

HISTORICAL NOTE

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN was a dramatic turning point in the history of the Second World War.

The German object was to eliminate the Royal Air Force both in the air and on the ground, and to obtain air superiority in preparation for a seaborne and airborne invasion. Deployed along the French and Belgian coasts, the Luftwaffe began their first heavy onslaught, early in July 1940, against British shipping and the Channel ports. Their intention in this first phase of the Battle was to draw the Royal Air Force into combat and wear down its strength. The second phase, from 8 to 18 August consisted of intensive day operations against coastal radar stations and fighter airfields. The third phase began after a five-day lull with increased night attacks and an assault on the fighter airfields in the London area.

The daylight bombing of London itself marked the beginning of the fourth phase. It opened on 7 September, with attacks on the docks, and lasted most of the month; though serious in itself, it brought vital relief to the fighter airfields that had been under such pressure. This phase reached a climax on 15 September, when over one thousand sorties were flown against the capital in the afternoon and at night.

On that occasion the Luftwaffe lost 61 aircraft. It was, in Sir Winston Churchill's words: "One of the decisive battles of the war." Churchill went on to say: "The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world... goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of world war by their prowess and by devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Throughout October, the fifth and last phase of the Battle saw the decline of enemy daylight attacks on London and an increase in the night bombing of Britain's major ports and industrial centres. At the beginning of the struggle the Luftwaffe had 2,790 aircraft to launch against England. Britain had fewer than 60 fighter squadrons, - some 650 aircraft - and the ground staff had to work sometimes 16 hours a day to keep the machines in the air. Between 24 August and 6 September alone, Fighter Command lost 103 pilots and 128 seriously wounded, while 366 fighters were put out of action.

By the end of the Battle the home base had been secured. The Royal Air Force could now turn to wider tasks. The long fight for Malta, North Africa and the control of the Mediterranean; the unstinting efforts of our maritime airmen whose contribution was central to winning the Battle of the Atlantic; the struggle for air supremacy over North-West Europe, without which the Normandy invasion would have been impossible; and the support of the invasion campaign itself: all were essential to final victory in Europe.

In the Far East too, most memorably in the appalling conditions of the Burma campaign, the Royal Air Force played a major part. In commemorating the airmen who fought in the Battle of Britain, we pay tribute also to those who in later years of the war served in all the Allied Forces at sea, on land, and in the air. The Battle of Britain Heritage Walk is a permanent reminder of the debt we owe to the Few.

1 - ST CLEMENT DANES CHURCH

St Clement Danes derives its name from the earliest church to stand on the site, founded by descendants of the Danish invaders, whom Alfred the Great allowed to remain in London in the 9th century.

The body of the present church was rebuilt in 1680 - 82 by Sir Christopher Wren and in 1669 Joshua Marshall created the west tower, the familiar spire added by James Gibbs in 1719.

St Clement Danes was damaged by bombing in 1941, and the restoration work was carried out by Anthony Lloyd in 1955.

The galleried interior, with its dark stained wood, follows Wren's original. Above the galleries Corinthian columns and coffered arches support the tunnel-vault of the nave.

The east end consists of a quadrant bay on each side and an apse and over each arch are the Stuart arms. The reredos, built in the Wren style, has two large panels painted by Ruskin Spear representing the Annunciation.

Other features include the east window depicting Christ in Glory created by Carl Edwards, a highly carved pulpit dating from the 17th century with an ornate lectern designed by Anthony Lloyd, and in the west gallery is a gilded organ by Ralph Downes.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, 1709 - 84, was a regular member of the congregation of St Clement Danes. During the 17th to 19th centuries many people were buried in the crypt and the chain hanging on the crypt wall was used to secure the coffin lids against body snatchers.

Since 1958 St Clement Danes has served as the central church of the Royal Air Force. The nave and aisles are inlaid with the slate badges of over 700 RAF squadrons and units, and below the aisle windows are the RAF rolls of honour. At the west end is a larger badge for the RAF, surrounded by the badges of overseas allies, together with carved stalls for the commanders of the RAF.

Outside the church are statues of Lord Dowding, victor of the Battle of Britain, and Sir Arthur Harris, Marshal of the RAF.



2 - THE ROYAL AIR FORCE MEMORIAL

The Royal Air Force Memorial, which stands at the head of the Whitehall Stairs on Victoria Embankment, is a simple monument in Portland Stone, surmounted by a gilded eagle.

It was raised by the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund as a memorial to airmen who died in the First World War. The memorial was completed in 1923 and unveiled by The Prince of Wales who spoke prophetically of 'our cloud armies of the future.'

The gilded eagle surmounting the memorial was sculpted by Mr W. Reid Dick and it was originally intended to face inwards to the Embankment traffic, however Sir Reginald Blomfield the consultant architect altered the design to allow the eagle to face across the river and symbolically towards France.

Years on, the memorial shows honourable scars from bombs of the Second World War and it remains a focus for remembrance among serving Royal Air Force personnel. Wreaths are laid throughout the year, but particularly on Battle of Britain Sunday to remember and give thanks for those that have served and continue to serve in the Royal Air Force.

Standing on the Embankment in clear view of the Air Force Board at the Ministry of Defence, it is also fitting that the memorial is watched over from Whitehall Gardens by the Statues of Lord Trenchard who conceived the RAF and Lord Portal who became Chief of the Air Staff in 1941.

