

# Tally-Ho!

A young man,  
his Hurricane and  
the Battle of Britain



BY RAF WING CMDR. ROBERT W. "BOB" FOSTER (RET.) AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

**If Hollywood had its way with history**, the Supermarine Spitfire with its long slender fuselage and graceful elliptical wing, would most likely be portrayed as the lone defender over the White Cliffs of Dover during the Battle of Britain. Although the Spitfire played an important role in beating back the daily Luftwaffe raids, it was the tenacity of the pug-nosed Hawker Hurricanes of the RAF that bore the brunt of aerial combat during England's darkest days. The Hurricane was slower than the Spit and it took longer to climb to altitude, but once it got there, the stubby little fighter jumped in and out of scrapes like a backstreet brawler.

Although the RAF Hurricane had its nose bloodied many times over by the German raiders, it was able to stay upright as it absorbed many punishing blows. British estimates credit the Hurricane with four-fifths of all German aircraft destroyed during the peak of the battle—July through October of 1940. Follow along with one of these Hurricane pilots as he slugs it out with the mighty Luftwaffe high over England.

Owner Peter Vacher painstakingly restored this Hawker Hurricane Mk I, serial number R4118, which Bob Foster flew in combat during the massive air battles with the Luftwaffe over Southern England in 1940. Carl Schofield is the privileged pilot behind the stick. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

## Learning the ropes

I joined the RAF in 1939 because I thought it would be more glamorous to be shot down in a fighter than to be shot or bayoneted as a foot soldier in a trench! By November of 1939, I had already accumulated over 50 hours of flight time in a trainer called the Avro Cadet and progressed on to the Hawker Hart, Audax and Harvards. I only had five hours of retractable undercarriage time in the Harvard before I was “kicked out of the nest” in June of 1940 and sent on to a Hawker Hurricane operational training unit in Norfolk. My first flight in the Hurricane was almost my last as I tried to bust up a perfectly good flying machine.

There were no two-seat trainers and no pilot notes to study, just a seasoned Hurricane pilot standing on the wing, leaning into my cockpit telling me to push this button, pull this lever and turn this dial as I prepared for my maiden flight. I was able to start the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine under my hood with no problems as I waddled down the long grass runway trying to get my propeller into the correct pitch. I had it all backwards and it seemed like it took me forever to get airborne. With my propeller out of sync, I wondered out loud how I could ever fight a German fighter in this wretched machine! My attitude quickly changed however when I figured out my mistakes and managed to get the Hurricane into its proper flight régime. It was at that moment I began to appreciate the finer points of the Hawker Hurricane Mk I.



Fit. Lt. Bob Foster, 605 Sqn RAF—Volunteer Reserve, 1940. (Photo courtesy of author)

The Hurricane turned out to be a very easy airplane to fly and fight with. It had no real bad vices; it swung a little on takeoff and it would drop a wing if you got too slow—but both of these were easily corrected. Although you could get it to spin quite easily, you could get it out of



Fox Features in the U.S. dispatched a photographer to RAF Hawkinge in September 1940 to document the “Island Nation’s” solitary stand against Hitler’s Germany. Whilst the photographer attempted to capture iconic images of the dashing Hurricane pilots at rest, they were genuinely scrambled against a German raid! Fit. Lt. Pete Brothers, one of the RAF’s top Hurricane aces, sits below the roundel. (Photo courtesy of the John Dibbs Collection)

## COMPARED TO THE GERMAN BF 109, THE HURRICANE WAS ON AN EVEN PLAYING FIELD WHEN IT CAME TO A TURNING CIRCULAR DOGFIGHT, OTHER THAN THAT THE 109S HAD US BEAT ON ALL FRONTS.

the spin even quicker. I thought it was the perfect little airplane for the job we had to do.

Compared to the German Bf 109, the Hurricane was on an even playing field when it came to a turning circular dogfight, other than that the 109s had us beat on all fronts because they were faster and could fly higher. But their main weakness was the fact that they lacked the fuel capacity to stand and fight for any length of time. We in the RAF on the other hand, flew over our homeland so it was more or less a safe haven when our fuel gauges were low and it was time to land.

### So much owed by so many to so few

The Battle of Britain was in full swing when I had joined 605 Squadron in July of 1940. The problem for me was that I was stationed up in Scotland and the battle was farther south around London. We had no action at all which turned out to be a godsend for me because I accumulated a total of 80 hours of flying time in the Hawker Hurricane. I think it was time well spent and it helped me immensely later on in the war. The chaps that were flying in the battle straightaway only had about 20 hours flying

time on Hurricanes and many of these poor chaps didn’t survive more than a few weeks in combat.

In early September, our squadron was brought down to Croydon, in the South London area to replace a very tired and worn-out group. When we arrived there in early September, the Germans had been targeting the docks around London. As I approached our airfield for the very first time, I watched London burn from the cockpit of my Hurricane and I knew I wasn’t in training anymore—I was in a bloody war. Our combat was straight away as we began to fly multiple missions per day.

On my first combat we had been scrambled to attack a formation of German bombers. The problem for us though was that our CO didn’t see the bombers and he led us right into a collision course with them. Aerial combat is a funny thing; you can train months and months for it, but the first time you attack another airplane, your survival instincts take over. For me, it was the first time I had seen more than 50 enemy airplanes in the sky at once. As our flight of Hurricanes flew into this crowd of German He 111 bombers, the whole thing turned into a ball of confusion on both sides. I got away with it by closing



Nestled in the Oxfordshire countryside, Peter Vacher operates his Hurricane from his private strip. Picture perfect, this scene is timeless and has will have hardly changed since this Hurricane scrambled to defend England against the Nazi aggressors during the war. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



**Above:** A Gloster Aircraft Company license-built version of the Hawker Hurricane Mk I, R4118, wears the colors of 605 Sqn, RAF Croydon, September 1940. (Illustration courtesy of John Dibbs Collection/artwork Chris Davey)

**Below:** Hawker Hurricane cockpit. Note the standard British 1930/1940s Spade grip at center. The eight Browning .303in machine guns were fired utilizing the brass gun button atop the circular grip. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



my eyes, firing my guns at the pack and diving straight through the middle of them. Whether I hit any of them or anything else for that matter is worthy of debate. My attack wasn't very straightforward and it was more or less a haphazard thrust, but you learn from experience and hope you survived for a next time.

Although the Hurricanes and Spitfires were more or less the aerial defense of England, the

thing that really saved us was radar. Dare I say without it, we might not have survived the continuous German onslaught. We seemed to be placed in the right positions at the right time as we slugged it out with the Luftwaffe on a daily basis.

### Luftwaffe Lufbery

On September 27, 1940, we had been vectored above Sussex and found a group of German bombers that were either lost or were waiting for their Bf 109 escorts to show up. The Me 110s were flying at 18,000 feet in a defensive circle, going around and around. During my attack I opened fire with my machine guns when all of a sudden, there was a

### AS OUR FLIGHT OF HURRICANES FLEW INTO THIS CROWD OF GERMAN HE 111 BOMBERS, THE WHOLE THING TURNED INTO A BALL OF CONFUSION ON BOTH SIDES.

horrendous bang that came from under my hood; the Hurricane's engine blew up! With hot glycol pouring out of my stricken fighter, I knew it was time for me to leave the party. No one stayed with me as they were quite busy with other things so I pushed my nose downward and headed for the deck.

At first I thought I had been hit and had to bail out, but after seeing no fire I thought, "I'll stay with the Hurricane for awhile and see if I can do something about this." I shut off the petrol and the engine and turned my oxygen all the way up. As my fighter turned into a glider, I glanced down and saw a large lovely green grassy field below me. I knew I could easily make the field, but I wasn't keen on the fact that I might have to belly in my Hurricane. I tried my flaps and they wouldn't work. I hit the undercarriage lever and the wheels came down like a piece of

cake! After I made smooth dead-stick landing, I hopped out and saw that my engine was literally blown apart—although it wasn't from enemy fire, the effect was just the same. I can't say enough about how tough the Hurricane was.

### Ju 88 cloud chase

I was back at it on September 28 and flew four patrols that day. Most of the patrols were less than an hour in length. On my last flight of the day, I was sent along with two other Hurricanes as we swung out towards the south coast of England. As we began to patrol, we lost our number three man in cloud. As the two of us came out of cloud together, we spotted two Ju 88s making a fast exit back across the channel to France. These Ju 88s had been on a hit-and-run mission and came in together, dropped their bombs and were trying to make a mad dash for home.

We picked out one of the German bombers and dove down on him as we both fired our eight .303 machine guns at him simultaneously. We got one of his engines to burn as he began to trail smoke and flame as he ducked back into a cloud. We knew he had to come out sooner or later so we puttered about until his safety cloud disappeared. He was easy to spot with that engine on fire. We made another go at him as he disappeared below us. Our job was to hit the bombers hard and get out of there quickly. You didn't want to linger

Fields of conflict. Peter Vacher's magnificent achievement in restoring this historic airframe can never be better appreciated than when seen in the skies above England's picturesque landscape. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

## BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Comparing the Supermarine Spitfire to the Hawker Hurricane

Let's face it, in the movies the good-looking actors and actresses always get the lead role. And when it comes to airplanes facing the cameras lens, it's no different. Take for example the classic 1960s movie *Battle of Britain* that cast the graceful, elliptical-winged Spitfire in the lead role over the White Cliffs of Dover with the pug-nosed Hurricane getting no more than a bit part. That's why it's always best to hear how it really was during the war from the horse's mouth. And in this case, from the pilot who actually flew both of them in combat.

—James P. Busha

### Pilot/Officer Charles E. Edmondson

■ 451st Squadron, RAAF

I hopped into the Hurricane and got some last-minute advice from my instructor before I tore across the desert sand. I went up and down the desert like a roller coaster as I learned the finer points of keeping a Hurricane upright. Once I got it under control, I found that it flew quite nicely, especially without my erratic stick inputs. The Hurricane was the workhorse of the RAF and despite its flimsy fuselage, it was able to absorb a lot of punishment. It was by far, the RAF's most versatile single-engine aircraft but lacked the glamour of the Spitfire. I had a total of five hours and five minutes in the Hurricane before I was sent off into combat. I found out quickly that as a fighter plane, it was too slow but on the same token, it was extremely maneuverable and could out-turn any of the German

aircraft. The problem was that you couldn't go on turning turns all day and you had to get away somehow!

Most of my combat flying was over the deserts in Hawker Hurricanes, P-40 Kittyhawks, P-51 Mustangs and Supermarine Spitfires. The Kittyhawk was the easiest to land and the Mustang was my choice when it came to dive-bombing and strafing. But for straight-out air-to-air combat, *à la* Battle of Britain, I would prefer the Spitfire for its maneuverability. The Spit was exceptionally sensitive on the controls and proved too good against the Bf 109s and had a slight edge over the Fw 190s. A drawback was its limited range and its tendency to yaw in a steep dive during dive-bombing.

Our dive-bombing technique in the Spitfire was pretty standard and very quick. You dive, you bomb, you pull out and then you black out. When you awoke a few seconds later, you got the hell out of there!





**Above:** 32 Sqn. Hurricanes return to Hawkinge after combat in September 1940. The RAF man in the foreground is carrying a flag to alert the pilots to unexploded bomb locations from previous German raids on the base. **Right:** Fit. Lt. Bob Foster's log book, which details his combat sorties in R4118 during the battle. (Photos courtesy of the John Dibbs Collection)

for other 109s because I thought this had to be some sort of trap. As I closed to about 100 yards I opened fire on the 109 and immediately hit him. The 109 began to burn as he arched downward to the channel below. This chap had paid the ultimate price for being foolish and breaking the golden rule; there is no time to relax when you are involved in aerial combat.

**Nuisance raiders**

By late October, the massive German raids that had occurred throughout the summer of 1940 had now been whittled down considerably to more hit-and-run nuisance-type attacks. Sometimes it would be just bombers and other times it would be 109s carrying a small bomb load. Nevertheless, it kept the RAF on its toes as we tried to intercept these bandits.

In early November, we were scrambled to intercept some very high flying, bomb carrying 109s that were more interested in trying to get us into the air to fight on their terms. It was a typical cloudy English day as we rattled around with the 109s in a running dogfight over the Channel as we chased them back towards France. With their fuel becoming low, the 109s turned for home as we did the same and dropped below the clouds making our way for the southern English coast. When I finally came out of the clouds, I turned north and glanced at my instru-

about too long to see whether or not these chaps crashed or not because you never knew if a 109 was right around the corner or not to do the same thing to you.

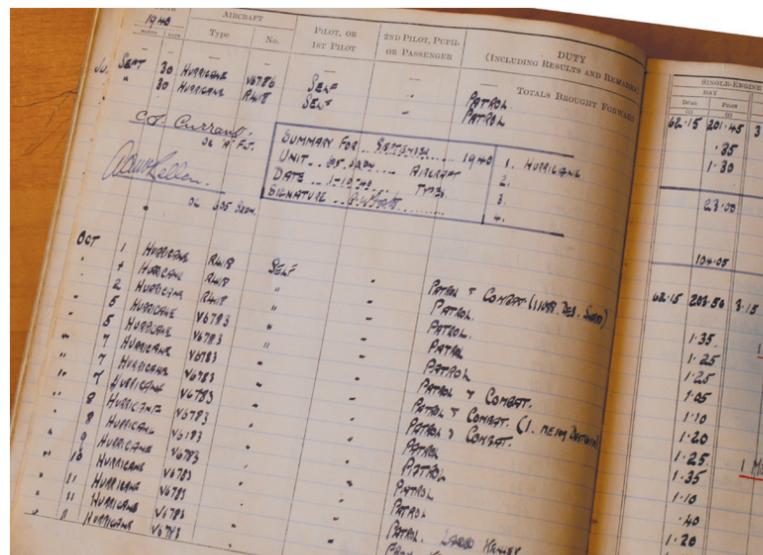
**Turning the tables on a 109**

We had been up near the south of England in early October and got ourselves into a running fight with some bloody 109s. One minute we were stooging along being vectored by our radar contacts to incoming bandits when all of a sudden some yelled over the radio "Break!" I pushed my Hurricane towards the deck while my number 2 pulled his nose upward and climbed. When I finally leveled off, I thought I was all alone; that was until I spotted the 109 flying straight and level below me.

It was almost surreal for me to see my adversary flying as if he was on a pleasure flight a mere 200 yards ahead of me. As I inched the Hurricane forward, I had my head on a swivel looking

ments and thought I had fouled them up during our swirling dogfight because my compass said I was heading south. I could clearly see the English coast up ahead of me and as I crossed over it, I was met with a barrage of black-colored flak.

I instantly became infuriated with our gunners for shooting at me and my Hurricane—they must have thought I was a 109! It only took me another second to realize that I was not over England, but I was on my way to Paris! I quickly turned my



Squadron scramble—in a scene played out thousands of times during the summer of 1940. Hurricane pilots run to their machines to engage the Luftwaffe. (Photo courtesy of the John Dibbs Collection)

Hurricane around and made a mad dash across the Channel. Lucky for me, the 109s were long gone and my own British gunners welcomed me with a friendly wave as I passed overhead.

**Change of scenery**

In early February, our squadron was sent to Martlesham Heath on the east coast of England where we received a new and improved version of the Hawker Hurricane. The Hurricane Mk. IIs were a vast improvement over the Hurricane Is because we now had superchargers which gave us more height and speed. The Hurricane II also carried heavier guns in the form of 4- 20mm cannons. It didn't take us long to utilize and exploit these refinements on the German Luftwaffe.

During a cloudy dreary day in early March of 1941 we sat in our Hurricanes on the airfield in a readiness state. As my mind began to wander about, thinking of the breakfast that awaited me, a large formation of low flying He 111s came roaring across the airfield. They dropped their bombs on some of our buildings and caused quite a ruckus as they thundered on by. We were scrambled individually to have a go at them as they disappeared back into the clouds as they made their way out across the North Sea.

I really didn't think we would ever see them again or even catch them for that matter, as I pointed the Hurricanes nose through the low

gray clouds. I was droning around boring holes through the clouds for over 20 minutes and was 30 miles out over the North Sea when I popped out on top. I began to daydream again about my hot breakfast back at the airfield and was enjoying the splendid view of the clouds around me when I suddenly sensed I was not alone. I turned around and looked over my shoulder and there sitting right behind my tail, larger than life, was an He 111.

In an instant I snapped the Hurricane over as the He 111 gunner opened up on me trying to plug my Hurricane. Fortunately, he missed and it now became my turn to have a go at him as I quickly maneuvered my Hurricane into a firing position. The He 111 tried to make a run for it and tried to dive back into the clouds, but he wasn't quick enough as I raked him over with my 20mm cannons. The last I saw of the He 111 was him smoking badly as he re-entered the clouds. I still don't know to this day why I turned around, had I waited another half second I trust I would have missed my breakfast altogether! †

*The photographer would like to thank Peter and Polly Vacher, Hurricane pilot Carl Schofield and cameraship pilot Richard Verrall for their kind assistance in creating this article.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Foster continued to fly and fight with the RAF and eventually became a Hurricane instructor pilot before being sent to the South Pacific as a Spitfire pilot tasked with fighting the Japanese. His total wartime credits include six and one shared destroyed, three probable, and six and one shared damage. Although he flew a variety of British fighters, he still has much affection and admiration for the Hawker Hurricane as he considers it his first love.

"I had great faith in the Hurricane even though it was publicly overlooked in favor of the Spitfires. I didn't pay attention to that, though, because it was a long war, one in which I grew up fast."