

Geoff Wellum

Teenage Spitfire Pilot

ONE OF THE “FEW” REMEMBERS

BY GEOFF WELLUM, AS TOLD TO ROBERT “CRICKET” RENNER

The mood was, “We’ll have a go at you.”

You didn't allow yourself to dwell on the losses, or the seriousness of the situation. You had tomorrow morning to look to. You made a resolve to do the best you could. The thought of defeat never entered our heads.

Nobody would beat us. In the Battle of Britain, for the first time, the Germans realized they could be stopped and prevented from their cause.

Seventy five years ago, across airfields spread about the green fields of England, young men of the Royal Air Force scrambled into their Spitfires and Hurricanes. They would fly four, five or even six sorties a day into the unusually clear blue skies, hurtling their aircraft and bodies repeatedly into mortal combat against a determined, and until-then, undefeated foe. The entire population of Britain would watch the contrails in the sky, as their fighter pilots, immortalized by Winston Churchill as “the few,” attacked the Luftwaffe invaders.

Seventy five years ago, men such as Pilot Officer Geoffrey Harris Augustus Wellum, nicknamed “The Boy,” fought and bled and died in their cramped, noisy cockpits. Today, Geoff Wellum is one of the very few of The Few who remain to tell what it was like to fly and fight in the Battle of Britain.

After being accepted on a short-service commission with the RAF in August 1939, Geoff Wellum trained on Tiger Moths and Harvards. After earning his wings, in May 1940 he was posted to No. 92 Squadron as a Spitfire pilot. Geoff Wellum,

the youngest pilot in the Battle, will be 94 this year. Fellow squadron mate Tony Bartley called Geoff, “a youngster who fought and drank as hard as any of us”—high praise indeed

from any fighter pilot! Wellum is the consummate fighter pilot and gentleman (yes, they can be one and the same). His memoir *First Light* is one of the best fighter pilot autobiographies available, simultaneously capturing the beauty of flight and the horror of war and lost friends. Geoff further reflected on his wartime service in a recent interview.

The Spitfire and the Boy

Nicknamed “The Boy” by Brian Kingcome, Geoff joined 92 Squadron on the eve of the ferocious aerial battles over Dunkirk. His first night at the officer's mess he met another new pilot, “Wimpy” Wade. The squadron adjutant asked Pat Lemond to look after the two new boys. While enjoying a pint, the squadron was put on standby for the next morning's mission.

Up to that point, Geoff “had never seen a Spitfire, let alone fly one, so I was of little use to them. Over the next two days, we lost five experienced pilots, including the CO Roger Bushell and my flight commander Paddy Green,” as well as Pat Lemond.





"Being in a Spitfire, at 30,000 feet on a lovely day, it does things—particularly in the evening. Sometimes there's a feeling of an unknown presence. I can't define it. It's rather beautiful, as if someone's with you."

Above: The joy of an 18-year-old pilot flying a Spitfire can only be imagined today. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)
Left: Geoff Wellum's (right) mentor in No. 92 Squadron was Flt. Lt. Brian Kingcome, "the best fighter pilot I ever flew with." (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

“For the first time, I started to think responsibly. ‘Why were they getting shot down?’ The idea of getting shot down didn’t appeal to me one little bit! How do you prevent such a thing happening?” He would have to learn how to fly the Spitfire in order to survive the upcoming ordeal, and he would have to learn quickly.

Like most fighter pilots, Wellum fell in love with his first fighter. “In those days,” he says, “for a young chap of 18 years and 9 months, it was a great privilege to be given the opportunity to fly probably the best fighter interceptor in the world. To be put in that position at that age, in charge of this wonderful aeroplane, it made a tremendous impression on a young mind, and you never forget it. I can see the thing standing, waiting for me today, with the ground crew standing, looking at me, saying, ‘Oh, dear, and now this young pilot who’s never flown one. This is our aeroplane. I hope he doesn’t break it!’ I can still see all that. I can remember sitting in it.”

“Flying a Spitfire is a pilot’s world. Being in a Spitfire, at 30,000 feet on a lovely day, it does things—particularly in the evening. Sometimes there’s a feeling of an unknown presence. I can’t define it. It’s rather beautiful, as if someone’s with you. Some think it’s too much oxygen, or not enough. In the height of the winter, we did a patrol at just under 40,000. On that patrol, I could see

was: ‘Never fly straight and level for more than 20 seconds in the combat zone, never stay still.’ It’s always the German that you did not see that shot you down, and if you don’t see one, don’t stay still, because he might be there—chuck it around. I always felt that in a Spitfire, if you saw your antagonist, you could always outfly him.”

Geoff took advantage of the Spitfire’s tight turn radius in order to defeat Me 109 attacks. “If you were turning in a Spitfire, you got into a high-speed stall by overloading the wing, and it would ‘jutter.’ By putting your feet up on the rudder extensions and leaning forward, you could stop the blood draining from your head and hold it on that ‘jutter.’ You could look back over your shoulder and see the 109 shooting hell out of you from behind, or trying to, and you could outfly him if you did that. A 109 had wing slats along the leading edge. They used to come out (at different times) and they would flick. I remember seeing one, he was a pretty determined sort of chap, and I was presenting a very good target. I saw him flick like that, and I thought, ‘I’ve got you!’ The old Spit was ‘juttering’ around, and I looked over my shoulder, and there he was. I was outturning him, and providing I held it on that ‘jutter,’ I could get away with it. And I did!”

Geoff’s mentor in 92 Squadron was Brian Kingcome. “He was the best fighter pilot I ever flew with. I was young and impressionable, and he was a nonchalant fighter pilot and I looked up to him. I tried to model myself on his sort of nonchalance. He seemed to go about it the right way and instill confidence. I flew number two to him quite a lot, and he was so calm over the R/T. Very calm.”

“The first time I went into real fighter combat, the thing that stands out in my mind very clearly was Brian and I being vectored into 150+ Germans coming in over Dungeness. I remember looking at this 150+, and it was just like a bunch of gnats on a summer evening. The bombers were in a good formation and over the top and around the sides were 109s. I thought, ‘Where on earth do you start with this lot?’ We were coming up slightly to the bombers, and the 109s dived at us.

“Before we knew what happened, we were in amongst them because our combined closing speed was something like 500 miles an hour. Therefore, once we were there, it all happened very, very quickly. A quick squirt and then out of the way. We had a go at the bombers, and we had an awful lot of crossfire. I think Brian was hit. I certainly was, with a couple of bullet holes appearing in the wings. It all happened in less than two or three seconds, so you didn’t have much time to think. You just had a go at them, got away with it, and thought, ‘Well, that’s all right. Let’s go back and do it again. Pick a target next time.’ Because that’s what you had to do.”

During the Battle, Geoff was “shot up three times, twice quite badly. I managed to get back

The best advice I got for combat flying was, ‘Never fly straight and level for more than 20 seconds in the combat zone, never stay still.’ It’s always the German that you did not see that shot you down

from the Isle of Wight to the curve of East Anglia where it goes around to the Wash. And I thought this is absolutely wonderful! This is beautiful ... and I got the feeling of somebody else with me. Coming back in the evening, with the sun sinking down, all the colors, and the peace and tranquility of it ... you look out and there’s this little beautifully shaped wing that’s keeping you in the air. You get this feeling of loneliness. I want to get back with my mates on the ground. The peace and tranquility of it—fighter pilots know what I’m talking about.”

Juttering in the Spitfire

In early September 1940, No. 92 Squadron moved to Biggin Hill, directly in the thick of things at the very height of the Battle of Britain. Geoff soon had many opportunities to put his newfound skills into practice. “If you were going to be a very good fighter pilot,” he says, “you were never going to be ‘easy’ on the aeroplane. You threw the thing around. You did things that weren’t in the rulebook. You didn’t do a perfect slow roll, or a perfect this or a perfect that—you just chucked it around. You never stayed still, and in a way, abused it. The best advice I got for combat flying



to Biggin Hill on the first occasion with the first Spitfire I had on 92, but she was taken away to be repaired. I was very fortunate not to be hit myself, because the aeroplane had glycol all over the place, that sort of thing. I got back to Biggin after I got hit over Maidstone at around 15,000 feet and I could nurse the engine, throttle it back a bit and glide down to Biggin.

“The second time I was hit by doing what I said I would never do—flying back at the end of a day, I was a bit tired, flying straight and level. There was a bang and a flash, and a 109 had a go at me. I was jolly lucky because he should have shot me down, should’ve killed me. But he must’ve been a lousy shot, thank God. I got that back to Biggin, too.”

Woefully Inadequate

Throughout the Battle of Britain, the RAF had excellent airplanes flown by brave pilots, but its pilots were flying with outdated tactics. Geoff says, “We lost so many over Dunkirk because of total inexperience, that and a gung-ho attitude. Eventually you learned when to attack, how to attack, where best to attack. And, of course, our training was woefully inadequate. The first time

I ever fired my guns was at a Heinkel 111, one of the 150+. Nobody told me how to use a reflector gunsight. While they taught you how to fly an aeroplane, and taught you very well, they did not teach you how to use that aeroplane as a weapon, as a gun platform. The Germans did. They’d evaluated their aeroplanes and their tactics in the Spanish Civil War in 1937. In 1937, we didn’t even have a Spitfire in squadron use.”

“Initially,” he says, “we used the wrong formation. The Germans evaluated the finger four, well spread out. We were in tight three-plane vic formation. It looked very good for the Hendon Air Display. The crowds loved it, ‘Aren’t they brilliant!’ But it’s no good in battle because in tight formation, you look at the bloke next to you. There’s only one chap looking out, and that’s the leader. The answer was to spread out to finger four, with each one covering everyone else’s tail. We eventually ‘cottoned’ on to not flying this tight formation business.”

Despite the daily threat of death, the British fighter pilots “didn’t really discuss this in the squadron because we were too busy being sent off and being scrambled. The last thing you wanted to do when you got down was talk tactics. I just

Bearing prewar markings, No. 65 Squadron converted from Gloster Gladiator biplanes in 1939. Later No. 94 Squadron shared the FZ code, flying Kittyhawks in North Africa. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

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wanted a cup of tea and a sit down and to think, 'Thank God for that!' You were concentrating on surviving until the next day, and then the day after, with any luck. It was a pretty hectic time, and all the rule books went out the window. I can't remember signing the authorization book. Each trip in the RAF was authorized, and you had to sign the book prior to flying. If you were scrambled, you didn't say, 'Hold on a minute, old boy, I've got to sign the authorization book, ' You ran like hell for your Spitfire, got in it and off you went."

Reflections on War

Despite the passage of seven and a half decades, Geoff has vivid memories of the horrors of war. Regarding the ever-present possibility of dying, he became "totally reconciled, and you just got on with it. Bravery didn't come into it. I found waiting the worst, in the morning at dispersal. The moment I got in the aeroplane and felt the vibrations through the seat of my pants, I became a different person. I can't remember doing my cockpit checks, but the next thing I knew we were climbing up into the wild blue yonder. Here we go again, get stuck in. We didn't even know the word bravery existed, you just did it."

On one mission, he remembers watching as "a German who bailed out of a Heinkel opened his parachute too early, and it got caught up around the tailplane. The airplane was on fire, and there he was, plummeting down, streaming out behind it like a rag doll, waiting to hit the ground. I thought, 'What a way to die. Good God, what are you doing ... 20th Century civilization?' All this in a vast panorama of blue sky with aeroplanes in it, tracers, parachutes, some of them streaming so the poor chap on the end of it was plummeting down. Perhaps half a dozen parachutes at a time. Absolute mayhem."

Geoff would try to visit his parents during this chaotic and tiring time, but "in a way it wasn't easy to do. When I got home, I wanted to get back to the squadron. I felt out of touch once I was away from the squadron. The squadron became my home. The Spitfire cockpit was a second home. Everything revolved around the squadron and the Spitfires, and getting a job done. You became an automaton in the end. You just had total resignation. I remember walking out to the Spit, looking at the sky and thinking it's going to be a lovely day again. Oh,

God, another dawn. Don your flying boots. As you walked across the grass, humping your parachute to your Spitfire. It's going to be a lovely day. Here we go again. Resignation."

Remembering Lost Friends and Hope for the Future

During the Battle, Geoff and his squadron mates went to the White Hart pub to "knock back a couple of pints, play a game of darts, rub shoulders with the locals. It was all rather casual, and all the time you were suppressing thoughts of absent friends." Although they didn't have time to mourn then, Geoff still remembers them.

A few years ago, at the Flying Legends airshow at Duxford, 12 Spitfires took off in pairs. Geoff says he's "not normally 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. As I watched those Spits climb away and form up into battle formation, I mourned those ghosts. They knew the odds. They were young men, typical of my generation. And indeed, I suspect all generations. I've met so many of them, I've presented wings to them; I've spoken to the cadets at Cranwell. They're just the same as we were. They may live in a different world, have a different way of life, a different outlook, but if, and when, at some time in the future, the cards are face up on the table, and the chips are down, our country's in danger and there's a national crisis, together with a true belief in the justice of their cause, they will respond just as we did in 1940."

When asked if he was brave, Geoff immediately responds that "the young pilot who didn't get medals, but he made himself go day after day into something when he was scared stiff, that to me is bravery. It's not about medals. It's not about the thank you's to people like myself who are here to tell the tale and who survived. But it is nice to be remembered because being remembered covers everybody. It covers everybody who served, flew and fought in the Battle of Britain and many of whom paid the extreme sacrifice so that you are in a position to question me, and I'm in a position to answer you. That's what it's all about. It's all about remembering. Remember, all those chaps who gave their lives. Remember." Indeed, Geoff, may we never forget! †