

The 40th anniversary of the Battle of Britain at Biggin Hill

The *Daily Telegraph* published an article in early 1980 reporting the forthcoming 40th anniversary celebrations planned for all personnel who served at Biggin Hill airfield during the Battle of Britain. The invitation was being sent to all civilians as well as servicemen and women around the world including their spouses, and the programme was to feature a commemorative service conducted by Dr. Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a luncheon, followed by the air display and ending with an ENSA concert in the evening. No mention was made of a souvenir booklet so I telephoned the RAF station commander Wing Commander John Myers and suggested that I was prepared to undertake the design, typesetting and production of such a booklet for sale to the public, with the intention that all profits were donated to the RAF Benevolent Fund. No one at RAF Biggin Hill seemed aware of what that involved but I wanted to undertake the project as a personal tribute to my elder brother Cliff, a flight engineer, who was killed when two Lancaster bombers collided over Dunholme, Lincolnshire on November 10 1943, and also a tribute to The Few.

I was invited to meet the commanding officer at Biggin Hill to explain in detail how I envisaged the production of the booklet and in the Officers Mess I offered my services for design and typesetting free and stated that with my business contacts I could obtain paper and printing costs at very special discounts, happily the idea was accepted. I observed a painting hanging in the Officers Mess illustrating an aerial combat scene by David Shepherd, the artist famous for his wildlife paintings and suggested it would make a very suitable subject for the front cover of the booklet. My thoughts were that the editorial should trace the aviation history of Biggin Hill through the ages to the present time and focus on the squadrons that served there during the Battle of Britain. Further, I proposed that the RAF should appoint a serving officer as editor, and Squadron Leader Nick Wright who worked at the MoD in London, but lived at Biggin Hill was appointed. He was able to access material that was on the restricted list and provided photographs that were unobtainable elsewhere. Nick and I worked very closely together to produce the booklet we titled 'The Bump', the name popularly known by the services at Biggin Hill. The production was well received and reviews in the local press were very supportive. A copy was given to each invited guest to the Reunion Day and the booklet was put on sale to the public on the airfield on the day as well as making copies available through bookshops.

Much to my surprise, my wife Alice and I were sent an invitation to attend 'A Reunion to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of The Battle of Britain' to be held on Sunday, September 21, 1980 at Biggin Hill airport from Wing Commander Myers as a thank you for the work I had undertaken. This proved to be a most memorable day as we joined the Reunion with all the wonderful people around. The event was centred in a hangar that was divided into two areas, the first dedicated to the main assembly and the other to refreshments and converted later in the day for the evening variety show. In the centre of the hangar separating each area were panels displaying photographs of many of the personnel from the Battle of Britain period who had served at Biggin Hill. The programme began with a service conducted by Dr. Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the main assembly and we were directed and placed among the air aces. We expected to fit in somewhere at the back and felt rather embarrassed and humble and thought we did not deserve to be so honoured; we were treated like royalty. I don't know what the air aces were told about us but they treated both of us as though we were each one of them! The service was broadcast to the airfield and Nick Wright who had set up stall there to

sell 'The Bump' reported that a wonderful stillness fell everywhere as the public stood in silence to listen to the service. It was estimated the occasion drew a crowd of 30,000.

Following the service we all moved to the refreshments area and reviewed the array of photographs. It was strange to see these young men and women in the 1940-circa photographs, now 40 years later in the flesh, which must have stirred many happy as well as some sad memories we heard from the avid conversations going on around us.

We queued for lunch and suddenly came face to face with a couple of our neighbours. Dick Moore and his wife Margaret lived in Downe, and he served as a ground crew member of the RAF at Biggin Hill at the time. Dick was amazed to see us as he knew I had served in the Royal Navy. All became clear to him when we explained how we had become involved. Margaret was German and a lovely lady who joined in the good banter when we discussed why German wine was being served at lunch!

After the lunch we were directed to the airstrip to view the air display. Here the air aces and other RAF officers assembled whilst the other ranks gathered nearby. Happily, as time passed by the parties began to mix. We were placed with the air aces who expressed their admiration for 'The Bump' and were happy to add their signatures to a copy presented to us by Wing Commander Myers and Squadron Leader Wright as a memento. In the air display a mock 'dog-fight' was staged with a Spitfire and Messerschmitt which drew more banter from us when we asked Margaret Moore did she keep the Messerschmitt in the garage at home!

The sad event of the day was the crash of an American bomber in Biggin Hill Valley that killed all seven crew and passengers aboard towards the end of the air display. The Douglas A26 Invader bomber was taking part in the air show and failed to gain height, but fortunately where it crashed no one else was injured. Half an hour previous the area in the Valley had been crowded with picnic parties so it was a great relief they were all safe.

Evening came and we all gathered in the hangar for the ENSA concert. ENSA – every night something awful – as it was called by the services, but it wasn't. It was a fun night with Cardew (the Cad) Robinson as compere and a variety of acts including top of the bill Anne Shelton who flew especially over from Canada for the event. Anne was the RAF's favourite sweetheart as Vera Lynn was the Army's favourite. Anne included the German song 'Lily Marlene' and introduced her as a 'lady of the night'. This drew protests from Margaret Moore who claimed that it was a song about two young lovers! More banter! The day came to a close and left us with memories we shall treasure forever.

However, there was more to come. Some time after the main event we were invited to attend another ceremony at Biggin Hill. Evidently the sales of 'The Bump' and the donations that resulted were sufficient for the RAF to have a new stained glass window dedicated to the Battle of Britain installed in the Chapel on the airfield, which was blessed by the Bishop of Croydon.



The cover of 'The Bump' – oil painting by David Shepherd