

LONE WOLF
Blitz 'Ace'

WOLF

LONE

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TOP RIGHT:
Richard Playne
Stevens, airline
pilot, 1938.

ABOVE:
A typical scene
from the Blitz
period as a
night-fighter
Hurricane of
151 Squadron
taxies out for
an interception
patrol.



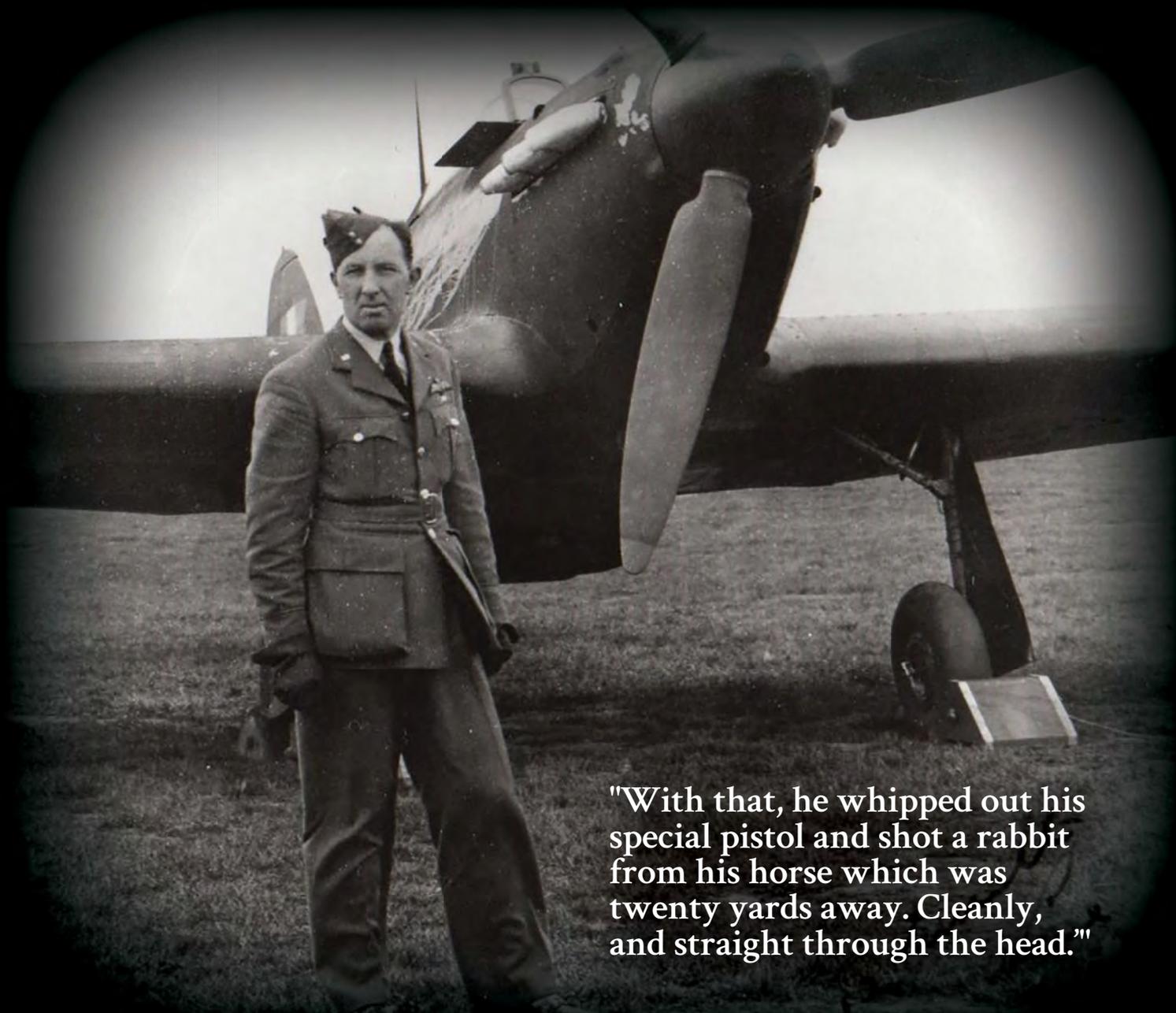
Flight Lieutenant Richard Playne Stevens is an almost unsung and unknown hero of the Blitz, although he was its leading night-fighter 'ace'. What has been written about him has often been fanciful or just plain untrue. Now, for the first time, **Andy Saunders** and **Terry Thompson** tell the remarkable story of a remarkable pilot.

IT WAS a moonlit night in September 1916 and the Dartford searchlights were probing to find the German Zeppelin airship *Schütte-Lanz II* as it drifted up the Thames Estuary towards London. Brothers James and Richard Stevens were asleep in their cottage near Gravesend when their mother called 'Boys, quick....he's coming down on fire!' James recalled: 'We rushed to the bedroom window to watch, and then how we all cheered as the airship finally split into two angry red balls of fire and fell to the ground north of the river.' >>



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"With that, he whipped out his special pistol and shot a rabbit from his horse which was twenty yards away. Cleanly, and straight through the head."

ABOVE: Flt Lt R P Stevens, DSO, DFC & Bar, pictured in front of his Hurricane shortly before his death in action.

The boys had witnessed the first successful night fighter interception in history over British soil, carried out by Lt William Leefe-Robinson who was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his action. Twenty five years later and destiny was to take a hand when Richard would rise to become the RAF's greatest night fighter pilot. By odd coincidence, he was destined to stalk his prey in the very same patch of sky that had witnessed the fall of Leefe-Robinson's Zeppelin.

'AT HOME IN THE DARK'

Growing up in the family home at Rusthall, Kent, Richard and his family spent hours on country walks, often at night. James recalled that Richard was '...at home in the dark.' Without a map, and on moonless nights, the family would

often get lost in the countryside surrounding the village. However, sister Helen recalled: 'He had the night instinct of a cat!' with the teenage Richard leading them back through the inky darkness to the welcoming sight of the Rusthall village lamps shining in the distance.

Richard had also become a crack shot, and with his Webley air pistol fired at old 78rpm records suspended from a washing line. As the discs danced and spun he would delight at getting his pellets through the centre hole! If any missed he would be mortified as the discs shattered into black fragments onto the lawn. Already, Richard was developing gifts and talents that would later stand him in good stead; excellent night vision and excellent marksmanship. By 1928, though, an adventurous

spirit led him to go farming in Australia. He was now a young man with aspirations – albeit still searching for a role in life, having few close or special friends and being something of a loner. He was, though, becoming an ever more proficient shot. James remembers: 'In Australia there was this girl he liked so he rode out on his horse to meet her from church. As usual, he carried his own personal armory. Someone teased him 'It's all very well going around like Billy The Kid but you couldn't hit a haystack at five yards.' With that, he whipped out his special pistol and shot a rabbit from his horse which was twenty yards away. Cleanly, and straight through the head.' Life in Australia, however, was becoming dull. He needed a new adventure.



FAR LEFT: Richard Steven's children, twins John and Frances. On the right, Frances who was the apple of her father's eye and her death in an accident on 1 October 1940, indirectly caused by German air action, fired yet further Richard's consummate hatred for the enemy.

NEAR LEFT: A portrait of T.E. Lawrence who is better known as Laurence of Arabia. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

BOTTOM: The painting by Eric Kennington of Flt Lt R P Stevens in his Hurricane, 1941.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF LAWRENCE

On a spring morning in 1932 the peace and quiet of the Stevens' home in Kent was shattered by what sounded like pistol shots. Richard was home! There, silhouetted in the open doorway, stood Richard cracking an Australian cattle-whip. His brother recalled: 'It was his pride and joy, and he used to while away time in the garden chopping off daisy heads.' Richard would ask: 'Which one do you want?' James would point to a particular daisy, and with a crack the daisy head would be sent spinning into the summer breeze. Now, with one adventure over, he was ready for the next and enlisted in the Palestine Police where he served for some four years. James

recalled: 'He had a distinct fellow-feeling with both Jews and Arabs, his great hero being Lawrence of Arabia. His book 'The Seven Pillars of Wisdom' had such a deep meaning for Richard that it became his second Bible. I think he wanted to follow in the footsteps of T E Lawrence.'

A MESSIANIC ZEAL

By 1936 he was back in Britain where he met and married Mabel Hyde and later learning to fly at Shoreham. Here, his instructor was Cecil Pashley, a famed aviator of his day and 'founder' of Shoreham Airport. Not only that, but by an extraordinary coincidence 'Pash' was first-cousin to Richard's hero, Lawrence of Arabia. Eventually, Richard would qualify as pilot and went on to fly commercially with 'Wrightways of Croydon'.

Here, another pilot recalled seeing Stevens walking across the aerodrome wearing Arab head dress – an echo of his fascination with T E Lawrence. >>



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ABOVE: Wreckage of the He 111 of 3./KG55 downed by Stevens at Roes Rest Farm, Peckleton, Leicestershire, on the night of 8/9 April 1941.

TOP MIDDLE: The crater caused by the crashing Dornier 17 at Hartswood, Essex, photographed in the snow the following morning.

These were the halcyon and pioneering days of civil aviation, but already Stevens was getting a reputation for his prodigious ability to see in the dark. Fellow pilots spoke of his instinctive and innate nocturnal capability; something which stood him in good stead on many night-time flights between Croydon and Paris. Guy Ashenden, a Wrightways radio officer, recalled why Stevens had already earned the sobriquet 'Cats-Eyes': 'I flew with him in the DH86. It was said at the time that if you wanted to find a really thick fog you only had to go to Croydon airport. His night sight was nigh-on incredible. Not only did he seem to be able to see in the

fog and mist, but he had the natural instinct of a homing pigeon.' During this period, however, Stevens visited Germany and saw the rise of Nazism, witnessing the Jewish race being persecuted. He became determined, almost with a messianic zeal, to help destroy National Socialism. James recalled his brother's prophetic words: 'You people in this country do not realise the menace hanging over you. I've met them face to face. You just don't understand.'

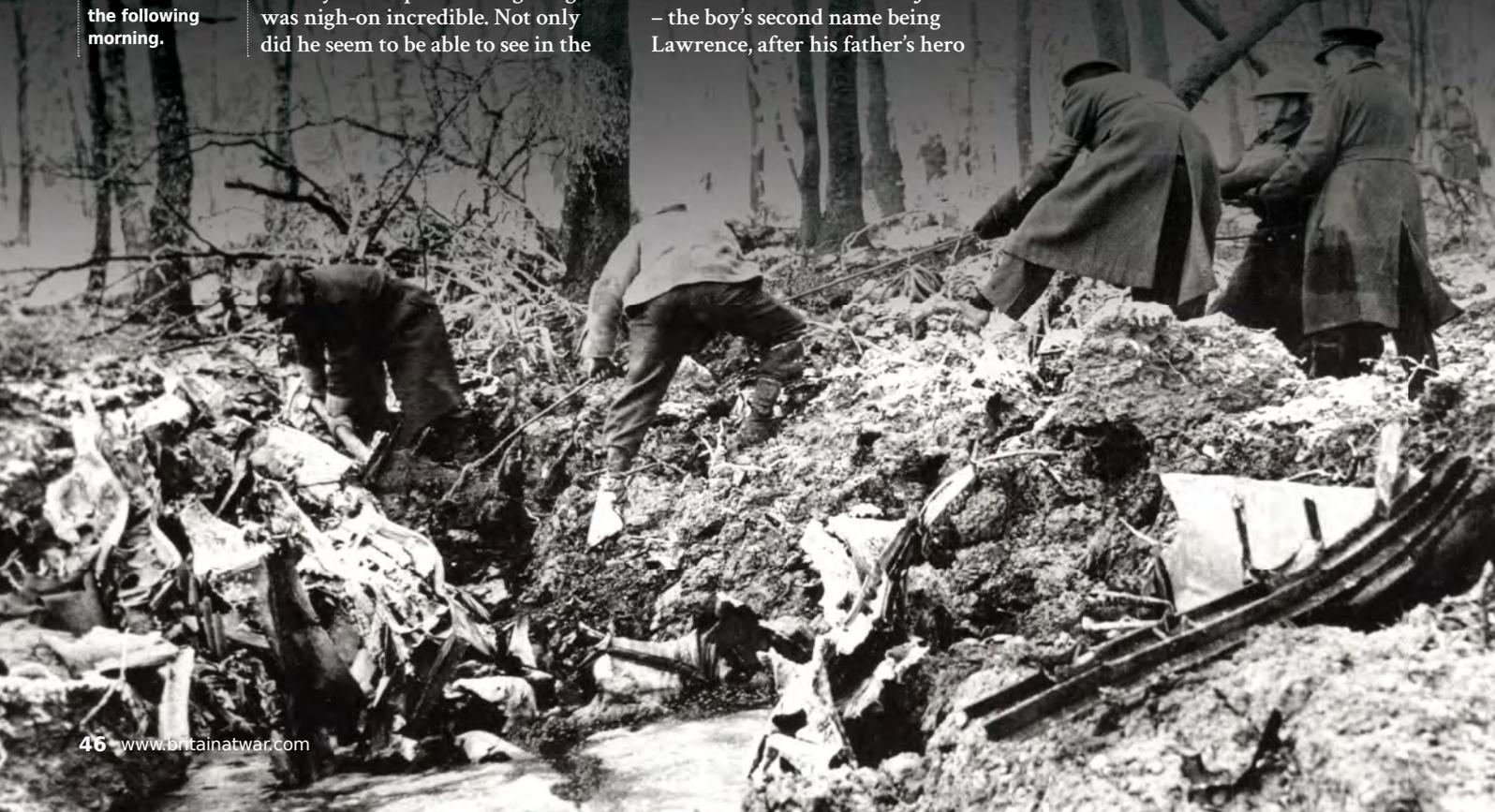
FAMILY TRAGEDY

December 1938, however, saw the birth of twins Frances and John – the boy's second name being Lawrence, after his father's hero

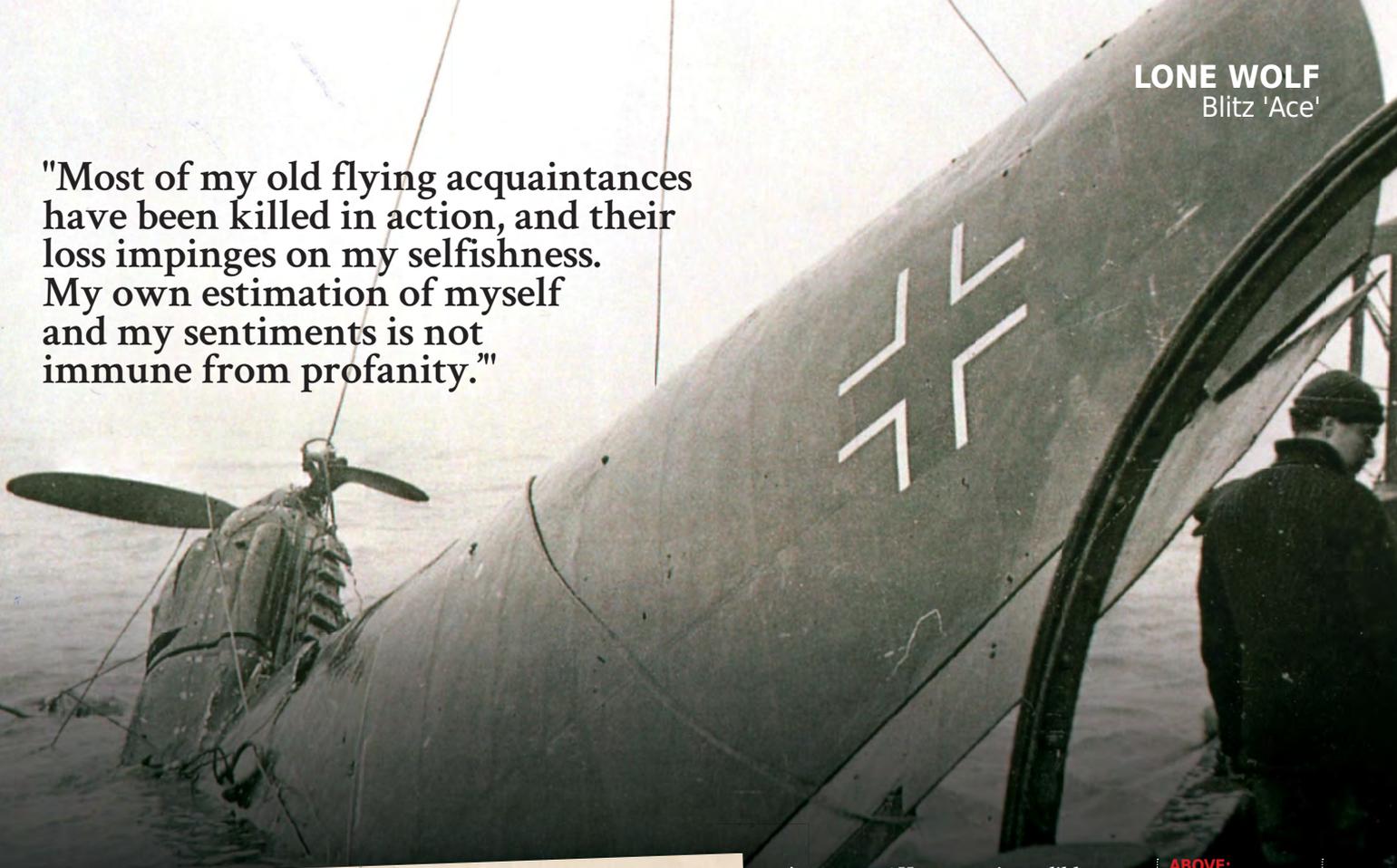
with Frances very much the apple of her father's eye: 'On leave he would walk up the lane to the peace and happiness of their country cottage and once he had opened the garden gate he would be welcomed by the present of flowers clutched in the tiny hands of his daughter. She was totally devoted to him and would be reduced to tears when he finally had to return to his squadron.'

Prior to the war, Richard enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve as a Sgt Pilot but continued working for Wrightways. When war was declared the airline was re-located to Barton Airport, Manchester, and for the first few months he flew with Wrightways on army co-operation flights. Then, in April 1940, he received his first RAF posting, being sent to Ringway Airport and 110 Anti-Aircraft Wing, 6 Anti-Aircraft Co-Operation Unit. Here, he was noted as '...a very good and professional pilot who just wanted to get on with the war.'

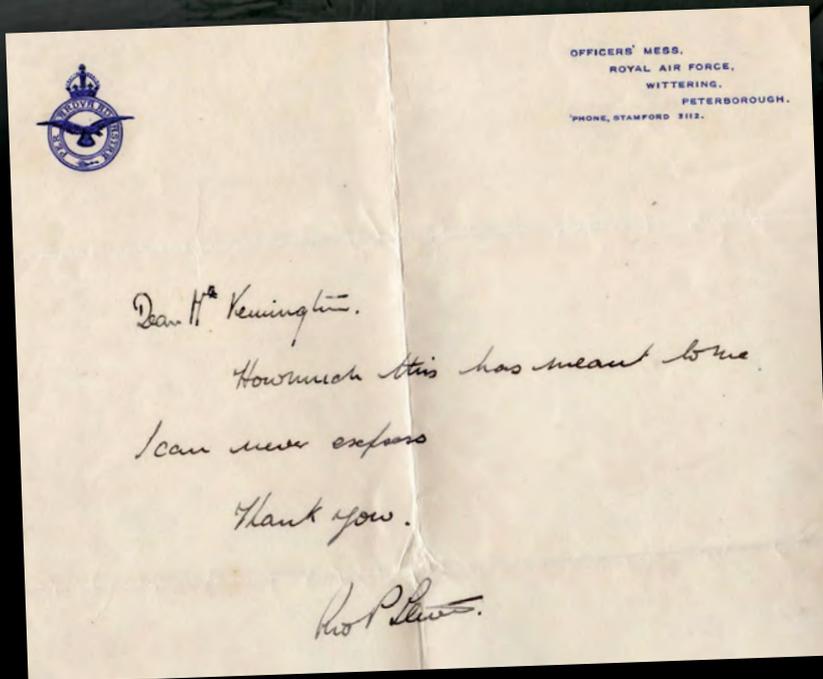
Meanwhile, his little family occupied a rented cottage in West Sussex and shortly afterwards, in a tragic accident, a paraffin stove overturned, causing a fire in which two year old Frances died. Her death was indirectly caused by the war, because light and heat to the house had been cut off in an air raid. Mabel was distraught, having witnessed the horrific death of her daughter, and Richard utterly devastated by the loss. As a result, he became estranged from Mabel but persistent stories that his wife and two children were killed in the night-Blitz are untrue. The loss of his beloved



"Most of my old flying acquaintances have been killed in action, and their loss impinges on my selfishness. My own estimation of myself and my sentiments is not immune from profanity."



ABOVE: The He 111 shot down into the sea off Canvey Island by Flt Lt Stevens on the night of 15/16 January 1941 is hauled aboard a salvage vessel



instructors! He was an incredibly competent bad weather pilot and we could have taught him to fly the Hurricane within a week, but the 'system' demanded he stay the full course. This contributed to his impatience, as he regarded his time at Sutton Bridge an interruption in his programme of getting to work on his vendetta with the Germans.'

Finally, in November 1940, he was posted to 151 Squadron*, RAF Wittering, as a night-fighter pilot on Hurricanes. (*NB: Post-war, Stevens was attributed as a Battle of Britain pilot, although he did not qualify as such.) The Blitz was now in full spate, and Stevens was raring to go. Retribution would be sweet.

One of the other pilots on 151 Squadron at that time, Flt Lt 'Black' Smith, recalled: 'We were in the kingdom of the blind at this stage, >>

LEFT: Stevens wrote to Eric Kennington from his base at RAF Wittering thanking him for his paintings.

Frances as a result of German activity, though, had given him incentive to get back at the enemy and, by late 1940, he was posted to an Operational Training Unit flying Hurricanes. Revenge was in sight.

VENDETTA WITH THE GERMANS

At RAF Sutton Bridge his instructor, Derek Dowding, recalled: 'He was someone outstanding in the flow of trainees. We were used to dealing with very young and inexperienced pilots and onto this scene burst thirty-one year old Stevens – vastly more experienced than any of his



BOTTOM LEFT: The tail fin of the Roes Rest Farm Heinkel was salvaged as a trophy for 151 Squadron, and is seen here with the addition of the squadron emblem and motto: 'Foy pour devoir', or: 'Fidelity into Duty'.

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This scroll commemorates
Flight Lieutenant R. P. Stevens
Royal Air Force
held in honour as one who
served King and Country in
the world war of 1939-1945
and gave his life to save
mankind from tyranny. May
his sacrifice help to bring
the peace and freedom for
which he died.

ABOVE: The commemorative scroll presented to Stevens' next of kin after his death in action.

BELOW: The wreckage of Flt Lt R P Stevens 253 Squadron Hurricane, Z3465, near Gilze Rijen airfield in the Netherlands, morning of 16 December 1941.

with the majority of pilots more concerned about not flying into the ground than looking for enemy aircraft. Then, onto this scene walked one Plt Off R P Stevens, older than any of us and vastly more experienced as a pilot. We had freedom of flight, but none of us put it to so much good as he did.' On the night of 15/16 January 1941 he found success for the first time. Now, his finely honed flying skills, remarkable night-vision and expert marksmanship all came together in two actions that saw the very nascence of a night fighter 'ace'.

First, over Essex, he found a Dornier 17, and sent it flaming into the ground at Hartswood. There were no survivors and Stevens, wheeling, banking and diving in the attack, momentarily blacked out from excessive 'G' and in the dive from 30,000ft over stressed his Hurricane to such an extent that the aircraft was immediately grounded. After completing his attack he had been seen from the ground performing a slow victory-roll against the cold glare of the moon's light. Taking up another Hurricane later that same night he found further prey, a Heinkel 111, and sent it smashing into the sea off Canvey Island.

STEVENS' ROCKET

That night, landing at Gravesend, Stevens strode into the dispersal hut to find exhausted Defiant pilots and gunners lounging around doing nothing. Wg Cdr Cosby recalled: 'Suddenly, in strode a chap wearing an Irvin jacket and flying boots. Looking around, he demanded: 'Why aren't you lot airborne?' He was told in no uncertain words of one syllable and more than a few expletives what he could do. We asked him who the hell he was, where he came from, and in what. He told us from Wittering, in a Hurricane. We told him to bloody well go back there. He said his name was Stevens. We had never heard of him.'

The episode of the Hartswood Dornier was immortalised in a painting by renowned war artist, Eric Kennington, in a work called 'Stevens Rocket' which was later published, along with a Kennington

portrait of Stevens, in the London Illustrated News.

Stevens was later admitted to the RAF Hospital, Halton, suffering from a burst eardrum caused by diving from 30,000ft on his first engagement. He then wrote to his father '...I have no fear of the night or the Hun, for it is to share the pleasure I have given the squadron and I have good hope for the future. Most of my old flying acquaintances have been killed in action, and their loss impinges on my selfishness. My own estimation of myself and my sentiments is not immune from profanity.' Modestly, he then tells his father 'I resent congratulations for a job that 9/10ths of the RAF could have done as easily or better' and went on to say: 'I have two Huns to my credit and now they have added a DFC. Sorry.'

BLACK HELMETED FIGURE

His first 'kill' after getting back on operations was a German bomber seen against the moon's reflection on the sea far below. The raider stood no chance. Then, on 8 April, another victory against a Heinkel 111 which was headed to Coventry, with the aircraft shot down and crashing in Leicestershire. Here, history repeated itself as another young boy watched from his bedroom window while Stevens destroyed the bomber, sending it down in flames onto the front lawn of Roe's Rest Farm. Two days later and he literally flew through the exploding debris of a Heinkel when claiming yet another night raider. His score was rising dramatically, with one of his victims finding out what it was like to be on





the receiving end of a Stevens attack, the traumatised Junkers 88 gunner telling his story:

'We were flying very slowly at under one hundred feet in misty conditions and I thought we were invisible. Suddenly, I looked up and saw the shadow of a night fighter right on top of us. I just couldn't believe it as the cockpit and propeller slowly moved inside our tail plane. When he opened up with his cannon I thought he had collided with us because our debris was all over him, but there, quite clearly to be seen against the background glare of our burning aircraft, was a black helmeted figure, quite clearly silhouetted in the open cockpit.'

Immediately after shooting down the Ju 88 in the event so graphically described by the rear gunner, the squadron diary recorded: 'Pilot Officer Stevens has been awarded a bar to his DFC'. Already, he had established himself as the Prince of night-fighters.

PROPELLER BLADES COVERED IN BLOOD

In what was a short and meteoric career, Stevens had become a legendary figure in RAF Fighter Command and steadily racked up his score. Newspapers lauded him as the 'Cats Eyes' night-fighter pilot, whilst a senior RAF commander described him as 'The Lone Wolf' with tales of his exploits abounding in the service and national press. Once, when a

bomber had exploded just in front of him, the bloody remains of one German airman was found splattered across his Hurricane. He refused to let his ground-crew wash it off and his fitter, Cyril Mead, recalled: 'How he landed in the dark I do not know. The windscreen had a large calibre bullet hole in it. The oil tank was punctured and dented and we found hair and bits of bone and human remains stuck to the leading edge of the port wing, whilst the tips of the propeller blades were covered in blood.'

Meanwhile, Stevens painted a colourful winged creature on his Hurricane's engine cowling, RAF ensign wrapped in its tail, and spearing a swastika-bedecked eagle. Hardly subtle, the garishly surreal artwork perhaps reflected his colourful character, a feature one of his Fighter Controllers recalled. One night, he told Stevens the weather was too bad to fly. Stevens was having none of it, and took off against instructions. On another occasion his airfield was bombed whilst the squadron was on the ground and Stevens raced to his Hurricane to get airborne, only to be told he couldn't take off because the runway lights were not lit. 'I don't need bloody lights' he retorted 'I'll get that bastard!'

Stevens continued to claim victories and at the end of June 1941 sent a Junkers 88 crashing into the waves ten miles off Happisburgh. It was victory number twelve, but on nights

when there were no operations he was to be found studying German aircraft to determine their weak points, or else reading the works of his hero, T E Lawrence, whom he regarded as 'his own man'; a man determined to do what was right, even if it flew in the face of authority.

At the end of July he got number thirteen by keeping the enemy silhouetted against the distant and flickering Northern Lights before the waters by Haisboro Lighthouse eventually closed over another Junkers 88. The squadron diary recorded after victory fourteen:

'Pilot Officer Stevens knocks down another, the clumsy devil. Why doesn't he look where he's going?! >>>

TOP LEFT: A newspaper cartoon of the period, referencing Flt Lt Richard Stevens and his exceptional night vision capability.

TOP RIGHT: The rather garish artwork painted by Flt Lt Stevens as his personal emblem onto the engine cowling of the Hurricane he usually flew.



DEATH OF STEVENS

SOON AFTER the death of Stevens, the war artist Eric Kennington wrote to his mother and father: 'To him 'lone wolf' was deep in his nature. When I first went to Wittering he ran across the room of the officer's mess greeting me with no hesitation. He had read *The Seven Pillars Of Wisdom* and connected me with T E Lawrence. I think that book by another lone wolf revealed to him the pattern of his own separate existence and made him understand all about a person who's spirit is solitary. Stevens had high gifts and intelligence which was manifesting itself for the moment in super-normally sensing the 'planes in the dark, and with the most sustained intention of using all his unusual power to defeat the Germans. His lightning brain only selected what it would teach him; new devices, parts of machines etc. He wished to go up every night when there were raiders over Britain while other responsible folk did not believe that he could see to land in fog and rain. I shall feel the presence of Stevens all my life.'

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BELOW:

The original grave marker on Flt Lt Stevens' grave at Bergen-op-Zoom Cemetery, The Netherlands.

'HIS WAS THE SKY'

By late summer the German night raids had all but stopped, but Stevens had learned his craft and learned it well in little over six months, but no longer were there bomber streams to find over Britain. Here, he had often flown deliberately and recklessly into British anti-aircraft barrages knowing that this was where the Germans would be, picking out individual machines with his exceptional night vision, control his Hurricane into the right position and pick off the raiders with consummate marksmanship. In fact, just flying a Hurricane at night was challenging – let alone finding and engaging the enemy. Often, cockpit canopies would be left open for better visibility, but allowed exhaust carbon monoxide to be sucked into the cockpit as temperatures plummeted to sub-zero. Also, The Hurricane could not be left alone to fly itself, a distracting factor at night. But with Stevens being master of machine, night sky and foe

it was inevitable he would now be sent over occupied enemy territory to seek out bombers as they took off or landed. It was called 'Intruding', and to undertake this new role he was posted to 253 Squadron. Gp Capt Tom Gleave was Station Commander at Manston at that time:

'Night intruding was in its infancy and 'Steve' was one of the pioneers. He was someone I admired tremendously. Although quiet, and very much a loner, he was imbued with this hatred of the Hun.'

That determination, and his success rate, led to the award of a DSO on 12 December 1941. Sadly, he would not live to receive the award.

Eventually, in his all-black Hurricane, Stevens set out for what would be his last operation on 15 December 1941, intruding over the Gilze-Rijen bomber base in the Netherlands. Here, he joined the circuit and shot down one Junkers 88 and damaged another before something went terribly wrong, his Hurricane crashing near the airfield

and killing him instantly. Tom Gleave was in the Officer's Mess: 'The ops room rang through to say they had heard 'Steve' calling, but could not make out what he was saying. Then, nothing more was heard from him. As the night ticked away the sad truth eventually dawned on us all.'

The bright star that had been Richard Stevens, 'The Lone Wolf', had been snuffed out. He was one of the RAF's high scoring aces, its highest scoring night fighter pilot at that time and the only pilot to achieve such results *without* the aid of radar or another crew member and using only skill, instinct and innate marksmanship.

Writing of Stevens, author H E Bates summed it up thus: 'He is dead now – you are the living. His was the sky – yours is the earth because of him.' ☉

Britain at War are sad to report that Terry Thompson unfortunately died under tragic circumstances on 1 October 2015. We send our heartfelt condolences to his family.

