

EXTRACT FROM BELGIAN BRANCH NEWSLETTER 62 – JULY 2000

CIRCUS 178 - 1st JUNE 1942

Our friend and Life-Member Bobby LAUMANS sends us a piece of History (See following pages)

Bobby was detained at the (in)famous Stalag Luft III at Sagan and took part in certain ways in the planning of the renown "GREAT ESCAPE"

Fortunately, he drew a "lucky" number to join the escaping queue; lucky in the sense that the alarm was sounded before everyone could get away and he had to stay in the camp.

Of the prisoners who ran away only three succeeded in reaching ENGLAND

All the others were caught and FIFTY were assassinated by the Gestapo, among them a Belgian pilot H. PICARD shot on 25.03.44.

Bobby writes: " *Mr Peter CAYGILL is a British author and has written a book called: "A Temporary Expedient" to be published by "Airlife" probably not before 2001. It is an operational history of the Spitfire V in Northern Europe. He has kindly given me permission to publish in this Newsletter, a few pages of Chapter 6 of his book concerning "CIRCUS 178" as flown by the DEBDEN wing on F' June 1942.*

I flew on that operation with 350 (Belgian) Squadron with fatal consequences to myself I was among the 20% losses suffered by the DEBDEN wing on that fatal day. Here follows the extract as written by Peter• CAYGILL":

CHAPTER SIX

By the middle of 1942, JG 2 *Richthofen* and JG 26 *Schlageter* had completed their conversion onto the Fw 190A and had approximately 200 machines serviceable at any one time. The technical snags which had caused problems shortly after the Focke Wulf's introduction to operational service had largely been overcome and the benefits of standardisation could now be exploited to the full. In comparison with the Me 109F, the new fighter offered its pilots much greater freedom when it came to engaging enemy formations, an advantage that could not be grasped fully as long as the 109 was still fighting alongside it.

It also took time for *Luftwaffe* pilots to adjust to their new mount. Before its arrival they had contented themselves by fighting defensively, only joining combat when the tactical situation was in their favour. Actions had usually consisted of short, sharp encounters on the fringes of the RAF's incursions into northern France and only when the 109s achieved local superiority did they consider coming down in any strength to indulge in a dogfight. Although still not in the same league as the Spitfire, the Fw 190's performance in the horizontal plane was better than the 109F which allowed its pilots to be much more aggressive in combat. As confidence grew with increased experience, they were able to take the initiative on many more occasions. The actions that had already been fought in the skies over France had shown the Fw 190 to be a formidable adversary, but the level of dominance that it was capable of achieving was underlined during operations that were carried out on the first two days in June 1942.

Situated three miles to the south-east of Saffron Walden in Essex, Debden was one of 11 Group's most important stations and had been in the forefront of the desperate actions fought during the Battle of Britain. In the early war years it was associated mainly with the Hawker Hurricane, but by mid-1942 these had been replaced by the Spitfire Vbs of 71, 111 and 350 Squadrons.

Number 71 had reformed in September 1940, its pilots being drawn from American volunteers who thus formed the first of the so-called 'Eagle' squadrons. It had been flying Spitfire Vbs since September 1941 and was commanded by Squadron Leader Chesley Peterson DFC from Salt Lake City, Utah. 111 Squadron was one of the most famous units in the RAF and had flown some of the classic inter-war biplane fighters including the Gloster Grebe, Armstrong Whitworth Siskin and Bristol Bulldog. It was now led by Squadron Leader Peter Wickham DFC whose first combat 'kills' had been achieved in Gladiators in the Middle East. The Wing was completed by 350 Squadron, which had formed with Belgian personnel in November 1941 and was commanded by Squadron Leader D.A. Guillaume DFC, and 65 Squadron which was based at Debden's satellite at Great Sampford.

On 1 June eight Hurricane fighter-bombers carried out an attack on a target near Bruges in Belgium (Circus 178). Direct protection was provided by the Spitfire Vbs of the Hornchurch and Biggin Hill Wings, the Debden squadrons being required to contribute target support. 65 Squadron were first away from Great Sampford at 1245 hrs with Wing Leader, Wing Commander J.A.G. Gordon in the lead, 71, 111 and 350 Squadrons lifting off from Debden ten minutes later. Having crossed the English coast at Deal at 1312 hrs, the Wing climbed over the Channel so that it crossed into occupied Europe at Thourout with 65 in the low position at 20,000ft and 111, 71 and 350 stepped up above and behind at 22, 23 and 25,000ft respectively. Weather conditions were ideal with excellent visibility.

As the Spitfires curved towards Bruges, condensation trails could be seen a few thousand feet above and to the south as a lame force of Fw 190s from I and 1115G26 watched and waited. The attack did not materialise until the Wing was on its way out near Blankenberge but when it came, it was timed to perfection and delivered with devastating effect. The German formation was led by Major Gerhard Schopfel who launched a feint attack by part of his force which succeeded in drawing 111 Squadron out of position. Within seconds, all squadrons were heavily engaged and the action that followed emphasized the fact that the *Luftwaffe* could now seize the initiative and press home its advantage, Wit so desired.

Looking down and to his left, Squadron Leader Peterson (BL449 - White 1) saw six 190s diving on 111 Squadron and immediately went to their assistance. The Germans were aware of the threat and turned towards him, but by closing his throttle completely and pulling hard, Peterson found that he was able to get behind one at around 100 yards range. Two bursts of cannon and machine-gun fire struck the wing root and cockpit area of the 190 and it spun away trailing white petrol smoke.

Pulling back up to 20,000ft, Peterson attempted to help four Spitfires of 350 Squadron which were being attacked by a Focke-Wulf formation twice its size. By the time he arrived it was already too late and six of the 190s transferred their attention to: him. Despite carrying out a series of violent evasive manoeuvres, his aircraft suffered a cannon strike in its wing but was not further damaged, even though all six of the enemy aircraft were, by now, very close. During a hectic dogfight, Peterson even managed to achieve a few De Wilde strikes on one of the 190s before diving for home.

71 Squadron's Red Section, led by Flight Lieutenant Gus Daymond DFC (BL583), were also attacked and began a hard turn to the left in an effort to get into a favourable position. During the turn Daymond became aware that his No.2, Pilot Officer E.G. Teicheira (BM386), was not turning as steeply as the rest of the section and he was not seen again. By now more 190s had arrived and the action had turned into general free-for-all. As he was endeavouring to help a Spitfire that was coming under attack, Daymond was set upon by no less than five 190s. Wringing every ounce of performance from his aircraft, he was able to foil their attacks which were kept up right from the Dutch coast to a point ten miles off the North Foreland. Like his C.O., he managed to get off some snap shots and one of the 190s suffered minor damage to its rear fuselage. Most of 71 Squadron's pilots fired their guns and Pilot Officer Eugene M. Potter (W3761 - Red 3), Pilot Officer Robert S. Sprague (W3368 - White 3) and Sergeant Morgan (W3957 - White 2) all put in claims for Fw 190s damaged.

The initial attack on 111 Squadron as witnessed by Chesley Peterson was carried out by Hauptmann Johannes Seifert's *I Gruppe* which shot down Rhodesian Sergeant R.C. Bryson (AB938 - White 2) and Sergeant W.H. Cumming (BL728 - Blue 4). Several other aircraft were hit including Flight Lieutenant R.C. Brown (AB905), Sergeant G.C. Heighington (BM629) and Sergeant H.D. Christian (AR281), but all managed to return to base without further mishap.

Continuing his dive, Seifert then attacked 65 Squadron. Almost immediately Wing Commander Gordon (BL936 - White 1) was heard giving a Mayday call and both he and his No.2, Sergeant R.E. Parrack (BL647) were shot down and killed. As Blue section were trying to fight their way home they came under accurate fire from the heavy gun batteries situated along the coast, but this did not deter Oberleutnant Johannes Schmidt of the 3rd *Staffel* who shot down Pilot Officer J.R. Richards (AR39 I - Blue 3). As Richards took to his parachute, his wingman, Sergeant V. Kopacek (AB133), also came under attack, but he managed to break free and landed a few

minutes later at Manston with a shrapnel wound in his right thigh. His Spitfire was later classified Cat Ac although he resolutely maintained that the damage had been caused by flak and not by enemy aircraft. Thanks to the efforts of the rescue services, Pilot Officer Richards was picked up by motor launch after spending 21/2 hours in his dinghy and was brought safely back to Manston.

The top cover squadron, Number 350, were attacked by around twenty Fw 190s of Hauptmann Josef Tips' Priller's III *Gruppe* which had maintained its height as Seifert had dived through the lower squadrons. Blue section soon became separated and Flight Sergeant G.G.A.J. Livyns (BL822 - Blue 4) was shot down near Ostend having lost touch with his leader. In the meantime, White section were also in trouble as their No.3 had been forced to return early with engine trouble, and Sergeant L.J.A. Hansez (W3626 - White 4) was shot down before he could close the gap with the two remaining aircraft.

Two other members of Blue section, Flight Lieutenant Du Monceau (BL540 - Blue 1) and Flying Officer R.J.L. Laumans (AB173 - Blue 3) found themselves quite alone and as they were crossing out over the coast, witnessed a Spitfire go into the sea near Ostend. The aircraft came down close to a fleet of fishing boats but there was no sign of a parachute. Not long after another Spitfire was seen being attacked by an Fw 190, its pilot baling out into the sea. As Du Monceau sent out a Mayday call, his No.2 chased inland after the 190 which was soon joined by four others. Robert Laumans takes up the story

"Between each engagement I tried to fly a few miles towards England as it was obvious that I couldn't shoot down all of the Germans. It was also obvious that they wouldn't let me go! My petrol was going down fast but I was ready to do battle to the finish. It was no good trying to flee as the Fw 190 was faster than the Spitfire V so I faced them each time they attacked. Finally, when I was firing at one of the enemy in front of me, two of his comrades attacked from astern, one left, one right. A shell suddenly entered my cockpit from the left-hand side, pierced the dashboard and exploded in the petrol tank in front. My aircraft was immediately set on fire and the only thing I could do was to bale out. The combat had started at around 25,000ft and I abandoned the aircraft at 900 ft, more than enough time to deploy the parachute. I ended up in the sea somewhere between Ostend and Dover, successfully opened my dinghy, and remained drifting for sixty-three hours. On the third day, in late afternoon, I was picked up by the Germans a couple of miles outside Nieuport (Belgium). I spent three days at Coxyde airfield with high fever (exposure) and was eventually sent to Stalag Left III at Sagen."

One of the most worrying aspects of this operation was the fact that a formation comprising forty-six Spitfires had been badly mauled and had suffered losses approaching 20%. There had been several occasions in recent weeks when large numbers of Fw 190s had been encountered, but this was one of the first actions that the Germans had been confident enough to take on a complete Wing. Up until now they had been content to pick off individual squadrons or sections which had become detached from the main Wing formation, surplus aircraft being used to contain the remaining RAF fighters rather than engage them. Thanks to the fighting qualities of the Fw 190, such reservations could now be swept aside.

The events of 1 June highlighted the difficulties that Fighter Command now had to contend with over northern Europe. The battle to win the technological war has often been likened to a pendulum swinging to and fro, with the advantage going to one side and then the other. For the time being at least, it was abundantly clear that this effect had moved decisively in favour of the *Luftwaffe*. As far as the RAF was concerned, worse was to follow.