and the tent-like structure to protect the engine. *KEC*

Above
Battles of 226 Squadron in France, early 1940. *ANDY THOMAS*



Left
Line-up of 88 Squadron Battles being prepared for a morning patrol at Mourmellion, France, during the bitter winter of 1939-1940. *PAUL SPENCER*

SPOT FACT A Battle achieved the first aerial victory of World War Two



“Over the next few months, training was limited by the weather (it was the coldest winter in Europe for more than a decade) and the awful state of the airfields once the thaw set in”

Above
Snow-covered Battles of 142 Squadron, probably at Plivot, France, during the winter of 1939-1940. KEC

woeful, a single forward-firing machine-gun, a Lewis gun in the rear cockpit and, in some aircraft, an awkwardly-mounted Vickers gas-operated machine-gun in the bombardier's position. The Air Ministry had reckoned that the defensive armament of a 1918 two-seater would suffice 20 years later, despite it being the age of the Messerschmitt Bf 109 and the Spitfire.

Most of these shortcomings were known well before the Battle went into service, but the Air Ministry was under severe pressure to produce aircraft, no matter what the quality. As a weapon of war the Battle was a disaster waiting to happen. Its saving grace is that it was remembered as easy to fly and reasonably reliable by the standards of the day.

Ten squadrons

The AASF was based north of Reims not far from the borders with the Belgian Ardennes region and Luxembourg. In the spring of 1939 a large consignment of 250lb bombs, as carried by Battles, along with other munitions was sent to a depot in the area ostensibly as part of a purchase by the French Air Force. Chateaux were requisitioned as headquarters and chains of command established.

Units flew out mainly on September 2, the day before Britain officially went to war. Spare crews were ferried by boat or chartered civilian aircraft. AC1 Les Frith, a wireless operator/air gunner (WOP/

Advanced Air Striking Force Battle squadrons

Sqn	Code	Initial base	Date	Returned to	Date
12	'PH'	Berry au Bac	Sep 2, 1939	Finningley	Jun 16, 1940
15	'LS'	Béthenville	Sep 2, 1939	Wyton	Dec 10, 1939*
40	'BL'	Béthenville	Sep 2, 1939	Wyton	Dec 2, 1939*
88	'RH'	Auberive-sur-Suippes	Sep 2, 1939	Driffield	Jun 14, 1940
98	'VO'	Chateau Bougon	Apr 16, 1940	Gatwick	Jun 8, 1940
103	'PM'	Challerange	Sep 2, 1939	Abingdon	Jun 15, 1940
105	'GB'	Reims-Champagne	Sep 3, 1939	Honington	Jun 14, 1940
142	'QT'	Berry-au-Bac	Sep 2, 1939	Waddington	Jun 15, 1940
150	'JN'	Challerange	Sep 2, 1939	Abingdon	Jun 15, 1940
218	'HA'	Auberive-sur-Suippes	Sep 2, 1939	Mildenhall	Jun 13, 1940
226	'MQ'	Reims-Champagne	Sep 2, 1939	Thirsk	Jun 18, 1940

* To convert to Blenheims, did not return to France.

No.142 Squadron's Battle were initially coded 'EF-', adopting 'QT-' from September 1939. KEC



AG) with 142 Squadron, travelled in a Dragon Rapide and recalled seeing holidaymakers standing on the beaches near Le Touquet waving to 'Les Anglais'. How different it would be ten months later when whistles, jeers and even a few shots accompanied the survivors' departure.

Altogether 160 Battles went to France in ten squadrons in 1939

under Air Vice Marshall Patrick 'Pip' Playfield. He was answerable to Air Marshall 'Ugly' Barratt, based at the French headquarters at Coulommiers. Also under his command was the Army Co-operation echelon led by AVM Charles Blount. The AASF was divided into four Battle wings plus a fighter wing with Hurricanes, from 1 and 76 Squadrons. Later the photo-reconnaissance Blenheims

of 212 Squadron arrived, while 98 Squadron fulfilled the role of an operational training unit for the Battles, based at Nantes. (See panel.)

Chaos reigned from day one. Some of the airfields turned out to be little more than flat farmland. Accommodation at some was virtually non-existent and personnel had to use either tents or buildings that were still unrepaired from the Great War.

Catering was basic with corned beef and hard tack the staple on offer. Even when field kitchens arrived things didn't improve much; personnel of 142 Squadron recorded 147 consecutive days of corned beef stew on the menu!

The plan called for sufficient airfields and dispersal sites to allow the second



Down to business

While all this was going on, the AASF got down to business. Initially, daylight recces were flown, but didn't venture any nearer than 15 miles of the German border. Towards the end of September 1939 the Battles began high level sorties a few miles into German territory.

On the 27th, Wg Cdr Henry Gemmell led six 103 Squadron Battles in a recce near the border. After first being attacked by French Curtiss Hawks, they were set upon by several Bf 109s.

One of the Battles was hit and its observer, Sgt John Vickers, mortally wounded. The Bf 109 pulled

Above
The wreckage of *Pit Off Ken Drabble's K9264 of 103 Squadron, shot down over Luxembourg, close to the Belgian border, on May 10, 1940.* DAVID FELL

Left
Tented accommodation for 142 Squadron 'erks' at Plivot, in the winter of 1939. KEC

Below
Battle P2177 of 15 Squadron at Condé-Vraux, France, in late 1939. It was the aircraft used by Wg Cdr Hugh George. V BINGHAM VIA ANDY THOMAS

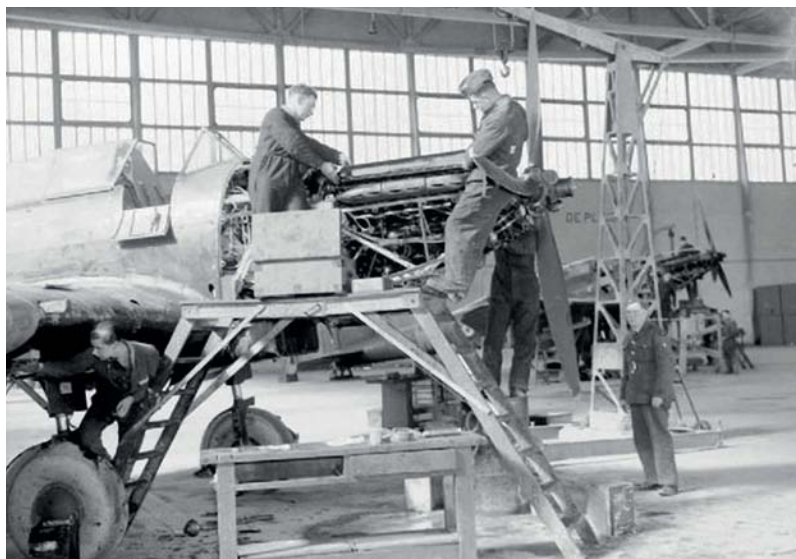


echelon, still ensconced in comfortable East Anglia, to join them. Shortcomings over bases meant this was quickly scrapped and the AASF bomber element was reorganised into

five wings of two squadrons, each sharing an airfield and a dispersal site. There was yet more reorganisation in the New Year as some order began to emerge from the turmoil.



SPOT FACT The type was withdrawn from frontline RAF service by the end of 1940



Top left
An unidentified Battle over snow-covered Binbrook village in the winter of 1940. PETER GREEN COLLECTION

Top right
No.226 Squadron Battles undergoing maintenance, Reims, spring 1940. ANDY THOMAS

Above
Battle K9204 of 142 Squadron under camouflage netting, spring 1940. ANDY THOMAS

alongside the Battle to inspect the damage caused, only to be promptly shot down in flames by the gunner, AC1 John Summer - the first RAF Luftwaffe 'kill'. Sgt Vickers was given a posthumous Médaille Militaire by the French while Summer received a DFM.

On the final day of the month, six aircraft from 150 Squadron were sent to Saarbrücken, just across the German-French border. One turned back, but the other five were bracketed by flak and then bounced by at least 15 Bf 109s - four Battles were shot down.

The fifth, K9283 flown by flight commander Sqn Ldr W L M MacDonald, made it back, his machine bursting into flames on landing. MacDonald received a DFC for his actions, while his crew members were awarded a DFM (Sgt F H Gardiner) and, curiously, an MBE for AC1 Murcar.

Five men died that morning: Fg Off Fernal Corelli (26), AC1 Kenneth Gay (19), Plt Off John Saunders (20), AC1 Donald Thomas (19) and Sgt William Cole (30). This episode provided a salutary

lesson in the failings of unescorted Battle sorties.

Over the next few months, training was limited by the weather (it was the coldest winter in Europe for more than a decade) and the awful state of the airfields once the thaw set in. Squadrons rotated through Perpignan to allow more flying time, but the experience gained did little to prepare the crews for what was to come.

All-out war

As the weather improved it was clear the 'Phoney War' wouldn't last. The Germans had attacked Norway and surely it wouldn't be long before they turned their attention to France.

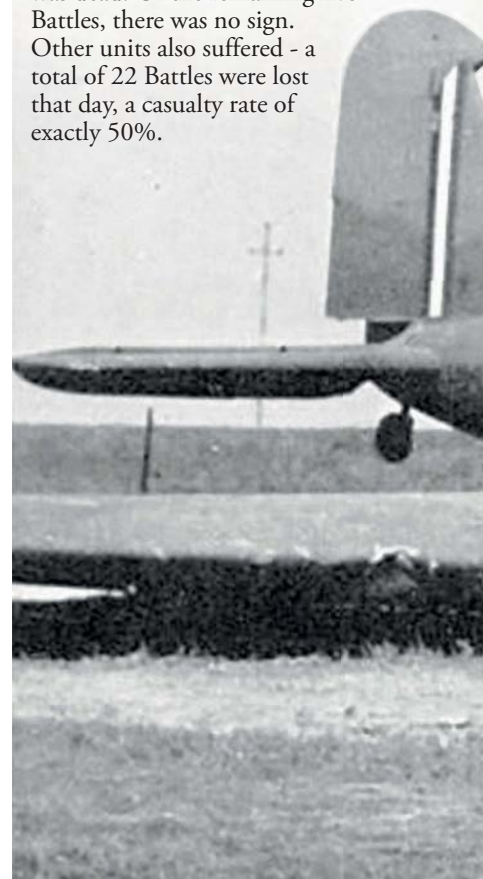
At 5am on May 10, Les Frith, the Bradford-born WOP/AG with 142 Squadron, was woken in his billet at Berry au Bac by the distinctive sound of German engines and the crump of bombs. He rushed outside in time to see what he identified as six Dornier Do 17s climbing away. While the airfield was cratered, it was serviceable.

Across the rest of the AASE, it was the same story - the Germans certainly caught the RAF by surprise, but the damage inflicted was not serious. At Mourmelon, 88 Squadron had two Battles wrecked, but elsewhere damage was negligible.

Battle aircrew were staggered when they learned that General Gamelin, the French CO ordered that only fighters were to be used to counter what was clearly the start of the invasion. At Béthenville, the newly-arrived CO of 103 Squadron Wg Cdr Tom Dickens demanded to know when his Battles could go into action. It wasn't until midday that AM Barratt over-ruled the French order and messages began to go out to be ready to hit back.

First into action was 142, six Battles were sent to attack German columns streaming through Luxembourg. Les Frith watched them take-off and shortly afterwards the airfield was raided a second time; adding to the anxiety of those waiting on the ground.

Finally, a single Battle appeared, firing flares to request urgent medical attention. Fg Off Doug Gosman, managed to land it on just one wheel. He had suffered a shrapnel wound in his ankle, his gunner AC1 Ron Cave had a bullet in his arm but the observer, Sgt George Irvine, was dead. Of the remaining five Battles, there was no sign. Other units also suffered - a total of 22 Battles were lost that day, a casualty rate of exactly 50%.



Eleven men were dead, five badly injured and 17 had become prisoners of war.

An air raid at 05:45 hours the following day left six of 114 Squadron's Blenheims destroyed on the ground, virtually wiping it out as an effective force. Four of the six 218 Squadron Battles sent from Auberville to St Vith (Belgium) were shot down that day; 11 of those on board were taken prisoner, one was killed in action.

Wholesale slaughter

It was on May 12 that 142 Squadron pilot Doug Gosman likened events to those of the Crimea 90 years earlier. Still recovering from the wound suffered 48 hours earlier, he missed the wholesale slaughter of both Battles and Blenheims that day.

Germans were pouring through gaps in the Allied lines and the choke points were the bridges they had captured or constructed across the region's many waterways. Two were at Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven on the Albert Canal near Maastricht on the Dutch/Belgian border, and 12 Squadron was tasked with destroying them.

All of the crews volunteered for what was clearly a suicidal operation. The first six on the duty roster were selected and departed in two sections of three, each with a different target.

The first section was heading for Vroenhoven. One of the trio was forced to abort; one was shot down near the bridge, the third was abandoned by its crew after it was attacked and damaged by Bf 109s.

Led by Fg Off Douglas Garland, the second flight tackled the Veldwezelt bridge where they met a withering storm of flak. Despite this, Garland, a 22-year-old Irishman, dropped his bombs close to the target before his Battle crashed in flames, killing all on board. The second machine caught fire and crash-landed while the final aircraft managed to release its warload before crashing fatally. The bridges were largely unscathed.

For his actions that day Garland received a posthumous Victoria Cross as did his observer, Sgt Tom Gray - the first RAF VCs of the war. There was no award for his WOP/AG, Lawrence Reynolds, who was a leading aircraftsman. It was an omission which said much about the mind-set of the RAF at the time. (See pages 74-78 for more on the raid, Garland and his crew.)

Incredibly, the losses experienced by 12 Squadron that day were eclipsed by 139 Squadron, which lost seven of nine Blenheims sent to Maastricht with 15 men killed.

Tipping point

Even worse was to come on the 14th when 32 Battles and a Blenheim were lost in a vain attempt to help stem the invasion. Flying out of Villeneuve near Maastricht, 105 Squadron suffered the most: 12 aircrew killed and seven Battles destroyed. One pilot - Fg Off Gibson - was badly injured and rescued by the French, only to be captured in his hospital bed a few days later. Operating from Auberive-sur-Suippes, near

Reims, 218 Squadron lost five aircraft on a day which proved to be a tipping point for the AASF.

Among 12 Squadron's replacements was Sgt Rex Wheeldon, who had spent much of the previous nine months flying Tiger Moths around French landing grounds. In a hectic introduction to war, he flew ten 'ops' in Battles, twice being attacked by Bf 109s.

It was the start of the great retreat. Airfields were being repeatedly bombed and the advancing German troops were getting uncomfortably close so the order went out to fall back. The task wasn't made easier by the tide of refugees and small groups of French and Belgian troops "undisciplined and out of control", according to 103's CO, Wg Cdr Dickens.

On one occasion, officers of 103 had to barricade themselves in their mess to keep French troops from breaking in; on another, the mess was ransacked while a squadron parade was taking place. Dickens had a very low opinion of the French and its air force in particular. On one occasion he visited a French airfield and found aircraft abandoned simply because they had flat tyres.

Les Frith, by now flying with 142 Squadron, recalled a daylight operation soon after moving to the Troyes area when the promised escort of French Moranes flew in a tight defensive circle as the Battles headed for the front.

During the fall-back, ➔

Below
A 150 Squadron Battle that crash-landed behind the German lines, May 1940. ANDY THOMAS



SPOT FACT At least four Battles were used by No.11 Squadron, South African Air Force

Right
German troops inspect the wreckage of 150 Squadron's P2184, France, June, 1940. ANDY THOMAS

Below
German personnel with the wreck of a bullet-riddled 150 Squadron Battle, France, May 1940. ANDY THOMAS



“Losses were so high that by the third week of May, Battles were gradually being withdrawn from the ground-attack role”

eight of 103 Squadron's ground staff hitched strings of bomb trolleys, laden with equipment, behind four Fordson tractors and drove them through refugee-packed roads and across open country to their new airfield near Troyes. The 60-mile journey took them four days. Others compared what was happening to working for a circus: “forever packing our tents and moving on”.

Temporarily, Battles were switched to night raids to stem losses. But it was completely unsuitable for this and the very nature of the conflict meant that Battles soon resumed daylight ‘ops’. The desperation of the moment was brought home to 103 Squadron crews when the gunners were issued with boxes of 25lb incendiaries to *throw* out once over enemy lines; a tactic last used over the same battlefield 25 years earlier.

As the Germans advanced, most units airfield-hopped at least three times as the AASF's area of operations switched from Reims to the southern Champagne region, then to the Lower Seine and Somme before finally being withdrawn. Losses were so high that by the third week of May, Battles were gradually being withdrawn from the ground-attack role.

Retreat to the UK

Operations continued for two weeks after the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk was completed. On the final two days, June 13-14, a total of 19 Battles were lost, either in action or in attacks on their airfields.

One of those shot down was L5524 of 150 Squadron, flown by Plt Off Alfred Gulley, who was killed when it was attacked by fighters. Sgt Berry and LAC David Phillips baled



out and were captured. Phillips, the 20-year-old air gunner, later escaped, making his way to Spain and returning to England via Gibraltar, one of the first to use this route. He was awarded a Military Medal for his efforts, but is believed to have been killed in a training accident shortly after his return.

No.12 Squadron had only eight





Battles capable of flying back to England when ordered to leave its final base at Sougé on June 15 – the AASF's final day in France. Earlier, Rex Wheeldon and another pilot were detailed to attack a pontoon bridge being used by the Germans near Les Andelys, only to find it obscured by mist. When they located the enemy the flak was as intense and accurate as ever. It accounted for a couple of the aircraft, while Bf 109s got another.

Eight Battles of 103 Squadron departed from Sougé just as the airfield came under attack. The indefatigable Wg Cdr Dickens had remained behind with two of his officers to carry out a final inspection, but as Bf 110s swept across the airfield, he dived behind a tree to avoid a stream of cannon shells. When the attackers left he found much to his dismay, that his Battle had been destroyed along with most of the other spare aircraft.

The ground party had already left and there was only one staff car left, too small to accommodate everyone.

Dickens made a quick inspection of the Battles littering the airfield. He found one that might just fly, despite having its main spar damaged and fuel tanks punctured. The Merlin started and that was enough for him. With the cockpit full of petrol fumes and the aircraft flying port wing down, he and two other 103 personnel made it to Nantes from where he was flown to Jersey and then back to England.

Thirteen aircraft of 142 Squadron managed to fly out of Villers-Faux; one gunner sharing his seat with the CO's black Labrador. No.150 Squadron had a hectic final few days – in one daylight attack Sgt W C Pay managed to avoid nine Bf 109s by diving to ground level – before 12 Battles were ferried to Abingdon.

No.226 Squadron suffered its final loss in France when Fg Off Kenneth

Rea and crew failed to return from a daylight operation on June 14. On that day the unit's ground party left for Rennes. The next day the survivors flew back to the UK.

At Nantes, 98 Squadron had provided operational training during the later stages of its deployment. Its ground crews were sent to St Nazaire where they boarded the former Cunard liner *Lancastria*. Not long after it sailed, the vessel was attacked by the Luftwaffe and sank with the loss of almost 4,000 lives - the worst single incident involving British forces in World War Two. Among those who died were 90 personnel from 98 Squadron, the last AASF casualties.

Changing times

During the journey back, 142 Squadron's Battles landed at Abingdon to refuel, giving the crews time to stretch their legs. The airfield was being used for training and AC1 Les Frith noticed that all the personnel were wearing sergeants' stripes.

The men told him that the Air Ministry had decided some time earlier that all aircrew were to fly with a minimum rank of sergeant. Despite having flown numerous 'ops' over France, Les realised that the trainees gathered around his war-weary Battle clamouring to hear his account of the fighting had the advantage. The veteran was out-ranked – and out-paid! ●

Above
One of the survivors, Doug Gosman's L5080 of 142 Squadron, at Binbrook, July-August 1940. It joined the RCAF in 1941. ANDY THOMAS

Left
Former 218 Squadron Battle L5245 at the 3 Bombing and Gunnery School, Macdonald, Manitoba, Canada, in early 1943. Note the Boulton Paul rear turret, a Canadian adaptation for gunnery training. SHAUN TURNER VIA GREG BRETT

Fairey Battle

Fairey Battle
J L5343 at the
RAF Museum
in Hendon. IAIN
DUNCAN-RAFM



Spotlight Next Month

Sopwith Camel

As we approach the centenary of the outbreak of World War One, next month's *Spotlight* shines on one of the Royal Flying Corps' finest fighters, the Sopwith Camel. Developed from the older Sopwith Pup, the Camel was not an easy machine to fly, but in the right hands it was briefly the most potent dogfighter in European skies. Several 'aces' came to fame as the Camel tangled with determined German opposition. Our *April* issue is on sale in the UK on *February 28* – or see *page 98* for our latest money-saving subscription offers.



Ice Warrior

A look at Hendon's preserved Battle and other survivors

The Fairey Battle on display at the RAF Museum is probably the best known of the five examples that remain extant.

Hendon's machine, L5343, was originally allocated to 98 Squadron in July 1940, and was based at Kaldadarnes in Iceland from where it flew anti-invasion 'ops' in support of British forces. An engine failure in poor weather conditions on September 13 resulted in L5343 becoming the first RAF aircraft to crash in Iceland – both crew members survived.

In 1972, the RAF embarked on a successful recovery operation to

salvage the wreck and return it to the UK for restoration. Another preserved Battle is R3950 which is part of the collection at the Royal Military Museum in Brussels, Belgium. It spent much of its 'life' in Canada, where a third Battle, R7384, is displayed at the Canada Aviation and Space Museum. The latter is a T variant, equipped with a gun turret.

The wreck of another aircraft was found in an Icelandic glacier in 1995, while the South Australian Aviation Museum at Port Adelaide is undertaking a restoration project using the remains of a machine exhumed from a swamp. ●