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**In World War II, a handful of American fliers answered Britain's call for help.**

# The Eagle Squadrons

By Tamar A. Mehuron, Associate Editor

**B**y Sept. 19, 1940, the Battle of Britain had depleted the Royal Air Force. Its fighter pilots and airplanes were worn down and stretched to the max. Responding to Britain's call for more pilots, however, was a small group of American volunteers.

In a brief ceremony that day at Church Fenton, RAF Fighter Command stood up its first all-American fighter unit, No. 71 Squadron. This unit soon became known to all as the Eagle Squadron, inspired by America's national symbol. Within a year, they would be joined by two other Eagle outfits, No. 121 Squadron and No. 133 Squadron.

The three squadrons valiantly defended Britain in combat against the Nazis from Feb. 5, 1941, until Sept. 29, 1942, when they were assimilated into

the expanding Army Air Forces presence there. The airmen then provided an invaluable boost of experience to the green USAAF crews who soon began to arrive in England in large numbers. "Those stout-hearted fellows who came from America to fight for us a year and a half ago, still fight with us," said Robbie Robinson, Member of Parliament and first intelligence officer for No. 71 Squadron, in a speech thanking them on the BBC.

By the end of 1942, the former Eagle Squadrons, now comprising USAAF's 4th Fighter Group, were the only US fighter group selected to remain to defend England, as most of the forces transferred to Africa for the North African campaign. It was a long road getting to that point, however.



USAF Museum

*Eight members of the first Eagle Squadron, No. 71, return from a training mission in October 1940.*

For Vernon C. Keough, Andrew Mamedoff, and Eugene Q. Tobin, three original members of No. 71 Squadron, the unit's activation made reality of their push to fly the RAF's hot military fighters of the day, the Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire. And they were convinced that, sooner or later, America would be drawn into the war. They wanted to get in on the action on their terms—as volunteer fighter pilots, not as infantry draftees in the US Army. It was a sentiment felt by many of the Eagles.

Those Americans—244 in all—who formed the three Eagle Squadrons found their way to the RAF by various routes, all of them chancy. One avenue for volunteers was to enlist first in the British or Canadian armed services, and then try to transfer into the RAF. This was the route taken by Eagle William Dunn. He came into No. 71 Squadron in early 1941.

Several, including Keough, Mamedoff and Tobin, were assisted by Col. Charles Sweeny, a World War I Army

*Eagle Squadron No. 71 member William Dunn is shown wearing both the RAF brevet and the US Army Air Forces pilot wings.*

veteran and admirer of the successful, legendary Lafayette Escadrille. In his post-Great War life, he was a daring, flamboyant promoter, who in the late 1930s and early 1940s publicized to Americans the French and British need for fighter pilots. His aim was to form an American squadron of fighter pilots, reprising the Escadrille.

Sweeny carried out his recruitment efforts in the face of stringent US Neutrality Acts, which forbade Americans to travel on the ships of combatant nations or travel in a combat zone. Violators were supposed to be subjected to stiff fines and other legal sanctions. Sweeny's recruitment activities in 1939 and 1940 thus earned him the ire of the US authorities.

Still, he was successful in finding volunteers. After the calamitous fall of France in June 1940, the US halted prosecution of violators of the Neutrality Acts. Sweeny pared down his

operation, but still channeled recruits to Britain, via Canada and then by sea to English ports.

In this, he was aided by his nephew, Charles Sweeny, a successful businessman. Charles Sweeny got London's authorization to establish an American RAF fighter squadron. He organized the volunteers, sent by his uncle, who were to form the nucleus of the first Eagle Squadron. And he created the Eagle flash, inspired by the image on his US passport.

The Sweeny operation was not the only recruitment effort. Another, even larger supplier of American volunteers was what was called the Clayton Knight Committee, which operated from April 1940 to October 1942. Knight was a World War I aviator, admirer of the Escadrille, and an aviation artist. At the behest of World War I ace William A. Bishop, Knight obtained British support for an organization that could tap into the large pool of American pilots. The Knight Committee had considerable reach as a result of a network of offices throughout the United States.

Although Britain supported both the Sweeny and Knight operations, the Knight Committee supplied more than 80 percent of the pilots for the RAF's Eagle Squadrons. Out of nearly 50,000 Americans who signed up, the committee took 6,700 to become RAF pilots.

### **A Passion for Flying**

The Americans who volunteered were mostly men under the age of 25. They came from a wide variety of both blue-collar and middle-class jobs. With the nation just emerging from the poverty of the Great Depression, they lacked money for college. Some of them had taken jobs in aviation or aviation-related industries.

All of them, somehow, were bound by their experience in or passion for aviation. They came from all over the United States, with many from California, which was at the time the center of American aviation. Many lacked the education and physical requirements to get themselves into the coveted Army Air Corps training schools. The stipulation of two years of college and 20/20 eyesight shut the door to many worthy candidates.

The RAF had less stringent standards. There was no college requirement, and a prospective pilot's eyesight could be 20/40 if corrective lenses could produce 20/20 vision. Applicants had to have a birth certificate, a high school

diploma, a minimum of 300 hours of certified flying time, a pilot's license, and be single.

The Eagles differed from their Lafayette Escadrille precursors in several areas. Many of the Escadrille pilots were well-educated and had come from wealthy, prominent Eastern families and tended to view flying as a hobby for the elite. The Eagles, for the most part, had high school educations and held blue-collar or working-class jobs. Far from treating flying as a lark, they had solid backgrounds in aviation. Carroll McColpin, for example, had more than 450 hours of flight time.

All of them recognized that volunteering for the RAF was their ticket to fly fast military aircraft, and to get into the war on highly exciting terms. Some were so eager to get in the British air service that they embellished their logbooks, registering more flight time than was actually the case.

Upon arrival in England, the volunteers were sent to an operational training unit for two to four weeks of initial flight training in Miles Master trainers, Hurricanes, and Spitfires. This was an important step in establishing a common baseline of flight training in fighters. When the volunteers completed this training phase, they usually were assigned to an RAF squadron.

There, the American volunteers were inculcated with the RAF cultural norms, military conduct, operations, and flying methods. The RAF approach was simple: If one could fly an airplane, one could fly all airplanes.

RAF Fighter Command divided Britain into geographic sectors called groups. Each group contained major cities and RAF bases, several of which were used by the three Eagle Squadrons.

Thus, No. 11 Group included the cities of London, Uxbridge, Dover, Southampton, and Portsmouth, as well as the Eagle Squadron bases of North Weald, north of London, Biggin Hill, south of London, the coastal bases of Martlesham Heath and Southend-on-Sea, and Debden and Great Sampford.

No. 12 Group, to the north, included the cities of York, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Coventry, and housed the Eagle Squadron bases of Church Fenton, Kirton-in-Lindsey, Colly Weston, Coltishall, Fowlmere, and Duxford.

No. 13 Group covered the north, as well as Scotland and Northern Ireland, which housed the sole Eagle Squadron base of Eglinton near Londonderry.



Staff Illustration by Zaur Eylanbekov

**Maj. William Daley brought with him this Spitfire Mk VB No. EN853 AV-D (shown as it appeared in November 1942), into the USAAF's 335th Fighter Squadron.**

On May 14, 1941, the RAF stood up the second Eagle Squadron, No. 121, in Kirton-in-Lindsey, with a core of experienced pilots and headed by an RAF veteran of the Battle of Britain as squadron leader. After two months of training in Hurricane Is, the unit switched to Hurricane IIBs, and was declared operational July 21, 1941.

Just 11 days later, the third Eagle Squadron, No. 133, stood up, moved to Duxford, and spent the month of September training. As with the predecessor squadrons, No. 133 began with convoy patrol duties, their target area covering the North Sea.

All three Eagle Squadrons were commanded at first by English RAF squadron leaders, which afforded the Eagles more grounding in RAF operations. Later, they were commanded by Americans. All three units also began by flying convoy escort missions in Hurricanes and transitioned later to Spitfires.

By October 1941, No. 71 Squadron had wielded the Spitfire so effectively in combat that it led all of Fighter Command in enemy aircraft destroyed. The Eagles moved on to fighter sweeps in France. RAF operations called for fighters to undertake air defense missions, bomber escorts, and attacks on enemy targets.

The pilots normally would be on three kinds of alert. Cockpit alert required the pilot to be in or near the cockpit, ready to take off. This category called for the pilot to run the engine every half-hour, if weather permitted, so the aircraft would have full power right as it started.

The second type of alert required the pilot to stay in the alert shack or dispersal hut on the flight line. He was dressed in flight clothes with his Mae West inflatable life jacket on. His parachute would sit on the wing, his helmet ready atop the control stick. Once alerted, usually by telephone, he had two to three minutes to get airborne.

The third alert category was the 15-

to 30-minute alert. In this situation, the pilots could be in their quarters or the mess, spending time reading, writing, playing cards or pool, but they had to be prepared to dash to their airplanes, most often to replace an alert crew that had already been scrambled.

Great care was taken not to grind down the pilots. The Eagles could request time away from duty, and each squadron had a different day off. There was also a stand-down day, with individual leaves on top of that.

Weather conditions proved to be almost as formidable a foe as the Luftwaffe. Bad weather led to the crashes of two No. 133 aircraft in October 1941. Poor weather grounded No. 71 Squadron for much of January 1942. Then, the weather cleared. That April, the squadron flew 661 missions, and on April 27, during a bomber escort mission over St. Omer, American squadron commander Chesley Peterson downed two enemy aircraft, with other squadron members destroying three more.

The three Eagle Squadrons flew together in only one mission: a raid on the French city of Dieppe on Aug. 19, 1942.

### Disaster Strikes

Designated Operation Jubilee, it was intended by the RAF as a dry run for an invasion of France. The raid was costly to the RAF, but the Eagle Squadrons outdueled the Luftwaffe on that day. For the Eagle Squadrons, Dieppe's bomber escort duty proved to be the high point of their service. The Eagles destroyed nine German aircraft and posted four "probables."

That victory was followed by disaster on Sept. 26, 1942.

Squadron 133 was assigned to bomber escort duty for a mission to Morlaix, France. The mission planner anticipated a routine flight, with intermittent clouds and a southerly 35 mph wind. Flying brand-new Spitfires, the pilots were

to meet up with a force of bombers in midchannel between Bolthead and Morlaix. Once airborne, however, the pilots flew in heavy overcast and were unknowingly blown far south of their rendezvous point by 100 mph northern winds. They lost radio contact with ground control in England.

With fuel running low, the Eagles met up with a group of bombers returning to England, and began to escort them back to base. One of the Spitfire pilots requested permission to go down through the cloud cover to determine their location, and the entire flight went with him. When the squadron broke out of the cloud cover, they were over Brest, France, flying in the teeth of a huge German anti-aircraft artillery trap.

Four Eagle pilots were shot down and killed, six more were shot down and taken as prisoners of war. One Eagle crash-landed in England and was critically injured. The final pilot bailed out and made his way back to England with the help of the French underground.

All 12 Spitfires were destroyed.

Three days later, on Sept. 29, 1942, members of the three Eagle Squadrons were transferred directly into the 4th Fighter Group, US Army Air Forces.

Having flown for Britain for two years, the Eagles brought to their green American units a core of badly needed combat experience. After helping the RAF in its time of desperate need, many of the Eagle pilots continued to serve valiantly for the remainder of World War II.

Members of No. 71 Squadron merged into USAAF's 334th Fighter Squadron. Those of No. 121 moved over to the 335th Fighter Squadron. The Americans in No. 133 Squadron became part of USAAF's 336th Fighter Squadron. These units live on today as three of the squadrons flying F-15E Strike Eagles for the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C. ■