

September 2025

What better way to celebrate being 90 than joining your boyhood heroes in a Spitfire?!

In March this year my father, Anthony Cobbold (#539) - the driving force behind the Cobbold Family History Trust, turned the ripe old age of 90. My brothers, Tim, Jeremy, and I decided that, rather than give him some old bit of tit-tat, we would offer him the chance to take a ride in a Spitfire with <https://flyaspitfire.com/>. After all, he had always talked about his early years being the war years and how he especially held the RAF and those who fought the Battle of Britain in the highest regard. And those who frequent the pages of Cobbwebs and the CFHT website will already know how keenly he wants us to remember all those – especially family members – who served in the military and the World Wars.

To his credit, he embraced the idea whole heartedly not least because my lovely neighbour, Richard Verrall, who happens to be one of the most experienced Spitfire pilots in the country, convinced him that he was 90 years young – and would love the flight! On a spectacular afternoon on August 10th Richard flew Dad from Biggin Hill to Beachy Head - Spitfire Alley as it was known in the war – completing a couple of barrel rolls along the way. Not a bad effort for 90! He loved it for the sheer enjoyment. But it brought back vivid memories of the days when he would see Spitfires in the sky across Southern Britain when he was very young, and it clearly gave him cause to reflect, quite deeply, on what was happening 85 years ago.

Battle of Britain Day this year - September 15th - will mark the 85th anniversary of the day a few young men (those to whom “never has so much been owed”) stood up and were counted in the most extraordinary way to save our country.

Anthony was a young lad aged 5 in Bristol on that day in 1940 and remembers the sense and feeling of that time in life - if not the exact day - very well. As he recalls, “Of course I didn’t really understand the detail, but I do remember that we passed the first few years of the war in a perpetual state of concern that our freedom might be taken away from us.”

As he related to me further, “It is far too easy for us to forget what a truly perilous state Great Britain and indeed all of Europe was in as 1940 unfurled as a year. Only Britain stood still free less than a year after the war had started.” During 1940, rationing was started in the UK, Hitler was rampaging across Europe – Norway and Denmark fell, France was invaded in May, and Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg were occupied shortly thereafter. Allied, British and French forces withdrew, backs against the wall, to Dunkirk And we all know what happened there as a flotilla of small boats evacuated hundreds of thousands of bedraggled troops. We were, truly, up the proverbial creek without a paddle in sight: Dad recalls that his parents (my grandparents) knew it. Hitler was coming for us – Great Britain - next and we had better be prepared for the worst.

In early June that year, Churchill secured his own immortality and laid the foundation for a renewed sense of national identity as he exhorted us to “fight on the beaches ... and on the landing grounds ... and [presciently] with growing confidence in the air ...”. These were then, and remain today, extraordinary, brave and iconic words. But they were just words. Deep down Churchill had a strong sense of foreboding, and this

can only have deepened through the Summer as Hitler ploughed his way across the continent and massed his war machine on the other side of the channel.

It was during August and September 1940, that the German Luftwaffe waged an intensifying war in the skies over Britain. Hitler's objective was simple, clear and chilling: to secure supremacy in the air rapidly and unequivocally, and thereby lay the foundations for the full invasion of Great Britain – Operation Sea Lion. By doing so, he would, within 15 months, have conquered the whole of Europe. The odds were hugely in his favour: Germany had a total of over 4,000 aircraft vs the RAF having less than 2,000. The RAF had 903 fighters to defend our country against 1,800 bombers and 1,450 fighters.

This Battle of - and for - Britain reached its peak and its defining moment on September 15th 1940. On that day, the Luftwaffe launched what today might be called a "Shock & Awe" attack: a show of overwhelming scale and force that was designed to break the RAF and break Britain. In short, the full weight of the mightiest fighting force on the planet was trained on Britain – that "jewelled isle in a silver sea". How could it possibly resist? Hitler thought victory was certain.

But he had failed to reckon with the belligerent brilliance and sheer courage of the Spitfire and Hurricane flying young men of the RAF – brave young British men but also hundreds from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Poland. In that one day they flew 1000s of aircraft sorties in Spitfires and Hurricanes with some pilots double or even triple shifting during a 24-hour period like none other. They fought dogfight after dogfight; they rained down on and disrupted formation-flying German bomber squadrons destined London; they flew out of the sun and through the cloud base, cannily to catch the enemy unawares; they were unstinting and unyielding in their efforts to defend our freedom. Many paid the ultimate price for being so dedicated to the task.

By the end of the day the invaders had been battered and repelled, and the RAF was bruised but ultimately victorious. It was an extraordinary day; it was a turning point in the air battle for Europe; and it was the first defeat inflicted on the Nazi war machine. After the horrors of Dunkirk and the first half of 1940 more broadly, it provided a new foundation for the morale and resolution of Great Britain. And, of course, it was Churchill who captured the moment by reminding us for eternity that, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few".

As my father said after his flight, "up in that Spitfire with Richard I had an extraordinary, exhilarating, and fun experience. It was great and truly life affirming for me in my advancing years. But more importantly I had time to reflect and be even more inspired as I flew in that amazing Spitfire by the extraordinary courage and bravery of those young men who fought to save our freedom. When they were doing their service they literally saved the life that I and millions of others have had the good fortune to lead over the last 85 years. I will never forget them. None of us should."

Humphrey Cobbold
15th September 2025