

## BATTLE OF BRITAIN

**O**n two days every year, Kent farmer Robert Maylam makes his way across the fields to a riverbank where Pilot Officer Albert van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck fell to his death during the Battle of Britain. It is summer when I join him for the stride through the grassy landscape. The trees around us are in full green hue, and the East Stour ripples along just as it did that day more than 80 years ago when Albert and his 501 Squadron comrades scrambled to intercept a bomber swarm as it headed across the skies of Ashford.

September 15, 1940, described by Churchill as 'Battle of Britain Day', marked a turning point in the RAF's fight against the Luftwaffe. It was also the moment Belgian-born Albert "gave his life in the name of liberty", explained Robert. "Every Armistice Day on November 11, I once again place a wreath at a special memorial

plaque honouring Albert's memory here in Biltong, near Wye.

"I reckon it hasn't changed much around here since 1940," he added, leading the way to the monument. "I grew up always knowing about Albert of 501 Squadron," Robert said. "As a boy in the 1970s, I remember the engine of Albert's Hurricane sticking out of the river, and I recall the day people arrived to remove pieces of the aircraft. My father, Peter, always told me why this place was special, and I remained friends with a chap called Don Key who saw Albert's aircraft go down that day in September 1940."

Robert described how Don, a teenager then, was fishing when he looked up and saw a Hurricane in trouble. A trail of smoke was coming from the engine as it headed for a field. Don said Albert looked fine as he tried to clamber out of the cockpit at around 200ft, perhaps to jump into

the water, but the aircraft came down too fast, hit trees, turned 360° and landed in the water. Don ran towards the wreckage and saw the pilot floating face down; his head having struck the trees as he fell. Don dragged him away. It was too late; Albert was already dead.

### Aristocratic aviator

Born in 1908 in Charleroi, Belgium, Albert Emmanuel Allix Dieudonne Jean Ghislain van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck was born into an aristocratic family. His mother was Baroness Margueritte-Marie Coppens, his father Joseph was a senior military official. Albert joined the Belgian Army in December 1928, transferring across to the Aéronautique Militaire Belge in December 1930, starting aircrew training as an observer the next summer and then beginning his pilot training in December 1931.



The solving of a decades-old familial mystery means a Battle of Britain 'lucky star' who came to grief in a Kent river will now never be forgotten by his daughters. **Words: Melody Foreman**



# FALLING STAR





RIGHT: Albert d'Ertsenrijck had a narrow escape from a Firefly biplane fighter early in his aviation career BELGIAN AIR FORCE

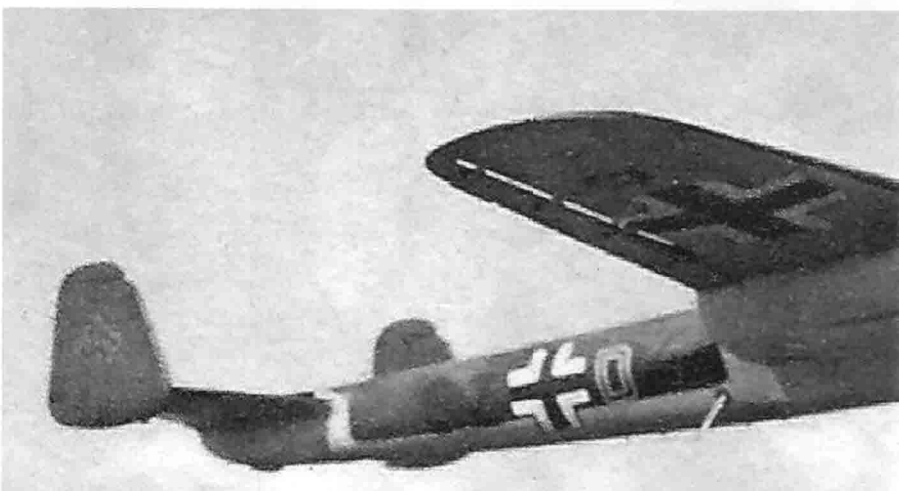
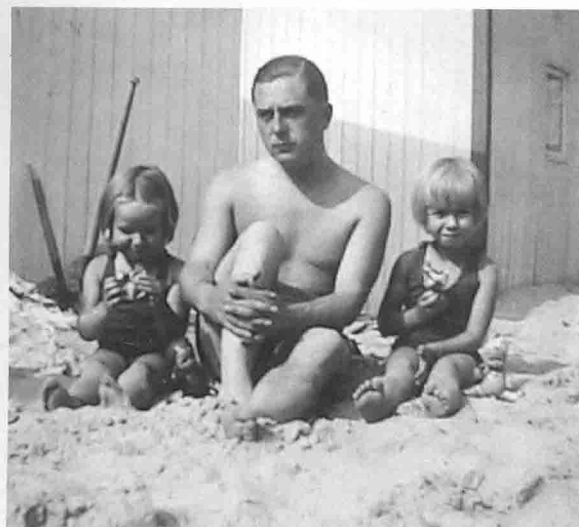


The Belgian-born aviator had already endured a tumultuous flying career by the time he arrived in England VIA AUTHOR

***"I refuse to obey the capitulation order, having estimated that my duty was to defend the Allied cause presently represented by Britain"***

PILOT OFFICER ALBERT VAN DEN HOVE  
D'ERTSENRIJCK, TO HIS WIFE

Rosemarie and Adrienne as toddlers with their father Albert VIA AUTHOR



On July 14, 1940, the determined pilot had written home to his wife, Laure: "When you receive this letter I shall not be any more of this world. But I want you to know that I did my duty to the end and that you can be proud of your husband. Being in France at the time of the Franco-German armistice signing I refuse to obey the capitulation order of the Belgian government, having estimated that my duty was to defend the Allied cause presently represented by Britain. I have succeeded in enlisting in the RAF

after a voyage of one month.

"I can completely assure you I died as a Christian, my conscience being clear and quiet, in defence of the good cause. When I took the decision to see my native country and my home again only after the victory of Britain, I did not forget you my loving Laure, I did not forget my two loving daughters, Adrienne and Rosemarie.

"I was where duty was calling me, and I did consign you all to the divine providence and more particularly to the Virgin Mary who never refused me anything. I have asked her to







A Thistle Squadron Hurricane at Schaffen, April 1940. The Belgian Hurricanes would be almost wiped out on May 10 BELGIAN AIR FORCE



Do 17s of KG 77 attacked the Belgian air base at Schaffen in a series of dawn raids CHRIS GOSS

look after you in all respects, being convinced she would do it better than I, and I am gone to my destiny with a conscience clear. I ask you to forgive me for all the sorrows and disappointments during the six-and-a-half years of marriage we had together. I have not always been kind to you; I did not cherish you as I should have. I beg your pardon for it. Goodbye my dear Laure. Goodbye my two loving daughters, I shall pray for you all in heaven and I shall wait for you."

This translated correspondence from Albert – who spoke little English – is a most heartfelt example to come from the RAF's portentous orders instructing airmen to write 'just in case' goodbyes. He wrote the missive fully believing that the Belgian embassy would have no need to send it on, and previous letters to Laure enthusiastically mentioned how Albert's "lucky star" was with him, and how during the German bomber raids on his aerodrome in Schaffen, Belgium, he had gone through it all with "a smile".

However, despite Albert penning this letter, the circumstances of his death and his initial disappearance from Belgium appear to have been withheld from his daughters Adrienne and Rosemarie. Tragically, for decades, it seems Adrienne at least had reason to have a dim view of her father. Indeed, she believed Albert had abandoned his family and

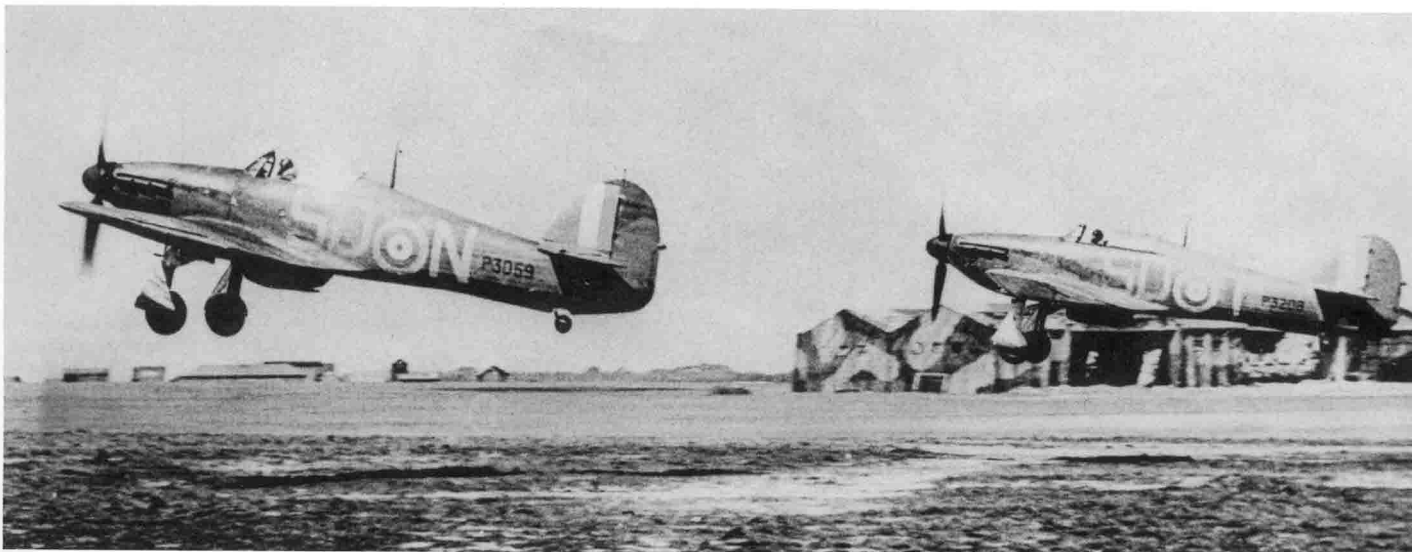
country – not knowing of his gallant, ultimately fatal effort to carry on the good fight.

### The 'vivacious Hole'

Albert van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck was quite the pilot and had already had a brush with fate twice before he fell to his death in Kent. In mid-September 1933, with just two-years' experience as an aviator with the Belgian 2/I/2Aé 'Thistle' squadron, he was forced to bale out of his Fairey Firefly IIM biplane after an accident.

Albert escaped unscathed and, just ten days later, was in fine form to marry his fiancée, Countess Laure Gaspard Marie Josephe Ghislaine Cornet d'Elzius de Peissant Beyghem.

The new Mrs d'Ertsenrijck was soon to learn all about Albert's flying adventures. Her husband's record was admirable, his CO describing his skills as "always completely



*“For 19 weeks, Albert had just ‘disappeared’, leaving friends and family fearing his death – or worse”*

satisfactory” and him as someone who had the aptitude and necessary “zeal” to lead. Memories and records of him recall a courageous, big-hearted and vivacious young man who earned the nickname ‘Hole’ (‘trou’ in French) because he won a beer drinking competition – his commander claimed Albert had the capacity of a hole.

The name stuck and whenever his pals were looking for him they’d holler: “Where’s Hole?”

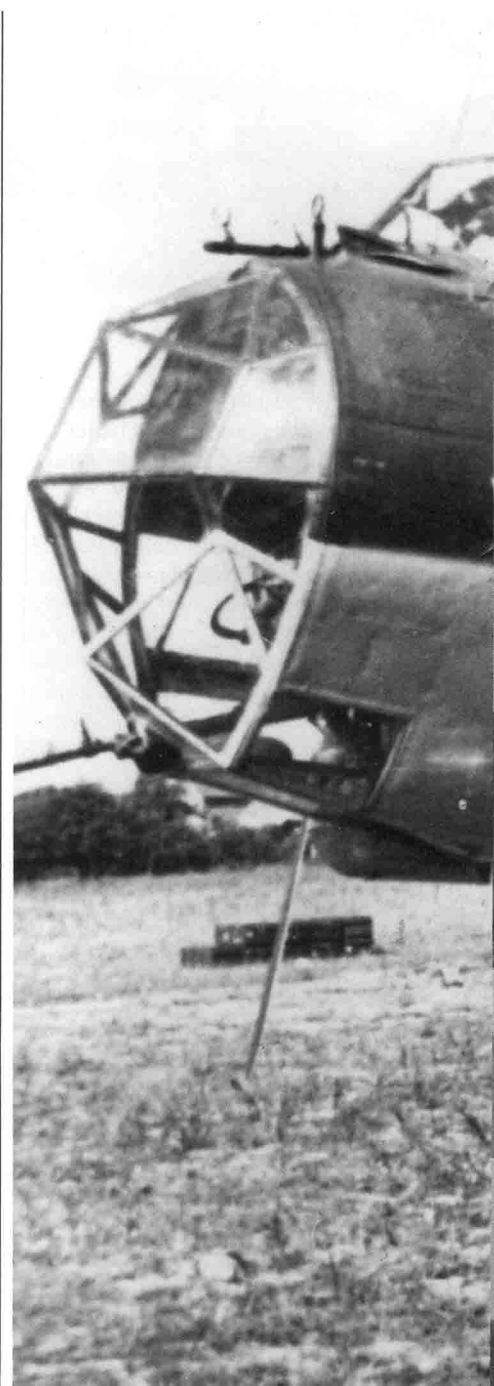
Albert’s ‘lucky star’ remained with him on March 2, 1940. His unit, the oldest fighter squadron in Belgium, was the first in the Aéronautique Militaire Belge to receive the Hawker Hurricane and Albert was

flying the newcomer when he was forced to crash-land. On return from a sortie, his aircraft developed problems with its propeller. Albert had tried to put down in a nearby field, but the aircraft tipped over after a wing caught the ground at Bierset aerodrome, near Liege. Albert sustained minor injuries that required him to recover in hospital.

In the early hours of May 10, the ‘Thistle’ Squadron base at Schaffen was bombed by German Bf 110s. Pilots were scrambled; Albert in H23 and H25 flown by Corporal Jacobs being the quickest to take off, those aircraft having been parked at the extreme left of the line-up. Over Brussels, d’Ertsenrijck

ABOVE: Albert (standing, centre) with his 43 Squadron comrades VIA AUTHOR

TOP: Two 501 Squadron Hurricane Mk.Is lift off from the grass during the Battle of Britain 43 SQUADRON RECORDS







Albert d'Ertsenrijk in his padded flying suit, with British and Belgian troops at Beauvechain, May 10, 1940 A VAN HAUTE

BELOW: A large force of Dornier Do 17Z bombers, such as this 2./JG 2 aircraft, was intercepted by 501 Squadron on September 15 VIA ANDREW THOMAS

intercepted a He 111 (which, in fog, he believed was a Do 17) and saw it leave formation, stricken. He also took shots at several Do 17s heading straight for him, landing his bullet-ridden Hurricane at Beauvechain.

His squadron leader, Captain Guisgand wrote: "My Gloster Gladiator is in the sky awaiting the arrival of the fighting group. I arrive alone, then there's a Hurricane – this is Jacobs – here. Then, another Hurricane! This is Captain van den Hove – 'the vivacious Hole' – a true fighter. He attacked alone a bomber formation. He came back disgusted. 'I think he took a hit,' he tells me, 'but the pig did not move and continued on course with no sign of a hit.'"

Incredibly, Albert had been up until 3am partying with newly arrived British troops. Flying in combat just two hours later, Albert was photographed on the 'morning after the night before' wearing dinner attire underneath his flying suit!

### Squadron scramble

Albert's adventures continued with a miserable withdrawal to southern France, but within a few weeks the heroic Belgian was labelled a thief and a traitor by some fellow countrymen. Along with a few Thistle Squadron friends, he had gone missing having stolen two lorries and a sum of money. His family and the military authorities



## HUNTER TURNED HUNTED

The pilot of the Bf 109 that Albert d'Ertsenrijck shot down on August 26, 1940, was flown by Oberleutnant Hans-Theodor Griseback of 2./JG 2. The German later wrote:

"I was leading the Staffel as Oberleutnant Heinz Gresert was not flying this day. Shortly before I got it, I managed to attack and set on fire a Hurricane that was attacking a He 111; the poor pilot got his parachute caught behind the cockpit of his burning aeroplane. If he had got out, his landing point could not be far from mine as immediately after, there was a bang and a smell of burning in the cockpit.

"I saw big holes in both wings and believe I was attacked from below. I did not wait. I rolled my aircraft onto her back, removed the canopy and pushed the stick forward. I was then thrown out of the cockpit."

Griseback deployed his parachute in cloud between 2,000-2,600ft and landed in a hedge. Civilians came running to



**Oberleutnant Hans-Theodor Griseback, who was shot down by Albert** CHRIS GOSS

assist him, even offering him tea. He put this treatment down to his attire – as it was hot, he was wearing no recognisable uniform, his clothing comprising a shirt, blue trousers and flying boots and flying helmet. This, he believed, made

his rescuers think he was Australian. However, a British soldier soon arrived, instantly recognised Griseback as German, and took him into custody on the back of his motorcycle with only a beckon of his finger!

Albert, however, was initially not sure whether he had shot Griseback down. He noted: "I approached the enemy formation head-on and fired three bursts at the leading line of enemy aircraft and then at successive waves from below without result. I turned behind them but was attacked by a Bf 109, which hit me twice through the fuselage and four times in the wing. I went into a spin, and when I came out, saw a Bf 109 following a Hurricane which was diving steeply.

"I got onto the tail of the 109, firing whenever possible, and white smoke poured from the engine. I lost the enemy aircraft into cloud somewhere north of Portsmouth and cannot say whether I shot him down."

Griseback's victim is believed to be Pilot Officer Roy Lane, of 43 Squadron, who baled out but was badly burned.

had no clue where he was.

Actually, Albert was doing his best to escape the German invaders. He had refused to surrender as ordered and commandeered a motor car hoping to escape to Spain and get to Britain. Eventually, he reached Gibraltar and boarded the SS *Apapa* bound for Liverpool.

For 19 weeks, Albert had just 'disappeared', leaving friends and family fearing his death – or worse.

**Wing Commander Paul Farnes (as a Sergeant Pilot) was the regular pilot of Hurricane P2760 but was on R&R on September 15, 1940 501 SQUADRON RECORDS**

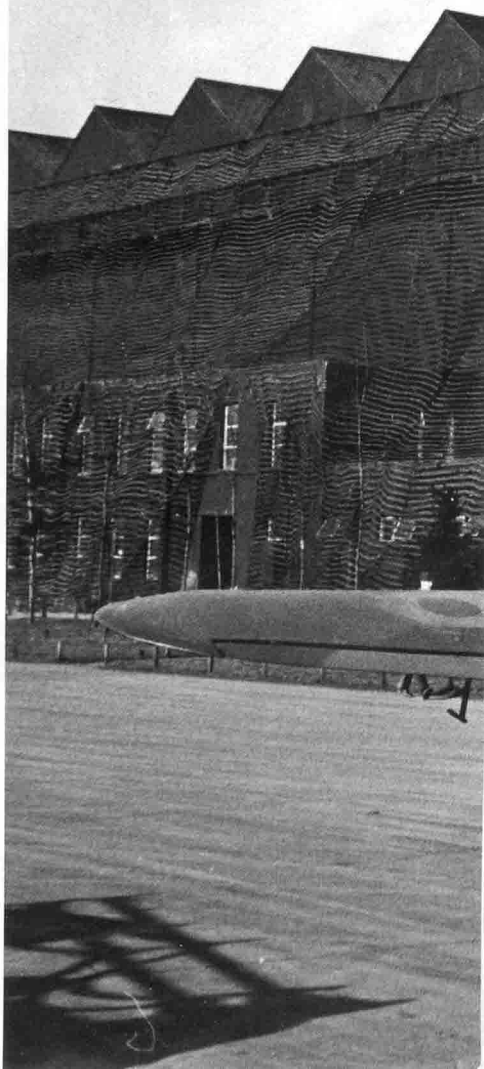
Between June and September 1940, he wrote three letters to Laure, but she didn't receive them until long after his demise. In one, he explained that he had joined the RAF and apologised for any suffering meted out by the invading Germans that she might suffer.

Shortly after his arrival in Britain, Albert was assigned to 43 Squadron at Tangmere, West Sussex. He proved a serious foe, bringing down a Ju 87 Stuka on August 16 and a Bf 109 on August 26. On September 4, he wrote to his friend, Pilot Officer Georges Doutrepoint, to detail his 'probable' shooting down of a Bf 110. It could have been more, but, in reply, his target put a round through his engine and oil sprayed his canopy, forcing him to land.

Doutrepoint died on September 15, the same day as Albert, a day to go down in history in Britain's climatic battle for the skies. Albert was then with 501 Squadron at Kenley, having only just joined the squadron. They were scrambled, and at 11.30am the 32-year-old Belgian was last seen at 20,000ft and under fire.

### "Great presence of mind"

At 1050hrs, radar had detected Luftwaffe aircraft forming up over the English Channel and, ten minutes later, 501 and 253 Squadrons were placed at readiness. The 13 Hurricanes of 501 Squadron departed Kenley between 1115-



1120hrs to patrol above Maidstone. Not long into their sortie, 'bogies' were spotted and identified as 20 Dornier Do 17s at 16,500ft – some 2,000ft above the Hurricanes.

The fighters climbed to engage the bombers, which flew in a wide 'V' as part of a stepped formation of 250 German aircraft ranging between 15,000ft-26,000ft as it crossed the Kent coast between Dungeness and Ramsgate. The bombers were heading toward London and, seeing the Hurricanes, climbed to make the coming attack more difficult.

Meanwhile, as 501 Squadron passed over Ramsgate, some 50 Bf109E fighters dived down and attacked before climbing back up

The Hurricanes of 501 Squadron were joined on September 15 by those of 253 Squadron, one of the latter's Mk.IIs shown on the ground at RAF Northolt, April 1940 253 SQUADRON RECORDS

and withdrawing, leaving 501 Squadron's 'Green' and 'Blue' sections able to claim two Do 17s and two Bf109s as destroyed, and a third as damaged.

Feldwebel Theodor Rehm, navigator in a Kampfgeschwader 76 Do 17, described their interception by 501's Hurricanes: "Their thrusting attack took them right through our formation. Manning the nose gun, I dared not open fire for fear of hitting our own aircraft, but the Hurricanes flashed close by, passed us and did not do much firing either, and we came out of the attack unscathed."

The pilot of another KG 76 Dornier, Feldwebel Wilhelm Raab,

on his 44th sortie, also wrote: "They came in fast, getting bigger and bigger. As usual when under attack from fighters we closed into a tight formation to concentrate our defensive fire. Four Hurricanes scurried through the formation. Within seconds they passed us.

"More black specks emerged from the bank of cloud in front, rapidly grew larger and flashed through the formation. They were trying to split us up, but neither attack had any success. Our formation remained intact."

It was during this combat that Squadron Leader Harry Hogan force-landed his Hurricane, V7435, at Sundridge, Kent. It was also when

*"More black specks emerged from the bank of cloud in front, rapidly grew larger and flashed through the formation"*

FELDWEBEL WILHELM RAAB







OC 501 Squadron, Squadron Leader Harry Hogan, went down on the same sortie as Albert but survived to theorise on the Belgian's demise 501 SQUADRON RECORDS

d'Ertsenrijck was brought down. Hogan wrote in his report: "Pilot Officer van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck arrived at Kenley on September 14. He seemed to have plenty of experience and had done very well when he was in 43 Squadron.

"As he was anxious to fly with 501 as soon as possible he came with me next morning and flew in my section. We carried out our head-on attack on a large formation of about 20 Dorniers escorted by numerous fighters. After breaking away from the attack I did not see him again.

"From the information I have received it appears that he tried to make a force-landing. His aircraft had probably been shot in the coolant, causing the engine to overheat, and it burst into flames when he was at 200ft. [He] must have tried to put the aeroplane in the river to avoid fire.

"This must have required great presence of mind. If the accident

happened this way, I believe that it did, such an accident was extremely unfortunate."

### Never forget

Back to recent times. Robert showed me the old oak tree that caught Albert's Hurricane on its way down, and recalled the day Albert's daughter Adrienne first visited the site: "When my father showed her exactly where Albert had died, she was overwhelmed and gave me a hug to thank us for placing the memorial plaque," he said.

"I will never forget it when she said, 'You've made me love my father again.' "She had spent years feeling hurt and angry with him for abandoning her, her mother Laure and sister Rosemarie. Learning how Albert left home to fight for liberty made her realise she could find some closure."

It was not until the late 2000s that Adrienne became aware of the true story behind her father's sudden disappearance.

Records of that day in 1940 reveal the heroic Belgian wasn't flying his usual Hurricane when he died. This I confirmed to Robert as I had previously interviewed the late Wing Commander Paul Farnes DFM. He told me how he'd arrived back at 501 Squadron from R&R on September 15 to find his favourite fighter missing. He asked groundcrew where it was and was told in hushed tones that Hurricane Mk.I P2760 was in pieces in the East Stour, and how its pilot, Albert, had died that day too.

But the story doesn't end there. Decades later, community archaeologists including Terry Parsons, Mark Kirby and Steve

Vizard, visited the site and with help from divers and heavy machinery managed to remove the Hurricane's Merlin engine. On September 15, 2016, to mark the 76th anniversary of Albert d'Ertsenrijck's death, this extraordinary artefact was presented on loan to the Kent Battle of Britain Museum by Steve Vizard, of the firm Airframe Assemblies.

As we gathered in nearby Hawkinge – where the Kent Battle of Britain Museum now stands on the former RAF airfield – to honour the memory of a hero, the freakishly hot sun of early autumn disappeared for a minute and a ghostly breeze blew through a still and silent crowd. If we thought this mysterious shift of cloud was a sign that Pilot Officer Albert van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck had joined us, who could blame us?

The event was made even more special as 17 members of Albert's family, including his daughters Adrienne and Rosemarie, had



RIGHT: Robert Maylam in a Spitfire cockpit. He maintains Albert's memorial plaque on his farmland AUTHOR



Members of the Medway Aircraft Preservation Society and the recovered Merlin engine at the ceremony AUTHOR





***"I will never forget it when Adrienne said, 'You've made me love my father again'. She had spent years feeling hurt and angry with him for abandoning her"***

travelled from Belgium to be there. They had also funded the Medway Aircraft Preservation Society's restoration work on the engine. Robert gave the address and as he did so, a Hurricane from the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar flew over the crowd. Reverend Ian Campbell led the prayers and dedication.

It was the restoration of this engine by MAPS and research by Vizard, Lewis Deal MBE (of MAPS) and chairman of the Kent Battle of Britain Museum Trust, David Brocklehurst MBE, that enabled this powerful story to come to light and for the family to be contacted.

### **Cherish the history**

Adrienne's husband Phillippe Lecoeuvre reflected: "My wife was a tiny child when her father was killed, so she didn't know him at all. His life was a mystery to us for many years until I began to research his story in 2009.

"Nobody knew much about him, and what they did know was so little that I said one day that I would like to know a lot more. I was curious and eventually managed to track down

Lewis Deal and from there we found more about the young Belgian pilot named Albert.

"It took my whole heart and soul to find out more and more. I have known Adrienne for 45 years and I was always thinking, 'Who was this man – this hero, this shadow we have over us?'. I am happy because now she knows about her father. She has changed too, it was important for her to know about him as she was once bitter, believing he had just disappeared and left the family in 1939. His reasons are now clear.

"In England I found all the records I needed about his flying career with the RAF, his friends and his squadrons. I have met some wonderful people who cherish the history of their country and thanks to them all our family have learned so much more about the hero pilot who is Albert."

Adrienne said: "We now know his motivations to fight the enemy were

righteous and pure and he paid the ultimate price for our liberty."

Phillippe concluded: "When you have a hero in the family, I think that you need to know."

Albert was buried in St Stephen's Churchyard, Lympne, Kent and in 1944 was posthumously awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre de Léopold. On October 20, 1949, his remains were re-interred in the Pelouse d'Honneur Cemetery of Brussels at Evere in Belgium with full military honours.

The plaque at his crash site, donated by Robert in 2000, reads: "In everlasting memory of one of 'THE FEW', Pilot Officer Albert E A D J G van den Hove d'Erstenrijck gave his life here on Sunday 15th September 1940 while flying Hawker Hurricane (P2760) with No.501 Squadron. Later repatriated to his native Belgium."

It is a powerful reminder as to why, for some, a small corner of Kent will always be part Belgium. **BW**

ABOVE: Albert's children only became aware of his sacrifice decades after the war  
VIA AUTHOR



Adrienne Lecoeuvre, Albert's daughter, with Terry Parsons and photographs of the excavations of her father's crash site  
AUTHOR