



## **Battle of Britain 73rd Anniversary Commemoration**

### *Dinner Address*

**- Chief of Air Force: Air Marshal Geoff Brown AO -**

*Saturday 7 September 2013*

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*(Check with delivery)*

Alderman Briscoe; Right Reverend Loewe; Air Vice-Marshal Espeland; Air Vice-Marshal McLennan; Air Vice-Marshal Scully; Group Captain Bean; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen. I would also like to welcome former Senior Air Force Officer to Tasmania, Wing Commander Robert Grey and former 29 SQN Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Charles Hill.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to express my thanks for the kind invitation to speak at this 73rd anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

Attending the Battle of Britain commemoration this weekend provides me with a rare opportunity to break from the day-to-day management of the Air Force. I get the opportunity to look at the heritage that has shaped our service and inspires our *esprit de corps*. Our heritage is important.

As an Air Force, we are influenced and shaped by events and people of the past. At times these events, while important, are quite minor and at the time go by with barely any notice. While at other times, events are so profound that they fairly resonate through history.

The Battle of Britain is one such major event.

For the first time in history the fate of a nation rested in the hands of an Air Force and in the effects generated by air power. It was won by the courage, dedication and skill of just under 2950 aircrew of Fighter Command in the summer of 1940. They were the 'Few' who Winston Churchill so graciously enshrined into history when in August 1940 he said: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.' Of those few, 554 were killed or mortally wounded.

To that number must be added another 1054 aircrew casualties from the other RAF elements who contributed to the wider air campaign. No less than 24 of the Battle of Britain casualties were Australians. However, without the aircrew rising up in response to the bombing attacks the invasion of Britain was almost a certainty. The implications of such an invasion would have been felt across the globe.

The impact on Australia was much as anywhere else in the world. Churchill was right in singling out the 'Few' that he did. Their contribution in terms of the effects they generated and in the casualties they suffered was significant indeed. However, Churchill said something else, prior even to the battle starting. In June 1940, while addressing the House of Commons, he 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.

Here Churchill was not speaking not of the aircrew of Fighter Command. He was speaking of every man and woman of Britain He wanted each to step up to contribute to overall victory. Tonight I would like to pay tribute to some of those people who stepped up. The mainly unknown RAF ground staff, who, as much as the aircrew, contributed greatly to the victory. Their courage and their dedication were no less important and no less vital to the final outcome.

The first line of defence of Britain in 1940 was the radar and observer stations spread along the coastlines and dotted across the country. Without these assets the RAF would have had none of the essential early warning of incoming raids that proved so decisive. These radar and observation stations were attacked repeatedly by the Luftwaffe. Despite the casualties, the operators and administrative staff stuck to their duties. They often were able to bring a badly damaged station back on line only hours after being hit by dive-bomber attacks.

Of course the main line of defence was represented by the RAF Fighter Stations. These stations housed not only the Hurricanes and Spitfires, but the maintenance workshops, fuel stores, ammunition bunkers, control and reporting centres, hospitals and mess facilities. These were all manned by the ground staff. All were vulnerable to regular bombing and staffing raids by German bombers and fighters alike.

Take the example of Biggin Hill. Between 30 August and 2 September the base was attacked no less than six times. With the attacks came casualties. One raid on the 30th, obtained direct hits on a number of bomb shelters. In that one raid 39 base personnel were killed and a further 26 were injured. Two members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Corporal Elspeth Henderson and Sergeant Helen Turner, managed to survive that raid. In the aftermath they helped remove dead and injured friends from the destroyed shelters. One can only imagine the devastation and horror that greeted them. But they worked without pause with their fellow RAF members to restore the base to full operational capacity again.

It should be noted that not every member of the base was in shelters during the raids. People like Sergeant Ben Elswood manned the anti-aircraft guns around the airfield. During the raids he and his fellow gunners were prime targets for attacking aircraft as they defended the base as best they could. In between raids he was employed in assisting the ambulances and in clearing debris. Overnight he was employed in shifts helping to repair the airfield and operations rooms.

There was constant danger and little rest for any of the ground crews it seems. When I consider the environment in which the ground staff worked, I cannot help but be struck by the very real courage they showed.

Allow me to explain.

In the afternoon of 30 August 1940, Douglas Bader and his pilots of 242 Squadron were scrambled to intercept an incoming raid. Bader calculated the best tactical approach and disposition of his squadron as they closed with the enemy. He achieved a near perfect intercept. 242 Squadron claimed 12 enemy aircraft shot down and several more damaged, without suffering any losses to themselves. Throughout the fight Bader and his pilots exercised complete control over where, how and when they would engage with the enemy.

Bader admitted later, that when he first saw the enemy formation he was tempted to abort the attack. Such were the odds so stacked against them. However they pressed home their attack anyway, despite the odds against them. Brave men indeed.

Consider now Corporal Elspeth Henderson and Sergeant Helen Turner who I mentioned earlier. The day after they dug friends out of ruined shelters on the base, they back at work on Biggin Hill airfield when it was again heavily bombed. Both were responsible for passing on information to enable fighter squadrons to be vectored on to interceptions with attacking aircraft. With bombs falling around the communications building they stuck to their posts. When their building received a direct hit, both remained working, keeping the vital communications links to the fighters open. It was not until the building was burning down around them were they finally forced to evacuate. But not before stopping to help get the wounded out with them.

Unlike Bader and his squadron, Henderson and Turner could not choose how they would engage with the enemy. They had no weapons to fight back with and they had no means to disengage from the fight. All they could do was to hold their ground, do their duty and await their fate. It should come as no surprise that both were awarded the Military Medal for their actions that day.

When we speak of the vital contribution of both the air and ground crews to the success of Fighter Command; we are speaking of people like Bader and 242 Squadron; we are speaking of the AA gunners like Elsworth; and we speak of the communications staff like Henderson and Turner.

Collectively they and rest of the RAF carved out a place in aviation history like few have ever done before and are unlikely to in the future. Tonight we pay homage to them all.

Thank you