

BATTLE OF  
70  
BRITAIN

# One of 'THE FEW'



words: SEÁN MAFFETT

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Concluding our series of articles on the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, airshow commentator and broadcaster Seán Maffett remembers the life and death of one member of Churchill's revered 'Few' — an individual symbolic of the 520 pilots who lost their lives in defence of freedom during the Battle

**N**ever in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few. Sir Winston Churchill's words have resounded down the decades. They introduced a name for the pilots in the Battle — 'the Few'. But before the Battle even started, Churchill had been building the public perception of 'the Few'. On 4 June 1940, he described them as: '... these young men, going forth every morn to guard their native land and all that we stand for, holding in their hands these instruments of colossal and shattering power, of whom it may be said that [and here he slightly misquotes Tennyson's 'Morte d'Arthur']: 'Every morn brought forth a noble chance, And every chance brought forth a noble knight', deserve our gratitude.'

But 'the Few' themselves were not so sure about being latter-day Knights of the Round Table. One of them, Christopher Foxley-Norris, was a Hurricane pilot who survived the Battle, and eventually became Air Chief Marshal Sir Christopher. He also wrote poetry. This is his 'Envoi'.

*Remember Him?*

*He was no Galahad, no knight sans peur  
et sans reproche.  
Sans peur? Fear was the second enemy to  
beat. No, he was  
A common, unconsidered man who, for a  
moment of eternity,  
Held the whole future of mankind in his  
two sweating palms —  
And did not let it go.  
Remember him.  
Not as he is portrayed, but as he was. To him  
You owe the most of what you have and  
love today.*

In this last of *Aircraft's* articles for the 70th anniversary year of the Battle, I want to look at the story of one pilot who was, I believe, just such 'a common, unconsidered man'. He was my uncle, Pilot Officer Gerard Hamilton Maffett.

Gerard Maffett was not extraordinary, not much remarked, although very much loved, and very popular. But he certainly went on to hold the future of mankind in his two sweating palms. He did not let it go.

He was born in 1916. His father, my grandfather, was a soldier — he'd survived the Boer War, and the First World War.



▲ Saturday 31 August 1940 turned out to be the worst day of the Battle for RAF losses. Amongst the dead was Uncle Gerard ▼

Gerard had been a tubby child, and he'd been unkindly nicknamed 'Fats'. The name stuck with him, fondly, but unfairly, into adulthood. He left school without much qualification, just the odd school certificate. He joined a baseball team. He wandered into work at the *Daily Mail*, in the marketing department. He was young, he was immortal — and in 1938, aged 22, he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve. He learned to fly, and when the war started he found himself mobilised, and being trained to be a fighter pilot.

As a Sergeant pilot, with his new 'wings' gleaming

**Pilot Officer Gerard Maffett, killed in action on 31 August 1940.** via Seán Maffett

proudly on his uniform, Gerard went home on leave. His younger brother, Alan, met him on Maidenhead Station. Gerard was only slightly taken aback by having to salute his younger brother, who was already a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army. Brotherly rivalry, of which we've been hearing much lately!

On Monday 7 July 1940, now commissioned as a Pilot Officer, Gerard joined the newly operational No 257 (Fighter) Squadron at Northolt, just west of London. Although they didn't know it, the Battle of Britain was officially to begin three days later. Meanwhile, he was learning to fly the Hurricane. There were no dual-control Hurricanes. Your first flight put you in charge, solo, of the first aeroplane type in the world to exceed 300mph in level flight.

With 10 hours of Hurricane time in his logbook, he made a mistake that was not unknown amongst pilots who had hitherto flown only aeroplanes with fixed undercar-

riages. He forgot to put the wheels down, and made a belly landing. He wasn't physically hurt. His early-mark Hurricane, with fabric-covered wings, was quickly repaired. I imagine Gerard's pride took a little longer to recover.

With only 15 hours' Hurricane experience, and 12 days after joining 257, he found himself part of a nine-aeroplane scramble on an operational flight. They made no contact with the enemy. The next day he was scrambled in a flight of three, but, once again, no contact. Towards the end of July, the squadron deployed daily to more southerly aerodromes. But the end of the month came, still with no contact for Gerard.

On Thursday 8 August, at Tangmere in Sussex, he was part of a scramble to protect a convoy in the Straits of Dover. It was the first time 257 had faced enemy aircraft in large numbers, and three squadron pilots

were shot down. Gerard landed, refuelled, and took off with two others to search for them — with no success. It was a blow to the whole unit.

After more days of non-operational flying — sector reconnaissance, formation flying practice and dogfighting training — the squadron was posted to Debden in Essex. They were to concentrate their efforts on the east coast and the Thames Estuary. From then until the end of August, he flew two or three operational sorties a day, mostly in Hurricane P3175, which carried the letters 'D dog' and 'T tare', for No 257 Squadron, and 'S sugar' to identify that aeroplane.

Gerard Maffett began to notch up 'possible' hits on enemy aircraft. On Sunday 18 August, flying from Martlesham Heath near Ipswich, the squadron had an uneventful convoy patrol in the middle of the day, but when they came to return to Debden in the evening they were vectored onto a formation of about 50 bombers returning after a raid.

Gerard attacked a Dornier Do215 bomber. It was damaged, and Intelligence confirmed it as a hit for Gerard because a glow was seen in the fuselage. With rather British modesty, he said in a letter to his parents that he'd thought the glow was just low sunlight — but the Intelligence guys thought otherwise, and credited him with it. He went on in his letter: 'The amazing part of the whole show was that my aircraft was not even scratched, let alone hit. The Hurricane certainly is a grand aircraft.'

Remember, he was 24, he was still immortal. He'd had a moment of eternity, and he hadn't let go, whatever he may have thought about it. That attack, and Gerard's Hurricane 'DT-S', are the subject of Geoff Hunt's great painting, entitled 'A Grand Aircraft'.

Next day, the squadron moved permanently to Martlesham Heath. Over the following fortnight, Gerard flew 11 operational sorties, with several attacks on enemy aircraft, but none was confirmed as a hit.

On Saturday 31 August 1940, the weather was fair but hazy. It turned out to be the worst day of the Battle for RAF losses. Fourteen pilots were dead or missing.

Amongst the dead was Uncle Gerard. No-one knows what actually happened. He appeared to have been picked off by an aeroplane firing its cannon, and it seems likely that his guns had jammed after being damaged. He was possibly heading for home when he was hit again. Witnesses on the ground saw Hurricane 'DT-S' spiralling down. They watched for the

**Below: The wreckage of Hurricane P3175 on display at the RAF Museum Hendon, 70 years on from the accident which killed Gerard Maffett.**  
RAF Museum

**Bottom: Gerard Maffett's grave at Bray. The very rare wooden cross is the original, now protected by a glass cabinet courtesy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.**  
via Seán Maffett



pilot to bale out, but nothing happened until about 400ft above ground, when the aeroplane turned over and the pilot came out.

'DT-S' crashed into the sea marshes just off Tamarisk Wall, at Walton-on-the-Naze, just after 9 o'clock that Saturday morning. Gerard's parachute had just begun to open when he hit the sand. There was speculation that the reason for his late bale-out was that he had taken a shot in the back, through the armour plating of his seat. But in more recent evidence, the policeman who found his body stated clearly that Gerard appeared not to have been wounded by gunfire, with no sign of blood except a trickle from one ear.

His coffin was delivered by train to his parents at Maidenhead in Berkshire. My grandmother, in her grief, refused to have the coffin opened. Exactly why he died remains a mystery. He was buried with military honours at Bray cemetery near Maidenhead.

Gerard's story was not unusual. He was, after all, that 'common, unconsidered man'. He was one of 520 British and Allied pilots to die in that Battle — 520 of those men who'd held the whole future of mankind in their two sweating palms, and had not let it go.

For the Maffett family, though, the agony was not over. Eighteen months later, in January 1942, Gerard's elder brother, my own father,

Wg Cdr John Maffett, died in a Beaufighter. The memory of them both makes me intensely proud, and I'm more sad than I can say that I never knew either of them. But my father had ensured that Gerard's name was carried on — my middle name is Hamilton too, and that of my son, Piers, and of his sons Luke and Toby. I'm very happy to say that John and Gerard's younger brother, Lt Col Alan

Maffett, is in excellent form at the age of 91. His son, Ian, has the middle name Gerard.

The wreckage of Hurricane P3175/DT-S was recovered in the 1970s by an extraordinary team led by Geoff Rayner. They painstakingly restored it over six years, and it is now part of the Battle of Britain memorial at the Royal Air Force Museum Hendon. It lies there, pretty much as it might have been shortly after it hit the sea marsh at Tamarisk Wall. I'm immensely grateful to Geoff and his team for their splendid work. You can read his account of it in his book 'One Hurricane, One Raid'. I'm also hugely grateful to Geoff for arranging for the Hurricane, Spitfire and Lancaster of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight to conduct several wonderful flypasts over the Naze on 27 August 2010, four days short of the 70th anniversary of Gerard's death. It was, needless to say, an almost unbearably moving occasion.

By the way, a story did the rounds after the Battle that all the stuff about 'so much being owed by so many to so few' really referred to their bar bills. I just know that my Uncle Gerard, and indeed my father John, would have really enjoyed that idea. ▲