

The Few of the Few

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

Winston Churchill’s words immediately conjure up images of plucky RAF chaps running to their Spitfires to go and give ‘Jerry’ a damn good thrashing. However, it is frequently overlooked that 56 Fleet Air Arm pilots also took part in the Battle of Britain with four becoming fighter ‘aces’. Although rarely acknowledged, three Naval pilots also flew with the famous 242 Squadron commanded by the legendary Douglas Bader.

The young Naval aviators who took part in the Battle of Britain between July and October 1940 saw some of the fiercest fighting of the battle. 23 Naval pilots served with twelve RAF Fighter Command Squadrons, flying Spitfires and Hurricanes, and a further 33 served with 804 and 808, the two Fleet Air Arm Battle of Britain Squadrons who operated under Fighter Command, providing Dockyard defence.

The first Naval fighter ace in the battle was Sub Lieutenant Francis Dawson-Paul who flew Spitfires with 64 Squadron. He was followed by Sub Lieutenant Arthur Blake from 19 Squadron, who also flew Spitfires, and then Sub Lieutenants ‘Dickie’ Cork and ‘Jimmy’ Gardner from Douglas Bader’s 242 Squadron. Cork was awarded the DFC for his actions.

The two Fleet Air Arm squadrons flew Gloster Sea Gladiators, Grumman Martlets and Fairey Fulmars, normally only seen in carriers. 804 Naval Air Squadron, based at Hatston, consisted of 22 pilots flying Sea Gladiators and Martlets whilst the 11 pilots of 808 Squadron, based at Wick, were equipped with Fulmars.

Amongst these pilots were five Petty Officers earning themselves the Battle of Britain Clasp. Petty Officers TJ Mahoney, FL Shaw and WEJ Stockwell flew with 804 Naval Air Squadron

and Petty Officers, RE Dubber and DE Taylor flew with 808 Naval Air Squadron. Royal Marine pilots were also represented in these squadrons; Captain AE Marsh RM and Lieutenant AJ Wright RM flew with 804 and Lieutenant RC Hay RM with 808.

Seven Naval pilots were killed and two wounded during the Battle of Britain and whilst all 56 Naval aviators are listed on the Battle of Britain memorial in London, the contribution made by the Royal Navy is rarely recognised. In the iconic films ‘Battle of Britain’ and ‘Reach for the Sky’, despite Douglas Bader having three Naval Officers in his Squadron, including his wingman ‘Dickie Cork’, no reference is made to them. In the eyes of the world the Battle of Britain is, and always will be, an RAF victory and the contribution and sacrifice of the ‘Few’ is something that is indisputable. However, the Royal Navy, and those with an interest in Naval aviation history, should never forget the bravery of the few within the ‘Few’ who fought in Naval uniform.

Sunday 15 September 1940 was the decisive turning point in the Battle of Britain and this year’s annual Battle of Britain service will be held in Westminster Abbey on Sunday 20 September 2009.