

September – Remembering ‘The Few’

Jack sits in his wheelchair enjoying the early autumn sunshine in the garden of ‘The Cedars’ retirement home. The sky is blue with the high-level milky haze that tells him of the gradual approach of a front from the west.

Suddenly, he hears the instantly familiar sound of a Merlin engine and, looking skywards, he sees the elliptical wings of a Spitfire. It is flying, he supposes, from nearby Duxford, perhaps to an air display in honour of the Battle of Britain.

75 years ago, he had been one of Churchill’s ‘Few’ and the memories flooded back.

The squadron at dispersal – a telephone order to Scramble! Run to the aircraft, parachute on and jump in, with hands moving swiftly round the cockpit to start the engine whilst the ground crew secure his harness. Put on the flying helmet, switch on the R/T.

The propeller starts to move and jerks as the cylinders start to fire, the exhausts ejecting puffs of smoke before the Merlin settles into smooth running. Oil temperature and pressures rising, coolant temperature OK. Close the canopy, release the brakes and weave behind his section leader as the squadron taxis for take-off.

‘Vector 140, 150+ Bandits, Angels 15, Sector 7’ the controller tells them. They form up in the climb at full power, trying to gain the advantage of height before they engage the enemy. Oxygen on, reflector gunsight on, weave. He is Blue 2 and, with Blue 3, must stick with Blue Leader and watch his back.

Ahead, he sees black specks on the horizon, with the enemy’s fighter escort leaving vapour trails above the bomber formation.

‘Tally Ho!’ The radio bursts into an excited incomprehensible chatter, that must be 303 Sqn babbling in Polish. Terrible radio discipline, but they fight like demons.

The fight begins with a beam attack on the Heinkels as the Spitfires burst through the escorting Messerschmitt 110s. Dicky in Blue 3 shouts ‘Look out Blue 2! There’s a 109 on your tail’. He hears a bang and his plane shudders. He pulls hard and the 109 overshoots. He gives it a quick burst as it passes – no hits.

His radiator is damaged though, with coolant and oil temperatures starting to rise. He pulls up to gain height and makes a radio call ‘Blue 2 breaking off. Trying for pancake, Hawkinge’.

He got back that day to fight again, but Dicky bought it.

The memories crowd in.

Dowding, Park, Leigh-Mallory, Bader, Sailor Malan, Stanford-Tuck and Paddy Finucane. Big Wing ops, Rhubarbs and Circus. 11 Group, Kenley, Biggin Hill, Hornchurch, he can still see the airfields in his mind’s eye.

No, you don’t forget. You can’t forget.

He looks up again. High overhead he sees a contrail that, to his ageing eyes, seems to be wearing the 1939-45 Victory Medal ribbon. Even the September sky is remembering ‘The Few’.

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