

This is the unabridged version of an article that appeared in Aviation World Autumn 2018 issue. The printed version was edited for space reasons.

**What became of The Few?
“The Battle of Britain” film and its aircraft 50 years on
by John P McCrickard**

Fifty years ago in the summer skies over southern England, Spain and the south of France, the main flying sequences for the forthcoming cinema epic, “The Battle of Britain”, had just been completed. However, this famous film could trace its origins back to the 1965. That year had seen an increased public consciousness of the aerial conflict that had taken place in the summer skies above Britain twenty-five years previously when “The Few” of the Royal Air Force successfully fought-off the determined onslaught of the German Luftwaffe. Awareness had been heightened by the sad passing of Britain’s great wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, on 24 January. The 25th anniversary of the Battle was marked on 13 September when the GPO (General Post Office) issued a set of commemorative stamps. No less than thirteen RAF stations still opened their doors for the annual “Battle of Britain at Home” annual airshows, these taking place at Acklington, Abingdon, Biggin Hill, Colerne, Coltishall, Cottesmore, Finningley, Leuchars, St Athan, St Mawgan, Ternhill and Waddington on 18 September, preceded by Hendon on the 11th.

It was against this backdrop that, during September 1965, Polish film producer Benjamin Fisz came up with the idea of a depiction of the Battle of Britain for the cinema. Born in 1922, Fisz had served as a Spitfire pilot with the RAF Polish wing during the war. No full cinematic account of the Battle had yet been made, and Fisz set to right this, with, importantly, equal consideration being given to the opposing British and German forces and commanding personalities. (Previous British films, for example “Angels One Five” had tended, perhaps understandably, to be somewhat “one-sided” in favour of the RAF!) A major challenge was set by the fact that the new film would be in full colour, widescreen format - no such wartime footage existed, so the new production would have to be made from scratch. However, the aviation comedy epic “Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines” released in June 1965 proved what was possible, with a fleet of restored and replica aircraft making for a splendid airborne spectacle on the “big screen”. “The Battle” aimed to follow this lead, with maximum use of REAL aircraft - as opposed to models - to ensure the most convincing portrayal. The screenplay drew heavily on the book *The Narrow Margin* by Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, seen as the most accurate, well-researched and balanced account of the original battle published thus far. Authenticity and realism were truly Fisz’s guiding principles for the new film. Apart from the command level personalities, individuals from 1940 would not be identified, and entirely fictitious squadron numbers, aircraft serials and squadron codes were used throughout. Aircraft used would bear varying serials and codes to increase the “size” and flexibility of the film force.

Fisz engaged a large team of researchers to gather historical information and data. Fortunately, just 25 years after the battle, a number of the famous pilots from both sides could offer their first-hand knowledge, memories and - importantly - technical plus tactical advice. These included Group Captains Douglas Bader and Peter Townsend, Wing Commander Robert Stanford Tuck and Squadron Leader “Ginger” Lacey from the RAF, with Lt General Adolf Galland and Major Franz Frodl from the Luftwaffe. No less a figure than Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, at the time of the original battle, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, now an

octogenarian, also proffered valuable advice. A major boost came when Fisz was joined by another noted film producer, Harry Saltzman of "James Bond" fame, as co-producer in May 1966. His presence was to be crucial in seeing the film through to completion, overcoming a series of obstacles to come. Firstly, that September, the Rank Organisation pulled-out of making the film due to differences with Fisz. Paramount also declined. However, by 1967, Saltzman had come to a deal with United Artists to make the film. Finance was also to prove a stumbling block on several occasions - but again, Saltzman, with his excellent film industry contacts was able to secure continued funding.

Mahaddie's Air Force

Meanwhile, "Spitfire Productions Ltd" had been formed to produce the film. A major coup by Fisz was the recruitment of Group Captain T G "Hamish" Mahaddie to assemble the RAF and Luftwaffe "fighting forces" for the film. A former RAF wartime Pathfinder pilot, Mahaddie had retired from the Service in 1958. Since the mid-1950s, he had become involved with sourcing aircraft for films, including "The Dam Busters" (1955), "633 Squadron" (1964), "Operation Crossbow" (1965) and the Vulcan forward fuselage mock-up for James Bond's "Thunderball" (1965). Mahaddie found 160 Spitfires still existed worldwide, including over 100 in the UK, though just a few were flyers. However, just a dozen Hurricanes were available. The vital cooperation of the MoD at a very senior level was also secured, allowing the UK aircraft, mainly stood on gate guard duties, to be surveyed and assessed for suitability of return to flying condition.

By a stroke of luck through his worldwide contacts, Mahaddie learned from the Air Attaché in Madrid that the Spanish Air Force were about to auction off their withdrawn Hispano HA-1112 Buchons - the Spanish license-built version of the Messerschmitt Me 109. A further Godsend was the fleet of CASA 2.111s still used by the Spanish AF. Another Spanish license-built aircraft, this time the Heinkel He 111, the air arm were happy to loan these for filming. The only "downside" was that both types were powered by Rolls-Royce Merlins in place of the original German engines - but one cannot have everything. In total, the assembled air armada ranked as the 35th largest in the world, Further details of all the aircraft types in the film are given below, together with their current (2018) identities, locations and statuses.

Production underway

After a number of false starts, but with an international stellar cast of top actors, production finally got underway in March 1968 when filming of the German sequences began at Tablada airfield, Spain. The RAF sequences out of Duxford and the other British airfields followed from May (see location list below). With renowned Director Guy Hamilton at the helm, production proceeded smoothly - apart that is from the typically English summer (ie rain) halting filming of the flying sequences for several weeks, the team taking three Hispanos and nine Spitfires to the south of France to maintain schedule. Over 3,000 people were involved with the film, including 200 pilots and aircrew, some from the US Confederate Air Force. Production was completed in early-1969, and the film premiered on "Battle of Britain Day", 15 September at the Dominion theatre in London, and simultaneously at major cities around the UK.

Film locations

Fortunately, it was possible to use several of the original battle airfields. These had changed little since 1940, and appropriate film "dressings" could be used where necessary; only the "purists" might be offended by the presence of Duxford's later

concrete runway. The main airfield/RAF locations used were as follows, UK unless otherwise stated:

Bentley Priory.

Bovingdon. Minor use only.

Debden. Minor use only.

Duxford. MoD granted permission for one of the four surviving WW1 “Belfast” hangars to be demolished in the bombing sequence. The airfield south-west corner served as the French airfield in the opening scenes, complete with dummy chateau.

El Corpero, Spain. Hispano HA-1112 main base, adjoining Tablada.

Folkestone, The Mound. A “foreground miniature” Chain Home radar station was built, simulating Ventnor radar for the Stuka dive-bombing attack.

Hawkinge. The disused grass airfield was revived for a couple of weeks filming in June 1968; background dummy hangars were provided in substitution for the demolished originals.

Henlow. Featured as the evacuation airfield for Hawkinge, complete with the “South Downs Flying Club” clubhouse.

London, Old War Office Building, Whitehall. Dowding corridor walk opening scene.

Manston. Minor use only.

North Weald.

Northolt. Minor use only.

Tablada, Spain. The airfield featured in the main title sequence, with CASA 2.111s and 352; also masqueraded as Berlin Staafen with Ju52s later in the film.

Uxbridge. No 11 Group underground operations room.

Other main locations:

Chilham village, Kent. Dispersed operations room.

Denton village, Kent. “The Jackdaw Inn”.

London, Aldwych underground station. Air-raid shelter scenes.

London, Bermondsey, Old Kent Road and Camberwell, Dragon Road areas.

Residential street blitz scenes; took advantage of slum clearance programmes.

London, St Katharine Docks, Tower Bridge. Warehouse blitz scenes.

Spain, San Sebastián. Berlin air-raid scenes.

Northern France was simulated by the following Spanish coastal locations:

Cape Higer. Goering and staff watch mass Luftwaffe formations heading for Britain.

Huelva. Dunkirk beach scene.

Hondarribia. German invasion barge and port scenes.

Txingudi bay. “Crippled” He 111 flyby.

Zarautz. Luftwaffe staff lunch.

Hurricanes

Despite outnumbering Spitfires considerably in the original battle, by the mid-1960s the Hurricane had become a comparative rarity. In 1968 only three airworthy examples could be mustered worldwide.

Spitfires

The variety of Spitfires posed a challenge to Mahaddie. Many were late variants, with obvious differences to the MkI/II used in the original battle. And thus were borne the so-called “Markaddie” Spitfires! These were converted to as near-1940 appearance as possible, by a series of modifications, applied as required: elliptical wing tips and narrow chord tailplanes fitted, cannons replaced by machine gun ports, bubble canopies replaced with the rear upper fuselage built-up to match. However, the cowling contours of the Griffon-engined aircraft (Mk XIVC RM689 and

subsequent) could not be satisfactorily disguised, so these Spitfires were placed in the background of airborne and ground scenes as far as possible.

“Heinkel He 111s” (CASA 2.111s)

The Spanish AF provided up to 32 CASA 2.111s plus aircrews, operating out of Tablada. Two aircraft were acquired by Spitfire Productions and flown to Duxford for filming there, registered G-AWHA and G-AWHB, respectively.

“Junkers Ju 52” (CASA 352)

Two anonymous Spanish-built CASA 352 transports were used, both loaned by the Spanish AF.

Junkers Ju 87 Stukas (“Proctukas”)

As no flying Stukas were available, the producers turned to alternatives. The first was the conversion of Percival Proctors to Stuka look-alikes, fitted with a new centre section embodying the characteristic wing crank, and long glasshouse-type canopies; the work was undertaken by Vivian Bellamy in early-1967. Quickly nicknamed “Proctukas”, unfortunately their handling was dire, and there was no way they would be able to safely reproduce the steep, Stuka-type dives. Four Proctors were involved, of which only two, G-AIEY and G-ALOK, were converted, with the former the only one to fly. Large-scale radio-controlled flying models were used instead, proving to be highly-realistic on the “big screen”.

“Messerschmitt Me 109s” (Hispano HA-1112 Buchons)

Mahaddie purchased 28 of the Spanish AF’s stored Hispano HA-1112 fleet in an auction held at Tablada, Spain in July 1966. Of these, 18 were made airworthy, six restored to taxiing condition and the remaining four used as static aircraft.

Mahaddie modifications to convert the aircraft to as near realistic Me 109 appearance as possible consisted of squared wing tips plus addition of tailplane struts and wing-mounted dummy machine guns. Unfortunately, one of the flying aircraft crashed at Tablada on 20 January 1968, killing the pilot. The remaining 17, comprising one rare HA-1112-K1L two-seat trainer and 16 HA-1112-M1L single seaters were flown to Duxford and registered G-AWHC/AWHP,AWHR/AWHT, respectively. All four static aircraft were moved to Henlow and at least one later went to Pinewood studios. The six taxiing aircraft are believed to have remained in Spain and went direct to the USA after the filming. In the scene with the Polish Hurricane training squadron, the three background aircraft are actually RAF-camouflaged HA-1112s, to make up the numbers, their tailplane struts clearly visible! In 1969, three of the flying aircraft (G-AWHG, G-AWHL and G-AWHS) masqueraded as USAAF P-51 Mustangs in the film “Patton - Lust for Glory”, filmed in Spain, receiving false serial numbers (see table).

Fibreglass warriors

For ground shots a number of Hurricane, Spitfire and Messerschmitt Me 109 full scale fibreglass/wood replicas were built at Pinewood studios. These could be damaged or destroyed at will in the airfield “attacks”, adding much realism to the final film. Some were fitted with motorcycle engines and wooden propellers to enable taxiing. Additionally, a fibreglass He 111 replica fuselage was also produced. A number of these highly-authentic replicas survive in preservation today, each now with a British Aviation Preservation Council (BAPC) number.

Camera platforms

The main aerial camera platform was Jeff Hawke's B-25J Mitchell N6578D. Nicknamed the "Psychedelic Monster" due to its bright and colourful paint scheme (to enable easy identification), multiple camera on-board filmed the flying sequences. Two Sud SA318C Alouette II helicopters were also used - G-AWAP and G-AWEE. Over 100 aircraft flew in the aerial scenes, requiring careful planning beforehand, using storyboards and models. Top aerial cameraman Skeets Kelly, of "Those Magnificent Men..." and "The Blue Max" fame, led the airborne photography. (Ironically, Kelly was killed aboard G-AWEE in 1970, whilst filming "Zeppelin" in Ireland.)

Film legacy

"The Battle of Britain" has stood the test of time as a respectful portrayal of the original conflict. There is no doubt that the film has proved a lasting inspiration to warbird enthusiasts in what can be achieved in returning historic aircraft to flying condition.

Acknowledgements: My grateful thanks for all information provided and offers of help from Rod Simpson, Colin Adcock, Tom Dunstall, Cyril Leeson, Mike McHugh, Andy Marden, Bernard Martin and Paco Rivas.

TABLE - AIRCRAFT FILM STARS

NOTES:

*ground static or taxiing role only - all other aircraft flew in the film

**post-filming with new owner, Hispano HA-1112-M1L Rolls-Royce Merlin replaced by Daimler-Benz DB 600 series engine, as used in the original Messerschmitt Me 109

↑ Reported airworthy in 2018

ALL UK locations unless otherwise stated.

Identity when filming	Later identity/identities (most recent last); current location/status
HAWKER HURRICANE MkI	
P2617*	RAF Museum, Hendon
HAWKER HURRICANE MkIIC	
LF363	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
LF751*	"BN230"; Spitfire and Hurricane Memorial Museum, Manston, Kent
PZ865/G-AMAU	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
HAWKER HURRICANE MkXII	
RCAF 5377/G-AWLW/ CF-SMI	C-GCWH; w/o 15Feb93 in hangar fire, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
HAWKER SEA HURRICANE MkIB	
Z7015*	↑ G-BKTH; Shuttleworth Collection, Old Warden
HAWKER HURRICANE MkI FULL-SCALE REPLICA	
BAPC.63*	Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.64*	Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.68*	Privately preserved
BAPC.72*	Jet Age Museum, Staverton
BAPC.73*	Omaka Aviation Heritage Centre, Blenheim, New Zealand

SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkIA	
AR213/G-AIST	↑ Fighter Collection, Duxford
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkIIA	
P7350/G-AWIJ	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkVB	
AB910/G-AISU	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
BL614*	RAF Museum, Hendon
EP120*	↑ G-LFVB; Fighter Collection, Duxford
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkVC	
AR501/G-AWII	Shuttleworth Collection, Old Warden
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkIXB	
MH415/G-AVDJ	N415MH; Vintage Fighter Restorations, Scone, Australia; under restoration to flying condition
MH434/G-ASJV	↑ Old Flying Machine Company, Duxford
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkIXC	
MK297/G-ASSD	N1882; N9BL; (N11RS); N9BL; w/o 15Feb93 in hangar fire, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
MK356*	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE TriX	

MJ772/G-AVAV	N8R; D-FMKN; Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar
TE308/G-AWGB	↑ CF-RAF; C-FRAF; N92477; N308WK; Bill Greenwood, Aspen, Colorado, USA
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkXIVC	
RM689/G-ALGT	Rolls-Royce Heritage Trust, Derby; under restoration
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE MkXVIE	
RW382*	↑ G-XVIA; N382RW; G-PBIX; Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar
SL574*	San Diego Air and Space Museum, California, USA
SM411*	Polish Aviation Museum, Krakow, Poland
TB382*	Airframe Assemblies, Sandown, Isle of Wight; stored
TE311*	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
TE356*	↑ G-SXVI; N356EV; N356TE; Evergreen Aviation Education Centre, McMinnville, Oregon, USA
TE384*	VH-XVI; N384TE; stored San Martin area, California, USA
TE476*	↑ G-XVIB; N476TE; Kermit Weeks Collection, Fantasy of Flight museum, Polk City, Florida, USA
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE PRXIX	
PM631*	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
PM651	RAF Museum Reserve Collection, Stafford
PS853	↑ G-MXIX; G-RRGN; Rolls-Royce, East Midlands airport
PS915*	↑ BBMF, RAF Coningsby
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE F21	
LA198*	Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow
SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE Mki FULL-SCALE REPLICA	
BAPC.65*	Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.69*	Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.71*	Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum, Flixton

“HEINKEL He 111” (CASA 2.111)	
BR.2I-10	N99260; G-BFFS; w/o 11Dec77 near Escorial, Spain on delivery flight to Doug Arnold's Warbirds of Great Britain, Blackbushe, killing aerobatic pilot Neil Williams
BR.2I-14	Flugausstellung Museum, Hermeskeil, Germany
B.2I-20	Fuselage in Austria for He 111 restoration project; location unknown
B.2I-22	National Museum of the USAF, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, USA; in store
B.2I-27	N99230; Cavanaugh Flight Museum, Addison, Texas, USA
B.2I-29	National Museum of the USAF, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, USA; current status unknown
B.2I-37/G-AWHB	Freighted from Duxford to the USA Jun15; location unknown
B.2I-39	N11105; Flying Heritage Collection; stored Washington area, USA
B.2I-77/G-AWhA	D-CAGI; Deutsches Museum, Oberschleissheim, Germany
B.2I-82	Technik Museum, Sinsheim, Germany
B.2I-97	“T.8B-97”; Museo del Aire, Cuatro Vientos airport, Madrid, Spain
B.2I-103	IWM Duxford; fitted with tail originally from B.2I-27 (see above)
B.2I-117	Militär Historisches Museum, Gatow, Berlin, Germany
BR.2I-129	Musee de l'Air, Le Bourget, Paris, France
T.8B-124	G-BDYA; N72615; w/o 10Jul03 in landing accident, Cheyenne, Wyoming, USA
BAPC.398*	He 111 replica fuselage; Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, East Kirkby

“JUNKERS Ju 52” (CASA 352)	
Two Spanish AF CASA 352 were loaned for filming, but it has not been possible to positively identify the aircraft used. T.2-176 (c/n 67) has been asserted by some sources as one of the two aircraft, but no definitive evidence to support this has been found. Subsequently sold as N99059, later N352JU, this aircraft is currently with the Military Aviation Museum, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA.	

“JUNKERS Ju 87” (PERCIVAL PROCTORS CONVERTED TO “PROCTUKA” LOOK-ALIKES)	
G-AIAE	Not converted; wfu and scrapped at Biggin Hill
G-AIED	Not converted; reported sustained broken back whilst being moved by road to Pinewood studios early-1967
G-AIEY	Last reported at RAF Henlow Jun68; possibly later to Derbyshire
G-ALOK	Fate unknown

“MESSERSCHMITT Me 109s” (HISPANO HA-1112-M1L BUCHONS) SINGLE SEATERS	
C4K-30*	RAF Henlow; spares use only during filming; reported thence to Confederate AF, USA c1968
C4K-31/G-AWHE	**N109ME; G-AWHE; D-FMGV; Air Fighter Academy, Hangar 10, Heringsdorf, Germany; under restoration to flying condition
C4K-61/G-AWHF	Damaged 21May68 in landing accident at Duxford; latterly stored at Big Spring, Texas, USA
C4K-75/G-AWHG	↑ **N3109G; N3109; D-FWME; Messerschmitt Foundation, Manching
C4K-77*	N700E; N109DW; N700E; Planes of Fame, Chino, California, USA; under restoration to flying condition
C4K-99/G-AWHM	↑ N90604; G-AWHM; Air Leasing, Sywell
C4K-100/G-AWHJ	N90605; N76GE; “C4K-19”; Air Zoo, Portage, Michigan, USA
C4K-102/G-AWHK	↑ N9938; G-BWUE; G-AWHK; Historic Flying Ltd, Duxford; aircraft incorporates fuselage ex C4K-154 (see below)
C4K-105/G-AWHH	N6036; G-AWHH; under restoration by Air Leasing, Sywell, believed to flying condition
C4K-106/G-AWHI	N90607; Nov14 sold to Boschung Global, Switzerland
C4K-107*	N170BG; G-BOML; w/o 25Sep99 in landing accident at Sabadell airport, Spain, killing aerobatic

	pilot Mark Hanna (who passed away the following day)
C4K-111*	Air Leasing, Sywell (184)
C4K-114*	Canada Aviation and Space Museum, Ottawa, Canada
C4K-116*	N6109; privately owned Quantico, Virginia, USA; stored
C4K-121*	**privately preserved Slaton, Texas, USA; believed under restoration to flying condition
C4K-122/G-AWHL	** "714112"; N109J; The Museum of Flight, Seattle, Washington, USA
C4K-126/G-AWHD	N90603; latterly stored at Big Spring, Texas, USA; 6Nov15 sold to Bank of Utah Trustee, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA
C4K-127/G-AWHO	N90601; N109BF; EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) Aviation Museum, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA
C4K-130/G-AWHN	↑ N90602; Erickson Aircraft Collection, Madras, Oregon, USA
C4K-131*	OO-MAF; Eric Vormezeele Collection, Brasschaat, Belgium
C4K-134*	**Wittmundhafen Air Base, Germany; on limited display
C4K-135*	**D-FMBB; rebuilt 1986 using fuselage from C4K-87; privately owned St Louis, Missouri, USA; stored
C4K-144/G-AWHP	N8575; Confederate AF; w/o 19Dec87 on take-off, Harlingen, Texas, USA
C4K-152/G-AWHR	N4109G; Air Leasing, Sywell
C4K-154*	Air Leasing, Sywell; see also C4K-102/G-AWHK above
C4K-169/G-AWHT	↑ **N9939; N109W; D-FMVS; rebuilt as two-seat trainer 2016; D-FMGZ; Air Fighter Academy, Hangar 10, Heringsdorf, Germany
C4K-170/G-AWHS	***743652"; G-AWHS; Technik Museum, Sinsheim, Germany
C4K-172*	↑ N48157; G-BJZZ; G-HUNN; N109GU; Cavanaugh Flight Museum, Addison, Texas, USA
BAPC.66*	Me 109 replica; Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.67*	Me 109 replica; Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
BAPC.74*	Me 109 replica; Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge
"MESSERSCHMITT Me 109" (HISPANO HA-1112-K1L BUCHON) TWO-SEAT TRAINER	
C4K-112/G-AWHC	↑ N1109G; G-AWHC; Air Leasing, Sywell. NOTE: Type currently stated as HA-1112-M4L

CAMERA PLATFORMS	
G-AWAP	Sud SA318C Alouette II; w/o 26Jun83 on Gat Sand, The Wash, Norfolk
G-AWEE	Sud SA318C Alouette II; w/o 18Aug70 near Wicklow Head, Ireland
N6578D	B-25J Mitchell; 44-31508; "N5-131/112916"; Reeves Warbirds, Parafield airport, Adelaide, South Australia; restored 9Apr17 as a WW2 Netherlands/RAAF aircraft; long term aim to restore to flying condition

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