

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK

RONALD 'RAS' BERRY, AIRMAN AND ONE OF 'THE FEW'

The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

Winston Churchill, Aug 20 1940, referring in Parliament to the Battle of Britain.



Image : Aircrewremembered.com

Ronald Berry, known as 'Ras', born near East Park, Hull, in May 1917 was one of Churchill's Few. Not only that, he was one of the Even Fewer Battle of Britain pilots who survived the war and went on to have a distinguished career in the Air Force thereafter, rising to the rank of Air Commodore.

Berry came from a modest background – his father was a cargo superintendent with the Royal Mail – and as a boy attended Riley High School and Hull Municipal Technical College before going on to work as a clerk in the City Treasurer's department. But his great ambition was to fly planes and he took his first steps to achieving his goal when he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1937, learning to fly a Blackburn trainer. In 1939, shortly before the outbreak of war, he was sent to Duxford near Cambridge where he learned to fly Spitfires, earned himself a commission and was assigned to 603 squadron in Montrose. Whilst patrolling the Scottish East coast he is thought to have shared three 'kills' including a Junkers 88 before his squadron was transferred to Hornchurch in Essex amidst mounting losses in the Battle of Britain. He was still only 23. On 31st August 1940 he was in the thick of the fighting, and his own words - quoted in *Aircrew Remembered* - best describe his actions that day, when on his second sortie of the morning he engaged *a mass of wheeling, milling Me 109s, which were protecting their big brothers, the Heinkel and Dornier bombers.*

The squadron split up and in seconds I was in a dogfight with a 109. The turn got tighter. The question was which of us would straighten up - would the 109 roll over and disappear or stay long enough for me to get a bead on him? He left it too late. I got in a long burst, then another, and he burst into flames . . . Another 109 crossed below and in front. I rolled over and followed him. He never saw me. I gave him a long burst as I closed rapidly on his tail. There was a long trail of smoke and flame and he went straight into the ground.

In the evening Berry was scrambled for a third time that day and spotted a *large beehive of fighters around a straggling clutter of bombers and some flashes on the ground where bombs were falling*. He chased and shot down a 109 over Shoeburyness, observing the pilot shaking his fist as he stood by his wrecked plane. This, he remarked in his understated way, was *a satisfactory ending to an eventful day*. The feat earned him the nickname *The Mighty Atom*, a reference to his short, stocky frame, which was a great help to him in the air. His nephew, Peter Long, explains that *Ron was small and thickset and he said it helped tremendously with the effects of G-force, he could take up more G-force. It really did help in the twisting, tight turns of a dogfight. That's why he was never shot down.* (Quoted by BBC News, December 2012).

Soon after his success in shooting down three planes in one day, Berry was given permission to return to Hull to marry Nancy Watson. His honeymoon lasted precisely one day, after which he returned to Hornchurch as a Pilot Officer. His biographer, Donald Chester, calculates that during the Battle of Britain as a whole, Berry *shot down ten enemy aircraft, claimed his part in the destruction of another six, had eight 'probables' and also caused damage to nine*. Nancy was probably more impressed that out of his squadron's 24 pilots he is thought to be one of only eight who survived to the end of the Battle of Britain.

Returning to Scotland he was promoted to Squadron Leader, taking command of 81 squadron, which took part in Operation Torch, the allied invasion of French North Africa. He then went on to train American pilots on flying Spitfires. In all, he flew over 400 combat missions during the war.

After the war he held a number of training and managerial roles in the Air Force before retiring in 1969 as an Air Commodore. He was highly decorated, his accolades including the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and bar and the Distinguished Service Order. He was awarded the OBE in 1946, upgraded to CBE in 1965. Possibly his greatest honour came on 30th January 1965 when he was chosen as one of only fourteen of The Few to march at the head of the cortege at Sir Winston Churchill's funeral. In later life Nancy suffered from multiple sclerosis and the couple, who had one daughter, moved to Hornsea. Ronald died in 2000 aged 83.

The citation for his first DFC – awarded when he was only 23 – sums the man up beautifully. It reads *Pilot Officer Berry has personally destroyed six enemy aircraft, and assisted in the destruction of several others. Through innumerable engagements with*

the enemy he has shown the greatest gallantry and determination in pressing home his attacks at close range. The skill and dash with which this officer has led his section have done much to assure their successes. How remarkable and fitting that a man from Hull, bombed so badly in the war, should show such enormous skill and bravery in leading his men in a successful onslaught against the German air force.

Don Knibb

01.10.2