

Per ardua ad astra

“For me, and I think the British people, these aeroplanes represent innovation, ingenuity, determination, and an unwillingness to be bullied.”

- Squadron Leader Andy Millikin, Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, RAF, as featured in the just released film documentary, [Spitfire](#) (2018).

“Spitfires, George. Greatest plane ever built.. Rolls Royce Merlin engines. Sweetest sound you could hear out here.”

- Mr. Dawson (Mark Rylance) in Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* (2017).

“Churchill followed the day’s fighting from No. 11 Group headquarters at Uxbridge, and he left clearly affected. Climbing into his limousine with Ismay, he said, “Don’t speak to me. I’m too moved.” His lips were trembling. They rode in silence for a few minutes. Then Churchill turned to Ismay and said something that “burned into” Ismay’s mind, so much so that he went home that night and repeated the words to his wife.

Five days later, when the most difficult and dangerous period in the battle was about to begin, Churchill paused during a long address to the House of Commons on the overall war situation, and delivered his tribute to the RAF:

“The gratitude of every home in our island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge of mortal danger, are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and their devotion.”

Then, he spoke the words that had so moved Ismay:

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

- From William Manchester and Paul Reid’s *The Last Lion*, volume three, ‘Winston Spencer Churchill: Defender of the Realm, 1940-1965’.

The history of the Spitfire is a catalogue of triumph against adversity. Its designer, the aeronautical engineer RJ Mitchell, died in 1937, three years before his creation's finest hour. Throughout its history, the Royal Air Force had been dismissive of fighter aircraft, hewing to the conventional wisdom that the bomber would always get through. When, in 1931, the British Air Ministry put out its original request for new fighters, F7/30, three designs were selected, and none of them proved to be much good. The Air Ministry briefly considered ordering aircraft from Poland instead.

As the economist Tim Harford points out, one of the firms competing for the RAF contract, Supermarine, delivered its prototype late and below specification. The unsung hero of the Spitfire's gestation was Air Commodore Henry Cave-Browne-Cave, a civil servant actually capable of serving his country rather than capitulating to foreigners. He decided to bypass the commissioning process and order the new plane as "a most interesting experiment". Tim Harford:

It's not hard to make the case that the Spitfire was one of the most significant new technologies in history. A brilliant, manoeuvrable, and superfast fighter, the Spitfire—and its pin-up pilots, brave to the point of insouciance—became the symbol of British resistance to the bombers of the Nazi air force, the Luftwaffe. The plane, with its distinctive elliptical wings, was a miraculous piece of engineering.

"She really was a perfect flying machine," said one pilot. A Californian who travelled to Britain to sign up for the Royal Air Force agreed: "I often marvelled at how this plane could be so easy and civilized to fly and yet how it could be such an effective fighter."

"I have no words capable of describing the Spitfire," testified a third pilot. "It was an aircraft quite out of this world."

It wasn't just the Spitfire pilots who rated the plane. The top German ace, Adolf Galland, was asked by Hermann Göring, head of the Luftwaffe, what he required in order to break down the stubborn British resistance. "I should like an outfit of Spitfires" was the terse reply. Another German ace complained, "The bastards can make such infernally tight turns. There seems to be no way of nailing them."

Thanks to the Spitfire, Britain's tiny Royal Air Force defied overwhelming odds to fight off the Luftwaffe's onslaught in the Battle of Britain. It was a dismal mismatch: Hitler had been single-mindedly building up his forces in the 1930s, while British defence spending was at historical lows. The Luftwaffe entered the Battle of Britain with 2,600 operational planes, but the RAF boasted fewer than 300 Spitfires and 500 Hurricane fighters. The wartime Prime Minister himself, Winston Churchill, predicted that the Luftwaffe's first week of intensive bombing would kill 40,000 Londoners. But thanks in large part to the Spitfire's speed and agility, the Germans were unable to neutralize the RAF.

This meant the Germans were unable to launch an invasion that could quickly have overwhelmed the British Isles. Such an invasion would have made D-Day impossible, denying the United States its platform to liberate France. It would likely have cost the lives of 430,000 British Jews. It might even have given Germany the lead in the race for the atomic bomb, as many of the scientists who moved to the United States to

work on the Manhattan Project were living in Britain when the Spitfires turned back the Luftwaffe..

It is only a small exaggeration to say that the Spitfire was the plane that saved the free world. The prototype cost the government roughly the price of a nice house in London: 10,000 pounds..

When we invest money now in the hope of payoffs later, we think in terms of a return on our investment—a few percent in a savings account, perhaps, or a higher but riskier reward from the stock market. What was the return on Henry Cave-Browne-Cave's investment of 10,000 pounds? Four hundred and thirty thousand people saved from the gas chambers, and denying Adolf Hitler the atomic bomb. The most calculating economist would hesitate to put a price on that.

In June 2016, the UK electorate voted to leave the EU. [Dominic Frisby](#) provides as good a summary of the reasons in favour of leaving as anyone. In [this recent interview](#) with James Delingpole, we provide one: if you're trapped in a burning building, it makes sense to try and make your way out. It is unfortunate that the last two years have been squandered by politicians in denial trying to either suppress or reverse the outcome of the referendum, but there is surely still time to deliver on the original Brexit vote, as 17.4 million people intended. Since Brussels appears intransigent, a 'No Deal' outcome may now be the optimal solution. But there is so much to play for and to be positive about. Britain is a maritime trading nation. Cutting taxes and regulations should only be the start of it. This should not be about craven supplication but rather exploiting a generational opportunity for the good of the country as a whole. Creating a Singapore off the western shelf of Europe would strike terror in the hearts of pigeon-hearted EU bureaucrats. But we have installed a Remainer to do a Leaver's job. There is still time to reverse two years of drift, provided the project has new life breathed into it by politicians – and civil servants – of vision and conviction.

At the conclusion of David Fairhead and Anthony Palmer's [outstanding documentary](#) on this most iconic of aircraft, Spitfire owner Maxi Gainza comments as follows:

When I was a child I read about Spitfires and the Battle of Britain. This aeroplane stands for so much. Grace and gallantry. She's a symbol of freedom.

The likes of Anna Soubry, Tony Blair and perhaps even Theresa May herself might get something out of watching it.

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