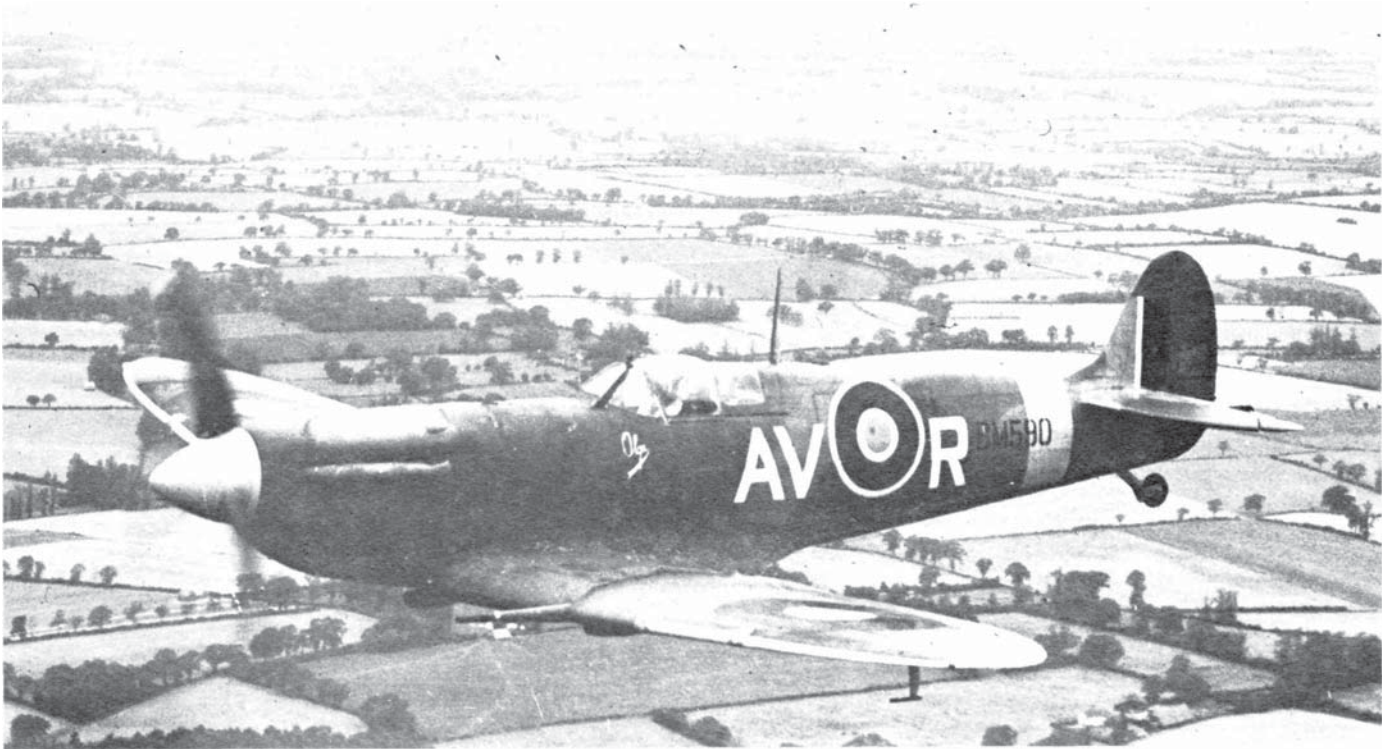




"Olga", a Spitfire of 121 (Eagle) Squadron, in full song above Essex. (Photo - Imperial War Museum CH 7341)

The Eagle Squadrons

By EARL BOEBERT

Part I

FIGHTER PILOTS IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE, 1940-1942

On August 19, 1942, the air above Dieppe, France, was rent by the whistle of shrapnel, the rattle of machine gun fire and the powerful, undulating roar of aircraft engines. On the ground Commandos were carrying out a grim rehearsal for the invasion of Europe, and in the air a German bomber rolled lazily over on its back and plunged into the Channel, a plume of oily smoke marking one more of many watery graves. It was shot out of the sky by British bullets, fired from British guns mounted on the wings of a British airplane; but the finger on the trigger, and the mind that guided it, belonged to Chesley Peterson, a 23-year-old pilot from Santaquina, Utah. He had flown for the British since October of 1940, and was the Squadron Leader of 71 Squadron, Royal Air Force, which, along with 121 and 133 Squadrons, was comprised of American volunteers. The three squadrons were known to the R.A.F. as the "American Eagles."

The Eagles were exclusively fighter pilots, flying that class of fast, maneuverable, heavily armed aircraft that were called Jager (Hunter) by the Germans, Intercepted by the British, and Pursuits by the Americans. Their profession dated to the early months of 1915 when a Frenchman, Roland Garros, succeeded in fashioning a crude and dangerous mechanism which allowed him to mount a machine gun on his airplane and have it fire straight through the propeller. Garros ultimately shot off one of his own blades, but he first drew the picture of

this sort of aerial combat that was to be standard for forty years: the victor, hunched behind his gunsight, flying above and behind the vanquished, pumping him full of bullets. Naturally, the tactics of this sort of warfare concern themselves with who ends up behind whom:

"You see the enemy, grab for his coattails, hold on to them, put your guns up against his pocket and press the trigger. But while you are reaching for his coattails, he is reaching for yours. You make a grab and he twirls out of the way and into a position to make his grab. Whereupon you twirl with a twist that will put you in a fair way to grab him and so on and so on, grab-twirl-twirl, grab-twirl-twirl, sometimes for quite a long time--for ten minutes or maybe fifteen minutes--until at last somebody has grabbed hold for good and the other fellow starts to die." (1)

This battle for position was of primary importance early in the First World War, when the encounters occurred in a rather haphazard fashion. But in the last months of the First World War and again in the Second, especially the Battle of Britain, the importance of teamwork was demonstrated, and, of even greater value, the successful interception of large enemy formations. Thus, the emphasis shifted from individual combat to the problem of getting one's formations to the right spot at the right time. The stress on teamwork changed the smallest basic unit of aerial combat from one man in one plane, the First World War standard, to the formation of two:

"The idea is to put protection around the coat-tails, and usually we fly with the more experienced man in the number one position and the less experienced man in the number two spot, which is close to number one's wing and slightly to the rear. Number one makes the play if the enemy is ahead of us, but if he...is first spied astern of us then the formation wheels around and the number two man will be in the number one spot to make the play." (2)

The victor, after gaining the advantage, starts

"...really clobbering him, hammering his guts out. Soon pieces start coming out of him. It's nuts-and-bolts stuff at first, then bigger things, big, ripped-off looking things as if you're tearing arms and legs off him and arms and legs and the head of him are going slowly, endlessly over your shoulder." (3)

The vanquished feels the terror of the hunted:

"And when the enemy has got you and is clobbering you, that's slow too. It's like lighted matches being dragged slowly across the bunched-up flesh of your brain. It feels like your brain is dissolving away under the pain on top of it. It's a fight to keep your brain together, and while you're fighting this fight, putting, it seems, your two hands on your mind holding it in one piece with all the strength in your fingers, how long it seems to be." (4)

With the important exception to be noted below, the Eagles always fought as a squadron, a unit of 12 aircraft, led by a Squadron Leader. Each squadron was divided into three sections of four aircraft each, which flew parallel to each other in three lines, with the middle section (generally headed by the Squadron Leader) slightly ahead of the two flanking sections. Each section was assigned a color, more or less at random, although the squadron was divided for administrative reasons into "A" and "B" flights, and the traditional colors were red and yellow for "A" flight and blue and green for "B" flight, with the third color at the discretion of the squadron leader. This system of colors was used for identification over the radio, each member of the squadron being assigned a color plus a number to indicate his position in the formation. For instance, if the three sections were Red section, Yellow section, and Black section, then the last man on the right (looking from above) would be Black IV. In addition to this method of identification, the R.A.F. painted three large letters on the sides of their aircraft. The first two letters were a code which indicated the squadron, 71 Squadron being XR, 121 being AV and 133 being MD. The third letter, which was set apart from the other two by the national insignia, was used to identify individual aircraft, and since almost all of the pilots preferred to fly a particular airplane, the pilot as well. The individual code letters were usually referred to over the radio with a short phonetic name, such as "G-for-George," "S-for-Sugar," "P-for-Popsie."

From two to four fighter squadrons were stationed at an Airfield. Each individual squadron had its own dispersal area around the perimeter of the field. This consisted of the dispersal shack, a temporary building which served as a clubhouse for the squadron, and several emplacements for aircraft, three-walled roofless structures of brick, with the interior of the walls forming a shelter against bomb fragments (although not direct hits) in case of an air raid. Earth was banked against the exterior walls and planted with grass, so that the camouflaged aircraft and the grass-covered emplacements blended in with the grass of the field. The squadrons assigned to a station used the same runway and control tower and ate in the same mess. At all but the temporary or bombed-out stations, the mess hall

was a large and comfortable building which contained a dining hall, a bar, and card and billiard rooms, and also had sufficient rooms to house all the pilots on the station in quarters similar to those offered by middle-class hotels. Almost all pilots were officers and hence were entitled to a batman or batwoman who awakened them and gave them tea in the morning, shined their shoes and attended to details of clothing and accommodations.

All the fighter squadrons on a given station (or that airfield and its satellites) comprised a Wing, which was led by a Wing Commander and was given the name of the major air station from which it flew; for example, the Hornchurch Wing, the Debden Wing. Each of the major air stations had operational command for the defense of a Sector, a geographical area which contained the air station and was named after it and were called Sector Airfields. Several Sectors were combined for purposes of command into a Group and the Groups were given numbers. Wo. 11 Group, to which all three Eagle Squadrons belonged for most of their history, was the section of southeastern England bordered by a line drawn from Portsmouth to Oxford, then to Cambridge, and finally southeast from Cambridge to the coast. Since its area contained London as well as several important Channel ports, Wo. 11 Group bore the brunt of the fighting in the Battle of Britain. No. 10 Group was next to it on the west and Wo. 12 Group was just to the north. A Group had control of the fighters, bombers, and coastal patrol craft in its area of jurisdiction, irrespective of Squadron number. Although this led to a certain amount of administrative difficulty, especially when the Squadrons were moved from Group to Group, it had the advantage of structuring the command on a simple and logical basis, geographical position rather than position in some arbitrary administrative construction.

When flying into combat, a squadron or wing would be under the command of the Controller, who was situated in either Group or Sector Headquarters, depending on the size and location of the operation. The controller sat on the balcony overlooking a large map of England and France, on which members of the WAAF moved small markers, plotting the information from the net of coastal radar stations, which were capable of detecting aircraft out of the Spitfire's operational range. The controller was responsible for notifying the Squadron Leader or Wing Commander of the size, altitude and direction of enemy aircraft in his vicinity. When the Squadron Leader or Wing Commander had the enemy formation in sight, he would radio back their altitude and number and call "Tally ho," the signal to attack. The formations invariably became broken up during the course of the fight, and after the battle was over the pilots would reform as best they could, fly a course reciprocal to their outward one, and call back to the controller for a compass course, or "vector," which would get them home. Every airplane carried an I.F.F. (identification Friend or Foe), a small transmitter-receiver tuned to the frequency of the British radar waves. Whenever this device sensed a radar pulse, it transmitted back a coded message, thereby allowing the radar operator to differentiate between friend and foe on his screen.

By the time the Eagles flew, the Battle of Britain was over, and the R.A.F., shifting to the offense, was mounting both day and night raids of increasing intensity over France. Owing to the relatively limited range of the Spitfire (which was designed as a defensive aircraft, pre-war schools of military aviation having held to the thesis that fighter escort of bombers was unnecessary), the limit of the Eagles' forays into enemy territory was 200 miles, and these forays were of four distinctly different types, code-named Ramrod, Rodeo, Circus and Rhubarb.

The Ramrod was the classic fighter sweep over enemy territory, in which a Squadron or Wing would fly over and challenge the Germans to fight. The Luftwaffe generally accepted the challenge by rising into the air near the coast after the British had flown inland, and

so the almost standard pattern of these combats was that the R.A.F. would fly into France for about 50 miles, execute a 180-degree turn, and fight their way home. Later, however, the Germans showed a marked reluctance to engage these fighter formations, although Ramrods were continued long after the Germans had given up resisting them, on the grounds that it did the Frenchmen good to see as many British planes as possible flying overhead. Thereupon, the British invented the Rodeo, in which a very light bomber force would accompany the fighters. If the Germans attempted to intercept the bombers, they were engaged by the fighters, which was the purpose of the whole thing; if they did not, the bombers dropped several sticks of bombs on their airfield and went home.

The Circus was a major bombing operation against an important target. The bombers, flying at about 20,000 feet, were usually escorted by four wings. Above them was the Top Cover Wing flying at about 25,000 feet, which was the limit at which Spitfires could hold formation, and roughly 5,000 feet below the altitude the German fighters could attain, so that the Top Cover Wing was inevitably "bounced," or attacked, from above. One or two wings flew Close Escort (i.e., in close formation with the bombers) and the remaining wing or wings flew as Target Support. Top Cover and Close Escort met the bombers at some predetermined rendezvous, either over England or over the Channel, and escorted them over and back; Target Support flew to the target on an entirely different course and altitude from the bombers, so timed as to arrive at the target as the raid was taking place. If the Germans mistook the Target Support Wing for the raid, as was perfectly possible on the crude radar of the time, their fighters would engage a numerically superior force; if they went after the bombers, the Target Support Wing would then arrive fresh and ready to give support to whatever combat required it; and if the Germans attacked both formations, they split and seriously weakened their defensive power.

The Rhubarb, which the Eagle Squadrons loved and the average R.A.F. Squadron disliked, was the strafing of ground targets from an extremely low altitude. This dislike was true of Fighter Command only. The low-level raids of Bomber Command, especially against shipping and such pinpoint targets as Gestapo Headquarters, were never equaled in the war for detail of planning, daring of execution, and lack of altitude. Besides harassing the enemy, Rhubarbs satisfied a desire for individual action that was especially strong in the Eagles, who often chafed under the tight aerial discipline of the R.A.F. Rhubarbs were generally two-man affairs, planned by the pilots themselves while sitting in the dispersal shack or in one of the nearby pubs. The pilots would agree on a time & would choose an area likely to contain targets from the map on the dispersal shack wall. Group Headquarters would then be notified, and permission would be given if the Rhubarb would not conflict with some other operation.

The Eagles were known for the determination with which they pressed home these personal little raids. J. J. Lynch once returned from one with a section of telegraph pole firmly lodged in the wing of his Spitfire, and M. W. Fessler, who was particularly fond of this sort of activity, was taken prisoner after a switch engine he had attacked exploded and the pieces sieved his aircraft, forcing him down just outside Brussels. Targets for Rhubarbs were generally small factories, railway yards, minor airfields, and freight trains. Attacking passenger trains was forbidden. It was a risky business. Over and above the danger of running into a high-tension line, or a telegraph pole, there was the danger of encountering even a small piece of debris or stray bullet, which could puncture the cooling system or oil tank located in the downward sweep of the nose and cause the engine to seize or catch fire in a few minutes.

Despite this drawback, the Supermarine Spitfire, which was the Eagles' mount for the majority of their

career, was well liked by them all, as it was by anyone who flew it. (As innumerable memoirs attest, it inspired in its users the peculiar loyalty that constitutes the ultimate accolade of a well-designed and high-performance aircraft.) It was a particularly handsome machine designed by R. J. Mitchell, who had been responsible for a series of successful seaplane racers before the war. Earlier 71 Squadron was equipped with the older Hawker Hurricane, and the Eagles met in the air primarily the Messerschmitt Me 109 and later the Focke-Wulf FW 190. (The designation Me 109 was used in all German propaganda, and hence by the Allies. However, the Luftwaffe and later historians referred to the aircraft as the Bf 109, the "Bf" identifying the Bayerische Flugzeugwerke, the manufacturer, for whom Willy Messerschmitt had designed the plane. To be consistent with the usage of the R.A.F. of the period, the aircraft shall be known in this work as the Me 109. The same applies to the Me 110.) Of the four, the Focke-Wulf is generally regarded as the best, although the relative merits of these four planes are still disputed in aviation circles, and, as with certain fighter planes of the First World War, these disputes will probably never be settled.

The Me 109 had a better rate of climb than the Spitfire, and was superior at high altitudes, but was a less pleasant plane to fly. The Focke-Wulf was faster than the Me 109 and more heavily armed than the Spitfire. The Spitfire, however, was one of the tightest-turning fighter planes in the world, superior in this respect to both the Messerschmitt and the Focke-Wulf. This meant that in the Spitfire a good pilot had an advantage in equipment over a less able pilot. On the other hand, the Germans, by virtue of their high speed in a dive, could always break off combat at will which the British could not. (The standard evasive maneuver for an Me 109 was to roll over on its back and execute a full power dive. The engine, when at full power, emitted a thin trail of black smoke, and this led to a rash of erroneous claims on the part of British pilots for one Me 109, Probably Destroyed, last seen smoking and headed straight down.) The Hawker Hurricane was the oldest design and slightly inferior to the other three in performance specifics.

All of these fighter aircraft offered similar accommodations for their pilot, the chief difference being that the Me 109 was more cramped and the FW 190 was more spacious and had slightly better visibility than the Spitfire.

The Supermarine fighter was 26 feet long, had a wingspan of 36 feet, and weighed two and one-half tons. It could go about 350 miles per hour and fly to roughly 35,000 feet. Armament was either eight .303 caliber machine guns or two 20 mm. cannon and four .303 caliber machine guns. The best pilots preferred the cannon-armed machine; they liked the greater destructive power of these guns, even though they suffered occasional stoppages. Some pilots disliked the use of tracers on the theory that they warned the enemy, and would instead load their guns with De Wilde shells, which exploded on impact. The guns were mounted in the wings and set so that their fire crossed at a predetermined distance from the nose of the airplane. The standard distance was 250 yards, although the more able and aggressive pilots would have their guns set for sometimes as short as 150 yards.

The seating position in a Spitfire was somewhat confined, and anyone taller than six feet or very broad-shouldered could barely fit. The pilot sat in a bakelite seat, slightly reclined like the driver of a small automobile, and the fuselage walls brushed his shoulders. The canopy (or "hood" in British terminology) closed by sliding forward on two rails which were about at shoulder height. There was a small door on the left side of the cockpit, with a three-position catch: open, shut, and barely open. Since the top of the door was the left-hand rail upon which the canopy slid, having the door in

the barely open position locked the canopy open. This was done to prevent the canopy from slamming forward and trapping the pilot in the event of a forced landing, which was always made with the canopy open. For a hasty exit in mid-air, the canopy could be jettisoned by releasing two catches in the front, which lifted its forward edge and caused it to be torn free by the airstream. A small crowbar, clipped into the door, could be used if any part of this operation failed to go as planned.

Although the reflector gunsight, which consisted of a tilted glass mounted on a padded box, was accurate enough for targets directly ahead, the pilot still had to estimate his deflection, or "lead," manually from other positions. Despite gunsight improvements, deflection shooting remained very difficult throughout the war, and a good fighter pilot (to connoisseurs) was one who could shoot well from any available angle. The difficulty of this can be imagined when one realizes that a target passing from right rear to left front, when both the attacker and attacked are traveling at 300 mph, goes from in range to out of range in a little over a second, during which time the attacker must identify the target as an enemy aircraft, "clear his tail" (make sure no one is attacking him), calculate his deflection, turn, and start shooting.

When flying, the pilot slipped his feet into the rudder pedals, which were stirrup-like affairs, and between his knees rose the control stick, which was hinged both in the middle and at the bottom. The lower half moved back and forth, and the top half moved from side to side, giving the necessary freedom in a horizontal plane. On the top of the control column was a ring about eight inches in diameter and an inch thick, called a "spade grip." Off to one side on this ring was a large, red button which triggered the guns and around the button was a collar which could be turned to "Safe" or "Fire." The pilot's head was in front of a small round cushion which was attached to a sheet of protective armor plate behind him. When flying he looked over the gunsight, through a heavy piece of bullet-proof glass, and down the long nose of the Spitfire. It was this nose, the tip of which was two feet above the pilot's head when the aircraft was on the ground, coupled with the narrow tread of the landing gear, which gave the Spitfire a reputation for being a very difficult aircraft to taxi. Spitfires were always taxied in a zigzag path, with the pilot leaning out of the appropriate side of the cockpit, since it was impossible to see anything straight ahead except the nose. Vision was further restricted by the wide wings and the exhaust stacks which jutted out from either side of the nose.

Aircraft, however, are only machines, and a well-designed fighter plane is nothing without a good pilot. Pilots in general are a breed apart; they hold the same attitudes toward the air that men have held toward the sea for centuries. Fighter pilots occupy a position unique in the business; they have been characterized as the last agents of individual combat in warfare.

Fighter pilots were young men, alert, aggressive, and high-strung:

"They ate lightly as a class and many couldn't sleep at night. Sometimes they got so tired they wanted to cry. Their nerves became tatters. One pilot would sit at the table and bend the knives and forks double... But the thrill of flying a fighter craft and firing the guns was usually enough to overcome the strain." (6)

They lived under great pressure, which each man had to endure as well as he could, and by himself. He occupied his aircraft alone; there was only his airplane, the sky and the occasional comfort of his squadron-mates nearby, hidden in their machines. On the ground, they relieved the pressure in the expectable ways. Every evening was a cause for celebration, because you had succeeded in living through the day, and the celebra-

tions were generally loud and alcoholic. Fighter pilots in the R.A.F. were allowed the affectation of a bright silk scarf, and they made a point of jumping up and down on their uniform hats (or using them for beer pitchers) until they had attained just the proper air of sloppiness. Although the pilots were part of a military organization, there was little drill or ceremony. Each squadron was run as if it were a gentlemen's club, with the squadron leader as its president and the dispersal hut as its clubhouse. This system maintained a strong esprit de corps and also allowed the squadron leader, by virtue of the close contact, to gauge the abilities of his various officers with a high degree of accuracy.

The membership of this club changed as the pilots were posted to other squadrons or became casualties. The pilots had very little contact with the gory realities of war. Either their friends failed to return one day, or their end was marked by a smoking machine, a few pathetic words on the radio ("Goodbye, you chaps, I'm afraid I've had it!") and a quick splash of flame on the ground. The old hands became callous:

Besides the opiate of living at a fast pace, there is another consolation that comes in time, I believe, to almost every fighter pilot. In the early days of their fighting most pilots are upset by the loss of their pals; but after they've been through battle after battle, after they've seen any number of their pals go down around them, they suddenly wake up to the fact that they themselves have come through, they're still alive... and each time a pal is shot down it doesn't bring so much a feeling of sorrow for the dead, as an accentuated realization that I'm still alive. And this whiskey is good. And the fire is warm. And I'm still alive. They haven't got me.' (7)

Many of the Eagles had a romantic picture of aerial combat derived from the popular accounts of First World War dogfights which they had read as boys, and the hard reality of death in the air came as a shock to them. Fighter pilots invariably remember the first airplane they saw shot down, and few accounts would differ much from that of one young Eagle:

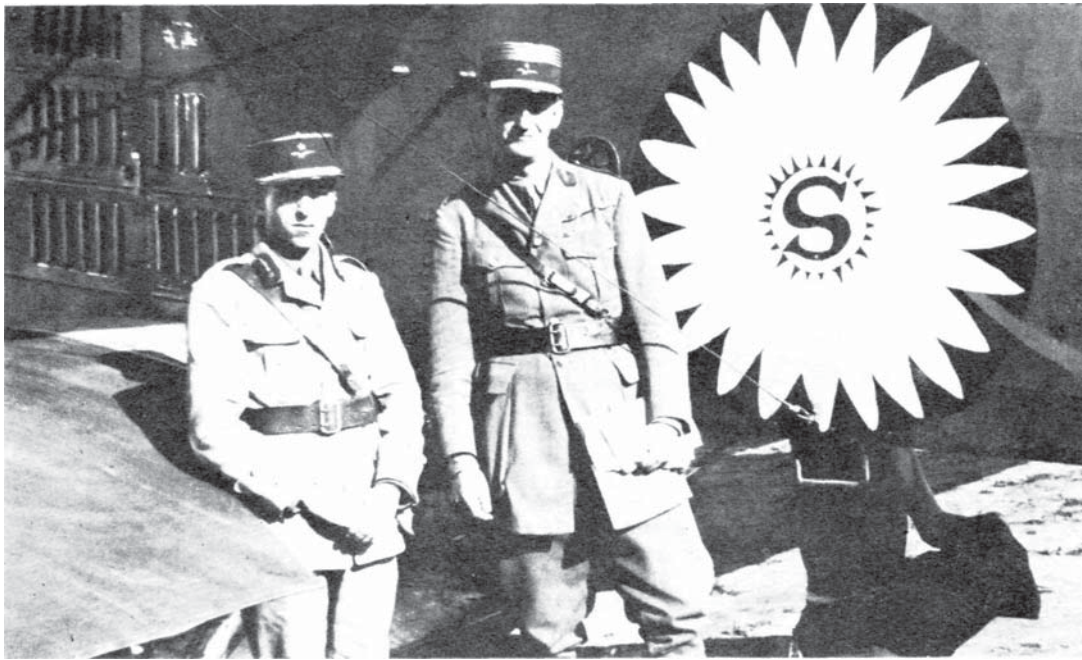
"I saw little balls of fire appear on the wing-tips of another bomber, and then the whole thing was blazing and it went down, and I said to myself, 'Jumping Jesus, but this is a rough game.'" (8)

Part II

THE FORMATION OF THE EAGLE SQUADRONS

The Eagle Squadrons began in November of 1939, when Charles Sweeny, an American soldier of fortune, negotiated with Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and General Armengaud of France for the formation of another Lafayette Escadrille. This was the period of the so-called "sitskrieg" or "phony war," when the French and German armies faced each other on the frontier and fired shells full of leaflets back and forth. It was thought by Sweeny that the existence of another Lafayette Escadrille would arouse the French population, who, in his opinion, were not taking the war very seriously.

War was not a new experience for Sweeny; he had been in or observed half a dozen of the major armed conflicts of the twentieth century. He was born in San Francisco, California in 1883, the son of Robert Sweeny, who had been superintendent of a Comstock Lode mine and who later owned the Federal Mining and Smelting Company of San Francisco. Charles spent his early life working in his father's mines in Idaho and British Columbia, and began his military career at the age of 16 when he enlisted as a private in the U. S. Army during the Spanish-American



Col. Charles Sweeny, right, at Beni Malek, Morocco in 1925 with Lt. Curt Day. The aircraft is a Breguet and the markings are those of the Escadrille Cherifienne.

(Photo - Curt Day)

War. After the war he enrolled in Notre Dame and later West Point, from which he was expelled twice. After the second expulsion, he went to Mexico and fought with the Madero Army in Mexico.

August 1914 found him in Paris, and immediately after the outbreak of the First World War he and about thirty other Americans in Paris formed a volunteer group to fight on the side of France. Sweeny, by virtue of his previous military experience, was put in charge of drilling the new recruits into the American Battalion of the Foreign Legion. This experience and his excellent command of French made his rise in the Foreign Legion rapid; in 1915 he was the first American commissioned (as Sous-Lieutenant) in the Foreign Legion in that war, and he became runner for Colonel Passard, the first of many close relationships with other officers of the French Army. The same year he was seriously wounded in the chest by a machinegun bullet and given up for dead in the dressing station. The regimental surgeon advised him to call a priest to administer the last rites, but Sweeny replied that he would pull through. He lay in the dressing station for several weeks because he was too weak to move and spent many months in the hospital. For his show of fortitude he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor, the first American in the war to receive the latter decoration. After his recovery, he was put in charge of training and new recruits. With the entry of the United States in the war, he was assigned to training duties at Fort Meyer, Virginia. He was sent back to France with the A.E.F., and about the time of the Armistice was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army.

In 1920 he took part in the Battle of Warsaw, being given the temporary rank of Brigadier General in the Polish Army, and then returned to France to report to Petain and other French generals, on the battle and subsequent pursuit. Two years later he was a correspondent for a New York newspaper in Anatolia, covering the birth of modern Turkey and the Greco-Turkish war. In 1925 the Spanish asked France to assist them in putting down the Rif revolt in Morocco. The French there needed air support, and since only the Foreign Legion was involved and hence the regular French Air Force could not participate, Sweeny and Paul Rockwell, another American who had served in the Foreign Legion in the war, started the Escadrille Cherifienne. This air arm was made up of American volunteers, and commanded by Sweeny, now a colonel in the Foreign Legion. The revolt was put down, and Sweeny

45 years old and probably suffering from his old wound, went into semi-retirement. In 1929 he was asked and declined to write a biography of Marshal Foch, and in 1937 he and his old commander Armengaud went to Spain to observe how the Republican Army was using the aircraft furnished to them by France.

In 1939 he was living in Paris with his Belgian-born wife, Eva, and began what he called the Eagle Flying Corps by negotiating for its acceptance by the French. Sweeny later said that the results of the negotiations were favorable, but there must not have been much enthusiasm on the part of the French, for in March 1940 he announced that he was going to give his organization to Finland. The announcement was made but ten days before that country fell, and Sweeny went back to his original plan to send pilots to France. According to him 32 men went, four were killed, eleven taken prisoner, and five escaped to England; the rest probably fled to Spain after the German victory.

Sweeny's Foreign Legion background instilled in him an attitude toward soldiering as a profession separate from political or ideological considerations, an attitude which partially explained his willingness to recruit combat pilots for any country which seemed to need or want them. "The soldier," he wrote, "follows the officer, not the flag." --a restatement of the motto of his old outfit: "The Legion is my Fatherland." (9)

The first known activity of Sweeny's organization began in March 1940, when his recruiters contacted Eugene Tobin at Mines Field near Inglewood, California. Tobin, a 20-year-old guide at Metro-Goldwyn Mayer studios, was spending most of his free time flying airplanes that he rented by the hour from Mines Field. When he was contacted by Sweeny's agent to fly for Finland, Tobin found the offer ("All expenses paid to Helsinki and \$100 a month as long as we last"), plus the opportunity to fly a large, fast airplane, irresistible. (10) That night he talked to his friend Andy Mamedoff, who had been engaged in air taxi work and general barnstorming most of his life. Mamedoff was undecided; he flipped a coin and Finland won. Tobin quit his job and sold his car, Mamedoff sold his airplane, and the combined proceeds were devoted to gathering cold weather flying gear. They were ready to go on the 12th of March, when word reached the United States that Finland had surrendered. "There wasn't a war any more," lamented Tobin later.

The two pilots, now cut off from their incomes and

feeling a bit foolish about having volunteered ("We'd said far too many dramatic farewells. Life would be awfully tough if we stayed around"), (11) contacted or were contacted by Sweeny's organization again, this time to go to France. They were given a train ticket to Montreal, \$5, and a "warm but limp handshake." In Montreal they went, as they had been instructed, to the Mount Royal Hotel, where they were to pick up letters in their names containing money and further instructions. At the hotel the desk clerk informed them that no such letters had been left, but he pointed out a man sitting in the lobby who had been making similar inquiries. This was Vernon Keough, a man only 4' 10" tall, who had traveled to Montreal from Brooklyn, where he had been a professional parachute jumper, working the fairs and carnivals along the Eastern Seaboard. Tobin and Mamedoff introduced themselves, and Keough informed them that he had decided to join the French Air Force "to get away from it all" after a friend of his had bankrupted him by wrecking his brand new airplane.

About an hour later a bellhop arrived with the expected letters. Inside the envelopes they discovered train tickets to Halifax, \$10 apiece, and instructions written by somebody who "had been reading too many detective stories":

"You will take the night train to Halifax.

Upon arrival, remain at the station after the other passengers have departed. Discuss flying in a loud voice so our agent can identify you." (12)

At Halifax they were met by a man who told them that he was an agent of the French Government. They followed him, through alleys and sidestreets to the waterfront, where they climbed to his tiny office on the top floor of a deserted building. They were given "three pink official-looking cards" and informed that, since the neutrality laws made it illegal for them to travel on an American passport, these cards would identify them as persons of "indeterminate" nationality who were traveling to France to join the French Air Force. They were also given 2500 francs (about \$50) each, and instructions for boarding a ship the following morning.

Keough, Mamedoff and Tobin arrived in Paris, after a long zigzag voyage to avoid U-boats, in the middle of May. The German Army had overrun the Maginot Line and were cutting off the B.E.F. near Dunkirk, and the French were understandably little interested in American volunteers. They and the "other Americans" (presumably the rest of the 32 Sweeny claimed to have recruited), sat in Paris for four weeks. At the end of that time they were informed that the government was moving to Tours, and that the pilots were going along.

In Tours the Americans were told that any day they would see action. But nothing happened, and, besides, there were persistent rumors that the Germans would be arriving any day. "Just what would happen if we were taken prisoners, we didn't know, but we weren't interested in finding out." (13)

Two Czech pilots approached Keough, Mamedoff, and Tobin with a scheme to steal an airplane and fly it to England, since France seemed lost. They agreed, but when the attempt was made, the sentries thought the Czechs were German parachutists and shot them. (There were many rumors during the first year of the war to the effect that the Germans landed parachutists disguised as nuns, officers of the defending army, and streetcar conductors just prior to an invasion. "No one," remarked one historian, "ever questioned the utility of these disguises to troops engaged in an overt military 'operation'.")

Soon after the Czechs were shot, the three joined the stream of refugees fleeing south and got on a boat at a city which Tobin referred to as "St. Jean," possibly St.-Jean-de-Lus, near Bayonne. It is likely that they were simply caught up in the general movement of civilians toward Spain, and when at "St. Jean" discovered

a boat taking British subjects back to England, and got on board. They left the port a scant two hours before the Germans arrived.

Once in England, they attempted to join the R.A.F., but were told to return to Canada and try from there. They then contacted a member of Parliament whose name had been given to them by a woman on a boat, and he arranged for them to enlist. On July 5, 1940, Tobin, Mamedoff, Keough, V. W. Olsen and Michael Lucakow, the five that Sweeny claimed were the part of his organization that escaped to England, joined the Royal Air Force.

Some time previous to this, and as far as is known completely by coincidence, Colonel Sweeny's nephew in London was forming an American unit for the Home Guard. The younger Sweeny, also named Charles and active in financial circles, had lived with his father in New York as well as in London, and was enlisting Americans in London into his unit. (Joseph P. Kennedy, then Ambassador to Great Britain, did his best to discourage Americans from joining Sweeny's organization. Since, in his opinion, a German victory was inevitable, Kennedy felt that the least that would happen to these people would be internment. His views on this matter leaked to the press, and caused an uproar in London.) The Americans were attached to the London Area Headquarters, trained by Guard's instructors from Wellington Barracks, and armed with 50 submachine guns sent to Sweeny by his father in New York.

After the success of his first venture, Sweeny evidently started searching for another way of obtaining American aid to Britain. It was common knowledge that Germany would have to strike at England from the air, and that the R.A.F., particularly Fighter Command, would be severely taxed; it was also common knowledge that there were a great number of American pilots who wanted to fly fighter planes, as was demonstrated by the enormous number of men who applied for the U.S. Army Air Corps. With these thoughts probably in mind, Sweeny decided to attempt the formation of an American Squadron in the R.A.F. This was a considerably more complicated undertaking than attaching a group of Americans to the informal and quasi-military Home Guard, and Sweeny began by talking to Lord Beaverbrook, then Minister of Information, who agreed that this would be worthwhile for propaganda purposes. Sweeny then went to the Air Ministry, described his idea, and was asked to call back. When he returned, he was led to the office of Sir Archibald Sinclair, then Minister for Air. Sweeny had anticipated an informal conversation with Sinclair; instead he was shown through a door and faced the entire Air Council. "I sat down and simply could not think," he related later, "I had no ideas or words; I was so intimidated by all those Marshals and Air Marshals I just could not speak." (14)

"We won't bite your head off," said Sir Sholto Douglas, putting Sweeny at ease, and he again explained his plan. The Air Council, despite the very delicate nature of such an undertaking, acted quickly, and a few days later Sweeny received a telephone call from Sir Louis Grieg: "I have the first three of your boys."

The three were Keough, Mamedoff, and Tobin, and they were sent to be trained in one of the many flight training schools the R.A.F. maintained around England. Sweeny then cabled his uncle, who had built up a number of contacts around airports in the United States, especially in California, where there were potential volunteers. The Colonel cabled back that he would start his operations again and send the volunteers to England. He worked very quietly, since the F.B.I. was following him at a discreet distance and would certainly step in if he became obvious about his activities. One of Sweeny's first volunteers for Great Britain described how he enlisted:

"I got word from (the person) who was running Culver City Airport. All he had was a phone number which got me the address of ...the meeting place,

a contractor's office on Melrose Blvd. (Colonel Sweeny) asked us our qualifications as to flying time and told us... where to pick up our tickets and expenses to Ottawa. We were then referred to as Sweeny Candidates, took a flight check and physical, and embarked on the SS Duchess of Richmond for Liverpool." (15)

Gus Daymond remembered going to a "little garage-type office" in the Los Angeles area, and Tobin had told him he had been to this same office twice, which would indicate that this particular contractor's office was one of Colonel Sweeny's recruiting locations for all three of his operations. (16)

At almost the same time, and completely independent of Colonel Sweeny's efforts, another organization was recruiting combat pilots in the United States. The Royal Canadian Air Force had set up the Clayton Knight Committee, a "highly illegal" operation which was first conceived before the war by Air Marshal "Billy" Bishop, a famous Canadian ace of the First World War. Bishop realized that he would need "connections" and money to recruit pilots in the United States; for the former he chose Clayton Knight, famous aviation illustrator, and for the latter he chose Homer Smith, a Canadian living in New York. Smith was commissioned as a Wing Commander in the R.C.A.F., and he and Knight traveled around the United States shortly after war broke out. They discovered that the Neutrality Act imposed a \$10,000 fine and two years in prison for soliciting Americans to serve in a foreign war, so Knight and Smith restricted themselves to finding out where available pilots were located. They ascertained that 26% of the unemployed pilots lived in California, and when the R.A.F. sustained heavy casualties in August and September of 1940, the committee was instructed to go to work. Captain Benway, an American citizen who had served in the Lafayette Escadrille, flew from New York to Los Angeles on the inaugural TWA trans-continental flight, and he used the publicity given the flight to issue the following statement to the press:

I am Captain Benway, formerly of the Lafayette Squadron. I will be staying at the Hollywood Plaza Hotel where I am authorized to give commissions in the Royal Air Force or the Royal Canadian Air Force to interested pilots. (17)

The response was immediate and overwhelming. Smith termed it a "near riot," and Benway hastily phoned "headquarters" (presumably in Canada) that he was overwhelmed by applicants--"the police were in his room and pilots were storming the corridors and breaking up the bar." Smith flew the first ten recruits to Canada, and returned with orders for 500 more and instructions to report to the F.B.I. immediately. The F.B.I. informed Smith that, so long as the pilots contacted him and he did not solicit them, he would be allowed to continue. (Operating under this fine legal distinction, the Clayton Knight Committee established 15 offices around the United States, carefully staffing them entirely with American citizens. From early 1941 until they were disbanded in June 1942, the committee processed 49,000 applicants and accepted 6,700.) Smith said that "apparently some very high authority, indeed, in the American government gave the permission."

This was the beginning of the organization which was to furnish pilots for the Eagle Squadrons all through 1941, as well as men for other branches of the R.A.F. and R.C.A.F.

The first group for the Eagle Squadrons, however, were recruited by Colonel Sweeny, and between August and September 6, 1940, his nephew met 24 men as they arrived in England and enlisted in the R.A.F. On September 19, 1940, No. 11 Group issued the necessary orders, and at R.A.F. Air Station Church Fenton, 71 (Eagle) Squadron was born.

The British allowed an American Squadron to be formed for another reason beside the propaganda value; the R.A.F. was short of pilots. In June, Winston Churchill had expressed his concern about this situation in a minute to Sir Archibald Sinclair, saying, "The Cabinet was distressed to hear that you were now running short of pilots for fighters ... It will indeed be lamentable if we have machines standing idle for want of pilots to fly them." (18) This was before Sweeny contacted Sinclair. Moreover, there was ample precedent for having pilots of other than British citizenship in the R.A.F.; Polish, Czech, Belgian, French, Dutch and Norwegian refugee pilots served throughout the war. The fact that the United States was not yet in the war bothered neither the British nor the Americans who flew for them.

While Sweeny was recruiting for Britain, Keough, Tobin and Mamedoff finished their schooling and were assigned to 609 Squadron, which had a mixed complement of British, Belgians and Poles. On August 5, 1940, the Americans' arrival was recorded in the Operations Record Book as follows: "Hard on the heels of the two Poles arrived three Americans, all excellent types ..." (19)

While the three Americans were putting in flying time on 609 Squadron's Hurricanes, the Battle of Britain became intense and the squadron was busy as any in the R.A.F. during these historic months. Action was not long in coming, and Tobin had the distinction of getting in the first battle. On August 25, he attacked and claimed as probably destroyed, two Me 110s over London. Three weeks later he shot down a Dornier, again over London. On September 19, he, Mamedoff and Keough traveled from the base of 609 Squadron to Church Fenton, where they became the first members of the Eagle Squadron. They left 609 Squadron to that squadron's "great regret ... Both in the air and on the ground they had contributed colour, variety and vocabulary to the Squadron, and their 'wise-cracking' will be missed." (19)

At Church Fenton pilots were arriving in little groups, since the main body of recruits were still at No. 5 Flight Training School at Sealand. Squadron Leader Walter Churchill, an Englishman, arrived to command 71 Squadron; G. A. Brown, another Englishman, came to lead one of the Flights; and Arthur Donahue, an American who had gone to Canada on his own initiative and who had been shot down and badly burned in the early stages of the Battle of Britain, came to lead the other flight. Soon after that came Robert Sweeny, Jr., another nephew of Colonel Sweeny, and W. E. G. Taylor, an American friend of the Sweenys who had joined the Fleet Air Arm before the war and who was to be Co-Squadron Leader with Churchill. Colonel Sweeny had accompanied his recruits to England, and had been made a Group Captain and honorary commander of the squadron. He stayed fairly well out of the picture, although he did visit his recruits at the Flight Training School when the newsmen came to take pictures, and visited Church Fenton at odd intervals before his departure for Canada, ostensibly to recruit more men.

By early October, the Eagles consisted of a handful of pilots but no airplanes at all. In late October, Donahue left in disgust to try to find an outfit that would give him a plane to fly. The day after he left, the squadron was furnished three Brewster Buffaloes, tubby little American monoplanes which the manufacturer was trying to sell to the R.A.F. The first thing 71 Squadron did with them was to crash one, starting a reputation for sloppy flying which was to follow them long after they were as proficient as any squadron in the R.A.F. Phil Lechrone, an American who, like Donahue, had enlisted independent of the Sweeny effort, was not used to the way the Buffalo floated on landing; as a result he overshot the field and turned over the aircraft, giving himself a concussion and landing in the hospital. While they were waiting for the newer pilots to finish their training at Sealand and for aircraft to arrive, the little nucleus of the squadron flew the Buffaloes around and entertained many visitors, most of whom came from



The entire first group of Eagle Squadron volunteers pose for the press in February 1941. From the left they are: Bill Nichols, Ed Bateman, Mike Kolendorski, W.E.G. Taylor, Andy Mamedoff, "Red" Tobin, Nat Maranz, Luke Allen, Pete Provenzano, K. S. Taylor, R. Tongue, Gus Daymond and Sam Mauriello. (Photo - IWM CH 2404)

the U.S. Army Air Corps. Finally on November 7, nine rather tired Hurricanes from 85 Squadron and nine fresh pilots from Sealand arrived simultaneously, and the Eagles at last looked like a Squadron.

By this time the German offensive had died down and the weather was getting bad, so the squadron moved to a different air station and practiced formation flying and aerial combat with gun-cameras. They flew practice flights all through the winter, and in the first two months of 1941 three pilots, including Keough, were lost in flying accidents. The older R.A.F. personnel attached to the squadron used these accidents to demonstrate their attitude toward the inevitable wartime casualties; when a witness to one of the crashes burst into a lecture with the news, he was abruptly told to quiet down and join the audience, since he could do nothing for the man who was dead but would live much longer himself if he paid attention to the speaker.

The British meanwhile were beginning to lose patience with the Eagles, who had not fired a shot in the seven months they had been in existence. In the middle of April, General H. H. (Hap) Arnold of the U.S. Army Air Corps visited the Eagles. Arnold later discussed them with Sir Sholto Douglas, and Douglas told him that the Eagles were having problems—"too many prima donnas." Arnold replied that if the Eagles didn't start getting effective soon, they should be disbanded and sent home.

(20)

By "prima donna" Douglas did not mean men who were so good as to be cocky: he meant men who did not fit into the R.A.F. pattern of training. It was the policy of the Royal Air Force to form new outfits in northern air stations, out of range of German raiders from France, and use the relative inaction to allow intensive training. In the beginning of both wars in which they operated, British pilots had been outnumbered and were forced

to use their resources in as efficient a manner as possible. Efficiency was obtained by formation flying; the two-man section, by virtue of greater adaptability and vision, was much more effective than the two men could be if they were flying separately. Moreover, there was a strong emphasis on navigation and instrument flying, much stronger than in the United States. The weather over the British Isles was far more variable than any the Americans had encountered; it is perfectly possible to leave on a clear morning, spend two hours over France, and return to find solid overcast. Navigation also had to be done "by the book," for it was almost impossible in England for the Americans to engage in their practice of navigating by means of highways and rivers. Essex, where the Eagles were based for a large part of their history, is a patchwork of small fields, woods, winding rivers and roads, and it looked much the same to an American no matter where he happened to be.

This made learning very difficult for the Eagles, even though all of them had many hours of flying time. In civilian life, formation flying is almost never done; as a result pilots do not achieve the extreme smoothness required to avoid having the formation alternately expand and contract as each pilot corrects later and more than the one next to him. (When the formation contracted, there was the danger of collision; when it expanded there was the risk that one of the members of the formation would be left vulnerable to attack.) Instrument flying and navigation require constant practice, and are more or less unnecessary in America. When flying in the United States, the volunteers generally navigated without the fear that an error would take them miles out to sea, and in civilian flying it is almost never necessary to fly in bad weather; hence few of the pilots were proficient in instrument flying.

The Eagles' unfamiliarity with these practices, and

in some cases their unwillingness to learn, made the transition from a collection of individuals to a fighting unit difficult, and the British were reluctant to move them south and into the action.

While the Eagles were still at their advanced training location, and three days after Douglas had complained to Arnold about them, Gus Daymond was out patrolling a convoy over the Channel.

Born in Montana, he'd learned to fly at thirteen after his family had moved to California, using the airplane of a neighbor whose son was not interested in flying. Daymond later described this period of his life:

"I was a tiny little thing sitting on a stack of pillows in order to see out. I flew a J5-9 Travelaire a good deal, a rugged old clunk of a biplane that looked like it was right out of World War I."

In 1940 he was working as a set dresser in Hollywood when he heard "some local airport scuttlebutt" about flying for the R.A.F., and decided to join.

"When I joined the R.A.F. at 19 I think I was motivated by a certain sophomoric, but genuine, sense of social consciousness. People on movie sets used to listen to Hitler's speeches between takes. We were immensely concerned and there was an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. Well, I went tearing off to do my stuff, and I gave what I had to give."

Despite his youth, which prompted him to grow a mustache in order to look at least 20, he was one of the best pilots in 71 Squadron. In manner of dress he was extremely neat, and "some people would look askance at him, but not those who had seen him fly." Said Duke-Wooley, one of his old commanders, "The hotter the situation became, the cooler Gus was." He studied the techniques of fighter piloting carefully, and he acquired a reputation for being a serious young man, devoted to his craft.

While patrolling the convoy, Daymond spotted a Dornier going in on a bomb run a considerable distance away. He fired at it, despite the distance and contrary to his later tactics of closing to the absolute minimum range before opening fire. The Dornier dived, and Daymond pulled the "tit" (Emergency power boost, so named because of its appearance and effect when pulled.) to pursue. The Eagles had fired their first shot.

Part III

OPERATIONS

When Daymond pulled the boost lever to catch the German, nothing happened. Angry and frustrated, he returned to base, where he found that the switch had been wired closed. He had been flying the Hurricane belonging to one Kolendorski, a Pole whose hatred of Germans led him to chase them all over England at full boost. Kolendorski's crew, tired of rebuilding the engine after every flight, had introduced a factor of conservatism in his flying by making the lever inoperative. Daymond was furious and complained strenuously to Taylor.

A month later, 71 Squadron was in combat again, this time over Calais. Red and Yellow Sections attacked two Me 109s and as Yellow Section was turning to rejoin the squadron, it lost formation. John Alexander, leading the section, got behind his wingman, and a Me 109 got between them and started shooting Alexander's Wo. 2. Alexander slid in behind the German and held the trigger down for 13 seconds, hosing both the 109 and his wingman with bullets. The German flew up and to the right, smoking heavily, and Alexander's Wo. 2 crash-landed in England with about as many British as German bullets in his machine. Luckily, the pilot was unhurt, but there was further head-shaking by the R.A.F.

There was some trouble on the ground as well. Being



Four of the original Eagles, from left to right they are Kolendorski, W.E.G. Taylor, Nat Maranz and Andy Mamedoff. (Photo - IWM CH 2400)

Americans, the pilots of the Eagle Squadrons were often annoyed by social customs which prevented wealthy international golfers from mixing with ex-barnstormers, or officer pilots from drinking with the enlisted ground crews. One of the mechanics for 71 Squadron recalled "a pub at Saffron Walden where only officers were served and, needless to say, the Eagles would not drink there when they found they could not drink with their ground crews." A lack of patience with the formal aspects of belonging to a military organization was shown again and again, and in the early days of 71 Squadron it was often directed toward W. E. G. Taylor, whose Royal Navy background made him seem something of a martinet.

By this time 71 Squadron had been in existence for 9 months and had succeeded in shooting down nothing except one of their own members. It was widely remarked that having Group Captain Sweeny as honorary commander, one of his nephews as adjutant, and the other as "liaison and reception officer," (21) along with one of their friends as squadron leader, made 71 Squadron look more like a country club than a fighting unit, especially when these men were below-average pilots or nonflyers. The Sweenys eventually left, their role in forming the squadron largely forgotten, but even while they were with the organization two other men were making a squadron out of the Eagles.

They were Walter Churchill and J. Roland Robinson, both British and both well-liked by the men. Robinson was responsible for briefing the pilots about the location of anti-aircraft emplacements and other points of interest in occupied France, and for transcribing the combat reports which the pilots would dictate to him after they had returned from battle. He did his job well, and he also took upon himself the task of maintaining the psychological well-being of the pilots. The men would climb out of their machines, tired, possibly having seen a good friend killed, and there would be Robinson, with a few words to cushion the shock of unwinding. He helped keep their personal lives untangled, gave them advice, and steadied those whose nerves were becoming frayed. (Robinson's importance in the lives of the pilots was suggested to the author while interviewing veterans of 71 Squadron. Although the passage of time made many memories indistinct, none of the men had the slightest difficulty in recalling Robinson.)

Churchill, more than any other man except possibly Woodhouse, made the squadron, what it was. According to Daymond:

"In the summer of '41 the Eagles became a first-rate operational unit, especially in the field of close-escorting bombers in daylight. The campaign



One of the first Hawker Hurricanes of 71 Squadron. Notice this aircraft has the old underside painting of left wing black, right wing white. (Photo - IWM CH 2412)

of '41 saw the squadron hitting a peak which, in my view, we never again attained. This efficiency and aggressiveness (to me at least) was due entirely to ... the intelligence, enthusiasm, and outstanding personal leadership of Churchill in '40 or early in '41. If the Eagles ever amounted to anything, Churchill played the major role ..."

Churchill, whom the squadron called "Pappy", was posted to a ground job because of eye and sinus trouble, and he was replaced by Anthony De C. A. Woodehouse, an American-born Englishman who was indifferent to actions on the ground but was a perfectionist when it came to discipline in the air.

71 Squadron had finally been considered ready for action and was moved to North Weald, a station near the London suburb of Epping. The constant practice under Woodehouse, and the numerous patrols and escorts under Churchill, had given the pilots confidence in each other. On July 2, 1941, ten days after they had moved to North Weald, 71 Squadron demonstrated its ability in spectacular fashion.

Twelve bombers were to bomb the Lille Electric Power Station, and 71 Squadron was to provide part of the escort. Twelve of the more experienced members, with Woodehouse in the lead, met the bombers over the Channel and the formation proceeded to Lille. Over the target, they encountered greater than two-to-one odds. The Germans were trying to fight their way through the escort and get to the bombers, and as the two opposing formations met they split and broke up into individual combats. Woodehouse turned toward an Me 109 and let it fly past his sight, firing as it went; a heavy black line followed it as it half rolled and plunged to the ground. Meanwhile, Daymond's section had seen the bombers being attacked and had turned to the rescue. One of the Eagles got on the tail of a Messerschmitt and hung there, firing steadily, until it went down in flames near a crossroad. Daymond spotted two Messerschmitts attacking the bombers and swung toward the second one. The German saw him coming and turned into Daymond, firing and hitting the young Eagle's airplane; but as the Messerschmitt tried to escape downward, Daymond followed it at close

range and shot off its right aileron. The German pilot, unable to control his aircraft, jettisoned the canopy and "just seemed to float out of his machine." (22) Another Eagle, shooting from above and behind a Messerschmitt and seeing smoke come out of his target, had to break off when he was warned over the radio. The squadron reformed over the coast and staggered back to Manston in some disarray. (23)

The day after Alexander had shot down one of his own squadronmates, on May 16, 1941, a second Eagle Squadron was formed. It was made up of Americans who had independently volunteered and had been sent to various R.A.F. squadrons, plus a few transfers from 71 Squadron. From the beginning the two Eagle Squadrons did not get along well together, primarily because the men in 121 Squadron, or 2nd Eagles, had enlisted and served in the R.A.F. without fanfare. As a result they took a dim view of the publicity received by 71 Squadron, especially when the early performance of that squadron proved to be unimpressive. 121 Squadron practiced hard, and thanks to the previous experience of its members, was ready for combat in only three months.

In early August two members of 121 Squadron intercepted and seriously damaged a German raider over the coastal city of Hull. A week later, their squadron leader brought down an Me 109, and after a brief period of bad weather, 2nd Eagles made a similar mistake to that of their predecessor. Instead of shooting down one of their own men, two members of the squadron mistook a Bristol Blenheim for a Junkers Ju 88 and shot it down, killing the rear gunner.

Such cases of mistaken identity were common in the fast and often confusing business of aerial warfare. One of the worst instances was the "Battle of Barking Creek," which occurred August 16, 1940. Early British radar did not display whether the target was ahead or behind the receiver; an operator mistook an outgoing British raid for an incoming German one, sent fighters to intercept, and the R.A.F. fought the R.A.F. for several minutes, with many casualties.

On August 1, 1941, the third Eagle Squadron was formed at another of the northern bases favored by the R.A.F. for such activity. Most of its personnel was recruited



"Two Hurricanes of 71 Squadron "beat up" the flight line for the benefit of the press, probably on March 17, 1941, at Kirton-in-Lindsey. Note movie camera at right. (Photo - IWM CH 2402)

by the Clayton Knight Committee, and it was commanded by G. A. Brown, who had been one of the first flight leaders for 71 Squadron. 133 Squadron acquired pilots throughout August, trained and practiced in September, and in October was moved to a station from which it started flying convoy patrols.

In October, the Royal Air Force recognized the growing ability of the three Eagle Squadrons by replacing their Hurricanes with the more modern Spitfires. 133 Squadron flew their new aircraft on long, cold, and uneventful patrols over the North Atlantic, 121 Squadron was grounded by bad weather, and 71 Squadron, located in the south where there was both good weather and opportunity for action, had what was to be the best month in its career.

On October 2, a dozen pilots of 71 Squadron crossed the French coast in the early afternoon sun, 21,000 feet above Calais. They were flying top cover for a raid on Abbeville airfield, home of the notorious "Abbeville Boys," a crack Luftwaffe outfit. The more experienced pilots were on leave, so the newer men flew that day. Most of them had volunteered late in 1940 or early in 1941, and had (besides the 3-month training period) only a few months experience with the squadron. Nevertheless, they had the advantage of joining an established organization rather than having to form one, and since the Clayton Knight Committee was strict in its selection, were a more promising group of pilots. Much to the Chagrin of the older members, the new men shot down five Germans this day.

As they flew toward the target, the middle section was headed by Squadron Leader Meares, a quiet reflective Englishman who had replaced Woodehouse. One of the flanking sections was led by Humphrey Gilbert, who fitted the American stereotype Englishman, and the first Spitfire of the other section was flown by Newton Anderson, who was born in New Orleans and educated in France. Anderson had joined the Foreign Legion and escaped after the fall of France, and was a good pilot despite his bad eyes.

Gilbert, who appeared effete to the Eagles when they first met him, was a wild man in the air, and was the author of the unofficial motto of 71 Squadron. Gilbert

was leading the squadron one day when one section swung out a bit early, anxious to attack. "Wait a minute longer," said Gilbert, "Be brave and calm, chaps," and then gave the signal to attack. The phrase became popular with the pilots, and was shouted at least once every party. (24)

Meares and the Wing Leader saw 18 Messerschmitts, flying in three lines of six, climbing slowly up toward them. The squadron wheeled to attack and Meares realized that Gilbert's section, on the outside of the turn, was in an unfavorable position; he ordered them to stay at their altitude, and those four members had a grandstand view of the combat.

Meares' section went after the left-hand line of Messerschmitts and Anderson aimed his formation at the right-hand one. The Germans, whose lack of reaction led many of the Eagles to think that they were inexperienced pilots, were taken completely by surprise.

Meares and his wingman attacked the last aircraft in their line. Meares positioned himself directly behind the Messerschmitt and fired a long burst, and as he did his wingman slipped underneath him and fired; Meares' cannon shells hit the German and he burst into flames. Meares' wingman shot down two Germans in quick succession; the last two men in his section shot down another.

Anderson's group broke off their attack when a Messerschmitt flew past Anderson and he pursued it. His determination was such that he almost collided with the German machine while shooting at it, and he and his wingman destroyed it.

The excited and successful pilots returned to North Weald, where they were greeted by members of the press. One of the members of 71 Squadron paid tribute to Woodehouse's training:

"As we attacked, there was not a plane of ours out of formation. We just beat up those Me's according to plan."

"Nothing," said Meares, "could have gone more perfectly." (25)

With the new members from the Clayton Knight Committee, and with the leadership of Daymond and Peterson, the



Four Eagles in a German prison camp: from left—P/O M. W. Fessler, P/O W. D. Geiger, P/O W. H. Nichols, and McDaniel. (Photo - M. W. Fessler)



Inside a 71 Squadron dispersal hut awaiting a mission are a number of Eagle pilots. Gus Daymond is in the doorway, W.E.G. Taylor at far right. (Photo - IWM)

squadron was overcoming its original difficulties and was operating in a very effective manner. Rhubarbs were flown all through October, and the squadron had many combats. Peterson and Daymond received the Distinguished Flying Cross, Daymond for becoming the first ace of the Eagle Squadrons, and Peterson for his outstanding leadership as flight leader. At the end of October, the Air Ministry announced to the press that 71 Squadron was the highest-scoring squadron of the month; claims were allowed for nine aircraft destroyed, 11% of the R.A.F. total for October, (It must be kept in mind that "confirmed" claims do not give an accurate picture of how many aircraft a given individual or group destroyed; even with the very strict British system for confirmation, estimates ran about twice the actual German losses.)

The winter then set in, disrupting the operations of both the Luftwaffe and the R.A.F. 71 Squadron was moved back north, where they flew convoy patrols in the bitter cold. All three squadrons were engaged in similar activity, and the monotony was broken only by flying accidents.

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor had little emotional effect on the Eagles, some of whom had been in the war for two years; the entry of their homeland in the conflict meant (even for those who did not by now feel more British than American), only the vague prospect of eventual transfer to the U.S. Army Air Force. For three of the Eagles, however, the declaration of war by the United States against Germany carried very special meaning. The three Americans, Morris Fessler, Bill Gieger and William Nichols, were in a German prison camp. From the time Fessler arrived, in late October, these men and a handful of other Americans in the camp had been causing the Germans some concern; the passion for correctness of the German military was frustrated by the capture of several Americans in R.A.F. uniform. They were American citizens, and hence, non-belligerent; they were also members of the armed forces of an enemy nation. All through November, the first consideration was uppermost in the German mind. Each day the Americans, under guard, would be led into a forest and given a picnic. Their wonderment at this treatment ceased when, in late November, they were called into the office of one of the German officers. The officer told them that if they were willing, they would be sent to Argentina via submarine and deposited at the American Embassy. When asked the price for the trip, the German replied that all he would ask would be that the Americans truthfully relate how they were treated. The prisoners were still debating among themselves whether to go, when December 7 came along "and," Fessler said, "we sat." (26)

The pilots back in England sat out the winter, and

this inaction, coupled with many Eagles' desire for high personal scores, prompted many replies by members of the Eagle Squadrons, to an offer made by the R.A.F. in the Spring.

The German determination to blockade Malta from the air made the skies above that island a well-stocked hunting ground for R.A.F. pilots. More defenders were needed, and the opportunity was given to members of the Eagle Squadrons to transfer to squadrons on Malta. One of the Eagles who went, explained:

Come Spring 1942, some of the pilots were restless under the policies in effect for fighter sweeps in the channel area that usually forbade leaving formation to follow attacking aircraft down over France. This made things pretty slow at times. Some of the pilots wanted more action and were anxious to get in an informal sort of around-the-clock air war such as was going on at Malta. (27)

Seventeen Eagles volunteered, mostly from 121 and 133 Squadrons, and after they had gone for "more action" the weather improved over France and the R.A.F. resumed offensive operations.

71 Squadron was now led by Chesley Peterson, a Mormon from Santaquina, Utah, who had taken over after Meares had been killed in a flying accident. Peterson had been trying to get in an air force since late 1939. He joined the U. S. Army Air Corps, but was washed out of training for "inherent lack of flying ability." He then tried to get in Sweeny's group and fly for France, but was intercepted by U.S. agents at the Canadian border and sent back. Finally, when Sweeny was making his initial enlistments for the R.A.F., Peterson succeeded. He was a superlative commander, "as good as any of them," and was always concerned about the safety of his men and the well-being of the squadron. (28) A young British woman who knew many of the squadron members wrote of Peterson:

"There is the Pete who grabs you and dances a whole pile of records without stopping. And sits on the floor drinking beer and smiling in that boyish way of his, who likes eating cheese with sweet biscuits and laughs the way people of our age--his and mine--should laugh. And there's another Pete that funnily I love best, when he stands up with the squadron on their feet facing him, Pete in his boots and Mae West, with that shockingly operational hat over one eye, briefing the boys for the three o'clock bus service to Lille or St. Omer or Abbeville, or wherever they are flying that afternoon. A much older Pete, who doesn't smile but whose eyes seem to



Above, Chesley Gordon Peterson and Gus Daymond stand before an Eagle Spitfire after receiving Distinguished Flying Crosses. (Photo - IWM CH 3737) At the right, Chesley Peterson, age twenty-one, pauses before entering the cockpit of a 71 Squadron Hurricane. Of special interest is the complete Irvine suit which Peterson is wearing, including the boots which were later to become much sought after by 8th Air Force personnel. (Photo - IWM 2398)



flick over all those faces before him as though by doing so he could see into their minds and find out whether they understood him." (29)

On April 27, 1942, Peterson was leading the squadron on an escort mission to St. Omer airfield, about 10 miles inland of Calais. Here he demonstrated his concern for others by shooting down an FW 190 which was after one Spitfire, and breaking up a formation of six Germans attacking another R.A.F. Squadron. Two other members of 71 Squadron, Oscar Coen and Michael McPharlin proved that the Eagles could perform according to Royal Air Force tactics; flying as a two-man formation, they shot down three Germans in eight minutes.

The battle began when the squadron was turning over the target. Blue Section was led by Coen, and had McPharlin in the No. 4 position. When they started to turn, Blue III reported engine trouble and slipped back. McPharlin, wanting to keep the formation tight and protect Blue II, flew over Blue III and into the No. 3 spot. Red Section was then attacked, and Coen started to swing Blue Section around when someone yelled "keep your height." Blue III, whose engine had now picked up, cut into a hard turn and left the section. Coen's wingman could not hold the turn and so McPharlin, who had started out in the last position, ended up as Coen's No. 2. This took but a few seconds, and had the pilots been of lesser caliber or less rigorously trained, there probably would have been a collision or the section would have scattered; as it was, there still remained a fighting unit, even if it was half its previous strength.

The two Eagles dropped on a Focke-Wulf and riddled it with their combined fire, sending it down in flames. They then pulled out in a climbing turn, and carried the turn up and over so that they were flying inverted and attacked another 190. Coen positioned himself behind the German, who had spotted him and started to turn. What followed demonstrated the wisdom of the British insistence on fighting in pairs. Coen was turning as tight as he could, but could not hit the German, who was turning inside him. McPharlin, since he started his turn

at the same time but behind Coen, could hold the same radius and still be able to aim at the German. McPharlin fired, the German swung toward the outside of the circle to escape, crossed Coen's path, and was shot down.

The triumphant pair then turned for home, and as they passed the coast a Spitfire went past them with a 190 on its tail. With the same tactics that destroyed their second victim, they shot the Focke-Wulf down into the Channel.

Peterson's leadership showed itself again a month later, when 71 Squadron was part of the Top Cover Wing for a raid on Bruges. Daymond later wrote Robinson:

"We orbitted around and around with our fingers well up at 22,000 feet while smoke trails (condensation trails) converged on us from all directions. When it was about time to leave the target and get the bombers back, it happened. About 50 of those FW 190s that had been converging above us suddenly bounced on us like nobody's business. Jumping _____, what pandemonium broke loose. It's the first time I have ever heard of a genuine mass dogfight in this war." (30)

Daymond was heavily engaged by an "unfriendly bunch of bastards" who shot down his wingman and chased him far out over the Channel. Peterson, seeing another squadron under attack, took his section down and shot down one of the attackers. He then pulled up to 20,000 feet and was still climbing when he saw 8 Focke-Wulfs attack a section of Spitfires above him. Attacking from below is against the rules of aerial combat, for altitude gives the advantage of speed, surprise, and the sun at your back. The safest thing for Peterson to do, if he was interested only in increasing his personal score, would be to pick off the last German in the formation without alerting the others. This, however, would not stop the attack on the Spitfires; Peterson shouted a radio warning and fired at the first 190, with the predictable result that the rest dropped on him. He turned to escape, "... but one shot a big hole in my wing and all the rest were firing at close range all around me." Peterson fired back and

observed hits, and then, "As I was out of ammo I stuck my nose down and came hell for leather for home."

During the Spring of 1942, the other two Eagle Squadrons were not idle; both of them had been moved south, 121 Squadron to 71 Squadron's old base at Worth Weald, and 133 Squadron to Biggin Hill. Because it was the last station in the line between Calais and London, Biggin Hill had seen a great deal of action in the Battle of Britain and the London Blitz, and was regarded by that city as its personal air station. Almost all the famous aces in the R.A.F. had flown at one time or another with the Biggin Hill Wing, and it was a great source of pride for 133 Squadron to be based there.

121 Squadron flew numerous rhubarbs, the most effective of which was when they attacked and severely damaged two minesweepers in Holland. 133 Squadron had been engaged in similar operations, and had set "the largest fire in northern France" when its members discovered and shot up a convoy of ammunition trucks hidden in the forest. (31)

On July 30th, the members of the squadrons went to London to view the premier of the British film Eagle Squadron, which had sequences featuring 71 Squadron. A prologue to the movie was given by Quentin Reynolds, who praised the Eagles for volunteering so that "liberty might not perish from the earth." The movie continued in this vein, and when some flying scenes were shown which were laughable to anyone with a passing knowledge of aviation, the Eagles got up and walked out.

This behavior would have been typical of any R.A.F. squadron, for most pilots subscribed to one of two views of warfare; it was either a grand game or a dirty but necessary business. For American volunteers to say that they had been motivated by a burning desire to save England would have been to claim more self-importance than was considered proper in the R.A.F. Since they were often asked why they came, most of the Eagles adopted the socially acceptable explanation of extenuating circumstances:

"I asked them why they had come, expecting to hear about the defense of the Mother Country, and all that. Instead, this one told me he was browned off at his wife, that one was browned off at his girl, a third was in debt ..." (32)

J. S. Childers, who lived with 71 Squadron and wrote a book about them, devoted a chapter to justifying this statement:

"This simple truth is that idealism played little, if any, part in their leaving home. These young fellows left for reasons that young fellows have always left home." (33)

Childers based his argument on the observation that the Eagles had difficulty in stating their motives, and since "when a man is driven by a great ideal he knows why he acts," there must not have been any idealistic motives. This, and other similar accounts, relied on what the Eagles themselves said while they were in England, and assumed that men in their early twenties are capable of expressing their feelings, provided that the feelings are strong enough; Daymond's "sophomoric, but none the less genuine sense of social consciousness," stated 20 years later, is probably closer to the truth. Superficially, the Eagles could be called adventurers and misfits, but if these labels are attached, a major change in character after they joined the R.A.F. must be explained.

Whatever their motivation, the Eagles were definitely not mercenaries; as Pilot Officers in the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve, they received \$2.70 a week, plus 20cents a day flight pay.

Adventurers and misfits did not make good fighter pilots in the R.A.F.; the discipline was too great. An

adventurer would not be willing to fly endless patrols over the North Atlantic, never seeing an enemy aircraft, nor would a misfit put up with having to stay in formation and avoid combat if so ordered by the squadron leader. Those who did not obey the rules were quickly shot down, or, as with a very few early members, asked to return home. Evidence for this is given in the casualty figures for the Eagle Squadrons. The first members of 71 Squadron had among them the greatest number of nonconformists, as was shown by the difficulties they had in training. The later members became effective more quickly, probably because they were recruited by the Clayton Knight Committee, whose high rejection rate (6,700 accepted out of 49,000 applicants) indicated that a great deal of care was used in selection. The total losses of the Eagle Squadrons were about one-half the number of men who ever joined, about average for the R.A.F. in the period; but of Colonel Sweeny's original group of 28, only Gus Daymond, Chesley Peterson and C.E. Bateman were in the R.A.F. after a year.

Most of the Eagles probably volunteered, as would be expected, for a number of reasons. There was the opportunity to fly a fast, maneuverable airplane, the adventure of being a fighter pilot, the glamour of a foreign military, and an unknown amount of sympathy for the British cause. The latter was probably as strong as the desire to leave home; the Luftwaffe offered all the other inducements, and not even the language difference would otherwise explain why 15,000 Americans flew for the Commonwealth and not one, so far as is known, for the Third Reich.

After the Eagles had left the movie honoring them in disgust, they went to the "Crackers Club," a favorite drinking spot for Americans in the R.A.F. The next day, many of the pilots were either nursing their hangovers or continuing the party. 71 Squadron stayed on the ground, but 121 Squadron and 133 Squadron were called to escort a "rush show" over Abbeville at ten o'clock in the morning. The Eagles took off, breathing oxygen to help their hangovers and hoping that the resistance would not be strong. Unfortunately, it was; the two squadrons lost four pilots and the squadron leader of 121 Squadron was so severely wounded that he had to be relieved of his command. Over Abbeville, the R.A.F. was outnumbered as usual, and the standard of flying of the Eagles was understandably not up to their usual level.

On August 19, 1942, the Eagles took part in Operation Jubilee, the Commando raid on Dieppe. No. 11 Group was ordered to supply air cover for the landings, and dispersed its squadrons on numerous coastal airfields. An umbrella of fighter planes had to be constantly maintained to keep the Luftwaffe from interfering with the landing and defend the convoy from bombers. Every squadron flew at least three sorties, and some flew four. 133 Squadron had the best day in its history, shooting down four fighters and two bombers in four sorties, and 121 Squadron destroyed one FW 190 in three sorties, and had several of its aircraft severely damaged by flak.

On 71 Squadron's third sortie, about one o'clock in the afternoon, the team of Coen and McPharlin, using their favorite tactics, shot a Ju 88 down in flames. The bomber was one of a group of three attacked by the squadron. Peterson engaged one which had tried to escape. Peterson chased the Junkers and as he was shooting at it the rear gunner in the bomber returned his fire. Peterson later reported, "I knew I was hit and would have to bail out anyway so I kept firing up to 150 yards when I had to quit as there was so much steam and smoke in the cockpit."

Peterson jettisoned the canopy, which cleared the cockpit of smoke, and began the necessary preparations for bailing out over water. He pulled off his flying boots and threw them over the side, and then he removed his service revolver and was about to toss it away when he remembered that he had never had the opportunity to shoot it. Dropping through the sky, with smoke pouring out of his airplane, Peterson held the gun over his head

and emptied it. He said, "I subsequently bailed out as my motor was on fire."

Hanging from his parachute, he saw his favorite "V-for-Victory" hit the Channel "with a great splash." Peterson was picked up by the Royal Navy, as was McPharlin, who had been shot down just after he and Coen had emptied their guns in destroying the bomber. After their last sortie to protect the withdrawal of the landing parties, at about six o'clock, the pilots of the three squadrons were generally too tired to celebrate.

Later in their career, another problem was besetting the Eagle Squadron. The rivalry between the individual squadrons had grown to the point where it was causing concern to various wing commanders. 71 Squadron, now that they were an experienced outfit, smarted under the claims that they were over-publicized, and regarded themselves as the Eagle Squadron. 121 Squadron, who had received little publicity, and still with its attitude of being R.A.F. regulars, thought that it was just as good as 71 Squadron and certainly better than 133 Squadron. The latter squadron, which disliked the name "3rd Eagles," was not publicized at all, and liked to point out that it was better than the other two because it was allowed to fly the Spitfire IX, while the other squadrons were equipped with the older Spitfire V. The British and American governments were now negotiating for the transfer of the squadrons to the U.S. Army Air Force, and this bitterness would have created a potentially disrupting factor if the three squadrons were combined, as they later were, into one Fighter Group. The problem was minimized by keeping the squadrons on separate bases, and was finally eliminated by mixing them up, but it was in large part alleviated by a tragedy which befell 133 Squadron on September 26, 1942. Eleven mem-

bers of the squadron were lost on a single mission, which cut the complement of the squadron almost in two, and aroused the sympathy of the other two squadrons.

On September 16, after the members had gone to London and visited the Air Ministry, 133 Squadron was the first of the Eagle Squadrons to be transferred to the United States. This was purely symbolic; the pilots still flew R.A.F. Spitfires with British insignia, were commanded by R.A.F. personnel, wore R.A.F. uniforms with the Eagle Squadron patch on their shoulder, flew in R.A.F. operations and were addressed by R.A.F. ranks. Nevertheless, they were in the United States Army, and on September 26 were sent to Bolthead, near Exeter, where they were to escort a raid mounted by the 97th Bomb Group of the USAAF against Morlaix airfield on the Brest Peninsula. One member of the squadron, George Sperry, had been having carburetor problems with his airplane, and after repairs had been made he went along on the flight from Biggin Hill to Bolthead to check out his airplane. At Bolthead the pilots half-listened to the briefing; Morlaix was on the coast and "we knew the coast of France like the back of our hand." (34) They were informed that the Biggin Hill Wing, flying close escort, was to meet the bombers in mid-channel and be under the supervision of the Exeter Controller.

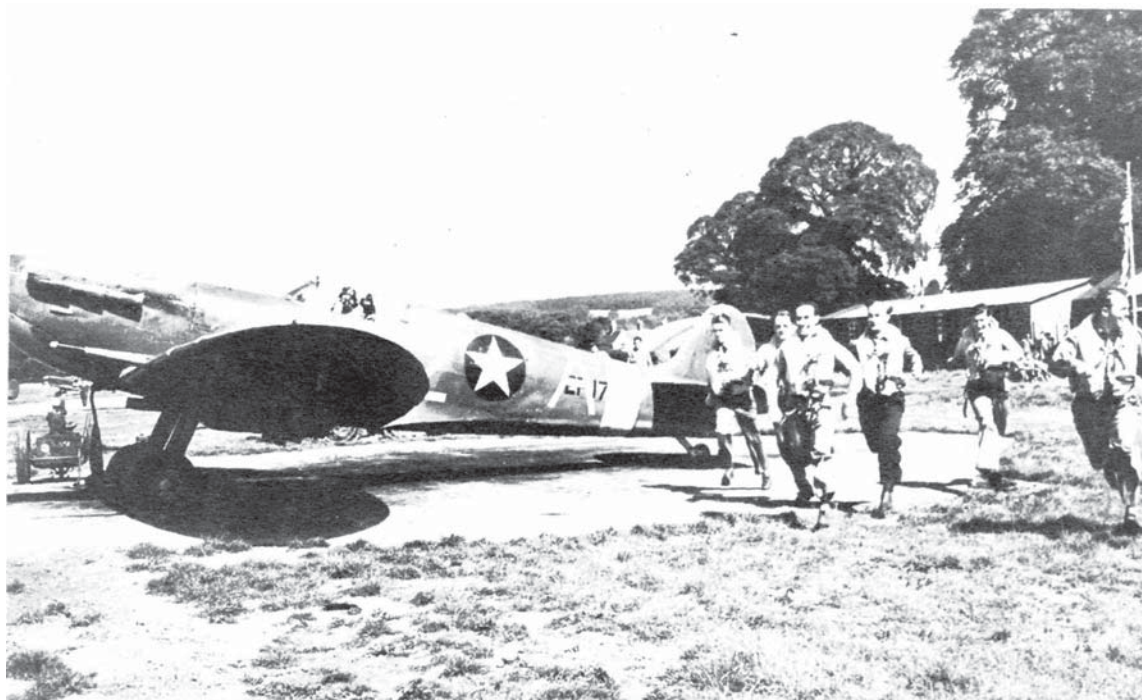
Just before the mission, Don S. Gentile decided not to go along, and Sperry, who had intended to fly to Bolt-head, wait until the mission was over, and then fly back to Biggin Hill with the wing, took his place. 133 Squadron was led by George Bretell, and was the last squadron of the wing to take off. Their Spitfires were overheating, due to a strong tailwind which cut down the flow of air through the radiators, and just before take-off Bretell blew a tire. Sperry signaled to him to change airplanes, and as he took off in Sperry's Spitfire, about 30 of the ground crew held up the wing of the other aircraft and changed the tire. Sperry, his engine well overheated and leaking coolant, caught up with the squadron, and they proceeded to the rendezvous point. When they reached it, they could not see the bombers but could see that there was a solid bank of clouds over all of France. The wing orbited over mid-channel several times, while the wing commander, who was the only one who could break radio silence, asked the Exeter Controller for instructions.

After some unknown confusion on the ground had been resolved, the Controller radioed back that the bombers had arrived at the rendezvous point early and had proceeded to the target, and the Biggin Hill Wing was ordered to fly south after them. Three mistakes were made which were to result in the loss of 10 pilots from 133 Squadron and another 7 from the rest of the wing: The bombers were early, and did not wait for their escort; the bomber commander had decided to fly to the target, even though he could see it was completely covered by cloud, and bombing was impossible; and the fighter escort was ordered to follow the bombers, even though the rendezvous had been missed and the bombers were many miles away. The last is the least understandable, for it was standard R.A.F. practice to abort a mission if the rendezvous was missed by so much as half a minute; it was widely rumored after this mission that the lapse while the Controller made up his mind and the decision to follow the bombers was due to USAAF pressure, in an attempt to make up for the serious mistake of having the bombers go to the target at all.

The members of the Biggin Hill Wing still had a slim chance of returning home but this was erased by the weather. The navigators in the bombers, unable to see anything below them but solid and featureless cloud, were basing their calculations on a 35 mph tailwind. In actuality the formation was in the middle of a jetstream, a high-altitude, high-velocity wind which was little understood in 1942. The navigators calculated their airspeed, and then added in the estimated wind velocity to obtain ground speed; the number they added was some 200 mph too small.



Don S. Gentile, of 133 Squadron and later a top ranking AAF ace with a total of 23 air and 7 ground victories, stands in front of his Spitfire, the "Buckeye-Don", location unknown. (Photo - A. J. Stephenson)



Reminiscent of the era after the Eagle pilots transferred to the U. S. Army Air Force is this photo of a Spitfire V belonging to the 309th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group, which also saw action on 19 August 1942 during the Dieppe raid. (Photo - IWM NYF 25948)

According to their incorrect estimate of wind speed, it would have taken them 33 minutes to arrive over Morlaix. With the strength of the wind what it was, after 33 minutes they were over the Bay of Biscay, more than 100 miles south, and could still see nothing but cloud beneath them.

The Exeter Controller was now faced with the awful choice of deciding which of the two groups to sacrifice. The wing commander of the Biggin Hill Wing was insistently radioing that he could not see the bombers and he wanted their position. If the Controller told him, there was a good chance that the German monitors would notify the Luftwaffe, and the bombers, almost defenseless without escort, would be attacked. If he ordered the fighters back, the Germans would certainly deduce that something was seriously wrong from the way the conversation had been going and send up a strong force. If he said nothing, the wing would keep orbiting and keep drifting, as he could see it drift on his map, deeper and deeper into France. His only hope, and the only hope for the men in the air, was that somehow the wing could meet the bombers with a minimum of radio conversation and make it home, so he told the wing commander that the bombers were "south."

By this time the bomber commander had given up trying to find a hole in the cloud, and had turned back north to return to England. The fighters now had a strong tailwind and the bombers a strong headwind, and the two formations met south of the Brest peninsula, still over solid cloud and without the slightest idea of where they were. The wing commander was still radioing Exeter and asking for his position, and the Controller was still unwilling to give it, for fear the Germans were listening; had he done so, the formation could have turned around and easily flown to Spain, losing their airplanes but saving the pilots.

In desperation, the wing commander ordered 133 Squadron down through the cloud to find out where they were and radio this information back to the wing. Apprehensive because of their low fuel supply, eyes riveted to airspeed indicators and altimeters, the pilots of 133 Squadron began the exceedingly dangerous descent through

cloud, which, as far as they knew, could stretch clear to the ground.

They emerged at 1,000 feet, right over the middle of Brest Harbor, and were immediately greeted by heavy anti-aircraft fire. The squadron split, and there was a "hell of a racket over the radio" as each man called out what the situation was and tried to save himself as best he could. Brettel, not wishing to bail out over water, turned inland; Sperry climbed to 7,000 feet, where his engine, weak from overheating, seized and he bailed out; R. N. Beatty tried to make it home, and just did, landing a few miles inland and injuring himself.

The Germans had not been monitoring the British fighter radio frequencies, since the day was obviously unsuitable for flying, and the first warning they had was when a squadron of Spitfires suddenly appeared over Brest. The Luftwaffe reacted quickly as it always did, and M. E. Jackson, badly wounded ("We were picking flak out of him for a year" (35)) was flying over the airfield at Brest as two Me 109s were taking off. With the last drops of his fuel, he swung to one side and shot one of them down, and then belly-landed in a nearby vineyard.

Sperry was arrested by the French and sat in a jail until the Luftwaffe came and took him to Brest airfield. The commander of the base, one Oberlieutenant Bruno Stelle, treated Sperry and another member of 133 Squadron who had come down uninjured to a tour of the base, and then took his own Me 109 up and gave the two Eagles an aerobatic exhibition. After he landed he asked Sperry what he thought of the Messerschmitt. Sperry replied that it was a fine airplane, and asked Stelle if he could take it up for a short flight; he was politely but firmly turned down. That night, the two Americans were given a banquet in the best World War I tradition, and then sent to P.O.W. camp.

On the cold, damp morning of September 29, 1942, at R.A.F. Air Station Debden, ceremonies were held which transferred the three Eagle Squadrons to the United States. The men of the squadrons marched past, swinging their arms in the British fashion, stamped their feet as they came to attention, and saluted with their

palms out as officers of the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force reviewed them. They listened to speeches, had USAF wings pinned to the right "breast of their unfamiliar American uniforms, matching the R.A.F. wings on the left, and marched off the parade ground.

That night the Debden Officer's Mess shook as fire-crackers exploded, smoke bombs went off on the lawn, and rockets shot out of windows and chimneys. The Eagles celebrated, addressed each other by the strange ranks of "Captain," "Lieutenant," and "Major," and discussed whether one gold bar was worth more than two silver ones, what rank was signified by an oak leaf, and how much beer they could buy with the money they were now earning, three times as much as they had in the R.A.F.

They were now the 4th Fighter Group, the first military outfit in the United States to be formed entirely of members of a foreign military and the first to be formed in a theater of combat. Between this day and the end of the war, they were to destroy over 1,000 German aircraft, a performance largely made possible by the experience and training they received while in the R.A.F.

The British, while they had cause to regret the loss of three fighter squadrons, had no cause to regret having formed the Eagle Squadrons. The squadrons had collected their share of medals, had their share of casualties and destroyed their share of enemy aircraft. They had created no special problems for the R.A.F., nor had they shown themselves to be vastly superior to the average R.A.F. fighter squadron. After their initial difficulties had been overcome, the Eagles had fitted more smoothly into the R.A.F. than many had predicted, and that organization paid them its greatest tribute by treating them the same as any other squadron.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas, who had doubted the ability of 71 Squadron in early 1941, expressed the sentiments of the Royal Air Force:

"In the course of the past 18 months we have seen the stuff of which you are made, and we could not ask for better companions with whom to see this fight through to the finish." (36)

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FOOTNOTES AND NOTES:

Part I: Technical data on the aircraft was obtained from FAMOUS FIGHTERS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, London: Macdonald & Co., Ltd., 1957, by William Green. The description of R.A.F. operational practices is from Duke-Woolley, and the information about the Air Stations is from Flight Lieutenant M. Monaghan, Officer Commanding, R.A.F. Air Station North Weald, who graciously provided a tour of that installation.

(1) Gentile, Don S., as told to Ira Wolfert, ONE MAN AIR FORCE, New York; 1944, p. 4.

(1) Ibid.

(3) Ibid., p. 5.

(4) Ibid., p. 6.

(5) Not used.

(6) Hall, Grover Cleveland, 1000 DESTROYED, Dallas, Texas: Morgan Aviation Books, 1961, p. 48.

(7) Childers, James Saxon, WAR EAGLES, New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1943, pp. 241-42.

(8) Ibid., p. 29.

Part II: The biography of Colonel Sweeny, whom Chesley Peterson described as a "capable, impervious, calculating and extremely knowledgeable man," was compiled from Payl Ayres Rockwell's AMERICAN FIGHTERS IN THE FOREIGN LEGION, Boston, 1930; Sweeny's pamphlet PETAIN, privately printed, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1945; an article entitled Soldier of Fortune which appeared in the New Yorker magazine for December 21, 1940; and various obituaries written when he died in 1963. The five years which intervened between the magazine article and Sweeny's pamphlet, the eighteen years between that and the obituaries, the agreement which exists between the three and information gathered from Sweeny's friends and son were the basis for the confirmation of Sweeny's claims.

The description of his recruiting activity is based on the account of C. E. Bateman, one of the early volunteers, a newspaper story which appeared in the Washington Times Herald for March 2, 1940 (and which was brought to the author's attention by Mr. J. Edgar Hoover, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation), the introduction which Colonel Sweeny wrote for THE EAGLES ROAR (Kennerly, Byron, New York, 1942), and the article, Yankee Eagle Over London, written for Liberty magazine by Eugene Tobin. A very careful comparison of dates, especially with Tobin's story, was done. Tobin's account of his experiences in France, and the time intervals he gives between events, check with known facts (primarily from the works of Winston Churchill) to within a week; the continuation of his article, which

deals with his career in England, agrees in a similar fashion with the British official records.

There existed considerable confusion about who was responsible for the formation of the Eagle Squadrons, both Colonel Sweeny and his nephew claiming the credit. The fact that the operations of the two men were separate until July 1940 was suggested to the author in a telephone conversation with Colonel Sweeny, in which he stated that the Eagles "were mine until the R.A.F. took them over." This hypothesis was confirmed by the aforementioned checking of dates, the account of Bateman, and enlistment dates released by the R.A.F. of the early volunteers.

A letter was received from Chesley Peterson too late to be included in the text. Peterson said of Colonel Sweeny:

"Most of his pre-1939 machinations, I am sure, were purely business. I do, however, feel that sincere patriotism motivated his actions in WW II. He was... 'a son of France.' ...I rather admire the old war horse."

Peterson also mentioned that Sweeny had been in the "business of supplying arms to the various dissident elements around the globe since World War I," which explains in part how his brother was able to ship the younger Charles fifty submachine guns for his American unit of the Home Guard.

(9) Sweeny, Charles, *MOMENT OF TRUTH*, New York, 1943, P. 137.

(10) Tobin, Eugene, *Yankee Eagle Over London*, in *Liberty* magazine, March 29, 1941, p. 32.

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) *Ibid.*

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 39.

(14) Bolitho, Hector, *A PENGUIN IN THE EYRIE*, London, 1955. A copy of this work was unavailable, and Mr. Bolitho furnished relevant passages in a private correspondence.

(15) C. E. Bateman, private correspondence, 1962.

(16) G. A. Daymond, private correspondence, March 1962.

(17) Homer Smith, statement dictated for the archives of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Summer 1945. Released for use in this work, May 1962.

(18) Churchill, Winston, *THEIR FINEST HOUR*, New York: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1949, p. 543.

(19) Operations Record Book, No. 609 Squadron, Royal Air Force. 71 Squadron enters the arrival of Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough on September 19, 1940; 609 Squadron enters their departure on September 25, 1940.

(20) Arnold, H. H., *GLOBAL MISSION*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949, p. 219. Curiously, this visit was not remembered by any veteran interviewed, nor did a record of it appear in any British official or unofficial document for that day.

Part HI: The quotes from newspapers would be the same irrespective of the newspaper from which they came, for all news was furnished by the Ministry of Information, and hence all newspapers carried substantially the same story. For this reason only the wire service from which the story originated is given, with the exception of articles written by special correspondents.

(21) *The Aeroplane*, March 28, 1941, p. 362.

(22) *New York Times*, July 2, 1941. The quote is ascribed to "the youngest Eagle," which would be Daymond.

(23) Daymond.

(24) Childers, p. 116.

(25) *United Press International*, October 3, 1941.

(26) M. W. Fessler, interview, Los Altos, California, November 1961. The entire account is from Fessler.

(27) Reade Tilley, Private correspondence, March 1962.

(28) Duke-Woolley.

(29) Childers, p. 8.

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 315

(31) G. B. Sperry, interview, San Jose, California,

May 1962.

(32) Mrs. Hilda Hedges, interview, Epping, Essex, England, March 1962.

(33) Childers, p. 16.

(34) Sperry. There exist as many versions of what happened that day as there are records; Sperry's account is the one given, and is used because it is somewhat consistent with the others, and he is the only available informant who was actually on the mission.

(35) *Ibid.*

(36) *Flight*, October 8, 1942, p. 389. Douglas' speech was evidently not too well reported; there are several different wordings, of which this was chosen because *Flight* was the most reputable journal available.

PLEA FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: The author would greatly appreciate hearing from any person with information to add or personal photographs of the Eagle Squadron. He would especially like hearing from any associates of the late Colonel Sweeny, and from persons with information on the following subject: 1) the Escadrille Cherifienne; 2) Col. Sweeny's recruiting activities in the U. S.; 3) Recruiting activities by any other foreign nation for pilots of United States citizenship to fly in combat in a foreign war; 4) Details of personal combats of No. 133 (Eagle) Squadron, RAF; and 5) The incident of September 26, 1942 when 11 members of 133 Squadron were lost on the raid to Morlaix; whereabouts of any members of the 97th Bomb Group who were on that raid; or the location of any R.A.F. personnel who has information on the incident. Write to: Earl Boebert, 108 Pinecrest Blvd., Apt. 8, San Antonio, Tex.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Earl Boebert was born in Elko, Nevada in September of 1939. His interest in aviation dates to his eighth birthday when his father built for him a Cleveland model of the Piper Cub. He received a degree in mathematics from Stanford University in 1962, entered the U. S. Air Force, and, after the completion of training at Officer's Training School, was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the Air Force Reserve. He is currently stationed at Randolph Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas, where he is serving as an Electronics Data Processing Officer with the Directorate of Data Systems Development, Deputy Chief of Staff, Comptroller, Headquarters, Air Training Command.

This work on the Eagle Squadrons began in a curious way. While the author was a student at Stanford University he lived in a dormitory which had a policy of inviting faculty members to meals on a regular basis. As a result of this policy, he became acquainted with Professor Otis Pease. One day, during a mealtime conversation, he told the professor that he had discovered a photograph (in Alexander P. de Seversky's, *VICTORY THROUGH AIR POWER*) of something called "the Eagle Squadrons". He then asked Professor Pease if he would let him take "Directed Work in History" so that he might further investigate this subject.

Since neither man had any idea of the size or importance of the Squadrons, they agreed that Earl Boebert would work for three months on the subject and then report what he had discovered. If the subject seemed a blind alley at that time, he would write a paper on what he had found and that would be the end of it.

By the end of the three months period, however, Earl Boebert had uncovered sufficient evidence of the size and complexity of the subject to warrant a continued investigation. He'd also decided a trip to the British Air Ministry was absolutely necessary. To this end, a grant was awarded which allowed him to complete his work by traveling to England. It was in the spirit of academic inquiry that the grant sent a mathematician, interested in airplanes, to London to do work on a segment of R.A.F. history.'