



## RAF Digby Sector Lima Operations Room

Key Stage 2

History:

Chronological understanding

Historical enquiry

Key Stage 2

English:

Writing

Composition

Planning and drafting

Reading

### Overview of the activities

These activities look at the history of RAF Digby Operations Room by looking at the human stories. They also provide the opportunity to:

- explore sources of information
- recognise the difference between present and past
- find answers to simple questions about the past from sources of information
- learn about characteristic features of the period and experiences of men, women and children in the past
- explore how the past is represented and interpreted.

How do we know what happened?

High Flight

### Preparation

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhVUBJkI0fs>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtOdF8FtUaI>

### Venues

RAF Digby Sector Lima Operations Room

### Roles

Historian, plotter, pilot



## Activity 1: How do we know what happened?

### Introduction

Introduce the role of RAF Digby Lima Sector Operations Room briefly.  
Watch the Youtube video

### In groups ask young people to

Discuss the video.

- What was happening?
- When was it filmed?
- What time span did it cover?
- What were the women doing?
- What was the purpose of the Operations Room?
- Why was the role of the plotter so important?
- How did they get the information to help them plot activity accurately?
- What skills did people working in Operations Room need?
- What do they think it would have felt like to work in the Operations Room?
- How did they feel watching the film?

### Plenary

Feedback on the above.

### Activity

How do we know what happened in the Operations Room?

What evidence do we have?

How does the film help to bring the story to life?

Now listen to the extract of the living history of Eileen.

Again discuss the clip

- What was happening?
- When was it filmed?
- What time span did it cover?
- What were the women doing?
- What was the purpose of the Operations Room?
- Why was this role so important?
- How did they get the information to help them plot activity accurately?
- What skills did people working in Operations Room need?

### Discuss

What are the differences between the audio-tape and the video?

Which is more effective?

What sort of sources of information are they?

How accurate are they?

What are the problems with finding out about historic events?

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## **Activity**

Ask the children to recall an event that happened in the past. It would be good to choose an event that the whole class experienced, perhaps an educational visit or an assembly, a sports day or Christmas play. Give them the event and ask them to write down what they remember about the event.

## **Plenary**

Next ask the class to contribute their thoughts to create a collective account.

What is similar about their personal accounts and their collective account?

What is different?

What can they remember?

Who else was at the event?

Would their account be different?

Are some people more confident about their version of events?

Whose account is correct?

## **Background to the Operations Room**

RAF Digby Lima Sector Operations Room played a crucial role in defending Lincolnshire during the Second World War. There were 13 other centres around the country but this and Uxbridge are the only two that survived.

Three Hurricane Squadrons were based at RAF Digby with 40 pilots. In the Operations Room information was presented so the commander could decide how many pilots to send to defend against attack from the Luftwaffe.

The women who plotted the aircraft, from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, were chosen for their intelligence and ability to multi-task.

The women received information through headsets from phone lines.

There is an operations clock on the wall in the Operations Room which is a 24-hour clock with colour sequences triangles red, yellow and blue. The different colours were used as arrows plotted on the table to show the progression of the aircraft.

The plotters used two different types of blocks on the table to identify RAF and German aircraft. The German block had an X but the block also showed the number of aircraft and the height they were flying at. The British blocks had two rows, one showing number of aircraft and one showing altitude.

The Operations Room received information from RADAR stations near the coast and The Royal Observer Corps who worked in teams of three or four. They were at observer posts, generally at high spots on hills or tall buildings, all over the country and it was their job to watch out for enemy aircraft. They would plot the aircraft using time, height, speed and distance.

Information from the ROC and telephone information was given to the plotters.

Robert Watson Watt designed the RADAR system. He worked with Barnes Wallace and Lowell.

Squadrons were divided into flights. The leader of each three aircraft had a special transmitter so they could be identified and tracked.

It was the plotters job to get fighters into good positions above and behind the enemy ideally so they could fire on them.

Code words Parrot and Squawk were used.  
Each girl could handle three raids simultaneously.

Many pilots left training in the summer of 1940 with only ten to twelve hours on Spitfires and Hurricanes.

<http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafdigby/aboutus/johngillespiemageejr.cfm>

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## **Activity 2: High Flight by John Gillespie Magee Junior**

Key Stage 2

History:

Chronological understanding

Historical enquiry

Key Stage 2

English:

Speaking and listening

Writing

Reading

### Aim of the activity

Gain an insight into John Gillespie Magee Jnr and his love of flight.

Set this insight in the context of the Second World War.

Poem of John Gillespie Magee Jnr



## Activity: High Flight by John Gillespie Magee Junior

### Introduction

Display the poem High Flight by John Gillespie Jnr on the Whiteboard and read it to the group.

### High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air. . . .  
Up, up the long, delirious burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr

Give students a copy of the poem.

### Activity

Ask them what they think the poem is about?

Now ask them to look closely at the language.

Are there any phrases they don't understand?

Underline them.

Discuss what these phrases might mean with the class, ask for contributions from young people. If they don't know what the words mean, how might they find out?

What does the poem tell them about the person who wrote it?

Is it a man or a woman? Why do they think this?

When do they think it was written?

What was the poet doing?

How was the poet feeling?

Can they pick out any adjectives?

Can they pick out any adverbs?

Are there any phrases that stand out for the young people?

Explain the background of the poem, about who John Gillespie Magee Junior was, what he was doing and how he came to be in Lincolnshire at RAF Digby. Read the poem again.

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Ask young people to select six words to use in a poem about flight or John Gillespie Magee Junior.

When they have selected their words ask them to write a poem.

Writing frames and ideas for poems are provided in the resources section of this website.

## **Plenary**

Young people explain why they chose their six adjectives and then read their poems.

Ask the young people listening for positive comments about the poems.  
Create a display of the poems in class.

## **Background information**

The Second World War began on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 when the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany. The decision to go to war followed the unprovoked German attack on Poland on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939.

The war lasted for almost six years and it was one of the hardest wars Britain had been involved in. There were two sides in the War: The Axis and the Allies. The Axis was made up of Germany, Italy and Japan and the Allies included: the British Commonwealth countries, France, United States of America and Russia. Other countries that fought with the allies included:

- Australia
- Belgium
- Canada
- China
- Czechoslovakia
- Denmark
- Estonia
- France
- Greece
- India
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Malta
- The Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Norway
- Pan American Alliance which include 21 South American Countries
- Poland
- South Africa
- Yugoslavia

The war effort in Britain involved just about everyone. Children were evacuated out of major cities to safer places mainly in the countryside, women who did not usually work outside of the home worked in factories to make aircraft and munitions, or they worked on farms as farm hands and many people were called up to the armed forces.

After occupying parts of France, the Germans decide to turn their attention to Britain. They decided to weaken the RAF by attacking Britain from the air. This was called the Battle of Britain.

RAF Digby was one of only two Battle of Britain airfields in Lincolnshire; the other was at Kirton in Lindsey.

At the time of the Battle of Britain, the United States of America was officially neutral. Despite this hundreds of Americans crossed the border into Canada to enlist with the Royal Canadian Air Force, knowingly breaking the law, but

with the tacit approval of the United States Government, they volunteered to fight the Nazis.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr., was an American pilot who came to RAF Digby in this way. He was born in Shanghai, China, in 1922 to an English mother and a Scotch-Irish-American father. He began flight training when he was just 18. Within the year, he was sent to England and posted to the newly formed No 412 Fighter Squadron, RCAF, which was activated at Digby, England, on 30 June 1941. He was flew the Supermarine Spitfire.

John rose to the rank of Pilot Officer after flying fighter sweeps over France and air defence over England against the German Luftwaffe.

On 3 September 1941, Magee flew a high altitude (30,000 feet) test flight in a newer model of the Spitfire V. The experience inspired him to write a poem — "To touch the face of God."

When he was back on the ground, he wrote a letter to his parents, He said "I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It started at 30,000 feet, and was finished soon after I landed." His poem, 'High Flight' was written on the back of the letter.

Just three months later, on 11 December 1941 (and only three days after the US entered the war), Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., was killed. The Spitfire V he was flying, VZ-H, collided with an Oxford Trainer from Cranwell Airfield flown by Ernest Aubrey. The mid-air collision happened over the village of Roxholm which lies between RAF Cranwell and RAF Digby, in the county of Lincolnshire at about 400 feet AGL at 11:30. John was descending in the clouds. At the enquiry a farmer testified that he saw the Spitfire pilot struggle to push back the canopy. The pilot, he said, finally stood up to jump from the plane. John, however, was too close to the ground for his parachute to open. He died instantly. He was 19 years old.

The [Canadian Virtual War Memorial](#) contains a registry of information about the graves and memorials of more than 116,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders who gave their lives for their country.

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## **High Flight**

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And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air. . . .  
Up, up the long, delirious burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

— John Gillespie Magee, Jr

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## Ideas to get started

Give the young people the following frame and ask them to complete the phrase as many times as they like

Flying is  
Flying is  
Flying is  
Flying is  
Flying is  
Flying is  
Flying is

Flying makes me feel like  
Flying makes me feel like

When the young people have completed the phrase several times ask them to remove Flying is or Flying makes me feel like and they should have a poem.

Use the letters that make up FLIGHT as the start of sentences.

H  
I  
G  
H  
  
F  
L  
I  
G  
H  
T