

Surviving the Shambles

J. P. B. Greenwood

If it wasn't for a change in aircraft, John Greenwood would probably not have flown Hurricanes. He was trained at No 11 E&R FTS at Perth in Scotland, then went to Brize Norton in April 1939 as an acting pilot officer to fly twin-engined Oxfords. In November almost the whole course at Brize, No 2 FTS, went straight to Manston to form No 253 Squadron. This unit had been scheduled for Blenheims, hence the Oxford training, but in the event No 253 had no aircraft when the pilots arrived except two Magisters, and then some Fairey Battles that had been returned from France. They flew these around until the Air Ministry decided that No 253 should be a Hurricane squadron.

'We received the first Hurricanes in February 1940. The first one I flew, on the 10th, was L1600, an old wooden prop job, and we found that in fact we'd been given two aircraft from every other Hurricane squadron around and naturally they gave us their worst aircraft. My

impression of the Hurricane was that having read a lot about it, it was much slower than I'd been led to believe. On the clock we'd get 240mph if we were lucky and, having read that it could go at 332, I was rather disappointed, but on the other hand it was a lovely aeroplane to fly and we started to enjoy it right away.

'We continued to train on these aircraft, didn't see any action, and from Manston we moved to Northolt that same month. We did more training but they were slow on the climb. However, it was a lovely experience when you pulled the "tit" which gave us extra power and went about 30mph faster, but we were only allowed to fly with the "tit" pulled for five minutes, which we used to do regularly every time we flew. It was lovely to manoeuvre and having had no single engine training at Brize Norton, we had to learn to aerobate ourselves.

'Our CO at this time was Sq Ldr E.D.

Below:
Two sections of No 56
squadron before the war.
Note the aircraft letter on the
engine cowling beneath the
exhaust stubs.
British Aerospace





Elliott and flight commanders were Guy Harris and Anderson, a Canadian. On 9 May 1940 we moved to Kenley, but the next day the Germans invaded Holland. On the 16th, a huge Armstrong Whitworth Ensign airliner arrived without warning to take our men to France. The squadron was split in two, B being left behind while we in A Flight flew to Lille-Marck, following a Blenheim. We were supposed to join up with No 111 Squadron which had also been split, which was a bit upsetting.

'We landed at Lille early in the morning with our same old Hurricanes, still wooden fixed props, no armour and no rear view mirrors. We tried to join forces with Nos 87 and 504 Squadrons; they wouldn't have anything to do with us. At Lille the squadrons were all over the place, all round the field. Our radios were the old TR9D sets which gave us a range of about two miles and were absolutely useless. When the air-raid siren went off in Lille itself, we were supposed to take off. The first time that happened we had just landed and refuelled. We all took off and aircraft came from all directions from all over the field, and how we missed each other I

don't know. There was simply no organisation whatsoever. However, we joined up and tried to follow the others but what happened again I don't know but we managed to find our way back again and landed. That first night we slept in a tent as there was no accommodation for us. We were freezing cold, just lying on stretchers in our flying gear, no blankets or anything, and we got no sleep at all. The next morning standing in the early mist and cold, we saw two Lysanders, army co-op machines, making their final approach to land. Suddenly out of nowhere four Me109s just pulled in behind them. I remember hearing no sound whatsoever and off they went again while both Lysanders dived straight into the ground, both going up in a huge burst of flame. That was my initiation into air warfare.

'Later that morning the sirens went off again and off we went, again all taking off in a great "balbo". We didn't know who we were with or where we were going. It was a complete shambles. Anyway, we got up to about 15 to 16,000ft and ran into a big group of 30 to 40 Dorniers and Me110s. I'd forgotten to put my sight on and by the time I

Above:
Fit Lt Geoffrey 'Sammy'
Allard DFC, DFM, of No 85
Squadron, in France 1940.
courtesy Chaz Bowyer

Below:
Fit Lt John Greenwood,
John Greenwood



Right:
A Fairey Battle attached to
No 253 Squadron early in
1940 at RAF Manston. The
Battle was used to convert
squadron pilots from twin-
engined aircraft on to
Hurricanes. John Greenwood



did that and got on to an aircraft and pressed the button, I found my guns still on "safe" so had to turn them on. I was by then right in the middle of a mass of German aircraft but I got behind one and gave it a great burst – a Dornier which I believe was shot down. I was then separated from the others, found myself alone and went down on to the first airfield I found. I saw aircraft on it and discovered it to be Merville. I was completely lost having no maps, or if I did I couldn't read them. I was refuelled and then returned to Lille.

The next day all aircraft were supposed to take off and rendezvous with some Fairey Battles and escort them to Cambrai. We took off and climbed to 15,000ft, which seemed to be the fighting height in those days, but found no Battles. Then we suddenly engaged German aircraft and we all got split up again. I was on my own trying to find where I was, when a Me109 all on its own, passed just below me, about 100ft down. This time I had my sight and guns on – I was now putting them on before I took off otherwise I'd forget. I dived after the Messerschmitt, came up behind it and gave it a long burst, but our guns were loaded with deWilde ammunition, which gave off a white puff of smoke, rather like tracer only more accurate; it shook me. It looked just as if the German was firing at me! I could see my shots going into the 109 but it looked as if it was coming back. It scared the daylight out of me until I realised what it was. I continued to fire until my guns were empty and the 109 continued straight down into the ground and the pilot

didn't get out of it. Then I found my way back to Lille, where shortly afterwards we were told to evacuate as the Germans had just about cut us off. We only had two serviceable aircraft left, so I took mine and Plt Off David Jenkins took the other while the remaining Hurricanes were broken up with axes. Then the squadron personnel took to the lorries and came back to England via Boulogne, dumping all the kit, including mine – with my golf clubs I might add – into Boulogne Harbour. So when we got back we had nothing except what we stood up in. We were given £25 to re-equip ourselves which was totally inadequate, so spent some time flying to various airfields scrounging kit!

During our four days in France we had lost our flight commander, Anderson – no one knew what happened to him – had lost a couple of pilots, and all the Hurricanes except the two we flew back to Kenley. There we found that the other flight had been sent to Vitry and they had also suffered. The flight commander had been wounded, three pilots killed and two wounded.

Then we started flying Channel patrols to Boulogne and Dunkirk where we could see all the oil storage tanks burning; we did two patrols but lost Sqn Ldr Elliott on one of them. Then on 24 May we were sent off to Kirton Lindsey to re-form. We had no CO, no flight commanders and half the old squadron had gone. At Kirton we were met by a limping gentleman who took us to the Mess, whom we later found to be Douglas Bader, then a flight commander on No 222 Squadron.

We stayed there until we moved to Turn-



house on 22 July. Meanwhile we had a new CO, "Batchy" Atcherley, who lasted about five days. He was trying to get us back into action which we were loath to do just then, but he hadn't been in action and wanted to get to it. He was posted north to Wick and we got Sqn Ldr T.P. Gleave, while our flight commanders were G.A. Brown and W.P. Cambridge. We were re-equipped with Rotol prop Hurricanes, armour plating, mirrors... they were magnificent after our old ones. We really began to enjoy Hurricanes then. Later we went to Prestwick on 23 August and Sqn Ldr H.M. Starr arrived so we had two COs.

'By then we were all keen to return south. We were hearing and reading all about the Battle of Britain and all we could think of was shooting down enemy aircraft. Then on 29th we were ordered back to Kenley. We flew down and on the 30th we were in the air and really started flying. We got into a big fight on that day, got all split up and I found myself with an He111 which I shot down and saw crash into a field. I watched the crew climb out, one covered in blood - who later died while the others were taken prisoner. [This Heinkel was from KG1. No 253 Squadron lost three aircraft and pilots in this action with two more damaged, and lost another two Hurricanes and a pilot that afternoon.]

'The squadron lost a lot of aircraft and a lot of pilots in the Battle. We lost Sqn Ldr Starr on the 31st, Flt Lt Brown was wounded, Sqn Ldr Tom Gleave was shot down on the second day and badly burned. Bill Cambridge became acting CO until he was shot down

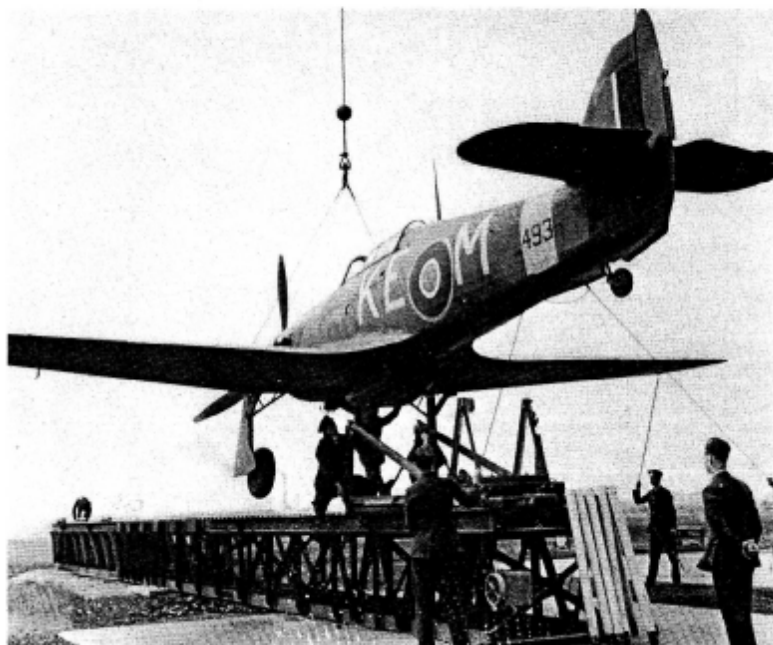
on 6 September, then Gerry Edge took over.

'He led us into a great attack on the 9th, when we did a head-on attack against 30-40 Ju88s who were going to bomb Hawkers at Kingston. We went in in line abreast and it was a most frightening experience, for as I was No 2 to the CO there was no way for me to break. The only way I could break was to push my stick forward, which I did, and of course the engine cut out and the 88s passed - it seemed like just inches - above me. But it was a success and I think it's recorded that we shot down five of them [all from KG30].

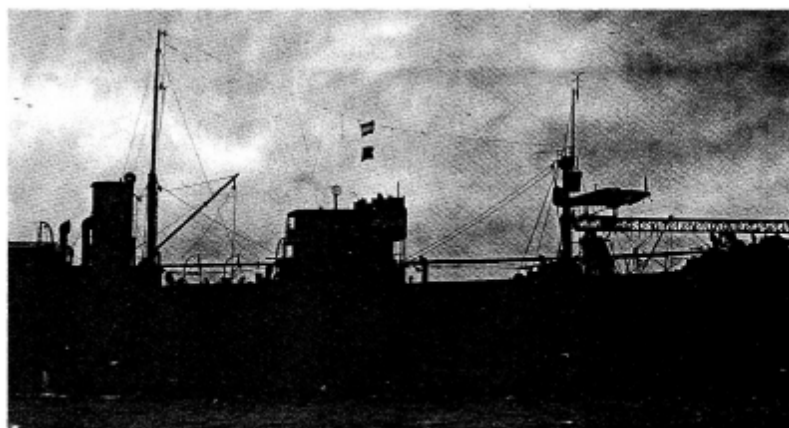
'The Battle went on and on. I remember on one occasion towards the end, after an engagement, finding myself alone yet again, this time at 28,000ft, which is a bloody stupid thing to be and be doing. I looked up and four Me109s crossed over the top of me at just a few hundred feet. It was the best target I'd had in my life and I pulled the nose up and had my sight and guns on and fired. But as I did so I stalled and spun. I suppose I was only doing 80mph and it just needed that little extra to spin me. If I hit any of the 109s I didn't have a clue for I saw nothing as I fell away.

'In November I was posted to an FTS to instruct on Masters. I loathed this and managed to get moved to an OTU as an instructor. In May 1941 a signal came round asking for volunteers for MSFU (Merchant Ship Fighter Unit). I volunteered and was sent to Farnborough where I was shot off on an experimental catapult. It consisted of a trolley with 12 cordite rockets about 6ft long and 5-6in in diameter - two parallel sixes in a

Above:
John Greenwood in his
No 253 Squadron Hurricane
at Northolt in April 1940.
John Greenwood



Above right:
A CAM ground training unit. Hurricane Z4936 was a Sea Hurricane used on CAM ships and at MSFU, Speke, then later at No 59 OTU. It was struck off RAF charge (SOC) in November 1944. *IWM*



Right:
The CAM ship *Empire Tide*. John Greenwood sailed on *Empire Flame* and the SS *Novelist* with Hurricane W9182. *IWM*

cradle. The aircraft – it was a Fulmar, not a Hurricane – was fitted on to a cable and held on by a strip of steel. The pilot sat in the cockpit with his engine running fully, his head and everything else braced, then he gave a signal, the rockets were fired, the strip of steel holding the aircraft was snapped, and the aircraft was shot off, with a force of $3\frac{1}{2}$ "G". I was third in line and it was frightening to watch. When the first chap went there was a tremendous bang, a sheet of flame and he went bouncing across the field and took off. Then the weather changed and we couldn't do any more and I didn't get any sleep that

night! The next day the same thing happened, one pilot was fired off before the weather stopped us, and again I got no sleep the second night. However, on the third day I went off, blacked out but came to bouncing across the field and took off. We were then sent to Speke where the unit was being formed under Sqd Ldr L.A. Strange DSO, MC, DFC*, a veteran from World War I who had got his bar to his 1918 DFC in this war for flying a Hurricane back from France [on his first flight on the type].

'On 1 July I was told to go to the shipyards at Birkenhead where the *Empire Flame*, a

5,000-ton wheat carrier just being finished, was to be my ship. The first trip was to Scotland where I was actually fired off the ship's bow to land at Abbotsinch then, reloading my Hurricane, we sailed for Halifax in a 60-70 ship convoy. I had a four-man RAF party with me to service the Hurricane, etc. It took 21 days to cross the Atlantic which was 21 days of tremendous boredom. I ended up pulling bullets from the Hurricane's guns and firing at birds and porpoises but I wasn't very popular so had to stop that!

'After a spell in Halifax I sailed to Savanna in Georgia on an old steamer. This was October 1941 with America still out of the war, so I had a great time in Georgia. Then we returned to Nova Scotia then back to England in another convoy. By this time I was bored stiff and decided to ask for a posting. Arriving off Anglesey I was fired off the ship and landed at Speke with the Hurricane full with the crew's contraband. I even took out the radio to help fit it all in. I got into a bit of trouble over this but really we got away with murder in that unit.

'I got a posting to No 55 OTU at Usworth and instructed there until February 1942 on Hurricanes until posted to No 615 Squadron at Fairwood Common and shortly afterwards we sailed for India. I had my 21st birthday in Freetown Harbour - very drunk - and was sent to bed by James Nicholson VC who was travelling on our ship.

'We arrived at Karachi on 26 May to pick up our aircraft to fly east but discovered another shambles. They had sent the wrong ship to Karachi. Our ship with our Hurricanes had gone to the Middle East while the ship that arrived was full of Spitfires, so we had to wait until the two ships were redirected.

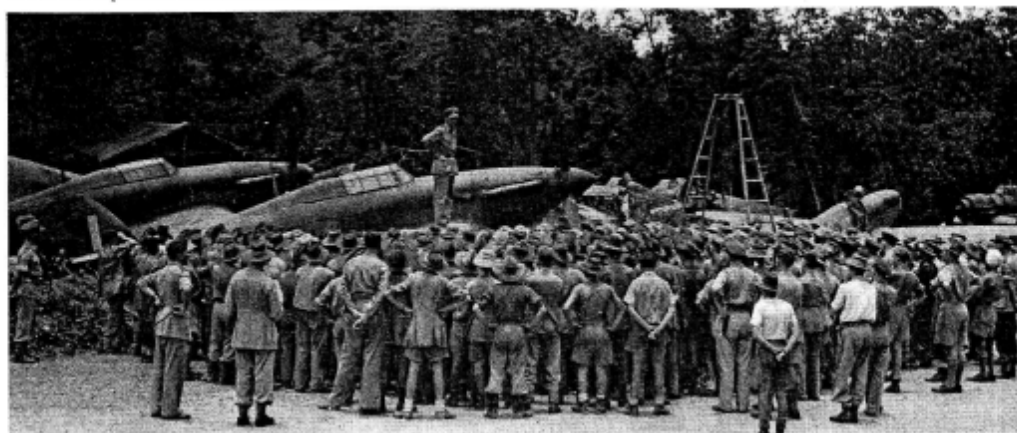
'Finally our Hurricanes arrived and we were led across India by a Blenheim via Delhi to Jessore. Here there was little for us to do so we were given various jobs. I went up to 4 Corps at Jorhat, Assam, and with a Brigadier Gilpin, drove all round in a jeep sighting various spots for airfields, some in the Imphal Valley, such as Palel. I eventually returned to No 615 Squadron in November 1942.

'In No 615 we had Hurricane IICs - four cannon and long range tanks - and were called fighters but we weren't fighters really. Fiat out we were doing 160mph and if we happened to meet a Japanese Zero the only way to get away was to head for the ground, and jink about so it couldn't get a bead on you. Later when the fighting started in the Arakan we flew down to Chittagong and used to shoot up boats and small steamers on the Mayu and Kaladan Rivers, with our cannon. At that time we had to make a raid on Akyab aerodrome when it was discovered there were some Zeros there. Two squadrons did the job, flying at nought feet and when we got there they were firing at us with heavy artillery shells. I went over the aerodrome but didn't see anything to shoot at, couldn't even see the airfield very well. On the way back to Cox's Bazaar, still at nought feet, flying over the coral strand, suddenly my cockpit filled with smoke and the motor stopped. I force landed on the beach - wheels up - having no time to do much else, then tried to destroy the IFF (the cock-a-doodle-do we called it), but it wouldn't blow up, so I unscrewed it and started walking down the beach carrying it. The next day I met a couple of natives who, encouraged with money from my money belt, took a message to the nearest army outpost 50 miles away. They later picked me up and I was back with the squadron on Christmas Eve.

'Just after Christmas I was leader, just with a No 2, flying a recce. On our way back we ran smack into six Zeros. We were both at about 1,000ft, so we screamed down to the deck and they followed. I had the "tie" pulled and got about 180 on the clock and we were jinking and weaving about with absolutely no distance between us and the tree tops. We managed to shake them and got home. Soon afterwards I was posted to No 17 Squadron in Calcutta as a flight commander, under Sqn Ldr M.C.C. "Bush" Cotton.

'One day I was flying an exercise near Jessore, very low down, when I heard a bang and there in my wing root was a great hole and a mass of bird feathers, etc. It didn't make a lot of difference to the performance of the

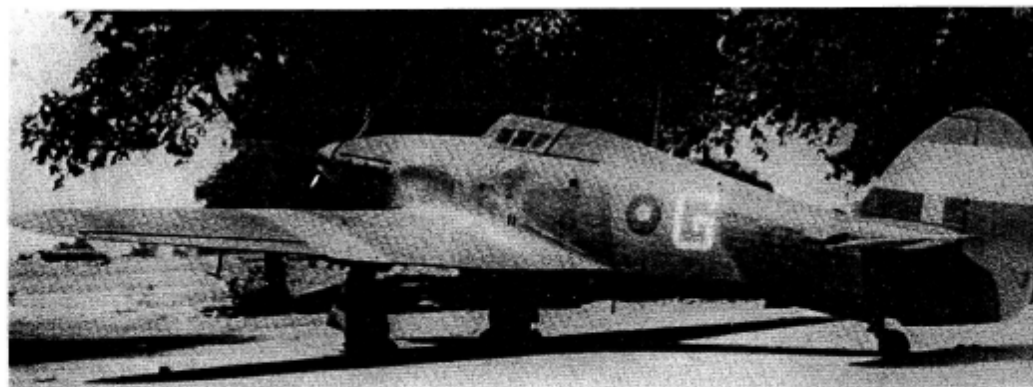
Below:
Lord Louis Mountbatten talking to air and ground crews at Imphal in 1944. There are Hurricanes and Spitfires under repair and maintenance in the background.



Right:
A Hurricane armed with four
20mm cannon flying over
Eastern India. *RWM*



Below:
Hurricane KZ353 of No 28
Squadron in Burma in 1944.
courtesy Chaz Bowyer



aircraft and it flew just as good as ever. When I landed there was just the neck and head of a vulture hanging down from this hole which was filled with blood and bone. The vulture must have flown up from the tree tops and I'd flown right into it.

'A couple of months later I was posted to No 151 OTU at Raisalpur instructing mainly Indian pilots on Hurricanes. Then in November 1943 I went down with malaria and heat stroke, returning to join No 9 (Indian) Squadron in February 1944 at Bhopal. Later we moved near to Khumbirgram at the time of Imphal and Kohima and we flew a number of attacks around Kohima. I left them in May going to No 224 Group HQ, which

was really the end of my Hurricane flying.

'I was being trained for a job as visual control officer to be parachuted into Singapore, when the war ended, which was perhaps just as well.

'The difference between operating Hurricanes in England and in Burma, India and Assam was hard to compare. In England we were on Hurricane Is with machine guns, and in the Far East on Hurricane IIs with cannons and long range tanks – much slower and really no longer a fighter although we did a number of bomber escorts. We couldn't really fight, only run away, so we were ground attack mostly. I much preferred the Hurricane Is, they were a much nicer aeroplane to fly.'

OPERATION RECORD BOOK. Appendix R.A.F. Form 54

DETAIL OF WORK CARRIED OUT.

Fromhrs..... tohrs..... By .. No. 253 Squadron. No. of pages used for day

Aircraft Type and No.	Crew	Duty	Time Up	Time Down	Details of Sortie or Flight	Reference
30/8/40.						
Hurricane.						
P.5179	S/Ldr. Starr.	Interception	1050	1220	<p>14 Hurricanes took off Kenley 1050 hours followed 5 more at 1125 hours when an attack on Croydon and Kenley appeared likely. The squadron was first ordered to patrol Maidstone, but the flights were separated and were ordered back to orbit base, where they were joined by the other 5 aircraft, and were then vectored off to the south, where, at 18,000 feet near Redhill, they saw three formations of 9 bombers escorted by 30 fighter, 110's and M.E. 109's.</p> <p>B Flight at once attacked the bombers, which included H.E. 111, D.O. 215 and possibly JU. 88's but observed no results with the exception of P/O. Novak (Green 3) who probably destroyed a D.O. 215 this pilot maintained that this bomber was a J.U.86). A Flight who were behind and below, followed in attack and Yellow 3 (P.O. Greenwood) fired all his ammunition into a Heinkel 111 which forced landed, four of the crew being seen climbing out. A series of individual fights took place, chiefly on M.E. 110's and M. 109's which had come to the rescue of the bombers.</p> <p>Blue 1 (F/Lt. Cambridge) delivered a beam attack which developed into a quarter attack, finally when a M.E. 110 was in a gentle dive with port wing streaming smoke, he gave it a long burst from a stern, causing the starboard engine to pour out black smoke and bring the e/a into a steep dive at 2,000 feet the M.E. 110 was still going straight down.</p> <p>Blue 2 (P.O. Samolinski) attacked an M.E. 110 from above and astern, silenced the rear gunner and saw his bullets entering wings and fuselage, sending it down in a spiral dive. He made a similar attack on a second M.E. 110 silencing the rear gunner. Blue 3 (Sgt. Innes) made a head on attack from 800 to 75 yards. As he broke away he saw parts breaking off the machine which then rolled over and dived towards the ground.</p> <p>S/Ldr. Gleave leading the emergency section, attacked some 109's which were trying to get his tails.</p>	
P.3213	P/O. Corkett.	"	1050	1220		
P.3537	P/O. Murch.	"	1050	1210		
V.6640'P'	P/O. Greenwood	"	1050	1155		
P.5185	P/O. Strang.	"	1050	1230		
P.3551	P/O. Clifton.	"	1050	1140		
P.3032	F/Lt. Cambridge.	"	1055	1220		
P.3115	Sgt. Innes.	"	1055	1220		
P.3717	P/O. Samolinski.	"	1055	1140		
P.3804	F/Lt. Wedgwood.	"	1055	1220		
P.3921	P/O. Jenkins.	"	1055	Crash		
R.2883'R'	P/O. Nowak.	"	1055	1140		
L.1965	P/O. Francis.	"	1030	Missi		
L.1600	P/O. Carthew.	"	1035	1220		
R.4119	F/O. Watts.	"	1125	1250		
P.3713	Sgt. Dredge.	"	1125	1220		
V.....	P/O. Bell-Salter.	"	1125	1220		
P.2631	S/Ldr. Gleave.	"	1130	1155		
P.3802	F/Lt. Brown.	"	1130	Crash		



P/O Greenwood 253 Squadron.



30th August 1940 Hell! 10KG1 Crashlanded, Shot down by P/O Greenwood 253 Sqdn Gef

No. of pages used for day

or Flight References.

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P/O. A.P.B. Greenwood, h26/20

FORM F

COMBAT REPORT.

Sector Serial No. (A)
Serial-No. of Order detailing Flight or Squadron
to Patrol (B)
Date (C) 30/8/40
Flight, Squadron (D) Flight : "A" Sqdn: 253
Number of Enemy Aircraft (E) One
Type of Enemy Aircraft (F) Heinkel IIIK
Time Attack was delivered (G) 1135 hours
Place Attack was delivered (H) 10-15 miles S.E. of base
Height of Enemy (J) 10,000 feet
Enemy Casualties (K) One He III destroyed
Our Casualties Aircraft (L) Nil
Personal (M) Nil
GENERAL REPORT (R) N.2. N/A.
..... N.2. N/A.
..... P. One attack 8 seconds.
300 - 150 yards.

Sighted enemy aircraft at 10 - 13,000 feet travelling S.E. of base.
Delivered my attack from rear, firing all the ammunition I had left into
the engines. the machine force landed in a field about 10 miles S.E. of
base, somewhere near Edenbridge. Four of the crew climbed out, one hurt.
The burst was about 8 seconds. The machine used no evasive tactics.
Opened fire at 300 yards closing to 160 yards.

Signature
O.C. { Section Flight "A" Squadron No.



30th August 1940 HeIII 10KG1 Crashlanded, Haxted Farm, Lingfield Surrey. Target : Farnborough.
Shot down by P/O Greenwood 253 Sqdn Gefr Reis killed. FW Schnabel. Uffz Paeslach. Uffz Staerk.

