

Address by the Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Leo Davies, AO, CSC

Battle of Britain Cenotaph Hobart, 18 September 2016 'A Matter of Duty'

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your very warm welcome. Rhonda and I, WOFF [Warrant Officer of the Air Force] Swanwick and Lisa congratulate the organising committee for the commemorative service, the dining-in events and this service at such a magnificent cenotaph but also the people of Hobart – what a great city.

The Battle of Britain was a defining moment in the history of conflict. It simultaneously represented all the essential elements of human endeavour in war while also graphically illustrating to the population of Britain in 1940 the reality of modern conflict. Apart from the members of the various military aviation arms, in 1939 there was very little appreciation across the world of the potential of modern air power. The events of 1940, and of the war in Europe up to and including the Battle of Britain, were almost unheralded for the vast majority of the population.

The Battle of Britain represented a new era in how war was conducted. That almost global realisation is perhaps why the Battle of Britain has become such a transcendent moment in time. For others the Battle of Britain has become enshrined in their consciousness for perhaps another more prosaic reason.

By 1940, it had been many generations since any large scale battle had been fought in Britain. Any eyewitnesses to victory within the British public were largely veterans of the last war who could speak of events such as the Battle of Jutland or the breaking of the Hindenburg Line. While in their history, the great and resounding victories of Waterloo or of Trafalgar were far distant events accessible only through history books and museums. However, when we consider the Battle of Britain, we can see an epic battle played out from horizon to horizon.

If Vietnam was the first television war, then perhaps the Battle of Britain was the first battle for the population to see live from their back yards or dining room windows. This was war and victory made real. It was 'their boys' in the sky; it was 'their planes' on show. They could see aircraft and contrails stretching across the horizon, they could hear the gunfire, the engines' roar and the bursts of anti-aircraft fire. There was the threat to their homes and family right over their heads and there was the response from Fighter Command. As aircraft tumbled from the sky bellowing smoke and flame, as parachutes drifted on the summer breezes the people of the UK could see victory writ large across the sky—and they could count the cost of such victory. There in the twisted aircraft wrecks were the broken bodies of aircrew, the burnt and wounded flyers.

I think there is a good reason why Winston Churchill's speech in praise of 'The Few' of Fighter Command in 1940 resonated so deeply with the population at the time. People had witnessed first hand what the pilots had endured to protect the nation's security. All too frequently, it was the families of Britain who raced to a downed aeroplane in the hope of

helping the pilot only to find a young man beyond any aid of this world. They knew of the cost and they knew of their debt.

With the advent of air power, Britain was no longer an island. Its population, its industries and its military forces were no longer protected by the English Channel. Everyone and everything was vulnerable. With such a dark shadow cast across the nation, how inviting then must have been the peace overtures being offered by Hitler in the aftermath of the Battle of France. How tempting it must have been for the Government to say 'Yes' we will make peace.

Into the midst of doubt and uncertainty stepped a stooped, overweight figure, cigar in one hand, and all too frequently a glass of champagne or scotch in the other. On 18 June 1940, Churchill rose in the House of Commons. He spoke of the disasters of the Battle of France, the threat now facing Britain and of his determination to not surrender. He spoke of how the Army was rebuilding and how the Navy and Air Force were prepared and ready. He spoke of how nations such as Australia were coming to Britain's aid in their time of need. Yet most importantly he spoke of duty and of responsibility. Not that of the armed forces or of Parliaments' – but that of the nation's. Churchill told the nation that they were at a crossroads, that if they were to fail, the world would suffer for it. Yet if they could stand against the tide of Nazi tyranny and oppression then they would be remembered. To quote directly Churchill said, 'Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour".' Churchill made the Battle of Britain a battle of national survival fought by the nation, not just the honoured few.

History tells us that Britain and its people stood the test of the inferno and weathered the firestorm. In the process, over 43,000 civilians were killed and over 50,000 were injured during the Battle of Britain and during the Blitz that followed. This is no small commitment to a nation's survival and no small price to pay.

Ladies and gentlemen, to the veterans of the Battle of Britain, to the air and ground crews, the Royal Navy, the Army and to every man, woman and child of Britain who stood the test, let me now acknowledge and commemorate your service and your suffering.

You are all remembered.

Lest we forget.