

# NEVER STAY STILL.

**Geoffrey Wellum:**

The Battle of Britain's Youngest Warrior

BY RACHEL MORRIS

As Hitler's tanks roll into Poland on September 1, 1939, Europe's worst fears are confirmed: war becomes inevitable. A thousand miles away, a young man celebrates his first solo flight in a de Havilland Tiger Moth, heading to a quiet English country pub with friends to enjoy a pint of beer. As his training continues, the mighty German Blitzkrieg sweeps across the continent. Soon he will earn his coveted Royal Air Force pilot wings in time to join the most epic aerial battle of history: defending the green fields of his homeland from the Luftwaffe foe determined to clear the path for invasion. Interviewed in London's RAF Club in 2012, Geoffrey Wellum recounted his experiences as the youngest pilot to fly and fight during the Battle of Britain.





Spitfire Mk I P9374 comes in to land at Duxford, England on a fall evening. No. 92 Squadron first received Spitfires in early 1940 and flew various marks throughout the war. Wellum was struck by the machine's great beauty but regretted they had to use such a wonderful aircraft as a weapon of war. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

## East India Flying Squadron gets blooded

After completing advanced pilot training, Wellum was posted straight to No. 92 (East India) Squadron at RAF Northolt where his young age earned him the nickname “Boy.” He felt the RAF was the best flying club in the world, and was elated to have joined the most elite section of that club: Fighter Command. Wellum arrived on the Squadron just as it was put on operational status, and he sensed an underlying tension behind the smiles and laughter in the officers’ mess. The men knew the gravity of war would soon make its presence felt.

On the morning of May 23, No. 92 Squadron was given its first taste of combat, when scrambled to provide fighter cover to the defeated British Expeditionary Forces. Desperately trying to evacuate from Dunkirk, the troops trapped on the beaches were being pounded by Luftwaffe bombers while the enemy soldiers drew ever closer. Wellum felt useless. He had not even seen a Spitfire close up, let alone flown one, and watched helplessly as his new colleagues got airborne. Upon reaching the French coast they were intercepted by Bf 109s, and a burning Spit soon tumbled downwards towards Dunkirk.

The loss held particular significance for Wellum who said, “Pat Learmond was shot down in flames and killed. Pat was the chap who looked after me my first night in the mess with 92 Squadron. Next morning he was dead.”

Scrambled again in the afternoon, the squadron suffered further losses with Flight Lieutenant Paddy Green badly wounded, Sergeant Paul Klipsch killed, and Flight Officer John Gillies downed over enemy territory. A resounding blow was dealt when the commanding officer, Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, was brought down and taken captive (Bushell later masterminded the mass breakout from Stalag Luft III, made famous by 1963 movie *The Great Escape*). The following day Peter Cazenove was forced to ditch his Spitfire Mk I P9374 on the beach at Calais.

The missing faces were a stark introduction to the perils of aerial combat for Wellum: “Over the two days we lost five very experienced pilots. That made me think seriously about this fighter squadron business and being in a war with certain gentleman in black-crossed aeroplanes.”

## His first Spitfire

Wellum’s first opportunity to fly the Spitfire left a tremendous impression: “I can still see the Spitfire standing waiting for me, with the ground crew looking as if to say, ‘Oh dear, another young pilot. This is our aeroplane, hope he doesn’t break it.’”

Once airborne, pure exhilaration took hold. Wellum was struck by the machine’s beautiful curves and effortless aerobatic ability. Knowing that he was in a unique position and the envy of many other young men, he remembers his feelings at the time — “For a young chap of 18

No. 92 Squadron made their first kills on May 23, 1940 over Dunkirk. They also suffered their first serious losses, losing six pilots in a matter of days. One of the downed aircraft was Spitfire Mk I P9374 flown by Peter Cazenove. Rediscovered in 1980, it is seen here in flight post-restoration. (Photo by John Dillbs/planepicture.com)



Geoffrey Wellum (right) with good friend and flight commander Flt. Lt. Brian Kingcome (left). Wellum looked up to the older man, frequently flying as his wingman. Kingcome led 92 Squadron temporarily and ended the war a Double Ace. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs Collection)

years and 9 months, it was a great privilege to be given the opportunity to fly probably the best interceptor fighter in the world. They gave me this wonderful aeroplane to fly — what a pity one had to use it to fight somebody! War seemed to be a great inconvenience. I didn't realize what it was all about."

Young and inexperienced, Wellum did not yet share the bond of combat with his fellow pilots. He used every opportunity to build his flying experience, making at least two trips a day to practice formation, dogfighting, battle climbs, cross-country and aerobatics. On June 18, the squadron was ordered to Pembrey on the quiet Welsh coast. The whole squadron flew west in formation, and Wellum described the new experience in his autobiography *First Light*: "Twelve aircraft all thundering along as if locked together over the fresh green countryside of an English spring. What a sight! The color, the different shades of green of field and woods, the bright roundels on the Spitfires. This is something very close to my idea of beauty ... This is what being a fighter pilot is all about."

### Squadron Scramble, Angels Twelve

No. 92 Squadron returned to the frontline at RAF Biggin Hill in early September 1940 and Wellum began flying combat sorties. "The idea of getting



squadron and learned some tactics there."

However, the squadron's state-of-the-art fighter afforded some advantage. Wellum always felt that "in a Spitfire, if you saw your antagonist you could always out-fly him."

He first experienced the terrifying chaos of a

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shot down didn't appeal to me one little bit. How do you go about trying to prevent such a thing happening? Make yourself a difficult target. Never fly straight and level for more than 20 seconds. Never stay still, even if you don't see anything around—the German you do not see shoots you down. If you were going to be a good fighter pilot, you were never easy on the plane. You threw the thing around, doing things that weren't in the rulebook."

The British were up against a well-trained and determined foe: "The Germans had evaluated their aeroplanes and tactics in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. Consequently, at the Battle of Britain, the Me 109 was a very well developed aeroplane. Ours weren't. We didn't have a constant speed airscrew. We hadn't taught people how to fly it as a gun platform. We didn't have an operational conversion unit. You converted onto the aeroplane you were going to fly on the

massive dogfight on September 11, 1940. Ten Spitfires were scrambled to intercept a large plot of 150-plus enemy aircraft approaching Dungeness at 12,000 feet. The awesome sight of the mass formation astounded Wellum.

He said, "Just like a lot of gnats on a summer evening spread over the sky, I thought 'Where on earth do you start with this lot?' The bombers were in a pretty good formation and over the top and round the side were 109s."

The 109s soon spotted the advancing Spits. "I could see the sun flash off their bellies as they peeled off to come down, and thought of trout streams. I used to do a bit of trout fishing and I loved to see them streaking over the smooth brown pebbles. A jumble of things went through your mind that you can't really define. You thought of all sorts of things: 'I'd rather be fishing at my trout stream because this is bloody dangerous!'"



**No. 92 (East India) Squadron Spitfire Mk Vb QJ-S RS923 over England in 1941. Having become the Squadron's longest serving pilot, Wellum was retired from operational duty in September 1941 and sent to a training unit to instruct new pilots. Although devastated at the time, he would be back on frontline duty with No. 65 Squadron in a matter of months. (Photo courtesy of Joe Gertler)**

Despite his fears, Wellum picked a Dornier flying slightly out of formation, and steamed in to have a go: "Before you knew what had happened, you were in among them, because your combined closing speed was something like 600mph. A quick squirt at them and then out of the way. We were pretty close and the crossfire was intense. The German rear gunners were hot stuff, they'd had good training."

He described the battle's confusion, "The R/T is alive with shouts, warnings, and odd noises. Too busy to listen. This is some fight, real and serious, no quarter asked or given. The effort required is tremendous. Strong arms hurling Spitfires around the sky, unreality, fear, anger, reconciled."

### **Out of ammo, a 109 on his Six**

Spotting a stricken Heinkel 111 heading for the

coast, Wellum gave chase. Ignoring return fire that put three holes in his port wing, he repeatedly attacked the bomber until it began streaming thick black smoke. As it began to fall away, he pressed his firing button to give it one final blast for luck, but nothing happened. He had run out of ammo and cursed his stupidity at leaving himself undefended. Satisfied the job was done, he headed for home. Moments later, he heard a gut-wrenching bang and saw red embers skipping across his wing: "I was hit by doing what I said I'd never do. Flying back at the end of the day, a bit tired, straight and level: a 109 had a go at me."

Wellum, now in serious trouble with no ammo, yanked his Spitfire round into a tight turn, knowing his only chance to survive is to out-manuever the 109. With the German pilot tight on his tail, Wellum was terrified but determined as he held



the juddering Spitfire on the edge of a high-speed stall. With his vision graying out from the severe G-force exerted on himself and his aircraft, he began to gain ground on the 109, which he knew must be getting short of fuel. Finally, the 109 pulled up and away, and Wellum seized his chance to escape, diving down towards the ground and hugging the landscape as he flew back to the safety of Biggin Hill and terra firma. He considers himself, "... jolly lucky, because he should have shot me down. He should have killed me, but he must've been a lousy shot, thank God."

During another large melee later that month, Wellum recalled a terrible sight: "A German crewmember bailed out of a Heinkel. He opened his parachute too early and it got caught up in the tail plane. The aeroplane was on fire, and there

he was streaming behind it like a rag doll, waiting until the ground got in the way. The sight of him shattered me. What a way to die. I thought, 'Good God, what are you doing, allowing this sort of thing to go on? Twentieth century civilization?' And all this in a vast panorama of blue sky with aeroplanes in it, tracers, parachutes — half a dozen at a time — some of them streaming because the shroud lines were twisted, so the poor chap on the end was plummeting down. Absolute mayhem madly war! Then I thought there's no sense in hanging about, so I slung it around and got out. Then I saw a bit going on at the top so went back to join in again, because that's what we were paid to do."

### Live at Biggin

The squadron would remain at Biggin Hill until October 1941, and Wellum retains fond memories of the place: "It had an atmosphere of its own.

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It was the leading fighter station of the Royal Air Force, at the forefront of the battle with a warm, welcoming atmosphere. You'd come back at the end of the day thinking, 'By God, I'm pleased to see that place'."

Biggin had suffered terribly when the Luftwaffe began attacking British aerodromes in August 1940. As Wellum describes, "Thank God the Germans stopped bombing the airfields and went on to London. That eased the situation but we never stopped operating at Biggin. The hangars were flat. You'd land and have to taxi to avoid shells and bomb holes, with little red flags all round them." 92 Squadron's operational record book recorded the bombing activity, with one entry noting wryly, "Night raiders still continue to drop bombs all around the aerodrome ... Golf links very adjacent seem to suffer most."

The pilots seized every opportunity to unwind from the daily tension they endured: "The mess had been bombed, so we used to go down to the White Hart at Brasted to get off the station and knock back the pints, have a game of darts, rub shoulders with the locals... All the time you were suppressing thoughts of absent friends. Because of the bombing, our billet was off the station in a country house at Knockholt, which we actually turned into a nightclub. It was called 92's Nightclub. We used to get it stocked up with booze, and we had an airman pianist on the squadron who'd been in a band and he used to come and play. We also had a double bass there. We used to get the girls down for a bit of dancing and we would entertain some of the other squadron boys, too.



Spitfire Mk Is of No. 65 Squadron in formation 1939. FZ-L K9906 was their first Spitfire delivered in May 1939, and was flown by Squadron Leader Robert Stanford Tuck. Note the punch-out panel on the canopy cover, an early solution to the new problem of canopy misting caused by the rapid altitude changes possible in the Spitfire. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs Collection)

Occasionally, if we were released early enough we would go to a nightclub in London and many's the time I've come back two or three in the morning and gone straight into dispersal. Put on your Mae West, and your flying gear and sleep there in the reclining chairs. We didn't worry about sleep too much. Life was a very demanding episode. The chips were down and we were up against it.

"I used to go back to see my parents whenever I could but it wasn't easy to do. I wanted to get home, but when I was there, I wanted to be back at the squadron. I couldn't settle down at all and felt out of touch once I was away. The squadron became my home, and the Spitfire cockpit was my second home."

The constant strain of combat flying, intermi-

going to be a lovely day. Here we go again."

### Ghosts at Duxford

The Battle of Britain officially ended in October 1940, turning the tide of Hitler's advance. In the year that followed, 92 Squadron began taking the fight to the enemy, escorting RAF bombers on raids over occupied France. In July 1941, Wellum was awarded the DFC and promoted to flight lieutenant. As the squadron's longest serving member, he dreaded being taken off operational flying. In September 1941, Wellum's fears were realized. He was thanked for his efforts and posted to instruct new pilots at an operational training unit.

Leaving his fighter pilot career came as a seri-

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able waiting at dispersal and lack of rest took an inevitable toll on the pilots: "You became an automaton and in the end, you just felt total resignation. I remember walking out to the Spit looking at the sky and thinking it's going to be a lovely day again, but feeling, 'Oh God, another dawn.' Dew on your flying boots, as you walked across the grass humping your parachute to your Spitfire. It's

ous blow and he described his sorrow, "Will I ever know quite the feeling of trust and comradeship as experienced in a frontline Spitfire squadron, and in such a period of our country's history, ever again? Nothing can possibly quite rise to such heights. How can anything replace or even approach the last eighteen months."

He didn't know that he would return to the

Spitfire P9374 heads over clouds. Watching Spitfires take off in formation at a Duxford airshow, Wellum was reminded of his absent friends who didn't survive the war. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)





fray in February 1941 as a flight commander in No. 65 Squadron. He went on to lead a squadron of Spitfires off aircraft carrier HMS *Furious* to aid the relief of besieged Malta during *Operation Pedestal*. The relentless flying, frequently at high altitude, eventually brought his flying career to an end: "I sort of 'shot my bolt' by the end of 1943. I was suffering from very chronic sinus problems although I didn't know it. They operated on me out there and something just snapped. Basically I'd had enough."

Wellum says he will never forget the indefinable emotion of flying at high altitude, "In 1941, at the height of the winter, we did a patrol at just under 40,000 feet. I could see all the way down the Isle of Wight, and right the way round to the loom of East Anglia where it went into the Wash. I thought, 'This is absolutely wonderful, this is beautiful,' and then I got the feeling of somebody else with me. With the sun sinking down; all the

colors and the peace and tranquility of it. You look out and there's this little, beautiful, shaped wing that is keeping you in the air, and you get this feeling of an unknown presence. Some think it's too much oxygen, or not enough. I think there's something else, I really do. Fighter pilots know what I'm talking about."

With typical modesty, Wellum insists that he and the other brave young wartime pilots were simply doing their job: "It's not about medals or thank yous, to people like me who are here to tell the tale and who survived. But, it is nice to be remembered, because being remembered covers everybody who served, flew, and fought in the Battle of Britain, many of whom paid the extreme sacrifice. Five or six years ago, I was a guest of the Flying Legends Day at Duxford and during the course of their display 12 Spits took off in pairs. I don't consider myself to be a very emotional person but watching those Spitfires get airborne, a lump came into my throat and I had to fight for self-control. You see, their cockpits were full of ghosts. Old friends. And as I watched those spir- its climb away and form up into battle formation, I mourned those ghosts. They were young men, typical of my generation. They knew the odds." †

## A Ghost Returns: Spitfire Mk I P9374

P9374 rolled off the production line on March 2, 1940. Assigned to No. 92 Squadron, it became the personal aircraft of Flying Officer Peter Cazenove. On May 24, Cazenove was shot down and forced to ditch on a Calais beach. He spent the rest of the war as a POW while P9374 disappeared beneath sand and saltwater. In 1980, shifting sands revealed the buried Spitfire. P9374's revival began in 2000 when Simon Marsh and Thomas Kaplan purchased it from the French owners. The Aircraft Restoration Company at Duxford painstakingly restored the Spit to original condition. It was returned to the skies in August 2011. Please visit [markonepartners.co.uk](http://markonepartners.co.uk) for more information about P9374.

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P9374 displaying the 'night and white' Special Recognition Markings applied to fighter aircraft from April 1939 – June 1940 to aid identification. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)