



The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight

Background Information for Teachers

The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight

The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF) is a living, flying memorial to all the men and women who flew, maintained and supported the aircraft of the RAF during the Second World War and the thousands of personnel who lost their lives serving their country. The aircraft are more than museum pieces: they are involved in around 700 display flights every year, ranging from village fetes, to air shows, to major fly-pasts to commemorate occasions such as Remembrance Day or the Queen's birthday. In 2005 BBMF's Lancaster, Spitfire and Hurricane were involved in the drop of 1 million poppies on the Mall in London to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Where did BBMF come from?

After the end of the Second World War, it became traditional for a Spitfire and Hurricane to lead the Victory Day flypast over London. From there grew the idea to have a historic fly-able collection, initially to commemorate the Battle of Britain and then broadened out to commemorate the Royal Air Force's role in the Second World War. The Historic Aircraft Flight was formed in 1957 at Biggin Hill. The flight is now called the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and is housed at RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire. All the aircrew serving with the flight are volunteers who have served in the RAF, flying a variety of modern aircraft.

What's in the collection?

- 1 Lancaster
- 1 Dakota
- 5 Spitfires
- 2 Hurricanes
- 2 Chipmunks

Spitfire

The Spitfire is a single seater fighter plane and was used by the RAF during the Second World War. It was designed by R.J Mitchell, and manufactured by Supermarine and was the fastest aircraft of its time.

Over 22,000 Spitfires were built during the 15 years that they were in use in the RAF. There were a number of different types of Spitfire, which included those adapted for aerial reconnaissance.

The Spitfire was vital during the Battle of Britain and was largely responsible for Britain's victory over the Luftwaffe. Because of this it became a symbol of



victory for Britain. Sadly, immediately after the war their importance was not recognised and thousands were sold for much-needed scrap metal. (Indeed, one of the Spitfires in BBMF's collection was initially sold for scrap for £25. Fortunately it was rescued and restored to life!) For this reason, very few Spitfires remain, and BBMF has 5 of the few Spitfires still in flight.

Many of the aircraft at BBMF are film stars. They have been used in a number of British war and other films including the 'Battle of Britain', made in 1968.

Hurricane

The Hurricane was designed and built for war. Its maiden flight was in 1935, and over 14,500 were made. They are single seater fighter planes and a hurricane pilot would be required to fly for an average of three and a half hours, alone, in very hostile conditions, frequently in poor visibility.

The Hurricanes were arguably more important to the Battle of Britain than the Spitfire, but they have not become the symbol of victory that the Spitfire has. The Hurricane was originally a fighter, but it was out-classed by the Spitfire, and many Hurricanes were therefore adapted to carry bombs.

Lancaster

The Lancaster was a four engine World War Two bomber. It is the largest aircraft in BBMF's collection. It has a distinctive cockpit, turret and twin tail.

Primarily a night bomber, the Lancaster flew about 156,000 operations over Germany and occupied Europe during the Second World War and dropped 608,612 tonnes of bombs. Many Lancasters were shot down in action, killing their crew: only 35 Lancasters completed over 100 operations. Of the 7,377 Lancasters built during the Second World War, over 3000 were destroyed or lost in action.

The Lancaster bomber is perhaps most famous for its role in the 1943 operation to destroy the Ruhr Dam, flown by 617 Squadron (more famously known as the 'Damn Busters' raid).

There are only 17 remaining Lancasters in the world, and only two which are airworthy. The only airworthy Lancaster in Britain is at BBMF, so if you see a fly-past by a Lancaster, it is more than likely that it is BBMF's!

The Lancaster was involved in the bombing of German cities such as Cologne and Dresden, actions which killed tens of thousands of people. Depicted on the side of the Lancaster are a number of bomb symbols – a chilling reminder of the number of operations the aircraft flew, and of the fact that it was, essentially, a killing machine. There are also four poppy symbols to commemorate the times that the Lancaster was used to drop poppies commemorating the men and women who were killed serving their country during the Second World War.



Dakota DC-3

The Dakota-DC was a transport aircraft that revolutionised air transport in 1930s and 1940s. Dakotas were used before the Second World War as passenger planes and were popular in transatlantic flights. BBMF's Dakota was originally used by the USA Air Force before being brought into the service of the RAF. The Dakota had a crew of two and could carry up to 32 passengers.

After the war, ex service aircraft were so plentiful that thousands were converted to civilian use. The Dakota was so reliable that it became the standard in the world's major airlines and was largely responsible for starting the post-war airline industry. It remained an important part of the transport industry until the 1970s, and is still used by some airlines, particularly in developing countries, today.

Chipmunk

BBMF has two De Havilland Chipmunks. They are the only aircraft with tail wheels and were used after the Second World War as training vehicles. In fact, Prince Philip took his first flight in a Chipmunk in 1952.

The Battle of Britain

The Battle of Britain began on 1st July 1940 and continued until the autumn of that year. At the beginning of the summer of 1940, it was clear that the German Luftwaffe were intent on destroying the British Air Force as they saw this as the only obstacle between them and a full-scale invasion of Britain. They intended to destroy Bomber Command in 4 days, and the aircraft industry in 4 weeks. However, they underestimated British aircraft and the RAF and the Luftwaffe's planes were out-classed by the new Spitfire.

For several months, the battle raged over the skies of Sussex and Kent. Hundreds of aircraft was shot down and destroyed and thousands of pilots and crew lost their lives. Every day when a squadron received the order to 'scramble' they never knew which of their friends would be killed, secretly, guiltily hoping that it would be someone else other than them. A continuous supply of replacement aircraft and crew were needed and at times it looked as though the RAF would be unable to train new pilots fast enough. Towns, cities and villages banded together to raise funds to buy new Spitfires, holding fetes and other fundraising events.

By September 1940, the Germans were actually winning the Battle of Britain, but, frustrated by their unexpected losses, turned their attention to the bombing of British towns and cities. The Battle of Britain ended, and the Blitz and aerial bombardment of innocent civilians had begun.

Who were the crews?

The crews who served on the aircraft during the Second World War were all volunteers who had elected to serve their country by joining the RAF. The majority of them were in their late teens or early 20s: a airman over the age of 25 was unusual and he would have been regarded as ancient. Very few of them had dreamt of ever flying in a plane; most of them would never have

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driven a car. Aircraft had only been around for 40 years, so the chance to serve your country flying in a Spitfire or Lancaster would have been very alluring. But to say that most had no idea what they were letting themselves in for is probably an under-statement.

Thousands of aircrew were killed: over 55,000 from Bomber Command alone. In 1943, only 17% of bomber crews could expect to live through a 30-operation tour. Only 1 in 40 crews survived two 30-operation tours.

It is difficult for us to imagine what it must have been like for these men who were asked to fly over enemy territory night after night, knowing that the odds were stacked against their survival and witnessing horrors most of us will fortunately never know. And these men who were little more than children themselves, being only about 19 or 20 years of age.

The crews developed enormous camaraderie and became closer than many families. It must have been extremely hard seeing so many of their comrades killed or lost on a daily basis. Crews were asked to do very little outside of their flying duties with the result that their days were spent in a combination of stress and boredom, being constantly ready to 'scramble' when required, but spending most of the daytime whiling away the time playing cards and sleeping, trying not to think about what the next operation would bring.

Not surprisingly, many of those crew members who still survive feel a great bond with their former comrades and still mourn the loss of their friends who were killed in action, men who lost their lives at such a tragically young age. BBMF is a living commemoration to all those who served in the RAF during the Second World War and in particular those whose lives were snatched away from them by the war.