

A Review of Geoffrey Wellum's *FIRST LIGHT*



The Baronage Press

20th Century Chivalry — Geoffrey Wellum

FIRST LIGHT

When Geoffrey Wellum's *FIRST LIGHT* was published I noted the seemingly extravagant praise heaped on it by the reviewers, decided I must read it, and then forgot about it. My godson, however, who was a soldier, not an airman, and never especially enthusiastic about aviation, did recently read it, pronounced it one of the best war stories he'd ever read (and he's read a lot of them), and bought me a copy. I've just put it down, reluctantly, wishing it would have continued for another few hundred pages.

The author joined the Royal Air Force in 1939, before he was eighteen, and just two months before the outbreak of war. He tells the story of his first four years in the service, first as a trainee, then as a fighter pilot during the Battle of Britain, then in Malta, and the reader listens to that story while sitting in the cockpit with him. The following extract tells of his return in 1941 to the white cliffs of Dover from a sweep over France.

The Biggin wing is detailed to fly rear cover to the bombers and escorts as they return. The object is to sweep the sky of northern France round behind the main force, thereby drawing off or intercepting enemy fighters which would otherwise be free to harass and get at the Stirlings [RAF four-engined heavy bombers – *Ed*].

We are way inside France, just behind Lille, when we run into a mass of 109s and before we know what is happening we have just one hell of a dog-fight on our hands. These bastards are asking no quarter and have no intention of giving any. Fighter against fighter and I find myself completely involved and heavily engaged. I realize that I am outnumbered and not only



Geoffrey Wellum's first operational unit, 92 Squadron, fought throughout the Battle of Britain from Biggin Hill following a period during which they had flown their Spitfires from several other airfields including Northolt, Duxford and Hornchurch. On the first day of operations from Hornchurch the Squadron destroyed 23 Messerschmitts.

In the Squadron badge the maple leaves commemorate its World War One service as a Canadian unit, and the cobra represents East India which helped finance the Squadron. The motto translates as "Either fight or die." Sadly, a very large number of 92 Squadron's pilots did both.

can I not get in a shot but I can't seem to break out. I reckon there are three of the sods on to me. I start to get a horrible sinking feeling. I throw the Spitfire around as never before.

I give a fleeting thought to the distance we are from those white cliffs and for some reason my room in the Mess and my personal belongings. A feeling of hopelessness and despair begins to make itself felt. I'm not going to get out of this one; this is it. Never a day passes when those white cliffs don't give relief and a haven for returning aeroplanes. Well, they're certainly going to be a haven today but, in the meantime, there's a bloke behind taking a pot shot at me. I see him in time and turn into him and he goes over the top of me. I don't think he hit me; at least, I didn't hear any hits.

The air is full of grey, dappled, black-crossed Messerschmitt 109s, the yellow-nosed brigade among them. There is little chatter on the R/T. We are a long, long way from home and everybody is busy fighting for his life.

Tracers everywhere, mostly German. They had the jump on us, came in from above. Lucky in one way there were so many of them, at least they are not troubling the circus [the bombers and their close escort – *Ed*]. We just saw them in time and turned into them, thereby at once committing ourselves to what has turned out to be a fight as hard, even after all these months in the front line, as ever I have experienced. More 109s drop into the fray. I just can't recall having to fly as hard as this before and for so long a period. No respite; I'm hot and tiring. I don't want to die!

The enemy are over their own territory, just as we were last summer. I'm still forced to go the wrong way. Must watch my fuel if I am going to get back. It's going to be bloody tight. We must have been in this fight for a good seven or eight minutes, which is a hell of a long time to be involved at this intensity. I ask the Merlin for everything she can give: 2,850 revs and emergency boost override. Must be literally drinking up the fuel. I also subject the Spit to stresses that I would not have thought possible for any aircraft to withstand. Most of the time I seem to be on the point of blacking out but my feet are on the raised extension of the rudder bar and that helps a lot.



1941 ~ A Spitfire of 92 Squadron shown above southern England by the acclaimed artist Robert Taylor.

Prints of Robert Taylor's pictures may be seen on the website of [Brooks Aviation Art](#).

Slowly I appreciate that I am being forced lower. Tracers from all directions it seems, and I know I've been hit. Heard it. I don't know where. I reckon that's probably Béthune beneath, but I haven't time to make sure as I have to break into yet another section of 109s coming in from port and yet another one is trying to tuck in behind me. He fires but misses, I think.

Occasionally I fire my guns, but it is more to keep up my morale than anything else. Don't seem to have time to think about targets, it's far more important to avoid being one myself. I'm beginning not to give much for my chances. Chuck the Spit around as I might I still cannot seem to get clear. God knows where my number two is, or any other friendly fighter for that matter. It seems to me that I've been on my own for some little time now. It's me against the whole bloody Luftwaffe.

The sun is hot and suddenly glaring. Perspiration gets into my eyes and they begin to irritate and feel sore. Oh, Jesus, I'm getting so bloody tired. My arms ache and my thigh muscles seem to be tightening up. By sheer luck the chap on my tail has to break away. He couldn't quite stay and he never really got into a good firing position anyway. There is yet another coming in from above and he may well be troublesome. Blimey, not any more, surely. Please leave me alone for a moment. Dear God, call them off.

Here he comes, in on a high quarter. I've shot my bolt. Let's just sit back and be shot down. Make it quick. It takes a tremendous effort to reverse my turn and go under him. I must make one more attempt to get away from this lot, to break clear, or I'll have had it. Laurie, Peter, Nick and all you others, won't be long before I join you. I shall be on my way in a moment, hang on mates, don't be impatient. Once again, asking everything the Merlin can possibly give, I pull up and try to gain a bit of height. Up we go using every last ounce of power. I can't at the moment see anything behind me. A quick wing over and then I am pointing towards the coast. What must that be? Twenty or thirty miles? A few seconds' respite, thank the Lord. Weaving, I look behind again and, sure enough, coming up from slightly below are a pair of 109s, their yellow noses showing quite plainly in the clear air and strong sun. Oh God, no. Right, right you sods. I'm utterly fed up with this bloody party. If I've got to go, I'll take one of you bastards



Northern France . . .
was sometimes a very long way
from home.

with me, I'll be damned if I don't. Eddy Lewis, you're going to be proud of me.

Throttle back a very quick turn allowing the nose to drop. We have a slight judder. Near a high-speed stall there; ease the stick. I find myself pointing straight towards them and my guns are firing. Don't remember opening fire. Throttle wide open and go straight at 'em. The closing speed must be in the region of at least 600 mph. That's what they didn't expect me to do. They break, thank Christ. Hope it bloody well shook them.

I'm almost beyond feeling. A quick glance at my airspeed . . . well over 400 on the clock. OK, Geoff, one more effort and if this doesn't throw them off I'll bail out of this bloody thing and get a bit of peace and quiet at the end of a parachute. Be nice and cool as well. Pull back firmly on the stick and up we go into a roll off the top. Pray God there's nobody waiting up there for me. This will gain me height and point me back in the direction of the coast. Here we go then, up . . . up . . . put your head back . . . watch for the horizon to appear just like Eddy told you . . . there it is! Now roll out. Lovely! Now full bore for the Channel. I can't hang around any more.

What's my fuel? Fifteen gallons. Won't get to Biggin. No, doesn't matter, anywhere will do, if I'm going to make it at all, that is. Just keep your height for the moment, Geoff, there doesn't seem to be anything up here. If there is, I can't see them and that will mean curtains. There is something climbing up away out to port. I keep my eye on them. They are Huns, right enough. Subconsciously, I climb myself to gain yet a little more height and keep my advantage on them. I'm streaming with perspiration.

They're not going to get up to me. The French coast gets closer. Beyond I can see those white cliffs, home. Could I glide back to England if I run out of fuel? Who's to say my fuel gauges are accurate? With the French coast almost below, the urge to get back over home territory overcomes everything else. Dropping the nose so that I can see the English coast clearly over the cowling I leave the throttle wide open and dive for the white cliffs.

It can't obviously be very much later and I'm not sure what has happened in the meantime but, below me, is an aerodrome. It's Hawkinge;



A "yellow-nosed" Messerschmitt 109 fought in the dogfight described here.

This picture is kindly provided by [Franklin Mint](#), makers of beautiful and accurate model aircraft.

I'm back on our side. Fuel gauge reads something below five gallons. Hawkinge will do me. I go straight in and land, taxi up to the Watch Office where I can see a lot of petrol bowsers. This'll do here, switch off, helmet off, and hang it on the stick. It's wet inside. Undo my parachute and Sutton harness and climb out. Nobody coming to meet me. I've just dropped in out of the blue.

Somewhere there is a skylark making skylark noises. The reaction sets in. I lie down under the wing . . . shade . . . coolness . . . green grass . . . Oh, God, thank You!

A voice from somewhere: "Are you OK, sir?"

"Yes, thanks, just a bit tired."

Gripping, isn't it? But how authentic? I'll try to answer that later, but first some comments on tiredness. Aircraft of this period did not have power-assisted controls, so such prolonged sessions of continuous and violent manoeuvres were absolutely gut-wrenchingly exhausting. Moreover, pilots did not have g-suits to compensate for the effect on blood circulation of sustained combat at high g-forces, so not only were their bodies weighing up to six times their normal weight, and requiring commensurate muscle strength just to move their arms and legs, they could black out as their blood drained away from their heads. Fighter pilots who were not physically super-fit died.

The Messerschmitt 109 was a good fighter which, like the Spitfire, was in a programme of continuous improvement, sometimes not quite as good, and sometimes rather better, so the type of warfare described in this passage, in which gallant warriors on powerful mounts whirled madly around each other in deadly combat, is as close as the twentieth century could get to the chivalrous spirit of mediaeval battle and close quarter killing with sword, axe and mace. The author does not make this point, but he does



Heinkel 111 in 1940 livery as painted in the Battle of Britain.

This, too, is a [Franklin Mint](#) model at 1:48 scale and can be ordered from the website.

recognise, especially in his description of the peace to be found in the closeness of God when flying alone at high altitude, the mysticism early scribes recorded in their descriptions of chivalry.

Throughout the book the reader is aware of the mystic bond between the author and his dead friends, and can sense how his early fear diminishes as the list of dead friends lengthens and he comes to recognise the inevitability of his own death. This is not explicit, but, although almost certainly unintentional, it is clear in the subtext, so clear that this reader, at least, quite irrationally, was surprised he survived long enough to be posted for a rest tour as an instructor.

Obviously, this is a great book for pilots, but one chapter alone makes it an **essential** book for pilots. In this the author describes a convoy protection patrol flown in atrocious weather, the cloudbase at 300 feet when it wasn't down on the surface of the sea, visibility rarely better than one mile, with no certainty of landing being possible at base and with no diversion aerodrome open. An enemy bomber is sighted, chased into cloud, and then the radio goes unserviceable. With no navigation aids the pilot lets down until he breaks cloud just above the waves, steers towards where he thinks the coast might be, finds an identifiable land feature, and then, low on fuel, he turns out to sea again to find the opposite coast, pinpoint himself, locate his base and sneak in at 200 feet only five minutes before the cloud comes down onto the deck. Although the reader knows that as the book has been written, the author must have survived, the narrative grips the attention to such effect that with the landing complete the relief is tangible. Such compelling writing as this is rare indeed.



The Focke Wulf 190 appeared in English skies in 1941 and proved to be the equal in performance of the old Spitfire V of 92 Squadron.

A beautiful and authentic model from [Franklin Mint](#).

But although this book is obviously a must-read for pilots, it has a wider reach. All who would wish to understand the *esprit de corps* and comradeship of those who defended civilisation in the skies over England in 1940, all who would seek to understand the stress of continued vigilance and the tragedies of lost friends, and especially all who would wish to learn how a healthy and vigorous eighteen-year-old boy could be burned out by the age of twenty-two — all these should read this book. In a wiser world it would be on the curriculum in every school and on the bookshelf of every parent.

How authentic? As I never flew Spitfires and never fought anywhere at the same intensity as the author, I must in this respect judge Geoffrey Wellum by his first two chapters. I, too, began to fly on the Tiger Moth and progressed onto the Harvard, a brilliantly designed aircraft intended to sort the sheep from the goats in the very short time war schedules allow. The book's description of learning to fly these two aircraft could not be bettered, absolutely dead accurate with no exploitation at all of writer's licence, and the depiction of the author's relationship with his Harvard instructor will bring back fond memories for all those older readers who trod this road. It overwhelms us with nostalgia for the comradeship of war and, for my generation, for those immediate post-1945 years in which we first flew. On that basis, and on the total lack of any jarring note of exaggeration in the remainder of the book, the author wins very high marks for authenticity.

The reviews in the newspapers and magazines have been uniformly full of praise, but it is worth mentioning one adverse comment that can be read on Amazon's UK website. Someone who considers the book worth five stars (out of the maximum of five) writes that the author "begins *First Light* as a fresh-faced, rather obnoxious public schoolboy . . ." ["public schoolboy" meaning in England, loosely, that he was educated at a fee-



The Junkers 87, the *Stuka* dive-bomber, was hugely successful in the 1940 blitzkrieg, but was very vulnerable in the Battle of Britain once separated from its fighter escorts. After the first few weeks it was withdrawn.

This [Franklin Mint](#) model has a scary realism for war veterans.

paying school – *Ed*], but in the first half-dozen or so pages in which the only mentions of his school occur, as in the remainder of the book, there is absolutely nothing to justify the adjective “obnoxious”. Its use says rather more about the reviewer and the deplorable remnants of class warfare in some of England’s socio-political groups than it does about Geoffrey Wellum, a man who entered the Battle of Britain as a boy, emerged as a hero, and has now written a classic for us all to keep alongside Richard Hillary’s immortal *The Last Enemy*.

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Buy **FIRST LIGHT** from Amazon in Europe (currently paperback only)



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