

'REACH FOR THE SKY' - MYTH AND REALITY

Douglas Bader's Capture - August 1941



9 AUGUST 1941

Circus 68

ON 9 August 1941 the leader of the Tangmere Wing, Wing Commander Douglas Bader, was famously brought down over France and captured. His conquest over adversity after losing his legs in a pre-war flying accident, his part in the Battle of Britain, being taken POW with subsequent escape attempts, and then incarceration in the infamous Colditz Castle are all legendary. All of these adventures are well known, but in the following feature we examine the facts surrounding how he was brought down. First, as introduction to our cover story feature, we take a look at the background to events on the operation that fateful day:

This 'Circus' operation was to the refinery at Gosnay, four miles to

the west of Béthune, with weather predicted at 8/10ths Cumulus cloud at 6-7,000 ft on the way in and 10/10ths over the target. The cloud was expected to be in layers, with breaks at higher levels.

Five Blenheims of 226 Sqn were the raiding force and the bombers were escorted and covered by the Fighter Wings from RAF North Weald (71, 222 and 111 Sqns), RAF Hornchurch (403, 603 and 611 Sqns), RAF Kenley (452, 485 and 602 Sqns) and RAF Tangmere (41, 610 and 616 Sqns) with RAF Northolt providing a Support Wing (306, 308 and 315 Sqns).

Some fifteen Messerschmitt 109s were claimed as destroyed on Circus 68, and six probably destroyed. In fact, the Luftwaffe only lost one Me 109.

The RAF lost a total of six Spitfires with three pilots POW, two killed and one safe in the UK. The Luftwaffe claimed to have shot down seven Spitfires during Circus 68.

Cloud cover over the intended target prevented any chance of bombing, and a secondary target presented the same problems but bombs were nevertheless dropped in the vicinity of Fort Philippe at Gravelines. It is not thought that any bombs actually struck the target, although several were seen to fall in the sea.

Overall, the operation can only be viewed as a failure – and a failure which lost RAF Fighter Command one of its brightest stars, the poster-boy Douglas Bader, and presented the Germans with a propaganda coup through his capture. >>

LEFT: Wing Commander Douglas Bader DSO & Bar, DFC & Bar, photographed after being captured in August 1941. Bader retired from the RAF on 21 July 1946, was made a CBE in 1956 and was knighted in 1976. He died on 5 September 1982.

CIRCUS OPERATIONS

Conceived in late 1940 and early 1941 to take offensive operations to the enemy in northern Europe, the purpose of Circus missions was later stated as:

'Fighter escorted daylight bombing attacks against short range targets with the aim of bringing the German Air Force to battle and preventing its withdrawal to the Eastern Front.'

Whilst the intention of forcing the Luftwaffe to hold a fighter force on the Western Front was understandable it was certainly a fact, anyway, that the Germans would not have left that front exposed and unprotected by a fighter force. In the event, a relatively limited fighter force was retained there (principally JG2 and JG26) and the Circus operations throughout 1941 were costly in terms of losses, ineffective in terms of the targets bombed and highly doubtful in terms of the over-optimistic level of claims against the Luftwaffe fighter arm which were made by RAF Fighter Command.



'Reach for MYTH AND REALITY

Seventy-five years ago this month the legendary RAF fighter pilot, Douglas Bader, was brought down over France and taken POW whilst leading the Tangmere Wing. **Andy Saunders** examines the circumstances surrounding this episode – an incident where facts do not necessarily fit the oft-accepted version of the story.

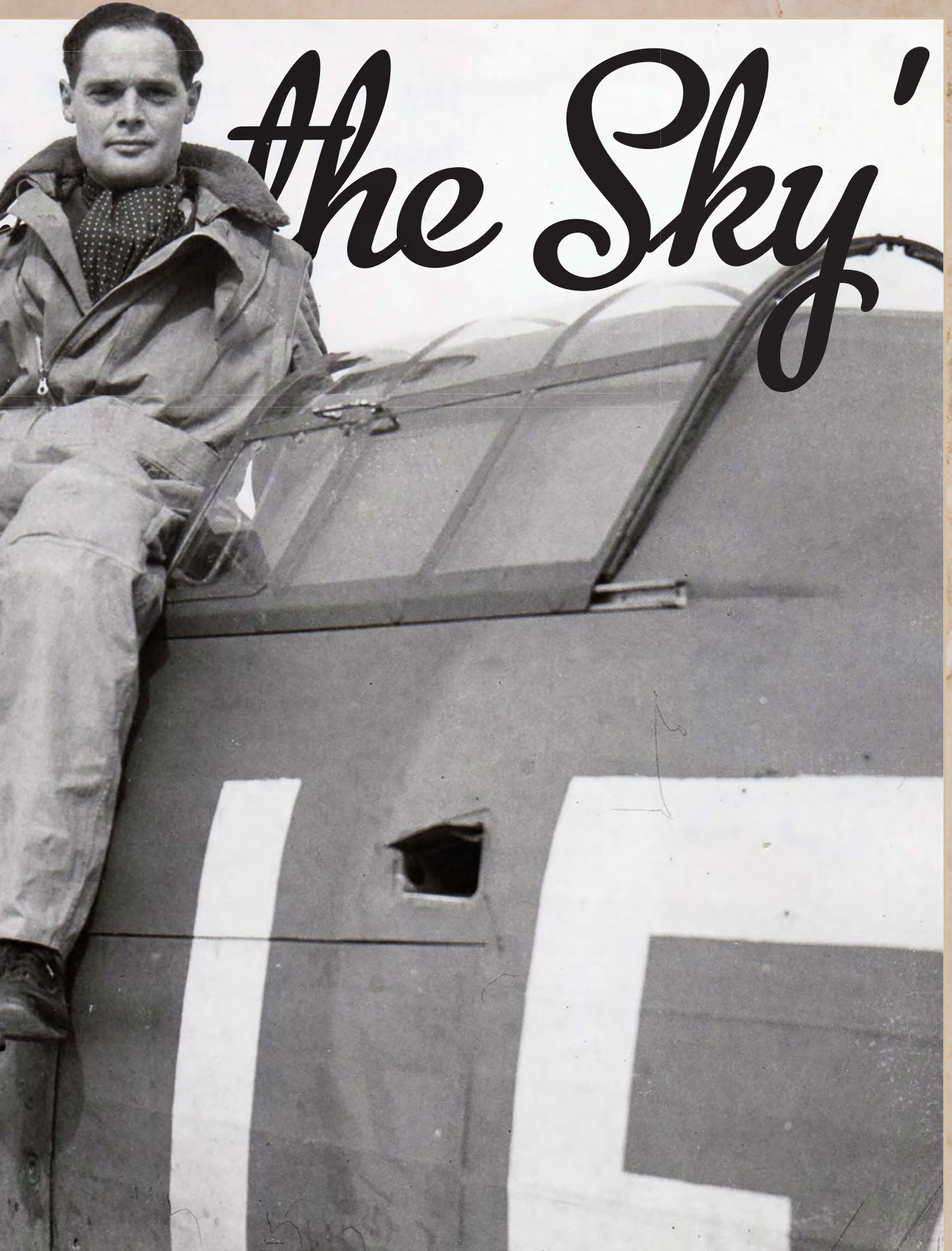
RIGHT:
Douglas
Bader, CO
of 242
Squadron,
1940.

PAUL BRICKHILL'S 'Reach For The Sky' became a classic of its genre and arguably the best known account of an RAF Second World War fighter pilot's experience. It was, though, typical of its time. Written in a somewhat gung-ho style, the book reflects a brash propaganda ethos of wartime writing, and contemporary books like Larry Forrester's biography of Bob Stanford-Tuck, 'Fly For Your Life', echoed the same style. The titles of these two books alone are redolent of 'Boy's Own' style action and of ripping yarns.

In the case of Bader's book it wasn't long before the film industry saw potential for this epic tale of an 'against-the-odds' story of heroic struggle.

In his book, Brickhill gives a version of events when Douglas Bader was downed over France on 9 >>





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ABOVE: Bader surrounded by his pilots during September 1940.

RIGHT: The Messerschmitt 109 F aircraft of JG26 lined up under the trees at St Omer, 1941.

August 1941, putting the stamp of approval on how Bader wished the world to view the episode. Brickhill, himself a former RAF Spitfire pilot and an ex-POW had empathy with his subject and was able to couple this to journalistic flair and ability to tell a good tale. That said, there were fractious moments between Brickhill and Bader, with Brickhill perceiving his reputation to be based on attention to minute detail and Bader not taking kindly to persistent questioning. This, to the extent that publication of the book was only saved by intervention of the publisher, Ian Collins, a golfing partner of Bader's. In the end, the book saw light of day but with Bader resentful that Brickhill did very well out of the book and film rights while he only received a one-off £10,000 payment.

CASCADE OF DEBRIS

There is little in Brickhill's book that adds much to our knowledge of the events for the Tangmere Wing from take-off to target area that day which cannot otherwise be gained from various eye witness accounts or official records. It does, however, tell of Bader's diving attack on the Messerschmitts, overshooting the first



ones in his headlong pursuit and then pulling up to 24,000 ft, finding himself alone, and then spotting and attacking more Messerschmitts - one of which he claimed to have set well ablaze. He then claimed to have damaged another with a three second burst, causing a gushing volume of white smoke and cascade of debris. Two fighters, though, were now turning to attack him from the left as Bader broke right. As he did so, it happened:

'Something hit him. He felt the impact but the mind was curiously

numb and could not assess it. No noise but something was holding his aeroplane by the tail, pulling it out of his hands and slewing it round. It lurched suddenly and then was pointing straight down, the cockpit floating with dust that had come up from the bottom. He pulled back on the stick but it fell inertly into his stomach like a broken neck. The aeroplane was diving in a steep spiral and confusedly he looked behind to see if anything were following.

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First he was surprised, and then terrifyingly shocked, to see that the whole of the Spitfire behind the cockpit was missing: fuselage, tail, fin - all gone. Sheared off, he thought vaguely. The second 109 must have run into him and sliced it off with his propeller.

He knew it had happened but hoped desperately and foolishly that he was wrong. Only the little radio mast stuck up behind his head. A corner of his brain saw that the altimeter was unwinding fast from 24,000 ft.

Thoughts crowded in. How stupid to be nice and warm in the cockpit and have to start getting out. The floundering mind sought a grip and sharply a gush of panic spurted.

"Christ! Get out!"

"Wait! No oxygen up here!"

Get out! Get out!



ABOVE: Bader, the archetypal fighter pilot; sports car, Labrador dog, pipe and spotted silk scarf.

LEFT: Gerhard Schoepfel (in light jacket, left) discusses tactics with his pilots at St Omer, 1941.

BELOW: A Spitfire is caught by the camera gun of Gerhard Schoepfel, one of the Luftwaffe's successful fighter pilots on 9 August 1941. >>

Won't be able to soon! Must be doing over 400 already. He tore off his helmet and mask and yanked the little rubber ball over his head - the hood ripped away and screaming noise battered at him. Out came the harness pin and he gripped the cockpit rim to lever himself up, wondering if he could get out without thrust from the helpless legs. He struggled madly to get his head above the windscreen and suddenly felt he was being sucked out as the tearing wind caught him.

Top half out. He was out! No, something had him by the leg holding him. (The rigid foot of the right leg hooked fast in some vice in the cockpit.) Then the nightmare took his exposed body and beat him and screamed and roared in his ears as the broken fighter, dragging him



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ABOVE: After capture, Bader was entertained by the pilots of JG26 at their HQ in a farmhouse at La Colombier, Audembert. Johannes Schmid, who was introduced as Bader's victor, is fourth from left (in light jacket) just over Adolf Galland's right shoulder.

by the leg, plunged down and spun and battered him and the wind clawed at his flesh and the cringing sightless eyeballs. It went on and on into confusion, on and on, timeless, witless and helpless, with a little core of thought deep under the blind head fighting for life in the wilderness. It said he had a hand gripping the D-ring of his parachute and mustn't take it off, must grip it because the wind wouldn't let him get it back again, and he mustn't pull it or the wind would split his parachute because they must be doing 500 miles an hour. On and on... till steel and leather snapped.

He was floating, in peace. The noise and buffeting had stopped.

Floating upwards? He thought it is so quiet I must have a rest. I would like to go to sleep.

In a flash the brain cleared and he knew and pulled the D-ring, hearing a crack as the parachute opened. Then he was actually floating. High above the sky was still blue, and right at his feet lay a veil of cloud. He sank into it. That was the cloud at 4,000 ft. Cutting it fine! In seconds he dropped easily under it and saw the earth, green and dappled, where the sun struck through. Something flapped in his face and he saw that it was his right trouser leg, split along the seam. High in the split gleamed indecently the white skin of his stump.

The right leg had gone.

How lucky, he thought, to lose one's legs and have detachable ones. Otherwise he would have died a few seconds ago. He looked, but saw no burning wreck below - probably not enough left to burn.'

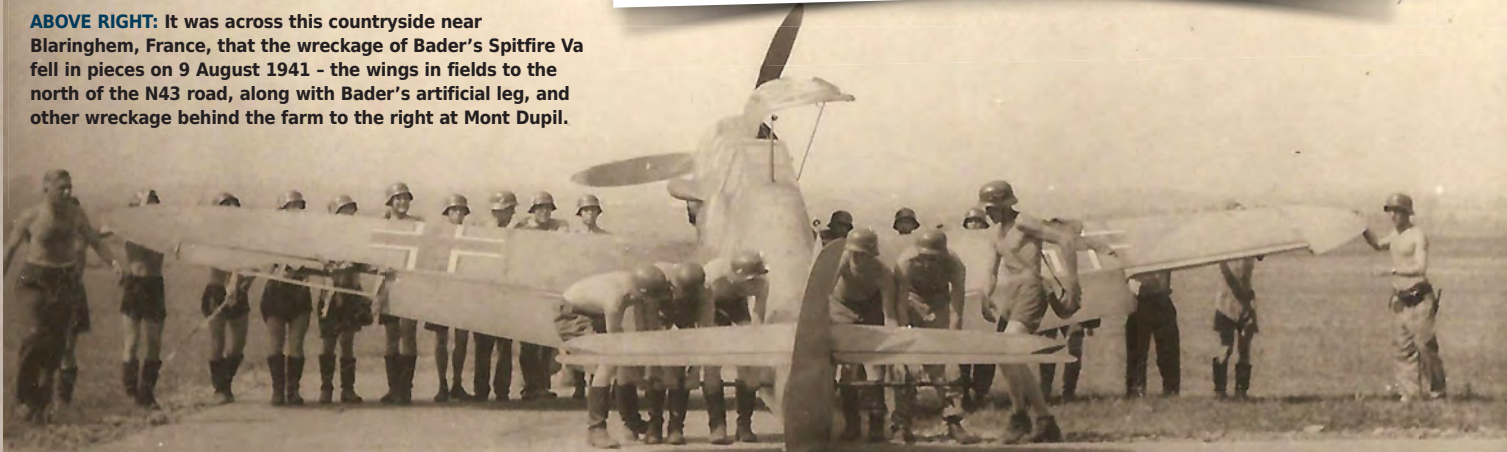
COLLISION WITH GERMAN FIGHTER

The story of Bader's bale-out over France in 'Reach For The Sky' is reflected faithfully in the film of the same name. Generally, it was well received when it premiered on 5 July 1956 in the presence of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. Bader stayed away, but was reportedly pleased with how the film turned out. Its frequent repeats on UK television means it has probably crept into British consciousness and there cannot be many who have not seen it at least once. All will surely remember, if asked, the cause of Douglas Bader's demise over France; a collision with a German fighter.

Adolf Galland, who commanded Jagdgeschwader 26 when Bader was brought down, had also written an account of his experiences as one of Germany's most famous fighter aces. 'The First and The Last', published in 1953, a year ahead of Brickhill's book,



ABOVE RIGHT: It was across this countryside near Blaringhem, France, that the wreckage of Bader's Spitfire Va fell in pieces on 9 August 1941 - the wings in fields to the north of the N43 road, along with Bader's artificial leg, and other wreckage behind the farm to the right at Mont Dupil.



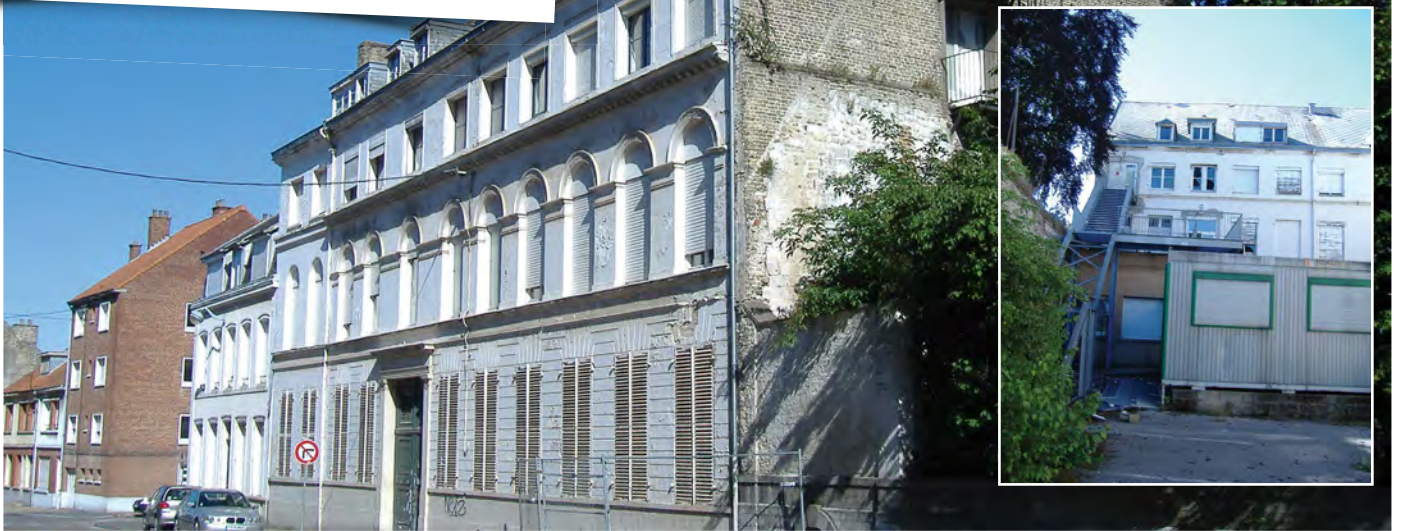
ABOVE: A damaged Me 109 F is wheeled away for repairs. Although only one was shot down on 9 August 1941, others are thought to have been damaged in the battle.

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LEFT: This grainy wartime photograph shows the room from which Bader lowered his knotted sheets. (The window on the far left was later turned into a fire escape)



detailed the engagement but gave a different version to Bader:

'One of the most successful and famous fighter pilots of the RAF, Wing Commander Douglas Bader, was shot down in a dogfight over the Pas de Calais. It was never confirmed who actually shot him down, but when Bader was captured he particularly wanted to know who it was, and if possible meet his master in the air. He said that for him it was an intolerable idea that possibly he had been shot down by a German NCO. It was not an NCO, but probably one of our able young officers, amongst whom there

were some outstanding pilots. I had shot down that day two Spitfires out of Bader's formation. In order not to offend him, we chose from amongst the successful pilots who had taken part in this flight a fair haired, good-looking flying officer, and introduced him to Bader as his victorious opponent. Bader was pleasantly surprised, shaking his hand warmly.

He described his crash like this: 'I saw pieces flying off my crate. The nose dipped, and when I looked round the tail unit had practically gone... Nothing else to do but to get out as quickly as possible.'

It is an account at odds with Bader's - but Galland was emphatic in his book and later when interviewed by the author in 1977. Another who was convinced that Bader had been shot down was 'Johnnie' Johnson, flying with 616 Sqn in the Tangmere Wing that day. Interviewed in 1989 he said: 'Douglas was shot down for sure. Trouble was, he hated the idea that anyone shot him down. Absolutely bloody hated it.'

'STAY WITH ME!'

That day had seen Galland's JG 26 ordered into the air shortly after 11.00 when the first reports of Circus 68 forming up over England were received. The pilot to whom Galland referred was said to have been Oblt Wolfgang Kosse of 5/JG 26 - although if we take at face value German reports of his victory then it rules him out as the pilot who downed Bader. The official list of Luftwaffe shoot-downs states that Kosse's was timed at 11.40. If accurate, and it probably is, then it is a little later than the time we know Bader to have been lost at around 11.20 when he called 'Stay with me!' as he went into action. Indeed, the actual II/JG 26 victory list times it at 11.45 but, more importantly, the claim can be ruled out on another factor as it was recorded as having taken place at 3,000m (9,842 ft), considerably

ABOVE: Injured in the bale-out, Bader was taken to this hospital in St Omer which had been taken over as a medical centre by the Luftwaffe.

ABOVE RIGHT: Famously, Bader escaped from his hospital room by knotting together sheets and shinning down the makeshift 'rope' before making good his getaway. His room was the second window along from the fire escape.

LEFT: The Operations Room at RAF Tangmere from where an anxious team plotted and monitored Circus 68.



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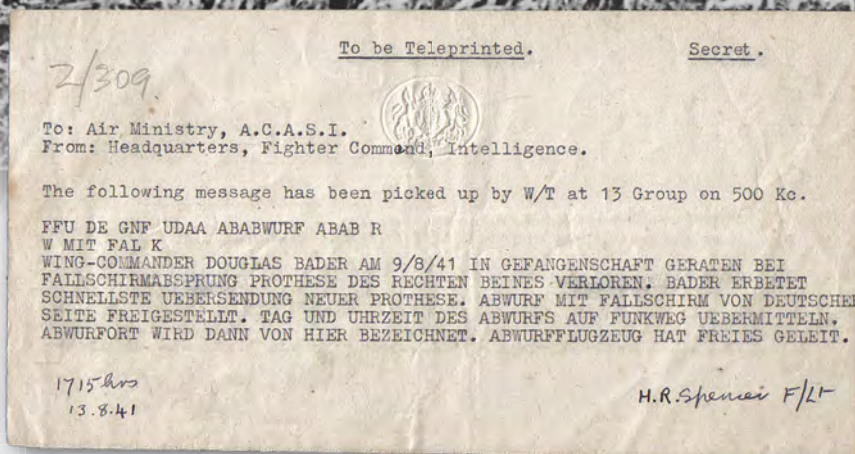
BELOW: The burnt-out wreck of Flt Lt 'Buck' Casson's Spitfire, 9 August 1941.



RIGHT: On 13 August 1941 came the first indication that Bader was POW in a transmission from German sources which also requested delivery of a spare artificial leg and offered safe passage for the delivering aircraft.

lower than the 24,000ft at which Bader said he was attacked. All evidence therefore points to the fact that he was neither the man who shot down Bader, nor the pilot who played 'victor' for the benefit of the captured RAF Wing Leader.

Also flying with Galland was Oblt Johannes Schmid, he too claiming a Spitfire. Flying a Messerschmitt 109 F-4, he was with his CO when Galland shot at another Spitfire. As he pulled away he saw a Spitfire flying alone which he attacked twice



at 2,500m (8,200ft) from behind, opening fire between 80 - 50m, shooting the aircraft down 10km from St Omer. He watched as flames and smoke came from the aircraft and the pilot baled-out at 11.25. Uffz Richter witnessed the pilot's parachute opening and the Spitfire going down on the edge of a forest, and we can identify the British pilot who fell to Schmid's hail of cannon and machine gun fire, although there are grounds for believing that it was Schmid who was the pilot introduced to Bader as his victor. On 21 August 1941 Schmid was awarded the Ritterkreuz after 25 aerial victories, and on 24 August an account stated: '...a few days before, Schmid had forced an opponent to bale-out after trying to attack one of his comrades. The meeting of these two men, the German and the Wing Commander, in the HQ of the Geschwader was an exceptional experience. The Englishman went to his victor, laid

a hand on his shoulder and said with clear respect in his voice 'I have mastered the art of flying in my career and I can fly! But you can do it better!' It seems, therefore, that Galland's arbitrary nomination of a victor was Schmid - at least so far as the German propaganda machine was concerned and the identification of a 'Wing Commander' further strengthening a link to Bader. Unfortunately, no evidence backs him up as victor. Instead, Schmid had shot down an Australian, Sgt G B Haydon.

DISAPPEARED FROM HIS VIEW

Haydon was flying Spitfire IIA P8361 (a presentation aeroplane named 'Krakatoa') with 452 Squadron (Kenley Wing) when he was lost on Circus 68 as the report of his CO stated:

'Whilst operating with Circus 68 over France on 9/8/41 at about 11.20 hrs Sgt Haydon was Green 2. Green

Later in the war, Bader required another spare leg and this was delivered via the International Red Cross. It is seen here being dispatched from London.



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I was P/O Truscott who reports that during an engagement with a number of Me 109s at 10,000ft he suddenly missed Sgt Haydon who had disappeared from his view.'

Clearly, the details match Schmid's report and we can also place the crash location on the ground. Postwar, the RAF's Missing Research & Enquiry Unit searched for RAF casualties and in the case of Sgt Haydon the scene of a crash at Forêt de Tournehem was investigated where it was found that he had baled-out too low, dying from injuries after landing in a tree. Carved onto the tree by French woodcutters, and still visible to investigators in 1947, was the wording: 'Il mort pour la France 1941'. Gerald Haydon lies buried in the cemetery at Longuenesse, St Omer, and there is no doubting that Schmid was responsible for downing him and not Bader, given the match of detail. In short, and without further outlining each claim by JG26, it is impossible to conclusively link any of them to the demise of Bader.

HIT BY CANNON SHELLS

There is no doubting that the blow which disabled Bader's aeroplane was sudden, catastrophic and utterly overwhelming to the senses of the pilot. If it was the case that Bader's tail and rear fuselage were hit by cannon shells, then the effects might have well appeared the result of a collision. And if hit by cannon shells then Bader could be excused for genuinely believing that something behind had collided with him, because the blowing away of the tail unit could well be a consequence of such hits. But if we cannot find a German victor then surely we must accept the collision version of events?

Hptm Gerhard Schoepfel, Commander of III Gruppe JG 26, though, was one pilot able to give an accurate and verifiable account of his

claim over a Spitfire that day, and it is a claim we can very definitely attribute to a particular pilot; Flt Lt Lionel Harwood 'Buck' Casson, 'B' Flight Commander, 616 Squadron. Casson, like Bader, was now POW but on his release from Colditz Castle on 14 April 1945 one of the first things Bader did was write to Casson who replied on 28 May 1945:

'Now for the day we disgraced the Tangmere Wing and you say you want the whole story - phew.

When we dived to attack those Me 109s that were climbing up in formation I was to starboard and behind you with three other aircraft of 'B' Flight. My No 2 was a Rhodesian sergeant who's name I have forgotten and Roy Marples was on my right with his No 2.

I watched you attack with 'A' Flight and break to port as I was coming in. I was well throttled back in the dive as the other three started to fall behind and I wished to keep the flight together. I attacked from the rear and, after having a squirt at two 109s flying together, I left them for a single one flying inland alone. I finished nearly all my cannon up on this boy who finally baled-out at about 6,000ft having lost most of his tail unit. The other three 'B' Flight machines were somewhere in my rear and probably one of the lads saw this.'

But what of the Me 109 Casson claimed that day, and which Me 109 might have collided with Bader? The first difficulty might be identifying likely collision contenders given that so many Me 109s were claimed as being blasted out of the sky during Circus 68 - some fifteen in total, begging the question; how can we know which Messerschmitt it was? And yet, when looking at the Luftwaffe losses for the day, the task becomes easy. There exists



ABOVE: Flt Lt 'Buck' Casson (left) and Fg Off Hugh Dundas, 616 Squadron, 1941.

BELOW: Bader (centre) with pilots of his Tangmere Wing, July 1941.

only one contender for any collision; Uffz Albert Schlager of 3/JG 26. His crash was near Aire-sur-la-Lys, in the right place and at exactly the right time, and although II/JG 26 lost another Me 109 that day its un-named pilot baled-out over Merville some 20 km east of the combat zone, the Luftwaffe reporting it as a 'crash' unrelated to combat. So, if Schlager is our collision victim then how can we exclude other Me 109s shot down that day given that no other Luftwaffe fighter units were engaged? Quite simply, there were no other Luftwaffe fighter losses - the RAF having over-claimed an astonishing thirteen victories! And, conversely of course, if Schlager is our collision candidate, then who did Casson shoot down? >>



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RIGHT:

After capture, and whilst being entertained by JG26, he was allowed to sit in the cockpit of a Messerschmitt 109. Here, at Duxford in 1969, Bader gets up close and personal with another 'Messerschmitt 109' during the making of the film 'Battle of Britain', on which he acted as technical adviser.

Doubtless, he is regaling this group of schoolboys with tales of derring-do!

FAR RIGHT:

In September 1945 Bader led a Battle of Britain flypast over London. Here, he climbs into his Spitfire (marked with his initials, DB) at RAF North Weald preparatory to making that flight.

BELOW:

A Spitfire of 616 Squadron, Tangmere Wing, after a landing mishap at RAF Friston in early 1941.



FRIENDLY FIRE?

Setting aside all RAF Fighter Command claims on Circus 68 for the moment, and looking only at Casson's combat, we need to take at face value his account; ie using up all his cannon ammunition, shooting the tail off a 'Messerschmitt 109' and watching its pilot finally bale-out at 6,000ft. But was Uffz Schlager Casson's victim? The answer is provided, at least in part, by a Combat Report filed by another 616 Sqn pilot, Plt Off 'Nip' Heppell, who stated that he fired at a Me 109 on the top of a stall-turn, with Heppell noting a large '6' behind the cross on the fuselage and he closed to almost point-blank range and gave a long burst. The Messerschmitt immediately went into a very slow gliding turn to the left as Heppell saw the hood fly off and the pilot jump out. With a morbid fascination, he watched as the pilot tumbled over and dropped into cloud, his parachute still not open. Accurately, Heppell judged that the German airman must certainly have been killed.

The timing and location of this claim can further be linked to Schlager by Plt Off 'Johnnie' Johnson who saw wreckage burning on the ground 'in a field close to a canal'. Indeed, he had almost certainly seen the burning aftermath of Heppell's claim because

we now know that Schlager's Me 109 had crashed into a field at Aire-sur-la-Lys, and it was close to a canal. Schlager himself had baled-out, but his parachute failed to open. The crash site was established in 2004 when it was located and excavated, the wreckage positively identified as Schlager's aircraft with the tail section found to have been firmly attached on impact, ruling it out as Casson's claim and raising the spectre of 'friendly fire'. Uncannily, the description of Casson's claim over an 'Me 109' is more than remarkably similar to the downing of Bader; the loss of the tail and the pilot finally getting out at 6,000ft. Another pilot in the squadron, Sgt Jeff West, also saw what he believed to be an enemy aircraft 'performing strange manoeuvres and adopting remarkable attitudes prior to breaking into pieces'. Since Schlager's Messerschmitt did not crash under such circumstances, and Bader's Spitfire fell in pieces, he can only have witnessed the demise of his Wing Leader's fighter.

In the heat of aerial battle, incidents of 'friendly fire' were surprisingly high. Indeed, we also know that at least one other instance of 'friendly fire' occurred during Circus 68

when 452 Squadron were attacked by Spitfires, this being a fact recorded in the combat report of Sgt Makin of that squadron, who, describing the battle, went on to say: '...we were then attacked by six aircraft out of the sun which were later identified as Spitfires.' Here, then, is a contemporaneous record of an instance of Spitfires attacking Spitfires, and during the very same operation.

Pilots were under extreme physical and mental stress and with only split-seconds to decide. Quite simply, it was a case of kill or be killed, and against a bright sky the rear-view of a Me 109 F is remarkably similar to that of a Spitfire. Under the circumstances, too, of such hectic and stressful combat no blame could ever be attached to 'Buck' Casson if, indeed, he had made such an unfortunate mistake. He was a valiant, well respected, well decorated, much-liked, successful and skilful fighter pilot. Whatever the facts, we can be certain of one thing. To a man, all of those

involved that day were surely brave and courageous fliers; ordinary young men asked to perform extraordinary deeds. Heroes if one likes, but all of them fallible. ☉

