

Bravery of the forgotten Battle of Britain heroes

THEY ARE the forgotten heroes of the Battle of Britain, the aerial conflict of which Sir Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime Prime Minister, famously said: "Never, in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few."

Understandably perhaps, it was our fighter pilots and air crew who enjoyed the bulk of the glory for their heroic deeds in the skies that enabled Britain to see off the mighty German Luftwaffe after nearly four months of battles from July to October 1940.

However, the bravery of the ground crew over this period was equally praiseworthy. These engineers, mechanics, fitters, riggers, armourers, medics and others were regularly bombed and strafed as they looked after both the aircraft and air crew around the clock at airfields all over the UK.

The statistics do not lie. During the Battle of Britain, at least 380 RAF ground personnel were killed, in addition to 544 RAF air crew. Eighty-five years on, it is time to right a wrong by highlighting the valour of those brave men – and women – on the ground, some of whom were decorated for their acts of gallantry.

August 16, 1940, for example, witnessed incredible bravery from two ground crew who went to the aid of a stricken airman, Pilot Officer William "Billy" Fiske, when his aircraft crash-landed back at RAF Tangmere, Sussex (now West Sussex).

Fiske was an intriguing character in his own right. He was an American who, before the war, had been a double Olympic gold medalist at bobsleigh, winning his first medal aged just 16. He later had the honour of being the country's flag-bearer at the 1932 Winter Olympics.

After the Second World War broke out in 1939, Fiske travelled to Britain and joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, claiming to be Canadian in order to be allowed to enlist. On July 12, 1940, he joined 601 Squadron (County of London), the so-called "millionaires' squadron", carrying out his first sorties eight days later, with two patrols.

Shortly after midday on August 16, 601 Squadron RAF was scrambled to intercept a squadron of German dive-bombers, with Fiske flying a Hurricane. The home squadron destroyed eight enemy aircraft but, after just 15 minutes of flying time, a German gunner put a bullet through Fiske's fuel tank.

With his aircraft badly damaged and his hands and ankles burnt, Fiske could have bailed out over safe territory. Instead, he opted to nurse his Hurricane home, gliding over a hedgerow to the airfield where he crash-landed his stricken plane wheels up.

Two ground crew, Corporal George Jones and Aircraftman 2nd Class Geoffrey Faulkner, raced to the scene in an ambulance and pulled Fiske from the cockpit of his blazing aircraft. The two men put out the pilot's burning clothes, administered first aid and placed him in an ambulance to be taken for medical treatment.

YET EVEN this was not the end of the bravery from ground crew. For, moments before Fiske landed, the medical centre at RAF Tangmere had been directly hit by a German bomb. The station's medical officer, Flying Officer Courtney Willey, was inside the building when it was hit and had been crushed by a chimney breast falling on him.

Injured, but saved from a fatal blow by his tin helmet, Willey staggered from the building to be confronted by Jones and Faulkner, bringing in a stretcher with Fiske on it.

With both eardrums punctured by the blast, Willey had to indicate to them using sign language that they should take Fiske to nearby Chichester Hospital. However, he first administered a dose of morphine to

the patient who was in agony due to the severe burns to his lower body. Fiske died in hospital the next day, August 17, 1940, aged 29, and he was buried three days later.

At RAF Tangmere, 14 RAF ground personnel and three civilians had been killed and 20 injured by the bombing that day. For their bravery in risking their lives to rescue the stricken pilot, Jones and Faulkner were both awarded the Military Medal (MM). Their brief citation stated: "During a heavy attack on an aerodrome, a burning British fighter aircraft landed. Despite heavy bombs which were falling and enemy machine gunning, Cpl. Jones and A/C.2 Faulkner took their ambulance across to the burning aircraft, assisted the pilot from it, extinguished his burning clothing and rendered first-aid treatment. Both airmen displayed calm courage and devotion to duty."

For his courage in attending to the injured while the bombs were falling and afterwards, Willey was awarded the Military Cross (MC). While serving in the Far East towards the end of the war, Willey was captured and became a prisoner of war. In prison, he continued to treat

'Pilots and air crew showed great courage in the skies but this rather eclipsed the sacrifices made by the ground crew'

ONSLAUGHT: Attacks on RAF Ford in Sussex across August 18, 1940 killed 25 people in total



They refuelled and rearmed aircraft while dodging enemy bombs... then rescued comrades from blazing downed planes. As a new book lists the 380-plus RAF ground personnel casualties, along with their burial places, LORD ASHCROFT remembers their sacrifice 85 years on



LESSER PRAISED: Ground crew pose on Spitfire wing; Hawker Hurricanes, above



power lines. Clack was electrocuted, dying shortly afterwards.

On October 30, 1940, four men became the final casualties from ground crew during the Battle of Britain. Butterfly anti-personnel mines were dropped on RAF Wattisham in Suffolk, resulting in the death of two men, Sergeant George Birkhead and Flight Sergeant William Fisher. Two others, Flight Lieutenant Fred Berry and Aircraftman 1st Class Frank Hamilton, were badly injured.

As well as displaying incredible courage, the ground crew often had to show grit and determination. Many lived in the most simple accommodation, with basic wartime food rations.

When they were under direct attack, they often sheltered in so-called "slit trenches", little more than narrow gaps in the ground built besides air strips to offer limited protection to personnel at the height of a bombing raid.

Andy Saunders, a military historian and author, has compiled a full list of ground personnel casualties, along with their burial places, for a newly revised edition of Battle of Britain Then and Now, which he has edited. The book was first published in 1980 but has been updated to mark the 85th anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

Saunders told me: "There is no doubt that over the decades, the gallantry of ground personnel has been largely overlooked."

"Eighty-five years on, it is absolutely right that their brave deeds should be championed. Of course, the pilots and air crew showed great courage in the skies but this has rather eclipsed the sacrifices made by the ground crew."

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft; Battle of Britain Then and Now by Andy Saunders (Pen and Sword) will be available to buy from early 2026



LIFE AND DEATH: Billy Fiske whose Hurricane crashed; right, medallist Avis Hearn



UNFLAPPABLE: Josephine Robins was decorated for her first-aid efforts

RAF Ford in Sussex on August 18 alone, 15 Fleet Air Arm personnel – the aviation branch of the Royal Navy – were killed, with two other military personnel and eight civilians.

However, by nightfall on August 18, due to the bravery and resilience of personnel in the skies and on the ground, 69 German aircraft had been destroyed and 97 airmen killed or captured.

Women ground crew were among those killed and wounded during the Battle of Britain. Aircraftwoman 1st Class Carol Lawry, of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) who was based at RAF Kenley in Surrey, was – tragically and somewhat ironically – killed while enjoying a few days' leave in Eastbourne, Sussex. She was badly injured by a German bomb on October 8, 1940 and died the next day.

Women ground crew were also decorated for their efforts. Corporal Josephine Robins, of the WAAF, was awarded the MM for her bravery on August 13, 1940 during a bombing raid on RAF Detling, Kent, that killed several men and injured others.

The citation for her gallantry ended: "Though dust and fumes filled the shelter, Corporal Robins immediately went to the assistance of the wounded and rendered first aid. While they were being removed from the demolished dug-out, she fetched a stretcher

and stayed with the wounded until they were evacuated. She displayed courage and coolness of a very high order in a position of extreme danger."

Similarly, Acting Corporal Avis Hearn received the MM for bravery while carrying out vital communications work at the RAF radar station at Poling, Sussex, as it came under heavy bombing on "the hardest day".

Her citation stated that she "remained at her post in a building which threatened to collapse around her, doing her work as much as the terrific noise would permit".

NEVITABLY, accidents, as well the Luftwaffe, caused death and injuries among the ground crew. The youngest RAF casualty of the Battle of Britain, and possibly the entire war, was Aircraftman Harry Clack, of 54 Maintenance Unit, on salvage and repair duties.

Clack was only 16 years old when he was involved in recovering the remains of a Dornier 215, which had been shot down at Eaton Socon, Bedfordshire, on October 24, 1940.

During the recovery process, the crane that the rescue party was using touched overhead

injured and sick fellow prisoners and so, after gaining his freedom, he was appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

August 18, 1940 – two days after Fiske was badly injured and a day after he died –

became known as "the hardest day" because wave after wave of German aircraft attacked numerous airfields in the south and south-east of England, involving 850 sorties.

In those 24 hours came a series of attacks on airfields including Kenley, Biggin Hill, West

Malling, Croydon, Ford, Gosport and Thorney Island. On that day alone, 15 RAF ground personnel were killed or fatally wounded and another 26 injured.

RAF ground crew were not the only ones to become casualties on this and other days: at