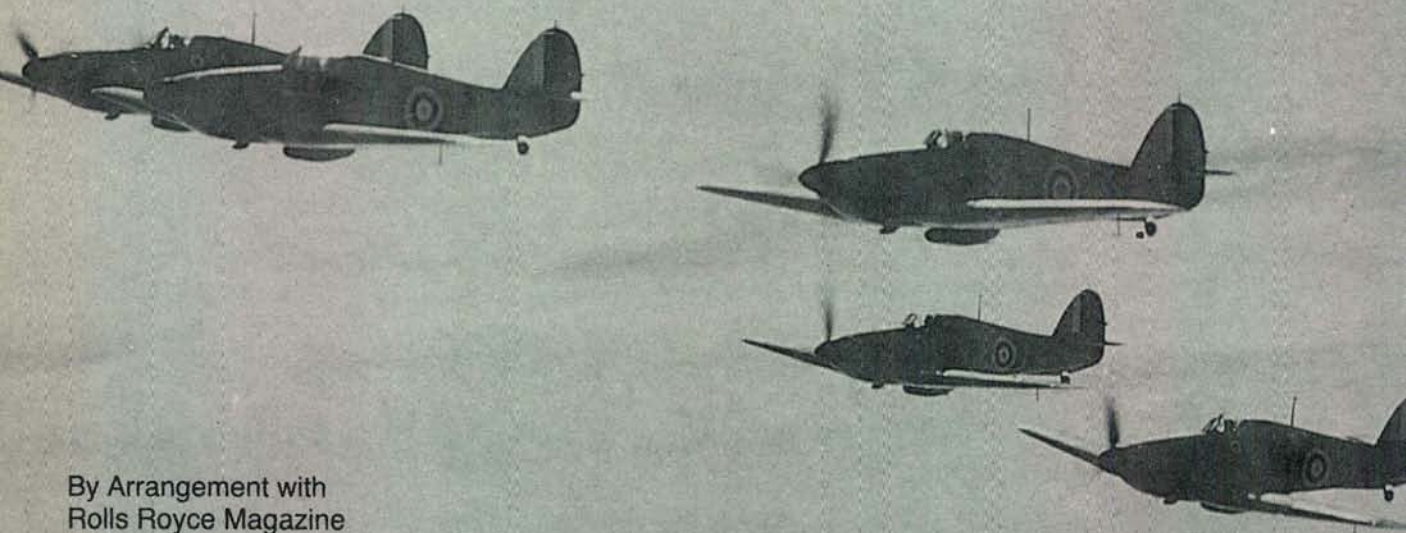


the decisive air battle fought over southern England in 1940.

The Battle of Britain

- as it really was



By Arrangement with
Rolls Royce Magazine

Fifty years ago the Battle of Britain was fought in the skies over southern England. Historians have analysed the Battle in detail, and as a result some of its mystique has been torn away. For example, the RAF's claim that 185 German aircraft were shot down on 15 September 1940 was highly inaccurate; in fact the Luftwaffe lost only about 60 bombers and fighters on that day.

But there are some certainties. The Battle was Hitler's first major reverse in the 1939-45 war, and it meant that Britain did not go the way of the countries in continental Europe which

had been conquered in 1939 and 1940. It was a very close thing. The Royal Air Force was helped by good equipment, radar, the benefit of fighting over home territory, and German errors.

On both sides the Battle was fought by a relatively small number of young men who "cultivated a rakish and light-hearted approach to life." As one British pilot said: "When we could be scared to death five or six times a

Part of George Barclay's log book, showing missions at the height of the Battle of Britain

YEAR	MONTH	DATE	AIRCRAFT Type	No.	PILOT 1st
1940	SEPTEMBER	1	HURRICANE	P 387D	NORTH WEAST
		1		N 2440	
		2		V 6610	
		2		V 6610	
		2		V 6610	
		4		V 6610	
		4		N 2440	
		6		V 6610	
		6		V 6610	
		7		V 6610	

and yet find ourselves drink in the local pub before closing time on a summer evening, it all seemed unreal."

Contemporary diaries and letters show what it was like for those taking part. The abbreviated extracts which follow show the Battle from the British and German sides.

George Barclay

Born in December 1919, George Barclay was at Trinity College, Cambridge, when he joined the university's air squadron in late 1938. He was called up in September 1939.

Commissioned in the RAFVR, he was on the first war flying course at RAF Cranwell and finished his initial flying training in April 1940. He then had just over 200 hours of flying experience.

After a short course on Spitfires he was posted to a new squadron - No 49 - which was equipped with Hurricanes when it took part in the battle of Britain. His diary begins on September 1940.

1 September: Yesterday evening we were told we were to move to North Weald today to relieve the war-weary and much shot-up 56 Squadron. We were meant to be going for a week

Hurricanes in formation during the battle of Britain



he will survive for at least seven days!

6 September: We are having simply magnificent weather - I've never known anything like it - clear skies and brilliant sun. It must be the finest English summer for years, just when we would sometimes give our boots for a day of low cloud and rain!

We had two trips today - the first 10,000 ft over Rochford - quite uneventful, and the second in the evening at 20,000 ft over the Isle of Sheppey. Though the weather was magnificent there was a bit of a haze at 10,000 ft. Eight Junkers 87 dive bombers came in in the haze at 10,000 ft and bombed Shellhaven. They were quite invisible from above - a very clever German manoeuvre.

Wing Commander Beamish [Station Commander, North Weald] was just climbing up to join us at 20,000 ft when he ran into the 87s - the fighter pilot's dream come true! He shot a couple down, but they plugged Shellhaven good and proper, the immense clouds of black smoke rising to over 8,000 ft.

7 September: Little did we realise what was in store for us today when we scrambled after lunch. Twelve aircraft took off to patrol Maidstone at 15,000 ft, seven came back.

We got on patrol and drifted up and down the sky. Then suddenly there was a tiny slanting black line which we knew were bombers. We turned towards them. I turned the gun button to "Fire"

and looked to see the reflector light was working OK. I opened the hood, and immediately I could see 50 per cent better, though it is 50 per cent colder. I saw that the rapidly closing bombers were surrounded by black dots, which I knew to be Me 109s.

So we were in for it this time! Before we knew where we were we were doing a beam attack on the Dornier 215s. All I remember is trying to avoid hitting anyone else as we attacked, and being conscious of Me 109s coming down to attack us. I had a long burst at one section of Dorniers and as I broke away noticed at least two lagging behind and streaming glycol or white smoke.

As I broke off I turned and two yellow Me 109s shot past underneath me. I turned back and fired at the nearest - no result. Had a burst at the farthest and immediately there was a puff of black smoke, a brilliant flame and down he went, slowly turning over on to his back. The whole hood and perspex flew off and the fuselage began to disintegrate.

I turned sharply and found another yellow 109 on my tail, sitting pretty. I did an aileron turn in a dive to get away and then flattened out and had a good look round. I was about 7,000 ft below the bombers, so I climbed up about a mile away on their starboard watching my tail carefully for Me 109s.

Just when I was on the bombers' level and thinking about an attack, the whole formation turned towards me - so a head-on attack happened. All I saw as I

DUTY
(INCLUDING RESULTS AND REMARKS)

TOTALS BROUGHT FORWARD

To North Weald

V.H.F. R/T PRACTICE.
No BARTON-SWIR DOWN-O.K.
X RAID. BASE 15000'.
No BEXLEY-SALED OUT-O.K.
X RAID. ROCHFORD 15000'.
No NYNH-SHOT DOWN-NOT RECD
X RAID. THAMES. ME No. 1 DAMAGED

X RAID. BASE 15000'.
FLY BARTON-B.O.-O.K.
X RAID. GRAYES 20000'.
S/LR GRANDY-B.O.-O.K. 10000'.
X RAID. ROCHFORD
P/O CRABBEY-S.O.-O.K. 20000'.
X RAID. SHEPPEY

MAIDSTONE. 15000'. 1 ME 109 DESTROYED.
1 Do. 215. DAMAGED. 1 ME III DAMAGED.
SELF SHOT DOWN-O.K. F/O WELLS
LATER FOUND Wounded
MISSING. F/O FLEMING-B.O.-KILLED.
BOARD-B.O.-OK. SGT. KILLINGBACK &
CORNER B.O.-OK.

SINGLE-ENGINE AIRCRAFT				MULTI-ENGINE AIRCRAFT				PASS-ENGINEER	INSTR./CLOUD FLYING (Inch. in code. 11 to 110)
DAY	PILOT	DEAL	PILOT	DAY	1st PILOT	2nd PILOT	DEAL		
80-30	210-20	1-40	6-45					13-10	
								15-20	
								3-30	

Squadron formation at this period

Delivered circles of ME 109's with high 109's a long and then did inverted spin. Hit in tail. Hit one engine of shot down in flames by the rear gunner.

Hit in party - 109's attacked Dornier. Hit engine of 1. 109's attacked Dornier. 6 of 109's shot down. 2 yellow raid 109's under me. Shot at front one which exploded. Meanwhile 109 appeared me with cannon & machine guns. Forced the great Peter Street in NW. Meanwhile still head on at Dorniers, a ME III, I hit 109's. Seen attacked from head on, but I could see nothing a oil on windscreen. Sprayed the 109's & came Disrupted this raid by following as a puff, as this raid seriously damaged the docks, by the amount I saw as the result of the bombing.

...oke away was the leader's port engine smoking, but I didn't wait to see as my windscreen was pitch black with oil and my engine dead as a gate post.

I lost a lot of height to get away from the 109s and then set about making a forced-landing. Actually my immediate reaction with all this oil about the place and fumes and smoke was to bale out, but I decided to stay in, and everything went well until at 1,000 ft I realised it was now too late to bale out! I landed safely, wheels up, in a field near Potterstreet village about four miles from North Weald.

The odds today have been unbelievable (and we are all really very shaken!). There are bombs and things falling around tonight and a terrific gun barrage. Has a blitz begun? The Wing Commander's coolness is amazing and he does a lot to keep up our morale – very necessary tonight.

15 September: We scrambled at about 11.30 and climbed over London to 16,000 ft. We cruised about above the clouds and chased some AA bursts without success and then suddenly sighted about 18 enemy bombers (Dornier 215s) on our right going in the opposite direction to ourselves.

We turned and crossed beneath them but the squadron got split up. I followed three of our Hurricanes climbing up on the left of the bombers for a head-on attack, lost patience and turned to do a beam attack on the leader. At the same time the leading Hurricane turned to do a head-on attack and we almost collided above the bomber.

I broke over the bombers because I was too close to break away below. I remember diving earthwards in the middle of the bomber formation. I opened fire with more than full deflection and let the Do fly into the bullets like a partridge.



Hurricanes of No 249 Squadron get airborne

The Do 215 broke away from the formation and I saw that the engines were just idling as it glided down. Then about eight of our fighters set on the lame duck about 3,000 ft below me. On landing I claimed this as a "probably destroyed".

We were scrambled again at 2 o'clock. Very shortly after reaching our height (16,000 ft) we sighted fighters above us, the usual heralds of approaching bombers. And sure enough there were about 20 Do 215s, for once at the same height as ourselves. The squadron went into the attack on the beam.

After my attack a Do 215 dropped behind the formation a bit and one parachute came out underneath. I claimed this Dornier as "damaged", although I observed no effect of my fire. I then noticed all the Dorniers jettisoning their bombs.

The Dorniers had broken up on our first attack and some dived for the clouds, but for some inexplicable reason they stayed just skimming the clouds and did not go right into them and Instrument Fly home. Inexperience? It

seems improbable but I can't find any other reason.

I dived after one Do and gave it a longish burst (4 seconds?) at about 200 yards. There was suddenly a flash of brilliant flame from the port engine and maimed, the Do went into the clouds.

I transferred my attention to another Dornier skimming the top of the cloud, and closed in to a range of about 30 yd, shooting all the time. The enemy aircraft took slight evasive action but I was able to keep the correct deflection on the glass-house of the pilot.

As my ammo gave out the Do dived into the clouds. I followed him through and picked him up below, again over Shellhaven. He seemed OK so I did a feint attack on him. He did a gentle left hand turn and began to dive more and more steeply towards the ground 7,000 ft below.

This beautifully streamlined aircraft seemed to gather speed steadily and I began to wonder when he was going to pull out of the dive. Then a gigantic flash several hundred feet high as the enemy aircraft went straight into the

Pilots of No 249 Squadron at North Weald. George Barclay is second from the right



ful sight.

All our aircraft returned safely, and we got about ten confirmed victories (Do 215s and He 111s) and the same number of probable victories, not to mention damaged enemy aircraft. Our best day so far since the squadron was formed in May. I had one bullet hole in the starboard wing, but no damage done. (British fighters shot down 185 enemy aircraft today, 131 bombers!) Cozy party this evening!

27 September: We went up to 15,000 ft over Kent. One lot of 109s came across in front of us and another lot came down on our tails. I went after a 109 that made a bolt for home.

He dived steeply and I lost him in the haze but continued to dive, and the 109 suddenly shot up vertically in front of me – he saw me and dived again. Again I lost him, and pulled the plug in an effort to catch up. Again the 109 gave himself away by climbing vertically against the sky. I caught him this time and the superiority of manoeuvrability of the Hurricane over the 109 stood me in good stead.

Every manoeuvre he did I could do but more tightly. I had a burst vertically up at him and another vertically down and a couple of deflection shots on the beam – and then the roof flew off and the pilot baled out successfully – the beautiful light green and yellow 109 crashing with a large explosion.

Letter to sister, approx 18 October: I suppose it sounds as if we are having a grand time – well I suppose we are really. I'm realising an ambition, but it's a bit tough to see fellows wiped off one by one.

There are only four officers in the squadron, myself included, who have come through September absolutely unscathed, and of the five officers, myself again included, who were at Cranwell together, I am the only survivor. Two of the other four are dead, and two wounded. But it's remarkable how hardened one gets to people not coming back.

After the battle

George Barclay was awarded the DFC on 12 November. Seventeen days later his Hurricane was hit by cannon shells from an Me 109 and he baled out successfully. He spent six weeks in hospital, but returned to operational flying in August 1941.

His Spitfire was shot down over France on 20 September during a bomber escort mission. Barclay avoided capture and returned to Britain on 10 December via the underground escape route for aircrew – through France and Spain to Gibraltar.

He returned to flying duties and

was posted to Egypt as a squadron leader. After an intensive period of action in July 1942 he was shot down and killed on 17 July near El Alamein. He was 22 years old.

The diary extracts come from the book *Fighter pilot – a self-portrait by George Barclay*, published in 1976 by William Kimber & Co Ltd, part of Thorsons Publishing Group.

Peter Stahl

Like George Barclay, Peter Stahl took part in the Battle of Britain from September 1940 onwards. Older than Barclay, Stahl learnt to fly in 1934 and was an experienced civilian test pilot when he joined the Luftwaffe on the



Peter Stahl (third from left) and his crew before a Ju88 sortie over England in 1940

outbreak of the war as an aircrew corporal.

He was posted for bomber training in January 1940. On 30 April he made his first flight in a Junkers 88. His first operational flight was a dive-bombing attack on warehouses at Cherbourg in mid-June.

The following excerpts from his diary start on 25 August 1940, when he was based at Grove in Denmark.

25 August: An air battle on a scale previously unknown is raging over England. It is being said that the English are already on their last legs, but when one hears what the operational pilots – and in particular bomber crews – have to report, we're obviously still a long way from victory. The losses suffered by our bomber units must be terrible.

1 September: Orders arrive for a major effort today: II and III Gruppen of KG30 [Kampfgeschwader 30] based on this airfield are to attack the RAF airfield at Driffield. But my Ju88 is withdrawn at the very last moment, because the boost pressure of the port engine registers certain irregularities.

Over the target our crews experience all that we have heard from other formations flying these daylight raids for some time: a well-led and numerically

strong fighter defence. The escorting German Bf 110 heavy fighters are delivered just as much "on a plate" to the British Hurricanes and Spitfires as the Ju88 bombers they were supposed to protect.

Our losses total eight Ju88s with their crews. There were many wounded, and numerous hits in the aircraft. As a result, both Gruppen are only conditionally operational for some days and perhaps weeks.

2 September: Sudden orders transferring our II Gruppe to Belgium. The new airfield is called Chièvre, near Mons. We take off individually whenever machines are cleared for flight. Of the 36 proud Ju88s we had yesterday only fourteen are fit to fly.

9 September: An attack on London. During the last few days our aircraft have been operational over England almost every day, and with hardly any losses. The returning crews report successful attacks on British towns, airfields and, most recently, on London.

Over Lille is our agreed meeting point with units from other Geschwader. Eventually there is an assembly of at least 200 bombers that gathers into some order and sets course for London. Soon afterwards we are joined by an escort of Bf 109s and Bf 110s.

While crossing the Channel our formations sort themselves out. The fighters begin to fly a zig-zag course alongside, above and underneath us.

Very soon we have reached the outer AA gun belt of the capital. The Brits are shooting unpleasantly well, and the whole formation becomes restless. The AA fire seems to me an indication that there are no fighters in our vicinity. I am scared of them like the plague.

With uncanny inevitability the whole big formation pushes forward over the great city. Ahead I can already see the first bombs falling, and then it is my turn to press the red release button: it is simpler in level formation bombing. The aircraft makes its usual jump of relief and we look down. The Thames bends, the docks and the whole colossal city lie spread out before us like a giant map.

Then come the explosions of our bombs. It must be terrible down there. We can see many conflagrations caused by previous bombing raids. The effect of our own attack is an enormous cloud of smoke and dust that shoots up into the sky like a broad moving strip. One cannot imagine that a town or a people could endure this continuous crushing burden for long.

Suddenly there are fighters among us. At first I take them for our own escorts and wonder about their tactics, twisting around among bombers in such a foolhardy way. Then I realise they are British.

There is tracer all around us, and a wild twisting turning air combat has broken out between our 109s and the Spitfires and Hurricanes. Now everything is happening right underneath us.

I spot some parachutes to the left below us, and see a He 111 ahead of me going down in a steep glide streaming smoke. A few moments later I overtake another He 111 flying with one dead propeller.

All at once everything is quiet again. Leo taps me on the shoulder and shows me a broad oil slick glistening over the wing behind the starboard engine. A quick check shows that we have already lost 80 litres. That leaves only 10 litres in the oil tank. I must immediately shut down the engine to avoid it seizing up.

We are over the same 10/10 cloud cover as before with its icing-up problems. I dive in, hanging on instruments with my eyes and senses. We dive out of the cloud cover at about 400 metres, but where are we? Hans pokes me in the ribs and points to the right – an airfield! It is Amiens.

In the hope that the meagre supply of oil would last at least for the landing I restart the starboard engine and make the shortest landing turn I have ever flown in a Ju88.

20 September: Today we transfer to Gilze-Rijen in Holland. The question of daytime raids on England now seems to have been settled somehow, either because our losses have been too high, or because we have not achieved the hoped-for successes, or because our formations simply need a respite: or probably, all three!

25 September: My fifth operational flight as part of the individual harassing attacks on London. We're now a bit more modest: it's not so much a matter

A Ju88A damaged during a night landing at Gilze-Rijen after an operational sortie over England

of achieving some kind of success, but mainly to ensure there's at least an air raid warning in London.

However for us poor sausages it is anything but easy. During the previous large-scale raids one could to some extent hide inside the large formations, but flying alone, one is always exposed like a practice target to a well-coordinated defence organisation.

After pushing the throttle forward for take-off I mentally recite a quick prayer which includes two important points: "Dear God, please let my two engines remain healthy, and see to it that there is bad weather – or at least a lot of nice thick clouds over London!"

The nearer we get to the target the fewer clouds there are, so that in a fighter attack we are pretty well unprotected in the air. All four of us are anxiously searching the sky around us for Spitfires. Sure enough, exactly at the spot where we could assume the sirens would begin announcing an approaching raid on London we see them: four fighters below us in a steady climb in our direction.

I break off our approach, tipping the aircraft on a wing and whipping round in the fastest turn of my life. All around us nothing but blue sky, and then Theo reports from his ventral gun position that the fighters are turning with us and coming closer. The nearest cloud seems almost out of reach.

The fighters have split up in two pairs in an obvious manoeuvre to take us in a pincer. I give full throttle and aim for the nearest cloud. It becomes a race that I succeed in winning. Inside the cloud it is very bright so that I know we will be through it and shoot out of the other side in moments. There follows a flying game which, if played in sport, would have been no end of fun. In our case it is a game played for our skins!

My Ju88 does not let me down, and every time one or two Hurricanes get in a firing position I succeed in diving back

Insignia of Kampfgeschwader 30 is shown behind the text

into the cloud. I finally succeed in shaking off the fighters, but it was a close-run thing!

This is where Hans comes into his own. As if nothing had happened, he calmly gives me a new course to fly and explains it is in the direction of Hastings, where we can get rid of our bombs. I really wonder where this fellow got his nerves.

A few minutes of blind flying, then we dive clear of the clouds and see the ground. Ahead of us is a town and Hans queries: the railway station? So be it. Everything is peaceful, no ground defences of any kind. I make an approach according to the book, dive, aim and press the button. The bombs are dead on target! The clouds take us in again, we pull through them and set course for home.

Operations by day became less frequent and the Ju88s moved on to night raids. Bad weather caused heavy icing of aircraft and led to many aircraft losses. Aircrew resentment about this is shown in a diary comment by Peter Stahl after a night raid on London.

16 October: While on the way back by bus to our quarters we discuss the question, in view of the known unfavourable conditions, of how daft it is to send out hundreds of aircrews by night without any hope of reasonable results, and run the risk of having heavy losses simply on account of the bad weather.

And tomorrow the communiqué of the armed forces high command will state that our brave aircrews have flown another major operation and despite bad weather conditions have inflicted devastating blows on various vital targets. Our own losses were only "minimal"!

— After the battle —

Peter Stahl took part in many of the widespread night attacks on British targets which followed the Battle of Britain. On 7 May 1941 he wrote:

To date I have completed sixty operational flights against the Island, almost all of them by night. At times I shudder to think that on average our new crews survive only three to four night operations.

Stahl later flew missions on the Russian, Mediterranean and North African fronts and, unlike George Barclay, survived the war. The extracts from his diary are taken from the book *The diving eagle – a Ju88 pilot's diary*, published in 1984 by William Kimber & Co Ltd, part of the Thorsons Publishing Group.





Hawker Hurricane I single-seat fighter monoplane of No 249 Squadron, as flown by George Barclay during the Battle of Britain. Span: 40 ft. Length: 31 ft 5 in. Weight: (empty) 4,670 lb; (loaded) 6,600 lb. Maximum speed: 315 mph at 17,500 ft. Service ceiling: 24,200 ft

Powerplant: One Rolls-Royce Merlin III 12-cylinder liquid-cooled 60° Vee engine of 27 litres swept volume. Bore: 5.4 in. Stroke: 6 in. Take-off power: 880 hp at 3,000 rpm. Maximum power: 1,030 hp at 3,000 rpm and 16,000 ft

