

## Biplane fighter aces

### The Commonwealth



## Wing Commander Peter Reginald Whalley Wickham DSO DFC and Bar, RAF no. 33403



**26 March 1918 – 29 April 1970**

Pete Wickham was born in Nairobi, Kenya on 26 March 1918, and he was educated in England at Marlborough College and Farnham Military College.

He entered the RAF College at Cranwell in January 1937. He was commissioned on 17 December 1938 and graduated in 1939 and being posted to 3 Squadron.

On 16 May 1939, he was posted to 112 Squadron when this unit was formed aboard HMS *Argus* in Portsmouth, Hampshire and in September he was sent out to the Middle East and Egypt.

When the war started in North Africa on 10 June 1940, 112 Squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader D. M. Somerville. It was based at Helwan 15 miles south of Cairo and solely responsible for the defence of Egypt's Capital. It probably had between 13 to 21 Gladiators and five Gauntlet Mk.IIs (among these were K5292, just received from 6 Squadron) left in Egypt. When the unit reached Egypt at the end of May 1939 for a "6 months temporary duty" it had 24 Gloster Gladiator Mk.Is (all used machines coming from 72 Squadron). Flying Officer [Joseph Fraser](#) remembered a slightly superior number: around 30. Since then only one machine was known to be lost before the beginning of the war. This was the CO Gladiator whose engine

caught fire on 15 March 1940 during a training flight. Somerville was badly hurt in the accident and Squadron Leader A. R. G. Bax temporarily took command of the Squadron. The Squadron was organised in three flights:

'A' Flight was commanded by Flight Lieutenant W. C. Williams and included Flying Officer H. C. Worcester, Flying Officer [W. B. Price-Owen](#), Pilot Officer Ross, Pilot Officer [Richard Acworth](#), Pilot Officer Davison, Pilot Officer Smither, Pilot Officer [Anthony Gray-Worcester](#), Pilot Officer Harrison, Pilot Officer Wickham, Pilot Officer [Peter Strahan](#) and Pilot Officer Van der Heijden.

'B' Flight was commanded by Flight Lieutenant Savage but this unit had been ordered to Sudan on 2 June (with 10 Gladiators – 8 aircraft according to the memories of the Adjutant, Flying Officer [Fraser](#)) to act as a detached unit, subsequently known as 'K' Flight. This flight was finally detached from 112 Squadron on 31 August 1940.

'C' Flight was commanded by Flight Lieutenant [Charles Fry](#) and included Flying Officer [R. H. Smith](#), Flying Officer [Joseph Fraser](#) (Adjutant of 112 Squadron), Pilot Officer Clark, Pilot Officer Chapman, Pilot Officer Duff, Pilot Officer de la Hoyde, Pilot Officer [R. J. Bennett](#), Pilot Officer [Homer Cochrane](#), Pilot Officer Butcher and Sergeant [George Millar Donaldson](#).

In the end of June, he was temporarily assigned to 33 Squadron to gain experience, which was based at Maaten Gerwala in the Western Desert.

At 06:00 on 29 June 1940, three CR.32s of the 160<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia took off for Ponticelli and from there at 11:15, a couple of them took off to operate in the Sollum-Sidi Omar area.

At 12:15, they were intercepted by an unrecorded number of Gladiators which quickly shot down the plane of Sottotenente Antonino Weiss, Adjutant of the 12<sup>o</sup> Gruppo. The pilot, wounded, made a forced landing near the "*Litoranea*" road, west of Bardia.

It seems that the CR.32s had clashed with 33 Squadron. At 04:55, in the first light of the morning, six Gladiators from 33 Squadron's 'B' Flight flew to Sidi Barrani for patrols covering Mersa Matruh and during the day, several sorties (at least three) were flown.

At 11:00, three Gladiators flown by Flying Officer [Ernest Dean](#) (Gladiator L9046), Sergeant [J. Craig](#) (N5783) and Pilot Officer Wickham (K8031) took off. These were followed by two more flown by Pilot Officer [Vernon Woodward](#) (N5774) and Pilot Officer [Henry Harrison](#) (a 112 Squadron pilot on attachment to 33 Squadron) (N5768), which took off at 11:40.

At 12:30, enemy aircraft was intercepted and a Ro.37 was forced to land three miles west of Sidi Aziez after being attacked by Pilot Officer Wickham. The rear gunner was apparently hit and the aircraft landed in enemy territory.

Three CR.32s were encountered at 12:40 by one formation of three Gladiators in the Ridotta Capuzzo area. A dogfight ensued and Pilot Officer [Woodward](#) forced one of the aircraft down 2-3 miles north of Fort Capuzzo, near the road between Capuzzo and Bardia. He then pursued another aircraft of the enemy formation, which he shot down after a long dogfight. Both aircraft were shot down over territory occupied by the enemy.

During this patrol, Pilot Officer [Harrison](#) claimed a damaged CR.32 in the Capuzzo-Sidi Aziez area.

The 33 Squadron pilots seem to have been spilt up and [Craig](#) landed at 12:30, [Dean](#) at 13:15 and the three other pilots at 13:20.

The IMAM Ro.37bis claimed by Wickham probably belonged to 64<sup>o</sup> or 73<sup>o</sup> Gruppi Osservazione Aerea. It is possible that this claim in fact relate to the combat Wickham was involved in the next day (30 June).

Wickham also claimed an additional CR.32 during the day.

[Woodward's](#) claim seems to have been Sottotenente Weiss.

Totally, it seems that 33 Squadron claimed three or four victories during the day while in fact the Italian losses seem to have been one CR.32 (Sottotenente Weiss).

At 08:00 on 30 June, three CR.32s of the 160<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia took off from Ponticelli to escort a reconnaissance IMAM Ro.37. Over Bir Sceferzen the Italian aircraft were attacked by Gladiators, which immediately shot down the Ro.37, killing the crew and the Fiat of Tenente Ivano Vanni, who parachuted from his burning aircraft. Sergente Aldo Santucci force-landed his CR.32 close to the T5 airfield, west of Tobruk (probably due to combat damage). While doing this he hit an Army truck, seriously wounding the Army driver and writing off the aircraft.

According to some sources Vanni was shot at by the British fighters while descending in his parachute but managed to land safely.

It seems that the Italian aircraft had run into a patrol from 33 Squadron, which claimed two fighters during an early morning patrol over Bardia. The Italian aircraft were variously identified as CR.42s or CR.32s, one of them shot down in flames. One of the planes was claimed by Pilot Officer Wickham while the other fell victim of Flying Officer [Ernest Dean](#). One Gladiator was damaged in this combat.

[Dean](#) described the combat:

*“Peter Wickham and I were patrolling near Bardia, and spotted two CR 42s. We each took one, and within minutes there were two black plumes on the ground. I got involved with another CR 42, a quite aggressive “Eyetie” (most rare), and I unfortunately got into head-on attacks with him, which are not recommended. We had three passes at one another but with no apparent damage, except that when we reached base together I didn’t perform any victory rolls, although Peter was performing perfect flick rolls in formation. Lucky for me, because my riggers reported to me that my centre section was badly damaged, and it was well I had overcome my exuberance.”*

Later he returned to 112 Squadron.

During the morning on 17 August, the Mediterranean Fleet was out for a raid in support of the Army. The battleships HMS *Warspite*, HMS *Ramilles* and HMS *Malaya*, supported by the cruiser HMS *Kent* and three flotillas of destroyers bombarded Bardia harbour and Fort Capuzzo, starting at 06:45 and continuing for 22 minutes. As the vessels headed back towards Alexandria a series of bombing attacks were launched against them by the Regia Aeronautica.

The RAF and the FAA provided escort for the fleet. HMS *Eagle's* Fighter Flight of three Sea Gladiators had been flown to Sidi Barrani airfield in Libya, and from here patrolled over the Fleet. 'B' and 'C' Flights of 80 Squadron provided air support with flights of four Gladiators over the ships from dawn to dusk. 'A' Flight of 112 Squadron was positioned at Z Landing Ground (Matruh West) while 'C' Flight of 112 Squadron was based at Y LG about 18 kilometres further west and they also took part in the covering missions.

The attacks on the Royal Navy began when, at 10:40 five SM 79s were seen at 12,000 feet, heading in from the north-east. Over the fleet there were, on standing patrol, at least the Gladiators of 'A' Flight 112 Squadron (probably six of them), the three Sea Gladiators of HMS *Eagle's* Fighter Flight and a single Hurricane from 'A' Flight 80 Squadron flown by Flying Officer John Lapsley (P2641). They intercepted the Italian bombers and altogether claimed six of them; one by Flight Lieutenant [Lloyd Schwab](#), one by Pilot Officer Wickham, (both from 112 Squadron) and three by Lapsley. Two Sea Gladiators flown by Lieutenant (A) [Kenneth Keith](#) (N5513) and Lieutenant [Anthony Young](#) (N5567) attacked several formations. [Young](#) attacked one in company with a 112 Squadron Gladiator flown by an unknown pilot. [Keith](#) joined the attack and the port wing of the bomber burst into flames, two members of the crew bailing out before the Savoia crashed into the sea. Commander [Charles Keighly-Peach](#) (N5517) became separated, and realizing the futility of chasing the fleeing bombers alone, headed back over the Fleet in time to see to more formations attacking (totally 25 SM 79s were counted). He made three attacks on one bomber, seeing numerous pieces fall off and it went into a shallow dive. One man baled out, but as the aircraft lost height rapidly, it disappeared into cloud. He attacked

another twice but without result.

The Italians lost four bombers and claimed seven Gladiators shot down in return (it seems that all the seven claims were submitted by the gunners aboard the Savoia bombers, two of them by 10<sup>o</sup> Stormo gunners). In fact only the Gladiator of Pilot Officer [Richard Acworth](#) was seriously damaged when he attacked an SM 79s, but although wounded himself [Acworth](#) was able to fly back to base where he crash-landed and the aircraft was written-off.

In 1942, [Joseph Fraser](#) remembered:

*“During August, the Squadron’s C.O. Slim Somerville was still non-operational, recovering from extensive burns which he had received getting out of a Gladiator on fire while practicing aerobatics at Helwan. The Flights were commanded by F/Lt [C. H. Fry](#) and [Algy Schwab](#), the latter had just been posted in Wally Williams place as O.C. “A” Flight. A number of patrols were carried out during August between Sollum and Mersa Matruh and a couple more victories were credited to the Squadron. F/O [Acworth](#) was badly injured by shrapnel in the leg during a dog-fight off Sidi Barrani but he managed to get his aircraft back to Gerawla, landing downwind and finishing up at the opening of the medical tent. The medical officer was infuriated at this demonstration, until he realized [Acky](#) was unable to get out of the cockpit and that it had saved him carrying [Acky](#) some hundreds of yards. A dozen or more splinters were taken out of [Acky’s](#) leg, two weeks sick leave in Alex. and he was back in the cockpit again.”*

John Lapsley told a newspaper about this combat:

*“I arrived just as five S 79’s had dropped their bombs, all well astern of the fleet, and were making off. One immediately went down in flames – evidently hit by anti-aircraft fire from the battleships. I picked on the leader and gave him about eight short bursts. He fell away, obviously in difficulties. Actually he landed his aircraft in our lines – there were six hundred bullet holes in it [probably ‘56-9’ flown by Tenente Lauchard of the 56<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia]. Then I picked on another and had just got a second burst into him he went up in flames. I was about one hundred yards away and the planes were much too close for comfort so I swerved away just as the crew of the S 79 ‘baled out’. The third remaining S 79 by this time was quite close to the coast and he was diving like mad for a cloud. I gave him three or four long bursts, and with one engine smoking he disappeared. I think he went into ‘the drink’. These Italian aircraft seem to be built of ply-wood. At any rate you have to dodge the pieces that come flying back at you when you fire your guns. There didn’t seem to be much more doing, so I came home. Even then I had some ammunition left.”*

Italian units participating in the attack were the 10<sup>o</sup> Stormo with ten aircraft and the 15<sup>o</sup> and the 33<sup>o</sup> Stormi with another 16 aircraft. The Italians arrived over the target in consecutive waves. There is a lack of details of the attack of the 15<sup>o</sup> and the 33<sup>o</sup> Stormi but they suffered no losses even if it seems that the bombers from the 15<sup>o</sup> Stormo were intercepted by the British fighters. Primo Aviere Antonio Trevigni of the 53<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia, 47<sup>o</sup> Gruppo, although seriously wounded in both legs, kept firing against them until his aircraft was able to escape, claiming two victories in the process. Trevigni was awarded with a Medaglia d’Oro al valor militare but was never able to recover and finally died in an Italian hospital on 23 October 1942.

The 10<sup>o</sup> Stormo aircraft were a first group of five Savoias of the 58<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia and a second group under the command of Capitano Musch and composed of four aircraft of the 56<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia and one of the 57<sup>a</sup>

Squadriglia. The 58<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia took off from Derna N1 at 07:55 and arrived over the Royal Navy ships at around 10:00 where they unloaded forty 100 kilos bombs. A group of seven Gladiators tried to intercept after the bombing but was left behind while AA was reported as extremely intense and precise.

The second group led by Capitano Musch arrived over the fleet just to find all the enemy fighters already alerted and ready for the interception. Attacked by the Gladiators and Lapsley's Hurricane the first to go down was aircraft '57-7' flown by Tenente Visentin, and Sottotenente Sartore (crew; Maresciallo Fasce, Primo Aviere Radiotelegrafista Pian, Aviere Armiere Vitolo, Aviere Scelto Motorista Innocenti). It was shot down while losing height rapidly to force-land after having been damaged when it was attacked by several Gladiators. The crew was all killed. The second aircraft to go down was the aircraft of Sottotenente Mussi of the 56<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia with the loss of the crew. The third to be shot down was '56-9' flown by Tenente Arturo Lauchard of the 56<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia, which was seriously damaged. With all the crew dead inside the second pilot Tenente Vittorio Cèard (Lauchard was wounded) made a forced landing on a beach. The beach was in Egyptian territory and the two pilots were taken prisoners. The plane of Lauchard was later recovered and, taken to Alexandria, was exposed as a war prize on Ismailia Square. Lauchard left a realistic narration of his capture where he told that he was transported to the airport of Sidi Barrani where he was taken to the Officer's Mess where an Intelligence Officer examined him. Lauchard told him only his name and rank and the amused British Officer showed him a chart where all the units of Regia Aeronautica were recorded with airbase, number of planes and names of the crew chiefs. There his name already was, written on a tag that the Intelligence Officer removed. Later the RAF officers offered a drink to him and he met a young Flight Lieutenant that around ten days before had been shot down by Italian fighters and obliged to bale out. The British pilot told Lauchard that while descending in his parachute an Italian fighter pointed on him but instead of opening fire he passed near him weaving with his arm. It seems that the pilot was almost surely Flight Lieutenant ['Pat' Pattle](#).

The two surviving Savoias ran for home but only Capitano Musch arrived back at Derna, with the aircraft damaged and a wounded crewman (Primo Aviere Motorista Falzoni). The other SM 79 flown by Sottotenente Venosta and Marsciallo Breda was almost shot down by the fighters when a cloud saved them. They were however obliged to force-land at T3 where the plane was written off as a consequence of the damage suffered. The 10<sup>o</sup> Stormo's records reported that three of their numbers were shot down by a single Hurricane that, hidden inside the Gladiator formation, attacked with quick passes of its guns but always remaining out of range of the Italian return fire.

On 6 September, a series of operations started with the aim of putting the railway station of Mersa Matruh out of action.

The first formation, 15 bombers in three vics of five, took off from Tmini led by Generale Porro himself. The take off was done under a sand storm and three SM 79s suffered engine failures and were forced to crash-land immediately (they were classified RD) while three others were forced to turn back. The rest of the formation: four aircraft of the 60<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia, 33<sup>o</sup> Gruppo, with Porro and Tenente Pastorelli and five planes of the 45<sup>o</sup> Gruppo under Colonnello Attilio Biseo proceeded to the target. After the bomb release, seven Gladiators attacked damaging slightly the plane of Pastorelli. All SM 79s landed at Tmini at 10:40.

In the meantime 15 SM 79s of the 15<sup>o</sup> Stormo (ten SM 79s of the 47<sup>o</sup> Gruppo led by Colonnello Napoli and Maggiore Tivegna and five SM 79s of the 21<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia led by Capitano Lualdi) took off from Maraua with the same target. The attack was carried out under heavy AA fire while the Gladiators attacked. This time too the SM 79s were able to defend themselves without suffering losses, the returning crews claimed many hits on the railway and two Gladiators shot down plus two probables.

It seems that the two Italian formations had clashed with Gladiators from 112 Squadron. A patrol composed of Flight Lieutenant [Lloyd Schwab](#), Pilot Officer [Henry Harrison](#) and Pilot Officer Wickham, was over Matruh at 15000 feet and reported to have met and driven out to the sea a group of five SM 79s.



Another patrol composed of Flying Officer A. M. Ross, Pilot Officer [Leonard Bartley](#) and Sergeant [G. M. Donaldson](#) attacked five SM 79s without results; Ross' Gladiator was damaged by one bullet in fuselage on the starboard side. It seems that Flying Officer [Joseph Fraser](#) claimed an unconfirmed SM 79 on this occasion.

He left 112 Squadron on 30 October and was again posted to 33 Squadron, apparently claiming two further victories during the First Libyan Campaign of December 1940/January 1941.

On 25 December, the 23<sup>o</sup> Gruppo flew its first escorting missions after its arrival in the theatre, one of these was at 15:00 with 12 CR.42s in collaboration with 22 CR.42s from the 10<sup>o</sup> Gruppo, which had taken off at 14:35 to escort the 15<sup>o</sup> Stormo's SM 79s bound to attack Sollum Harbour.

The fighters from the 23<sup>o</sup> included four from the 70<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Maggiore [Tito Falconi](#), Tenente [Claudio Solaro](#), Sottotenente [Oscar Abello](#) and Sergente Maggiore Balilla Albani), four from the 74<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Capitano [Guido Bobba](#), Tenente [Mario Pinna](#), Tenente [Lorenzo Lorenzoni](#) and Sergente [Emilio Stefani](#)) and four from the 75<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Tenente [Pietro Calistri](#), Tenente [Ezio Maria Monti](#), Sottotenente Giuseppe De Angelis and Maresciallo Giovanni Carmello). The fighters from the 10<sup>o</sup> Gruppo included six CR.42s from the 91<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Maggiore [Carlo Romagnoli](#), Capitano [Vincenzo Vanni](#), Sottotenente [Ruggero Caporali](#), Sottotenente [Andrea Dalla Pasqua](#), Sergente Maggiore [Leonardo Ferrulli](#) and Sergente Maggiore [Lorenzo Migliorato](#)), seven from the 90<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Tenente [Giovanni Guiducci](#), Tenente [Franco Lucchini](#), Sottotenente [Alessandro Rusconi](#), Sottotenente [Neri De Benedetti](#), Sergente [Alfredo Scavo](#), Sergente [Luigi Bagato](#) and Sergente [Enrico Botti](#)) and nine from the 84<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia (Capitano [Luigi Monti](#), Tenente [Antonio Angeloni](#), Sergente Maggiore [Salvatore Mechelli](#), Sergente [Domenico Santonocito](#), Sergente [Luciano Perdoni](#), Sergente [Corrado Patrizi](#), Sergente [Piero Buttazzi](#), Sergente [Mario Veronesi](#) and Capitano [Mario Pluda](#) (91<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia)).

The formation was attacked by some Hurricanes that were counter-attacked and obliged to flee. Two Hurricanes were claimed as probably shot down by the pilots of 90<sup>a</sup> and 91<sup>a</sup> Squadriglie (the 90<sup>a</sup> Squadriglia used 160 rounds of ammunition), which claimed them as shared with the 23<sup>o</sup> Gruppo even if the pilot from the 23<sup>o</sup> Gruppo in fact weren't able to claim anything. Tenente [Guiducci](#) landed at T5 with engine trouble while the rest of the formation landed at Z1 between 16:50 and 17:00. No losses were suffered by the bombers, which claimed to have hit an aircraft carrier. In fact, they aimed their bomb load at a monitor, but it is not known if the ship was in fact hit.

The Hurricanes were probably machines of 33 Squadron with Flying Officer Wickham and Flying Officer [Vernon Woodward](#) that encountered one SM 79 and one CR.42, damaging the CR.42. The action was however recorded in the morning.

The unit then moved to Greece.

On 6 April, Germany declared war on Yugoslavia and Greece and immediately attacked.

As German forces streamed through the Rupel Pass, the Royal Air Force waited tensely for news. Pilot Officer Winsland of 33 Squadron at Larissa later recorded:

*"We heard the news before dawn, got up, washed in freezing water- and dressed. Everyone was tense; our feelings and thoughts were confused - what was going to happen now? Our army was on the retreat in Egypt; the Greeks were only just managing to hold the Italians back in Albania; had we sufficient British troops to hold the Germans in Greece? What was going to happen in the air? While we had sufficient to cope with the Italians, surely we were going to be hopelessly*

*outnumbered by the Germans? For weeks past we had heard of colossal German air forces forming up in Bulgaria. What were we in for? Little did we know! In the afternoon (having been on instant readiness all morning, with all available Hurricanes parked at the end of the runway, facing into wind, ready for take off) all available Hurricanes (12) took off for an offensive patrol over Bulgaria. I had the good fortune to be flying next to Sqn Ldr [Pattle](#). Suddenly we spotted eight Me109s and dived to attack. This was my first really good look at a Hun from close quarters. I saw the CO beside me shoot down two of them in a few seconds. What a sight. I shall never forget it. What shooting too. A two second burst from his eight guns at the first enemy machine caused a large piece to break off in mid air, while the machine turned over vertically onto one wingtip as the pilot baled out - his parachute opened while his feet were still in the cockpit but he got clear in spite of the chute opening so soon. A similar fate awaited the second enemy machine which went spiralling down in flames. I did not have time to see what happened to its pilot."*

The Bf 109Es were aircraft of 8./JG 27, led on patrol over the Rupel Pass area by Oberleutnant Arno Becker; Becker was one of those shot down and killed, his aircraft -Black 2 - crashing in flames. He was possibly Squadron Leader [Pattle's](#) second victim; the first was undoubtedly Leutnant Klaus Faber, who baled out to become a prisoner. Flight Sergeant [Leonard Cottingham](#) claimed a third Bf 109 shot down, from which he saw the pilot bale out. As the German pilot floated down, another Messerschmitt circled round to give protection, and [Cottingham](#) promptly attacked this aircraft. It would seem that this was the fighter under attack by Winsland, who added:

*"While all this was in full swing and machines were twisting and turning in all directions I found myself directly on the tail of another Hun at whom I let off burst after burst, but either he was made of cast iron or possibly my shooting wasn't so hot! I fear it was the latter as I have had cause to discover several times since. However, I do know the cause - excitement - which is something. I start firing with the centre of the gunsight dead on target, then find myself a few seconds later aiming purely by my tracer - looking round the edge of the sight instead of through it! On this occasion the enemy plane merely "vibrated" all over and started a diving turn to the left. I continued to chase it but still could not get it down. Luckily another Hurricane (F/Sgt [Cottingham](#)) suddenly came diving at it as well as myself and at last the enemy "bought his packet."."*

The two pilots claimed a half share each, whilst Flying Officer Wickham claimed one more shot down out of a trio he engaged. Apart from the loss of Becker and Faber, Oberfeldwebel Gerhard Fromming was wounded and crash-landed his badly damaged 'Black 8', while a fourth pilot baled out of 'Black 6' and returned to his unit on foot, unharmed.

On 13 April Flying Officer Wickham caught a reconnaissance Bf 110 from 7(F)./LG2 over Mount Olympus and shot it down in flames. This was L2+HR flown by Leutnant George Lange (fate unknown).

During the day on 20 April Eleusis was almost under constant attack but in the afternoon there was a pause in activity, which allowed a little time for the ground crews to bring the maximum possible number of Hurricanes up to readiness state. Squadron Leader ['Tap' Jones](#) decided that if no further attack had developed by 18:00, all available Hurricanes would undertake an offensive sweep in an effort to raise morale amongst the civilian population of Athens and the surrounding areas, and as a boost to the defenders of Eleusis as well as to the pilots themselves.

However at about 16:45 a formation of 100 plus Ju 88s and Do 17s, escorted by Bf 109s and Bf 110s was reported approaching Athens. The Ju 88s (from I/LG 1) peeled off to make low-flying attacks on shipping at

Piraeus, while individual Bf 110s of II/ZG 26 scoured the area, shooting up likely targets. One appeared over Eleusis just as the Hurricanes (nine of 33 Squadron and six of 80 Squadron) were preparing to take off. Fortunately, none were hit, and all took to the air individually, climbed to 20 000 feet and headed for Piraeus, forming sections of two or three en route.

The first trio to arrive over the port, flown by Flying Officers Wickham, Flight Lieutenant Henry John Starrett (RAF no. 40188) and Percival 'Ping' Newton (a Rhodesian), caught 15 Ju 88s dive-bombing ships in the harbour (the Greek hospital ship *Ellenis* was sunk during the attack). The three Hurricanes followed them down and attacked as they pulled out of their dives; Wickham claimed one shot down, whilst Newton claimed two more. Just then Pilot Officer [William Vale](#) arrived on the scene, reporting seeing some 30 Ju 88s:

*"I carried out eight attacks on the Ju 88s. One caught fire and started going down, so I left him and attacked another. Big chunks broke away from his wings and fuselage, and smoke poured from his engines. He went down vertically. I was then attacked by a 109, but I easily outmanoeuvred him, had a crack at some more, and came home when my ammo was exhausted."*

One Ju 88 flown by Unteroffizier Helmut Benke (L1+ZH) was lost near Athens with all the crew; a second L1+UK, piloted by Oberfähnrich Werner Ziegler, was hit by a Hurricane's fire and the navigator Gefreiter Heinrich Baumgartner, received three bullets in the head and neck, dying almost at once. The gunners believed that they had shot down the attacking fighter, reporting seeing it fall into the sea near Kalamaki (it was probably the crash of Benke's Ju 88 they had seen or the explosions of bombs). A second Hurricane then attacked, putting the starboard engine out of action. This was also claimed hit by Gefreiter Hans Baumann (radio operator/air gunner) and was seen making for land. However the Ju 88 was rapidly losing height and although the crew threw out all removable equipment to reduce weight, it ditched in shallow water near Karies, at the foot of Mount Athos. The remaining members of the crew survived the crash. A third Ju 88 suffered engine trouble, but struggled back to Krumovo, where it crash-landed.

The Hurricane hit by Baumann was probably that flown by 'Harry' Starrett (V7804), which caught fire as a result. Starrett decided to fly back to Eleusis to attempt to save his aircraft. He made a hard wheels-up landing and the glycol tank blew up, enveloping the aircraft in flames. Starrett managed to get out, but had been very severely burned; he was rushed to hospital but died two days later.

Four more 80 Squadron Hurricanes now joined the battle, Flight Lieutenant [William Woods](#) leading Sergeant [Charles Casbolt](#) and Flight Sergeant Pierre Wintersdorff (a Frenchman) to attack a formation identified as Bf 110s, but probably composed of Do 17Z from I and III/KG 2, escorted by Bf 110s. [Woods](#) carried out two or three separate attacks, believing that he had probably shot down two (but only being credited with one) before breaking off to return to Eleusis to rearm. Wintersdorff claimed one aircraft shot down in flames, which he identified as an 'Fw187', but he was then attacked by a Bf 110 and wounded in one leg; his Hurricane was hard hit and he baled out into the sea from where he was soon rescued. [Casbolt](#) claimed two aircraft as Bf 110s, but was also then attacked from astern and had his rudder shot away. Breaking away, he encountered a Bf 109 which he reported he had shot down in flames.

Meanwhile the fourth pilot, Sergeant [Edward Hewett](#) found himself above six Bf 109s and later reported:

*"I dived on the rear one, and he rolled on his back, and crashed to the ground with smoke pouring out. I made a similar attack on a second, and the pilot baled out. I had a go at a third, but didn't see what happened this time."*

These Bf 109s were possibly from III/JG 77, two aircraft from this unit crash-landing, badly damaged. Three Do 17Zs also failed to return; U5+AL (Unteroffizier Helmut Reim), U5+HL (Leutnant Joachim Brüdern) and U5+AR (Oberleutnant Ludger Holtkampe) were all lost with their crews. Apparently Bf 109Es from 4./JG 27 were also involved in combat at this time, possibly with the 80 Squadron aircraft. Oberleutnant Rödel



claimed three Hurricanes shot down in just over ten minutes 16:57, 17:01 and 17:08 (victories nos. 18-20), while Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz (victory no. 6) claimed another at 17:10. It seems that Flight Sergeant [Leonard Cottingham](#) of 33 Squadron also claimed a Do 17 in this combat.

At Eleusis the returning Hurricanes were being refuelled and rearmed as swiftly as possible, before climbing back into the fray. Squadron Leader [Pattle](#) was by now very ill with influenza, his temperature having been recorded as 103°. Nonetheless he took off for the third time of the day together with Flying Officer [Vernon Woodward](#), following Flight Lieutenant [William Woods](#), who was now off for the second time. [Pattle](#) and [Woodward](#) had not taken off before, as their aircraft had not been ready. [Woodward](#) recalled:

*“I took off late with Squadron Leader [Pattle](#) - we climbed into a swarm of Ju 88s protected by masses of Messerschmitt 110s. We were overwhelmed. In sun I recall shooting down a 110 off [Pattle's](#) tail, in flames, then probably a Ju 88. Shortly afterwards [Pattle](#) got a confirmed Ju 88 (or Bf 110). Subsequently I lost contact with him, then damaged three more 110s, then, being out of ammunition returned tentatively to Eleusis. It was all over – for that day.”*

Ahead of [Woodward](#), [Pattle](#) was seen going to aid of the Hurricane flown by Flight Lieutenant [Woods](#), which was being attacked by a Bf 110. He opened fire at this aircraft and it was seen to burst into flames (presumably the aircraft [Woodward](#) had seen him to destroy), just as [Woods'](#) Hurricane also caught fire and dived into Eleusis bay, killing him. Two more Bf 110s latched onto the tail of [Pattle's](#) AS988, and it quickly began to blaze – there was an explosion, and the wreckage fell into the sea. Flight Lieutenant [George Kettlewell](#) arrived on the scene just in time to see the demise of his gallant leader and attacked one of the two Bf 110s responsible, shooting this down into the Bay also. He claimed a second Bf 110 before he too was attacked by yet another Bf 110, and was forced to bale out when V7807 was badly hit. A large and solid man, he landed heavily, cracking two vertebrae in his spine and spending several months in a plaster cast as a result.

Yet another Hurricane was falling to the Bf 110s at this time; Flight Sergeant [Leonard Cottingham](#) had claimed three Bf 110s in flames, but he was hit by a fourth and wounded, baling out of his stricken aircraft. The pilots of II/ZG 26's 5 staffel, led by Hauptmann Theodor Rossiwall, claimed five Hurricanes shot down in this engagement, one each by Rossiwall himself (victory no. 12), Oberleutnant Sophus Baggoe (victory no. 14), Oberfeldwebel Hermann Schönthier, Unteroffizier Fritz Muller and Oberfeldwebel Theodor Pietschmann. However two of the Gruppe's aircraft were lost in return – 3U+EN (Oberleutnant Kurt Specka) and 3U+FN (Feldwebel Georg Leinfelder), while a third crash-landed with severe damage.

He was awarded a DFC in July 1941.



Image kindly provided by Simon Muggleton.

On 27 April 1942, 11 Group RAF flew Circus 142 against Camps Forêt de Clairmarais, which was attacked 11:50. The attacking force consisted of seven Hurricane IIbs from 174 Squadron with a close escort from the Hornchurch Wing consisting of twelve Spitfire Vbs from 122 Squadron, eleven Spitfires Vbs from 313 Squadron and Group Captain Harry Broadhurst in a single Spitfire Vb. The Debden Wing acted as escort-cover with twelve Spitfires Vbs from 71 Squadron, twelve Spitfires Vbs from 111 Squadron and twelve Spitfires Vbs from 65 Squadron.

Squadron Leader Wickham of 111 Squadron reported:

*"I was Raggle leader of the escort cover wing. Some 5 miles north of St. Omer about eight Fw 190's and six Me 109's came up ahead and then down on us from above. Two 109's tried to get behind me. I turned on them and gave a 1-sec burst at each as they began to dive away, with 60° deflection on the beam.*

*The first e/a went down over the vertical, a plume of smoke and a small streak of flame coming from underneath the pilot's cockpit. I had seen canon strikes on it. My cine-gun switch was on.*

*The range was 250/300 yards. This Me 109 E is claimed as damaged.*

*No results were observed on the second e/a which was nearly out of range.*

*Engagement took place at about 17000 ft."*

This Me 109 was claimed as a damaged at around 12:10.

Totally the six RAF Squadrons claimed 9 fighters, 1 probable and 8 damaged for the loss of 5 Spitfires (4 pilots KIA and 1 PoW) and 3 Hurricane (2 pilots KIA and 1 pilot safe).

They had been involved in combat with JG 26 which claimed seven Spitfires between 12:14-12:30. Their losses aren't known even if the unit lost one pilot during the day (but they were involved in at least three combats).

During the raid on Dieppe on 19 August 1942, Squadron Leader Wickham (Spitfire EP166) flew five times during the day, leading his own 111 Squadron twice and leading the American 308th FS on three missions. During one of the later he reported:

*"I was leading 308 Sqdn. (U.S.A.) with 350 (Belgian) above. We took off at 10.00 hrs to patrol the target area. As soon as we arrived we were met by many FW.190's some of which were bombing the ships. During the ensuing combats I fired at at least five of them. From one quarter deflection shot at about 300 yds I saw cannon strikes. It half spun several times from about 2000 ft. and went towards the sea. I broke off as I was attacked by another.*

*I fired at several more, one from about 150/200 yds. Nearly full deflection which crossed me from left to right, I observed hits on the fuselage, just behind the engine. It seemed to stagger, pulled up slightly and then went into a gentle slow dive with a lot of smoke coming from it. I was about to finish it off when I had to break away as another enemy aircraft was firing at me from a very close range.*

*ROUNDS FIRED. 20 m.m. Cannon 70 rounds.*

*.303 m.g. 200 rounds.*

*N.B. This Spitfire has only 2 m.g. Cine Gun exposed."*

Wickham was credited with two damaged Fw 190s off Dieppe claimed at 5,000-1,000ft at around 10:45.

On 25 August 1942, he was awarded a Bar to his DFC for his leadership over Dieppe on 19th of that month. Both citations credited him with nine victories, the Bar citation adding that he had also claimed five probables. Immediately after this award, he was posted to command 131 Squadron.

He was rested in November but returned to operations in April 1943 as commander of 122 Squadron.

In the afternoon on 25 July 1943, RAF flew Ramrod 154. This consisted of the sub-operations; Ramrod 154/I and Ramrod 154/II. Ramrod 154/I was against Schipol with twelve Mitchells from 180 Squadron supported by seven squadrons of Spitfire Mk.Vs (10 and 12 Group) and Spitfire Mk.IXs of Northolt & Kenley Wings. Ten Mitchells bombed the Fokker works at Schiphol at 15:00 from 14,000ft with 80 x 500lb. bombs with good concentration of strikes while encountering heavy flak. All bombers returned. 504 Squadron flew as close escort and encountered four Bf 109Gs near Amsterdam at around 15:00. Flight Sergeant Gough claimed one as a probable and an unknown pilot from the unit claimed a damaged while Flying Officer J. Jagger (Spitfire V AA755) was taken PoW after having been shot down over Ostend. The rear-support from 12 Group (402, 118 and 611 Squadrons) rendezvoused over Lowestoft, making landfall at 15:00 when two miles south of Ijmuiden at 12000ft. The main force was seen crossing-out on exit. They became engaged in heavy air-fighting in the vicinity of Amsterdam against 10-20 Bf 109Gs in loose pairs and fours. Squadron Leader Jack Charles (Spitfire V AR610) of 611 Squadron was shot down over Ostend after having claimed a damaged Bf 109 and a destroyed Fw 190 over Amsterdam at around 15:00 but he managed to parachute and was picked up by a Walrus. A second victory (a Bf 109) was claimed Pilot Officer Harry Walmsley (AR509) at around 15:00 8m west of Amsterdam.

Ramrod 154/II was against Zeebrugge when twelve Spitfires from respectively 65, 122 and 602 Squadron gave support to medium bombers attacking Zeebrugge Coke-ovens. On leaving the target area 122 Squadron was bounced by twelve Fw 190s from above and astern at around 15:00. Squadron Leader Wickham (Spitfire EN841) reported:

*"I was leading my squadron as close escort to 18 Marauders bombing targets in the Ghent area. Just after the target, we moved over to the right of the formation. We were then bounced by 2 F.W. 190's and 2 109's - with the 109's flying No.2 to the 190's. Squadron (Red and Yellow)*

*sections broke to the right. From then on we were very heavily engaged by approximately 30 e/a - 190's and 109's. Later these were augmented by another 30/40 e/a. I am sure there was at least one Reggiane 2002 mixed up with them.*

*I fired various bursts at e/a with deflection from 15° from the front to 15° from astern. I claim 1 109 damaged on the port wing root and in front of pilot's wind screen. Red 3 witnessed this. I also damaged 1 F.W. 190 on the starboard side of the fuselage level with and behind pilot's cockpit. I think I destroyed a F.W. 190 as I took a burst at him as I drew my sight along his line of flight and he passed under my nose. I next saw him flicking downwards at about 2000 ft. escorted by two 190's. I was in no position to confirm any of these as I was engaged on my own by 20 - 30 F.W's and Me 109's."*

Wickham was credited with one probable Fw 190, one damaged Fw 190 and one damaged Bf 109. Pilot Officer Peet claimed a Bf 109G at around 15:00 over Ostend while an unknown pilot claimed a damaged Bf 109. Flying Officer J. K. Dudley (Spitfire Vb AB972) became a PoW after having been shot down by Fw 190s over Ostend.

165 Squadron flew as high-cover and were also surprised by enemy fighters suffering three pilots KIA when Sous-Lieutenant A. Imbert (Free French) (Spitfire Vc EE603/YT-M) was killed in combat over Ostend as was 23-year-old Flight Sergeant William Brown (RAAF no. 409288) (Spitfire Vc EP555/YT-E) and 28-year-old Flight Sergeant John Henry Curry (RAF no. 1335808) (Spitfire Vc AR609/YT-C) all were shot down and killed between 14:10 and 15:50.

Finally 453 Squadron claimed two damaged Fw 190 in the Ghent-Terneuzen area at around 15:10.

Totally RAF lost six Spitfires while claiming 3 destroyed, 2 probables and 7 damaged German fighters. They had been involved in combat with fighters from I./JG 26 and III./JG 54, which claimed six Spitfires and one Typhoon between 15:04 and 15:19. Claimants were Hauptmann Siegfried Schnell of Stab III./JG 54 who claimed a Spitfire south-east of Gouda at 15:04 and a Typhoon at 2,000m north-west of Ijmuiden at 15:07, Hauptmann Karl Borris of Stab I./JG 26 who claimed Spitfire at an altitude of 4,800m at 15:04, Hauptmann Karl Borris of Stab I./JG 26 who claimed a Spitfire (victory no. 28) at 1,000m south-west of Goes at 15:09, Oberleutnant Arthur Beese of I./JG 26 who claimed a Spitfire (victory no. 14) at 50m north-west of Terneuzen at 15:11, Feldwebel Peter Ahrens of 3./JG 26 who claimed a Spitfire (victory no. 5) at 500m at Westkapelle at 15:15 and Oberfeldwebel Eugen-Ludwig Zweigart of 9./JG 54 who claimed a Spitfire at 3,500m north-west of Ijmuiden at 15:19. As seen the German claims in this combat seems to have been were accurate.

Known losses were Unteroffizier Pfeiffe of 7./JG 54 who was wounded when his Bf 109G-6 (WNR. 19818) was shot down between Castricum-Velzen (Nordseekanal) and Unteroffizier Werner Walther of 8./JG 54 who was killed when his Bf 109G-4 (WNR. 19230) was shot down 10 km west of Velzen. It is possible that a Bf 109G-6 (WNR. 20218) of III./JG 54 suffered 25% damaged at the attack on Schipol. I./JG 26 didn't suffer any losses during the day.

He commanded 122 Squadron until November 1943. He then became Wing Leader of 122 Wing in 2nd TAF.

He was promoted to Squadron Leader on 1 January 1944.

During 1944, he was married for a year with Sheila Macneal, the widow of Squadron Leader [Frederick Shute](#).

From January to March 1944 he served with OLTW. In March 1944 he joined 2 TEU as CFI, remaining on strength until 12 September, when he was posted to HQ, ADGB.

From October 1944 to March 1945 he was a staff officer at HQ, Fighter Command, following which he led the Peterhead Mustang Wing on sorties up the Norwegian coastal area.

At the end of the war a full account of his wartime activities was prepared to support a recommendation for a DSO, this listing his claims as ten confirmed, seven probables and 15 damaged. The DSO citation, which appeared in August 1945, combined the two former figures and credited him with 17.

Wickham ended the war with 4 biplane victories and a total of 7 (plus another 3 without details) destroyed.



Medals awarded to Wickham during the war. From left to right:  
DSO, DFC and Bar, 1939 to 1945 Star, Air Crew Europe Star (France and Germany), Africa Star, Defence Medal: 1939 to 1945, War Medal 1939-1945 with a "Mention in Despatches" clasps and US Silver Star.

**Image kindly provided by Simon Muggleton.**

He remained in the RAF, commanding 43 Squadron on Meteors from February to December 1949, and ultimately becoming a Group Captain.

He was stationed at Duxford in the mid-1950s, becoming a Wing Commander again on 1 January 1953. At the end of June 1956 he was posted as Air Attaché, Bern, Switzerland, as a Group Captain. He retired from the service on 26 March 1961.

Pete Wickham died on 29 April 1970.

### Claims:

| Kill no. | Date        | Time   | Number | Type      | Result    | Plane type   | Serial no. | Locality          | Unit             |
|----------|-------------|--------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------------|------------|-------------------|------------------|
|          | <b>1940</b> |        |        |           |           |              |            |                   |                  |
| 1        | 29/06/40    |        | 1      | Ro.37 (a) | Destroyed | Gladiator I  | K8031      | 3m W Sidi Aziez   | att. 33 Squadron |
| 2        | 29/06/40    |        | 1      | CR.32 (b) | Destroyed | Gladiator I  | K8031      |                   | att. 33 Squadron |
| 3        | 30/06/40    | 08:00- | 1      | CR.42 (c) | Destroyed | Gladiator II | N5783      | Bardia            | att. 33 Squadron |
| 4        | 17/08/40    | 10:40- | 1      | S.79 (d)  | Destroyed | Gladiator    |            | Bardia-Alexandria | 112 Squadron     |



|   |             |         |   |             |                |             |       |                      |                |
|---|-------------|---------|---|-------------|----------------|-------------|-------|----------------------|----------------|
|   | 25/12/40    | morning | ½ | CR.42 (e)   | Shared damaged | Hurricane   |       | Sollum area          | 33 Squadron    |
|   | <b>1941</b> |         |   |             |                |             |       |                      |                |
| 5 | 06/04/41    |         | 1 | Bf 109E (f) | Destroyed      | Hurricane I |       | Rupel Pass, Bulgaria | 33 Squadron    |
| 6 | 13/04/41    |         | 1 | Bf 110 (g)  | Destroyed      | Hurricane I |       | Mount Olympus        | 33 Squadron    |
| 7 | 20/04/41    |         | 1 | Ju 88 (h)   | Destroyed      | Hurricane I |       | Piraeus              | 33 Squadron    |
|   | <b>1942</b> |         |   |             |                |             |       |                      |                |
|   | 27/04/42    | 12:10   | 1 | Bf 109E (i) | Damaged        | Spitfire Vb | AR281 | 5m N St Omer         | 111 Squadron   |
|   | 19/08/42    | 10:45   | 1 | Fw190       | Damaged        | Spitfire Vb | EP166 | off Dieppe           | 111 Squadron   |
|   | 19/08/42    | 10:45   | 1 | Fw190       | Damaged        | Spitfire Vb | EP166 | off Dieppe           | 111 Squadron   |
|   | <b>1943</b> |         |   |             |                |             |       |                      |                |
|   | 25/07/43    | ~15:00  | 1 | Bf190 (j)   | Damaged        | Spitfire V  | EN841 | Ghent area           | 122 Squadron   |
|   | 25/07/43    | ~15:00  | 1 | Fw190 (j)   | Damaged        | Spitfire V  | EN841 | Ghent area           | 122 Squadron   |
|   | 25/07/43    | ~15:00  | 1 | Fw190 (j)   | Probable       | Spitfire V  | EN841 | Ghent area           | 122 Squadron   |
|   | <b>1945</b> |         |   |             |                |             |       |                      |                |
|   | 25/03/45    |         | 1 | Fw190       | Damaged        | Mustang IV  | 'Z'   | S Bremanger          | Peterhead Wing |

**Biplane victories:** 4 destroyed.

**TOTAL:** (According to citations) 10 destroyed (3 no details), 7 probables (6 no details), 15 and 1 shared damaged (9 no details).

(a) Claimed in combat with Meridionali Ro.37bis probably belonging to 64<sup>o</sup> or 73<sup>o</sup> Gruppi Osservazione Aerea. Not verified with Italian records.

(b) Not verified with Italian records.

(c) Claimed in combat with CR.32s of the 160 Squadriglia escorting a Ro.37. The 33 Squadron claimed two victories and the Ro.37 (the crew was killed) and one CR.32 were shot down (Tenente Ivano Vanni parachuted).

(d) RAF and FAA claimed six S.79s and 1 probable for one damaged Gladiator. The 10<sup>o</sup> Stormo aircraft lost three S.79s and got two more damaged.

(e) Possibly claimed in combat with CR.42s, which claimed two probable Hurricanes without losses. The 33 Squadron claimed one damaged CR.42 without losses.

(f) Claimed in combat with Bf 109Es of 8/JG27. 33 Squadron claimed 5 without losses while 8/JG27 lost four aircraft and a fifth crash-landed. Oberleutnant Arno Becker (Black 2) was killed (possibly by [Pattle](#)), Leutnant Klaus Faber baled out and became POW (possibly by [Pattle](#)) and Gerhard Fromming (Black 8) was wounded.

(g) Bf 110 L2+HR of 7(F)/LG2 flown by Leutnant George Lange shot down.

(h) Probably claimed in combat with Ju 88s from I/LG 1. RAF claimed five for the loss of one Hurricane. I/LG 1 lost one aircraft (L1+ZH - Unteroffizier Helmut Benke and his crew killed) and got one damaged while claiming one Hurricane.

(i) Claimed in combat with JG 26 which claimed seven Spitfires with unknown (but very limited) losses. RAF claimed 9 fighters, 1 probable and 8 damaged for the loss of 5 Spitfires and 3 Hurricanes.

(j) Claimed in combat with fighters from I/JG 26 and III/JG 54 which claimed seven RAF fighters with at least two fighters lost. RAF lost six Spitfires in this combat while claiming 3 destroyed, 2 probables and 7 damaged German fighters.

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