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# 'We were interested in being alive and surviving to fight another day'



Maurice Leng today with the original relics from his days as a fighter pilot



Hurricanes of 32 Squadron took a major part in the fighting, among them the one seen here (Imperial War Museum)



Many a Messerschmitt 109 'Emil' only just made it back to France, this one by the narrowest of margins (Bundesarchiv)

A TEN BOB flying lesson in a Gypsy Moth biplane was Battle of Britain pilot Maurice Leng's first taste of the magic of flight. In the early 1930s Mr Leng, now a spritely 77 year old, was already hooked on the thrill of speed, with a passion for racing motor bikes and cars.

One fateful day at the Brooklands circuit, after a friend's motor cycle broke down, Mr Leng wandered over to the neighbouring airfield and paid to be taken up by the famous racing pilot Ken Waller.

He said: "I thought 'This is the thing for me'. I wanted to fly and I wanted to be an RAF pilot because they were the only people who had decent aeroplanes."

Problems with a slightly deformed right arm made Mr Leng so anxious at his RAF medical that his blood pressure rocketed.

But his single-minded determination paid off and he became a weekend flier as a Sergeant Pilot in the RAF Reserve.

For Muswell Hill-born Maurice Leng it meant the entrance to an exclusive club, "a people apart". That role of RAF pilot was to span three decades until Mr Leng retired from the Reserve in 1966 at the age of 53.

Two days before war was declared, Mr Leng was called up from his peacetime job in advertising and the following month was posted to Number 12 Flying Training School at Grantham.

When he finished training on December 20, Maurice Leng was assessed "above average" and after Christmas became a staff pilot flying First World War vintage Wallace biplanes, and obsolete Fairey Battles to train air gunners.

But that was not why Maurice Leng had joined the RAF: "I was only interested in one thing. I wanted to fly fighters — Hurricanes and Spitfires."

It was while "ferrying" a bewildering array of aircraft between airfields that

Maurice Leng first realised his ambition. He recalled: "On May 23 I was dropped off by an Anson to pick up Hurricane P2456 at St Athan Wales. It had a constant speed airscrew, which at that time was like Star Wars to us."

"Apart from that the controls were quite straightforward, so I sat in the seat and started her up."

Mr Leng's blue eyes light up with delight as he remembers what happened next: "I just opened the throttle and it was like a Formula One car. It was small and light and it went like the bloody wind. I was at 1,000 feet before I had even thought of lifting the undercarriage."

Despite the exhilarating speed of the Hurricane, dense cloud and lack of a radio meant it took Mr Leng two false landings and one hour to cover the 50 miles to Aston Down in Gloucestershire.

The almost comical flight, in the same month that the Nazi war machine rolled across France, is a stark reminder of just how inexperienced many of Britain's young pilots were for the coming air battle.

### Training

Within a week of his first Hurricane flight, Maurice Leng was posted to 73 Squadron in France. Although he had by now clocked up around 300 hours of flying time he had undergone no fighter training and had never fired his guns while airborne.

At his new squadron, he was immediately given a Hurricane Mark I which featured a wooden airscrew, unlike the more advanced models he had flown previously.

"I flew that 30 minutes around our airfield at Gaye, then that same day I went on my first operational trip."

Mr Leng's flight commander was the celebrated New Zealand ace "Cobber" Kane.

He said: "All you have to do is stick by me". Six of us took off to attack a German airfield. There were Messerschmitts all lined up so we opened up with our eight guns each firing at 1,150 rounds per minute."

The airfield was shot-up, but at a terrible cost: "When we came back there were three of us left. One became a prisoner of war and the other two were killed. I was just in a daze."



● Maurice Leng in wartime

So much myth has attached itself to the Battle of Britain that it is sometimes difficult to sift fact from fiction. Retired businessman Maurice Leng of Griggs Close Chaddlewood was one of the "few" and saw action throughout the Summer of 1940. His story provides a valuable glimpse of what it really meant to be a fighter pilot in the wartime RAF.

"Cobber" Kane himself was killed on June 13, as Maurice Leng's Flying Log for that date details: "Patrol recalled 'Cobber' Kane flew over aerodrome at 20 feet, did a flick roll and killed himself."

It was the kind of stupid loss that the RAF could ill afford as pressure on its Advanced Air Striking Force in France began to mount.

Although many survivors of the British Expeditionary Force plucked from the beaches of Northern France felt they had been denied proper air cover, Mr Leng knows a different story.

He said: "The RAF saved more lives than anyone else did on Dunkirk beach."

Mr Leng added: "When the retreat to the coast started everything was chaos. We were up fighting and had to land wherever we could. Often it was a case of leapfrogging airfields."

While 73 Squadron was fighting over Nantes in Western France it suffered a heavy blow after many of its ground crew were lost when the Lancastrian was sunk.

On June 18 — two days after France collapsed — the squadron finally evacuated and took up station at Church Fenton in Yorkshire.

Maurice Leng's log book records the grinding routine of endless sector reconnaissance patrols as the battle for Britain began to take shape.

He said: "Any enemy action in that area we had to deal with. I really learned fighting at this time after I had come back from France. I was training and in action at the same time."

Young Maurice Leng was shot down for the first time on August 25 while night flying over Beverley in pursuit of a Dornier 17 that was bombing Hull.

In what was an all too

common occurrence during the battle, his Hurricane fell victim to "friendly" ack-ack fire.

He bailed-out and managed to land safely between telegraph poles on the Hull to Beverley road. Picked-up by the police, Mr Leng was returned to his unit and was back on patrol again that same day.

On September 2, as the battle neared its crisis point, the squadron was transferred to Castle Camps near Saffron Walden.

### Survived

It was a testing time: "Our losses were colossal. We only went up on radar call when the Germans were actually arriving, and you were just faced with a mass of enemy aircraft."

"We were in the air many times everyday, and if you were shot down and survived you were flying again immediately afterwards."

He added: "The strange thing is that you were not frightened. At the evening in the pub if someone was morose you knew that the next day he was going to be killed because he had lost



85 Squadron Hurricanes carrying the squadron's white hexagonal motif beneath the cockpit canopy

his motivation for the job in hand.

"It was not a question of how many victories you got. We were interested in being alive and surviving to fight another day."

"You saw so many stupid acts of death. It is bloody silly to commit suicide, which anyone can do. You learn to be a survivor, but you still find people driving on the road just asking to die and you can't understand why they do it."

He recalled: "During the Battle of Britain we had psychiatrists and we reckon it took us about two weeks to send them round the bend."

"They could not understand why, when they asked us these questions, we gave them such stupid answers. We took the mickey out of them left, right and centre."

Mr Leng said the hot weather Britain has experienced over the past months reminded him uncannily of the summer of 1940 when the young pilots had lounged in their deck

chairs in the sunshine waiting for the telephone to ring.

"Then, the telephone operator would shout out 'scramble 25,000 feet, area so and so'. The longest we took to get airborne from the time we were fast asleep was two minutes."

"Nobody waited for anybody else. There was no leader, but we formed up and all knew where we were going to meet the enemy."

The reality of aerial combat was often far removed from the precisely choreographed manoeuvres portrayed in so many films: "Battles in the air are funny things. A squadron of 12 aircraft will arrive at the scene of action and it is just a milling mass of aeroplanes."

"Suddenly the skies cleared and you were on your own — and that's when you seemed liable to get clobbered from above."

Mr Leng was shot down for a second time on September 14, but managed to land his Hurricane.

Maurice Leng's gruelling Battle of Britain came to an end on September 23 when he bailed out over Sittingbourne in Kent after suffering shrapnel wounds to his right thigh and elbow.

Mr Leng managed to rejoin his squadron in November and the following month was back in action over North Africa.

It is a badly-needed reminder that the Battle of Britain was not a clear-cut incident for most pilots, but just part of an on-going conflict that would only end with the defeat of Nazism.

If anything, Maurice Leng's experiences after the summer of 1940 were as dramatic as those first hectic months of combat.

In April 1941, Maurice Leng was commissioned in the field with the rank of Pilot Officer. By then he had been shot down a fourth time and spent days wandering in the desert without food or water before being guided to safety by the Bedouin.

After a spell fighter training with the Royal Hellenic Airforce Maurice Leng was flying a Spitfire with a camera but no guns on a shipping observation sweep when he was chased the length of Crete — 120 miles — by six Me 109s and shot-up.

He was eventually forced to crash-land on the island and fell into the hands of the Italians who turned him over to the Nazis. Mr Leng, by now with the rank of Flight Lieutenant, arrived in late 1942 at the notorious Stalag Luft III in Upper Silesia, the scene of the "great escape" featured in the famous film.

Two years behind the wire, and the massacre of many of his comrades by the Gestapo, has left Mr Leng understandably reluctant to dwell on his time as a POW.

On May 7, 1945, Flt Lt Leng was a free man once again and ready to enjoy the world that he — and those others who did not survive — had done so much to defend.



A young Flt Lt Maurice Leng with a Tiger Moth. This striking photograph was later used as the model for a popular recruiting poster



Vapour trails over London — the image from afar that sticks in many people's memories



Scramble: A determined dash to get to grips with the enemy