

Air Force
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Commemorative Edition

FIRST IN THE AIR

The Eagle Squadrons
of World War II



AIR
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Cover picture: Hawker Hurricanes

First in the Air

The Eagle Squadrons of World War II

During the perilous years of 1940-1941, a small band of Americans joined the Royal Air Force to help England resist Nazi Germany. They did so while the United States remained a neutral power and overcame significant obstacles to accomplish their objective. Over time, the RAF formed three fighter units, known collectively as the Eagle Squadrons, around these volunteer pilots. These Americans flew alongside their British comrades in fighter and bomber escort missions until 1942, when they transferred into the United States Army Air Forces. The Eagle Squadron pilots made noteworthy contributions to the RAF, assisting them in their transition from fighting a defensive war to waging an offensive campaign against the German *Luftwaffe* and helping pave the way to an eventual Allied victory.

* * *

In 1940, Nazi Germany held continental Europe in its deadly grip. German armies had crushed the armed forces of Poland, invaded the neutral nations of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and easily dispatched French forces in Belgium. France held out longer, but on June 4, 1940, the British evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk and on June 22, France surrendered. Great Britain now faced Hitler virtually alone.

The British government relied heavily on the Royal Air Force (RAF) to protect England from the seemingly inevitable German invasion. The British Army suffered severe losses during the Battle for France and the British Navy was vulnerable to German air power. In addition, the RAF suffered significant losses from its aerial combat over France. More than 900 aircraft were lost in six weeks; of this total 453 were fighter aircraft: 386 Hurricanes and 67 Spitfires. Moreover, the RAF lost 1,382 individuals, which included 534 pilots, killed, unaccounted for or wounded. The Germans, lost 1,279 aircraft destroyed or damaged, including 300 fighter aircraft.

The German High Command called upon the *Luftwaffe* to inflict a decisive defeat upon the RAF. The *Luftwaffe* and the RAF's Fighter Command dueled in the skies over England during the Battle of Britain from July 10, 1940 until October 31, 1940. Initially, the *Luftwaffe* focused on engaging the RAF itself in aerial combat, and attacking military airfields, and the logistical pipeline and aircraft production facilities. However, in September, Hitler ordered his bombers to attack English cities but the RAF, aided by radar and intelligence gained through the *Ultra* communications intercepts, prevailed over the *Luftwaffe*. Each side took tremendous losses: the *Luftwaffe* lost 1,882 aircraft and Fighter Command, 1,017 and the *Luftwaffe* lost an estimated 2,662 aircrew and Fighter Command, 537 pilots. But most importantly, the RAF deterred Germany from invading England.

England took advantage of the momentary breathing space. The British war industries increased production and the RAF expanded its ranks. In addition to Englishmen, pilots came from other Commonwealth countries such as South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Rhodesia.

Many Americans, too, wanted to join the conflict. In 1940, the United States was officially a neutral power. Unofficially, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wished to help England during its time of need, but was constrained by the dictates of the Neutrality Laws and Presidential Proclamations that had been passed and issued between 1935 and 1939. Of particular import to the wishes of Americans desiring to fight in the skies over Europe was the Presidential Proclamation 2348, *Proclaiming the Neutrality of the United States*, issued on September 5, 1939. This declaration specifically prohibited Americans from accepting a commission or enlisting in the service of one of the belligerent nations (Germany and France, Poland, the United Kingdom, India, Australia and New Zealand) “. . . against an opposing belligerent.” The document’s stipulations included the prohibition against “Hiring another person to go beyond the limits or jurisdiction of the United States with intent to be enlisted” The same prescription applied to those wishing “. . . to be entered into service”

For Americans such as Colonel Charles Sweeny, however, they were willing to circumvent the Neutrality Acts and Presidential Proclamations. Colonel Sweeny, a soldier of fortune had fought in the French Foreign Legion and the United States Army during World War I. He later served in Poland with other Americans in the Polish Army during the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. He then went on in 1925 to Morocco and spent time in Spain during its Civil War in the 1930s to observe how well French aircraft were faring in that conflict.

When war looked all but inevitable in 1939, Sweeny, in conjunction with U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Henry J. Reilly, worked on a plan to bring American volunteers to France. The French were receptive to the plan and in order to skirt the neutrality laws planned to use American volunteers as ambulance personnel. Sweeny, however, wanted these volunteers to serve as combat personnel and got the approval of General Paul Armengaud, former commander-in-chief of the French Air Force, to recreate a contemporary version of the Lafayette Escadrille of World War I fame. In late 1939, Colonel Sweeny returned to the United States and sought out recruits in California. He had to tread carefully, as American officials including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), kept a close eye on his activities lest he violate the Neutrality Laws. His activities were also under the watch of Canadian officials who knew of the FBI’s interest in Sweeny. Despite the scrutiny, Sweeny recruited 32 American pilots who arrived in France in April and May 1940. Some individuals, such as Chesley G. Peterson, who tried to go to France through Canada, were turned backed due to the Neutrality Laws. However, Peterson tried again and later made his way to Britain where he joined the RAF.

By this stage of the war, France’s future was imperiled. Accordingly, American pilots did not have a long stay. Of the 32 who arrived in France, 4 were killed, 11 became prisoners, 5 went to England. The whereabouts of the remain-

ing 12 were unknown. At this stage, Colonel Sweeny ceased his active recruiting of pilots and passed on the task to his nephew, also named Charles. This Sweeny and his brother Robert were Americans residing in England and pursuing finance as their line of work. They had been active in trying to help the British cause. In 1939, Charles, over the objection of then-American Ambassador to the Court of St James and father of a future President of the United States, Joseph P. Kennedy, recruited Americans living in London, to form the First Motorized Squadron, a home guard organization. Ambassador Kennedy believed such efforts were in vain, as he held little hope that England would defeat Germany.

After forming the motorized squadron, Charles moved on to recruiting what became known as the Eagle Squadrons. In June 1940, he wrote to Sir Hugh Seeley in the British Air Ministry suggesting that an American Air Defence Corps be organized. He buttressed his suggestion by stating that his uncle, Colonel Sweeny still had in-place a recruiting organization with a large pool of potential American recruits to draw upon. Charles Sweeny did not stop with Sir Hugh Seeley; he also contacted Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill's personal assistant Brendan Bracken. Charles Sweeny eventually made a presentation to the British Air Council which approved the idea on July 2, 1940—provided he had 25 pilots and 25 reserve pilots already on-hand.

The new unit acquired the Eagle Squadron name based on a shoulder patch Charles Sweeny designed for the Americans to wear on their RAF uniforms. The patch featured an eagle similar to that found on a United States passport. After seeing the patch, Charles' father thought up the idea of naming the new unit the American Eagle Squadron (AES). Charles presented the name recommendation to Sir Hugh Seeley and it received Air Ministry approval. The first patches had the letters AES on them but the A was later dropped and units were forever known as the Eagle Squadrons.

The only significant British opposition to the plan came from Under Secretary of State for Air, Captain Harold H. Balfour. He was concerned the plan would conflict with recruiting efforts in the United States for instructor pilots for the Empire Air Training Scheme (later British Commonwealth Air Training Plan). Training scheme instructors taught aspiring pilots throughout the British Empire and the United States. The scheme, officially established on December 17, 1939, consisted of the United Kingdom providing aircraft and a core of individuals, while the host countries provided everything else. Eventually, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand established a variety of schools ranging from elementary flying training to service flying training, air observer, bombing and gunnery and air navigation training. Southern Rhodesia and South Africa also participated in training pilots for the RAF. The first classes began in April 1940 and the program peaked in 1943 with 333 flying schools. After receiving assurances that the plan would not conflict with the training program, Balfour gave his consent.

While the Sweeny initiative progressed, another American, Clayton Knight, pursued another, even more ambitious, effort that had British and Canadian government support. Knight flew in combat in World War I but was shot down, taken

prisoner and remained in German custody until being released at war's end. In September 1939, Canadian Air Vice Marshal, William "Billy" Bishop telephoned Knight who was pursuing his craft as an aviation artist at the Cleveland Air Races. Bishop, a World War I flying ace, asked Knight to form a recruiting organization for Americans wishing to join the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and RAF. Initially, the Knight organization concentrated on recruiting instructors to train pilots through the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Homer Smith, another World War I Canadian pilot, served as Knight's assistant. Smith was sworn in as Royal Canadian Air Force wing commander and set up an office in New York in anticipation of Knight getting, at the very least, nodding approval from American military officials to conduct recruiting activities in the United States. Knight met with Maj. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, chief of the Army Air Corps and Rear Admiral John Towers, the Navy's chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics. Knight had become acquainted with the military leaders through his work as an aviation illustrator. Arnold and Towers agreed in principle to Knight's recruitment effort with the assurance that they would not draw individuals away from entering the United States armed forces or those already serving on duty. In actuality, the Canadian and United States standards differed in significant respects, which precluded the Knight group from trying to recruit the same individuals. United States requirements stipulated two years of university study, 20/20 vision and be no more than 30 years old. The RCAF had more flexible age limitations and permitted married men to hold flight status.

Knight next turned to coordinating his work with the United States Department of State. Generally speaking, the United States government did not object to the idea of recruiting American pilots for Commonwealth air forces. However, given the idea's political sensitivity, Roosevelt Administration officials, during discussions with British and Canadian representatives, asked that such activities be done without much fanfare. In a later communication to the Canadian Legation, a United States official passed on a message from the 'highest quarter,' stating that the United States government would not object to Americans traveling to Canada for enlistment purposes. These sentiments notwithstanding, Knight proceeded cautiously. Since he did not have any prior contacts he could draw upon, Knight asked his former World War I commander, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, to act as an intermediary and arrange a meeting with the State Department officials. Knight was able to find an acceptable solution to specific United States concerns. In terms of the prohibition of actively recruiting individuals to serve in a foreign military service or on a ship, Knight adopted the position that his organization would not engage in any advertising or recruiting activities, but simply provide advice and assist in their training and travel to Canada and England.

The citizenship question, however, proved more difficult to surmount and remained troubling for years after the war had ended. According to the Citizenship Act of 1907, American citizens who took an oath to another government would lose their citizenship. Knight did not realize that this law had caused a great deal of difficulties for many Americans who joined foreign military ser-

vices in World War I. He devised a way around this impediment which received the concurrence of the Canadian and British governments. Instead of pledging allegiance to the King, those wishing to join the RCAF and RAF only pledged to obey their commanders' orders. The United States Department of State and the Department of Justice kept a watchful eye on the Knight Committee's work, but ultimately decided not to pursue any legal action, given Britain's urgent need for foreign support, especially after France fell to Germany.

Once the legal issues had been dealt with, however imprecisely, the Knight Committee set about its recruiting efforts. The Committee first concentrated its work in California where there was a large pool of aviators. Eventually the Committee established offices in cities from coast to coast, including New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, Oakland, and Los Angeles. Each applicant had to meet specific criteria: possess a high school diploma or equivalent; be between the ages of 20 and 45, if under 21, have a parent's or guardian's permission; in terms of piloting qualifications have at least 300 documented flying hours and hold a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) license. For applicants applying to join the RAF, the age limit was set at 31 and they had to be unmarried. During the slightly more than two year existence of the Knight Committee (later known as the Canadian Aviation Bureau), about 6,700 out of the some 49,000 American applicants were selected for the RCAF and RAF and to staff flying schools as of part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Program.

The United States government's lack of insistence on strict adherence to the Neutrality Laws was not surprising given the desire of the Roosevelt administration to assist Britain's war effort. As of August 15, 1940, Britain had ordered 20,000 aircraft and 42,000 engines. Moreover, American suppliers provided high performance 100 octane aircraft fuel which improved the performance of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engines that powered the British Hurricane and Spitfire fighters. All told, by September 1940 the British already had in hand or expected delivery of a variety of first-line American combat aircraft such as P-36, P-38, P-39, and P-40, pursuit planes and B-17 and B-24 bombers.

While the Knight Committee continued its work, the elder Charles Sweeny moved forward on his scheme to bring American pilots to fight in Britain. By the summer of 1940, a number of Americans had traveled to Britain via Canada. Once in Britain, the first arrivals received basic training in skills such as aerobatics and formation flying. Acquiring combat training was in the words of one early pilot "woefully inadequate, most of us learning these skills 'on the job.'" By mid-1941, after the initial push to get pilots into combat had eased, recruits went to Bournemouth to receive indoctrination in RAF flying methods and military training before being assigned to an operational training unit. After November 1941, the new arrivals also attended advanced flying training for three weeks before being assigned to an operational training unit.

For those individuals who never had pilot training, more than half of them received their first opportunities to fly through the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CFTP). Initially, Congress created the CFTP to assist civilian pilot training schools to weather the economic downturn of the Great Depression. Pilot

training would be conducted at Civil Aeronautics Administration-certified flying schools and American colleges and universities. Overall, the program did not meet Air Corps approval. As President Roosevelt noted on January 7, 1941, the program graduates did not have any military obligation to perform in exchange for having their training paid for by the federal government. The graduates were not trained for military aviation duties but the CFTP did provide the foundation for a cadre of pilots who later served in the Eagle Squadron.

Knight's recruits who were pilots received opportunities for refresher training. In October 1940, Maj. Gen. Arnold received the approval of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to allow American volunteers to undergo this training at Air Corps civilian contract flying schools. The volunteers received their instruction at three schools, which became operational in November 1940, and located in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dallas, Texas, and Glendale, California. In 1941, another school, in Bakersfield, California, provided similar training. All Eagle Squadron-bound pilots signed up in America after November 1940 went to one of these schools.

Another group of Eagle Squadron pilots received their training through the Royal Canadian Air Force. These individuals joined the RCAF on their own accord and had no connection with either the Knight Committee or Charles Sweeny. Upon completion of the RCAF training, the graduates were more prepared for RAF service than their counterparts who went through the United States civilian contract training program. The training they received was oriented toward military flying operations and standardized so pilots received the same instruction as participants in the Empire Training Scheme. Of note is the fact that these Americans in the RCAF remained RCAF members until the Eagle Squadrons transferred to the Army Air Forces.

In contrast to the early cloak and dagger atmosphere surrounding pilot recruitment, by August 1940 there was no effort to conceal the fact that American pilots arrived in England and joined the RAF. The *New York Times* noted at the time that about 40 Americans volunteers, in the tradition of the Lafayette Escadrille, would be joining the RAF under the command of Colonel Charles Sweeny. This initial report suggested that these pilots would be flying Lockheed-Hudsons, a two-engine aircraft used for anti-submarine and reconnaissance duty, as part of Coastal Command. In September 1940, British Air Minister Sir Archibald Sinclair, officially announced that Colonel Sweeny was organizing an "Eagle Squadron" made up of American fliers who wished to fight for England. Although Colonel Sweeny did not exercise any operational control and did not play a major role in creating the Eagle Squadron, he was made an honorary commander of the soon-to-be-formed 71 Squadron and received the temporary rank of RAF Group Captain as his presence lent publicity value to the squadron's formation.

On September 19, 1940, Number 71 Squadron of the RAF's Fighter Command was formed at Church Fenton, near the city of York. The Eagle Squadron's unique nature led to an awkward and contentious period regarding the appointment of its first commander. During the initial organizational process, Charles Sweeny had suggested Billy Fiske, an American living in London take



Eagle Squadron pilots completing training, October 1940. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.)

the position, but Fiske, an RAF pilot, was killed while landing his damaged aircraft in August 1940. Sweeny then recommended William E.G. Taylor, a former US Navy and Marine Corps pilot who flew for the British Royal Navy and participated in aircraft carrier combat operations. However, another individual, Squadron Leader Walter M. Churchill, a decorated English RAF fighter pilot, was appointed the squadron commander and arrived on station on September 29, 1940. Churchill had extensive combat and command experience. He had eight aerial victories to his credit, served as 605 Fighter Squadron commander, and was involved with the establishment of two Polish volunteer fighter squadrons. When Taylor arrived at Church Fenton, he found Squadron Leader Churchill had assumed the commander position and clearly had matters in hand. Taylor opted to seek a temporary reassignment at another base. When Taylor returned to 71 Squadron, now at Kirkton-in-Lindsey, nothing had changed. Taylor left the squadron again for further training, this time with RCAF Squadron 242 under the command of Douglas Bader. Upon Taylor's return to 71 Squadron, he found Churchill still held the commander's position. He decided to force the issue and made a plea to the Air Ministry to right the situation. The matter was finally resolved in January 1941 when Churchill became ill and Taylor took command of 71 Squadron.

The squadron's initial cadre of pilots had widely differing amounts of experience. The first three pilots, Eugene Quimby Tobin, Andrew B. Mamedoff and Vernon Charles "Shorty" Keough, followed a circuitous route in their quest to

fight in World War II. Tobin and Mamedoff were recruited through the Sweeny organization to fly combat missions in Finland. However, Finland fell to the Soviet Union and Tobin and Mamedoff were told to go to France and fly for the French Air Force. While awaiting transport in Montreal they met Keough and all three set off for France. Once in France, the French Army and government was already unstable and the three barely managed to escape before France capitulated to Germany in June 1940. Once in England, the three men approached the RAF. After being initially refused, they were accepted and eventually assigned to 609 Squadron where they saw action during the Battle of Britain and credited with aerial victories. With the establishment of the 71 Squadron, the three were transferred, forming the core of the new unit.

Initially, the RAF equipped the first Eagle Squadron with Brewster Buffalos, an American-made fighter aircraft which paled in performance compared to the Hawker Hurricane and the Spitfire. In order to rid the squadron of the unwanted Buffalos, Squadron Commander Churchill told the pilots not to lock the tail wheel when they came in for a landing knowing full well that this would cause the plane to go into a ground loop. Squadron pilots followed Churchill's directive and as a result the planes were damaged and replaced by Hurricanes in November 1940. Although eager to get into combat, the Eagle Squadron pilots continued training and were not declared combat ready until late January 1941.

British governmental and military officials gave the 71 Squadron members a warm welcome. Speaking before squadron members and other foreign volunteers at London's Overseas Club in December 1940, Under-Secretary for Air Balfour said the Eagle pilots were "ambassadors of good-will as well as airman . . ." He also added they would also provide insight to the American people of what England faced in its fight against Germany. While in Washington D.C. in early January 1941, Air Chief Marshal Hugh C. T. Dowding, former head of the RAF's Fighter Command, commented during a news conference, that although England was not in dire need of airmen, the 71 Squadron had great symbolic value.

A declaration of being combat ready, however, did not bring 71 Squadron the long-awaited opportunity for action against the *Luftwaffe*. Instead the American Eagles were assigned the job of escort duty for North Sea shipping. This necessary but hardly glamorous assignment, however, did not last for long.

In late 1940, RAF's Fighter Command prepared to go on the offensive after weathering the Nazi onslaught during the Battle of Britain. Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas now guided Fighter Command; he had taken over from Air Chief Marshal Dowding who had served from July 14, 1936 to November 25, 1940. While Douglas was still at the Air Ministry, Air Marshal C.F.A. Portal had discussed with him future use of fighter aircraft. Portal said that, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Trenchard, who had served as chief of the Air Staff until his retirement in 1929, advocated a more aggressive stance, which he indicated should be to "lean towards France," including fighter sweeps across the English Channel similar to the approach used by the British during World War I.

Initially, Douglas was hesitant to adopt this policy. He felt, based on Britain's experience during World War I, there would be a large number of

casualties which would outweigh any benefits gained by taking offensive fighter actions. Upon further reflection, Douglas changed his mind, and believed Trenchard's recommendation sound and he opted to pursue an aerial offensive. Accordingly, in mid-December 1940, British fighters and bombers flew missions into occupied Europe. When flying independently, the fighters flew what were called "rhubarbs," and when in the company of bombers, these missions were called "circuses." The object of these schemes was to destroy enemy airfields, fortifications, and ports. With regard to the circuses, the British hoped to entice the *Luftwaffe* into joining the battle and destroying their opponents in aerial combat. The bombers would cause sufficient damage that German fighters would have no choice but to respond in defense and fight on terms favorable to the British. The end result would not only be the destruction of enemy planes and pilots but the Germans would be forced to shift forces away from other theaters of operations to defend against the increasing British attacks.

The RAF implemented this new approach in a measured fashion. Initially the emphasis was on strengthening the air defense system. When the war began in September 1939, Fighter Command consisted of three groups with 36 squadrons. In January 1941, there were five fighter groups consisting of 76 squadrons, one signals group and one training group. By the middle of 1941, Fighter Command's increased strength allowed it to include all of the British Isles with varying degrees of coverage within its air defense net. Command changes also took place. In addition to Air Chief Marshal Douglas' appointment, Air Vice-Marshal Keith R. Park was replaced by Air Vice-Marshal Trevor Leigh-Mallory as Air Officer Commanding No. 11 Group, the largest fighter group.

With Air Chief Marshal Douglas in charge, Fighter Command moved toward adopting the large "Big Wing" formation. During the Battle of Britain, Air Vice-Marshal Park and Leigh-Mallory had a highly contentious debate regarding the merit of attacking incoming German fighters and bombers with individual squadrons versus waiting for several squadrons to join together to form a "Big Wing." Park argued for attacking the enemy aircraft before they had an opportunity to attack or drop their bombs while Leigh-Mallory believed it made more sense to assemble several squadrons together before sending them into battle. During the height of the Battle of Britain, Park had little time to react as his 11 Group was responsible for protecting the most heavily targeted part of England. In contrast, Leigh-Mallory's 12 Group covered a less targeted portion and thus had more time to launch his fighters, and in-fact served as reinforcement for 11 Group. In short, the philosophical difference between the two group commanders reflected, in part, the difference circumstances that they faced.

In the midst of these new RAF efforts, 71 Squadron moved again, this time in April 1941 to Martlesham Heath as part of 11 Group. Moreover during the month, 71 Squadron replaced its Hurricane Is with Hurricane IIs. This new Hurricane variant had a Roll Royce Merlin XX engine which improved the airplane's performance. But it still could not hold its own against the German Messerschmitt Bf 109. The RAF received this aircraft in quantity in late 1940.



Hawker Hurricane II.

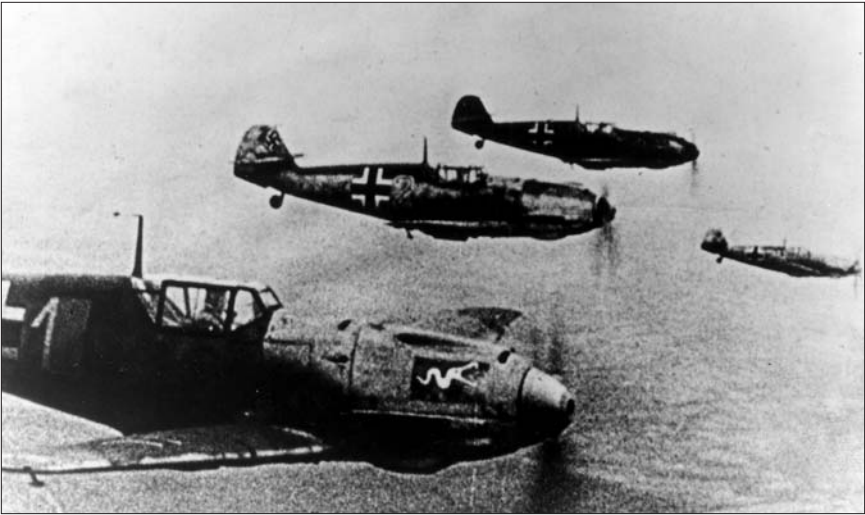
The squadron's move came at an opportune time. Maj. Gen. "Hap" Arnold was visiting England in April 1941 on a fact-finding mission and had a visit with Colonel Sweeney whom he called the "coordinator for Eagle Squadron." The American general expressed his view that the time for the Eagle Squadron to continue training had ended and commented approvingly on the fact that it was "... moving up front for combat duty: a good thing, either it fights or is disbanded, in my opinion." For his part, Air Chief Marshal Douglas felt that the American volunteers were high-spirited but as he put it he "did not pay much attention to that." ACM Douglas believed if the squadron commander exercised a firm hand they would be alright. The Eagle pilots had become restless and eager for action. Chesley Peterson, a squadron pilot, exceeded his authority by speaking directly to 12 Group Commanding Officer, Air Marshal Hugh Saunders. Peterson told Saunders that the unit needed to get into action and requested that it be moved into the 11 Group's sector of operations and have more combat opportunities.



Maj. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold.

The American Eagle Squadron pilots did not have to wait long for their first taste of combat. After arriving at Martlesham Heath in April 1941, 71 Squadron pilots flew several missions including one off the French coast, south of Boulogne where they encountered German aircraft but did not record any aerial victories. On May 15, two Eagle Squadron pilots engaged in a dogfight with three Bf 109s over the English Channel and during this encounter, one Bf 109 was damaged near Calais. The Americans, however, did not escape unscathed: one Hurricane was damaged, due in part to being hit by fire from another American aircraft, and had to crash land.

In June, 71 Squadron underwent a change of command and moved again, this time to North Weald, north of London. Taylor was replaced by Henry de Clifford Anthony "Paddy" Woodhouse, an Englishman who had flown during the Battle of Britain. Taylor was told by his Group Commander, Leigh-Mallory, that he had exceeded the number of operational hours he was permitted to have and



Bf 109s.

since he was 36 years old, he was too old to command a fighter squadron and instead the plan was for him to take charge of a fighter training unit. However, Taylor opted to return to the US Navy and left the unit on June 7.

On July 2, 1941, 71 Squadron pilots recorded their first confirmed aerial victories. The squadron was part of a large group of fighter units escorting 12 Bristol Blenheims, a two-engine bomber, to Lille, France. The Lille mission was of the Circus category in that the bombers were intended not only to bomb a target, this time an electric power plant, but also draw German fighters into battle. In this case, 25 to 30 German aircraft attacked the British formation. The 71 Squadron pilots acquitted themselves well as three enemy planes were shot down plus one probable and one damaged. Squadron Commander Woodhouse, and Pilot Officers William Dunn and Gus Daymond were each credited with destroying one enemy plane. The 71 Squadron lost one plane and the pilot, William Hall, was taken into enemy hands and became a prisoner of war. For the remainder of the summer, 71 Squadron pilots continued participating in defensive operations over Britain and as fighter escorts for bomber missions into France. They were indeed busy and during the month of July alone, 71 Squadron flew 568 operational missions.

In August 1941, the 71 Squadron transitioned from Hurricane IIs into Spitfire Mark IIAs. The Spitfire, although armed like the Hurricane with eight .303 Browning machine guns, had a higher top speed of 370 miles per hour versus 340 for the Hurricane, could climb faster and higher, and best of all it could stand up to the Bf 109 on equal terms. 71 Squadron members needed little time to transition into the new aircraft. Within a month, 71 Squadron converted again this time to Spitfire Mark VB, basically, a Mark I or II airframe with sturdier longerons that supported a more powerful Merlin engine. The pilot could now choose between firing four .303 machine guns,



71 Squadron pilots scramble to their planes. (*Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.*)

or two Hispano 20 mm cannons, or both at the same time.

In addition to receiving more capable aircraft, the RAF adopted different combat formations. In 1940, fighter pilots came to realize that the standard formation of three aircraft: one lead with two crossing behind to protect the lead and one another was no longer practicable. Instead, the two-plane formation: one lead followed by a wingman formed a pair. This gave more flexibility for pilots to engage in combat permitted by the higher performance aircraft the RAF had available and ensured the lead pilot would still be protected during a dogfight.

In June 1941, the situation in Europe took a decisive turn due to Hitler's decision to wage a multi-front war. German air and land forces were sent to the Eastern front when Hitler decided to invade Russia. The Soviet Army and Air Force, however, fought the invading forces to a standstill. Once the German invaders bogged down they were forced to endure the harsh Russian winter. Hitler also directed forces to the Mediterranean to support Italy's offensive actions in that region. By moving his forces away from the western front, British leaders saw the opportunity to strengthen their homeland defenses since an anticipated German invasion appeared unlikely. Moreover, the British could pursue an even more aggressive air offensive over continental Europe.

On May 14, 1941, a new Eagle unit, 121 Squadron, stood-up, as part of the British fighter unit build-up. This unit was first stationed at Kirton-in Lindsey and flew Hurricane Is. By this stage of the war, the Knight Committee had smoothed out its procedures and became a well-functioning organization. There was a steady flow of applicants for overseas postings, enough to fill out another squadron. Recognizing the long time the 71 Squadron took to go from organizing to combat readiness, personnel who went into the 121 Squadron received exten-



Bristol Blenheims.

sive training before going to England. Once formed, RAF officials assigned Squadron Leader Peter Powell, as commander. Powell's assignment reflected Fighter Command's policy of having British officers serve as commanders of the Eagle Squadrons. Also joining Powell were Flight Lieutenants Hugh Kennard and Royce Wilkinson. The latter officer, originally with 71 Squadron, was the first among those transferred from one Eagle Squadron to a newly formed one in order to fill its ranks with experienced personnel. The squadron reached its full complement of personnel by mid-June; and in July the unit transitioned to Hurricane IIs. The unit saw its first action on August 8, 1941, when Pilot Officer Selden Edner and Sergeant Pilot John Mooney claimed a probable kill of a Ju 88.

On August 1, 1941, the final Eagle unit, 133 Squadron, was activated at Coltishall, near Norwich, in Norfolk. Squadron Leader George A. Brown, an Englishman, transferred from 71 Squadron, to take command of the new unit. Flight Lieutenant Andy Mamedoff, one the first pilots to join the 71 Squadron, also transferred and became one of the two flight commanders, the other being an Englishman, Flight Lieutenant Hugh A. S. Johnston. In contrast to 121 Squadron, which received many pilots from other operational units, 133 Squadron took some time to reach combat readiness; it attained day operational status on September 26, 1941, when its pilots completed OTU instruction. After relocating a few times and flying some North Sea patrol missions, 133 Squadron settled at Eglinton, Northern Ireland, in October 1941, and carried out convoy patrol duties. During the transfer from Fowlmere, England to Eglinton, fifteen aircraft and crews departed on October 8, 1941. However, four pilots crashed due to inclement weather with three confirmed deaths; one pilot could not be found.



William Dunn in his Supermarine Spitfire Mark IIA at RAF Station North Weald, 1941. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.)

Andy Mamedoff, one of the original Eagle Squadron pilots, was among the deceased.

Significant changes were also taking place in 71 Squadron. In August 1941, Paddy Woodhouse was replaced by Squadron Leader E.R. Bitmead as commander. Bitmead, served during the Battle of Britain, but become mentally and physically exhausted from constant duty and was replaced after only a few weeks as squadron commander by Stanley T. Meares, another Battle of Britain participant who also saw action over Dunkirk. Under Meares' leadership, 71 Squadron made great strides and during October 1941, recorded the destruction of nine enemy aircraft—high among all RAF squadrons. The next month, the squadron again led RAF squadrons in enemy planes destroyed but suffered the loss of Squadron Leader Meares and Ross Scarborough during a mid-air collision while conducting a training flight. In recognition of 71 Squadron's outstanding achievements during Meares' tenure as commander, King George VI awarded the British Distinguished Flying Cross to three 71 Squadron members: Gregory Daymond, Chesley Peterson and Carroll W. McColpin, on October 4, 1941. The squadron could also boast that it had three aces: William Dunn, Gus Daymond, and Carroll McColpin. During one particularly intense combat action on October 2, the 71 Squadron joined in a fighter sweep from Berck to Abbeville and then to Le Treport, with two other Spitfire squadrons. The British units engaged Bf 109s from *Jagdgeschwader* (JG) 2 over Abbeville and 71 Squadron recorded five enemy aircraft destroyed. Following Meares death the RAF tapped Chesley Peterson to take command of 71 Squadron. This marked a significant event, as



Fw 190.

Peterson, only 21 years old at the time, became the first American to command an Eagle Squadron.

In December 1941, the United States entered World War II following Japan's surprise attack against Pearl Harbor. Eagle Squadron personnel welcomed the news of America's entry as they now believed they would be joined by other Americans in the war against the Axis powers. Personnel from the 71 and 121 Squadrons decided among themselves that they wanted to join America's fight and sent representatives to the American Embassy in London to make the request. The Americans spoke to Ambassador John Winant, who had replaced Joseph P. Kennedy, and asked that 71 Squadron be transferred to the Pacific Theater so it could fight against Japanese forces. Ambassador Winant replied that the Eagle Squadrons would be eventually absorbed into the United States Army Air Forces. Air Marshal Douglas denied the request for Pacific Theater duty believing it would be futile to send the squadron to Singapore because the Crown colony would likely fall to Japanese forces, so the units remained in England.

With their request for Pacific Theater duty denied, 71 Squadron members fought to stay engaged in European combat operations. In December 1941, in accordance with RAF standing policy, the unit was scheduled to rotate to a base in a less active part of England. Peterson protested the move to his group commander, Leigh-Mallory, who told them to move as ordered. However, Peterson would not accept this decision and made a direct appeal to Air Chief Marshal Douglas. The head of Fighter Command agreed to reverse Leigh-Mallory's order and 71 Squadron moved to Martlesham Heath, still in 11 Group's zone of opera-



Supermarine Spitfire Mark VB.

tion; 121 Squadron moved to North Weald and 133 Squadron transferred to Kirton-in-Lindsey.

By the end of 1941, the RAF had vastly increased its fighter force. There were now 100 squadrons: 71 were single-engine units, 2 flew were two-engine planes, 9 and 14 were equipped with single and twin-engine night fighters, 2 were fighter-bomber units and 2 flew Intruders. There were 66 British squadrons and 34 made up of pilots from Canada, Poland, Australia, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, New Zealand, Newfoundland, and France besides the American Eagle Squadrons.

As 1942 began, the RAF, despite its increased number of squadrons faced a great challenge as *Luftwaffe* units in Western Europe were being equipped with Fw 190s. The new aircraft, introduced in September 1941, proved superior to the Spitfire Mark V which the RAF and Eagle Squadrons used successfully against the Bf 109F. The Fw 190s were powered by a radial-engine, were slightly faster than the Spitfire Mark V, carried strong armaments, and had outstanding maneuverability. The RAF would not have an answer to the Fw 190 until 64 Squadron received the first Spitfire Mark IXs in July 1942.

The Eagle Squadrons made the best of their situation despite the German's fighter superiority. The three squadrons flew a variety of missions during the first six months of 1942: rhubarbs, convoy escort duty, and circuses, steadily adding to their victory totals. In February 1942, 121 Squadron participated in the British pursuit of the German capital ships: the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. These ships harassed British convoys in the

Indian Ocean, but now lay at anchor in Brest, France in need of refitting in Germany. After reviewing available options, German naval authorities opted to make a “dash” through the English Channel. Aided by the cover of poor weather, the German ships initially avoided British surveillance. Once discovered, they beat back British naval and air attacks, assisted by escorting ships and air cover. The *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* struck mines as they neared the end of their journey and suffered significant damage. However, the ships evaded the British attacks much to the intense displeasure of Prime Minister Churchill.

During this time, the Eagle Squadrons focused much of their attention on flying circus missions. On March 24, 1942, the 121 Squadron, in concert with six other fighter units, participated in a two-part bomber mission. The first portion consisted of escorting 12 Boston bombers which were to bomb the Comines, France power station. On the way to the target, approximately 50 Fw 190s attacked the British formation, broke through the outer escort ring and almost reached the bombers. On the trip back to England, German fighters continued to attack the formation over France, but again were successfully fought off. During this engagement, 121 Squadron pilots claimed one enemy plane as probably destroyed but lost one of their planes which crash landed after running out of fuel.

This March 1942 mission was part of a renewed RAF offensive which lasted until June 1942. The RAF pursued a day and night offensive: daylight operations consisted of fighters and bombers flying circus missions and night operations were intruder strikes on enemy airfields. British pilots flew approximately 22,000 fighter sorties for an average of 180 a day during this period against targets in France and Belgium. The RAF reported losses of over three hundred fighters. The British light bombers executed 700 sorties across the English Channel and lost 11 aircraft. The total British losses were 314 fighters and bombers. The British claimed they had destroyed 205 German planes but in reality the enemy had only lost 90 aircraft. The aircraft tally favored Germany but the fact remained that the *Luftwaffe* had to keep two of its most capable fighter wings on alert in Western Europe.

By August 1942, the Allied powers were planning how to take the offensive against German forces on continental Europe. Soviet leaders had been calling for a second front in order to force Hitler to shift forces away from the Eastern Front. Political leaders in London and Washington D.C. were decidedly aware of the Soviets’ urgent request. British and American forces, however, were not ready yet to embark on such a major undertaking. The United States was still mobilizing its industries to a wartime footing and there was not enough men and material available. Moreover, American political and military officials also had to contend with plotting strategy on how to best deal with the Japanese in the Pacific theater. In addition, the Battle for the Atlantic was still raging on as German U-boats were menacing Allied convoys.

American and British leaders had genuine concerns but they recognized the importance of preparing for a second front. To test German reaction and get a sense of what would be necessary to mount a landing in northwest Europe, British military officials led by Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of

Combined Operations, decided to attack German forces at Dieppe, France. On August 19, 1942, two brigades of the 2nd Canadian Division and a Canadian Tank Regiment plus British Commandos and 50 American Rangers stormed onto the beaches at Dieppe, during what was codenamed Operation Jubilee. There were a total of some 6,100 troops of which 5,000 were Canadian. The attacking forces were tasked to accomplish “. . . limited air and military objectives . . .” They were to destroy enemy fortifications in Dieppe, capture prisoners, destroy airfields, and seize and take away sea vessels such as landing crafts. The RAF also hoped to lure the *Luftwaffe* into a major engagement.

Air Vice-Marshal Leigh-Mallory commanded the covering air umbrella. He had at his disposal 70 squadrons of which 61 were fighters plus fighter-bomber, light bomber, and reconnaissance units. Initially, Leigh-Mallory wanted to employ 300 heavy bombers but this idea was dropped as Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur T. Harris, commander of RAF's Bomber Command, could not guarantee that the buildings on the sea front of the harbor could be struck without hitting the town itself.

The ground landings took place as planned but encountered fierce enemy resistance. The Canadian forces suffered 3,367 casualties as the landing force came under unrelenting enemy fire. While the Allied forces struggled on the ground before withdrawing, a raging air battle took place overhead.

Operation Jubilee marked the one and only time all three Eagle Squadrons participated in the same air battle. On August 19, the American pilots flew multiple missions: 71 and 133 Squadrons each flew four while 121 Squadron flew three. They provided air cover, in concert with other RAF units, for the ground troops and fought off German bombers and fighters. At the end of the operation the 71 Squadron claimed one destroyed, one probably damaged, three damaged and two of its own planes destroyed; 121 Squadron claimed one destroyed, two probably damaged, one damaged, two missing in action/two aircraft destroyed and for 133 Squadron, seven destroyed, one probably damaged, and ten damaged. All told the three units compiled a total of nine German aircraft destroyed, four probably damaged and ten damaged. The Eagle Squadrons tally accounted for a good portion of the RAF's overall total of 48 German aircraft destroyed and 24 damaged. For its part, the RAF recorded losses of 106 planes and 77 pilots killed or missing. Despite the ground attack's lack of success, the RAF's air umbrella fended off the *Luftwaffe*.

Several American pilots distinguished themselves during the Dieppe raid. Flight Lieutenant Donald Blakeslee claimed two German planes destroyed. His story was typical of many the Eagle Squadron pilots. He originally flew in the RAF as a member of Royal Canadian Air Force's 401 Squadron; he then joined 133 Squadron eventually rising to become squadron commander. While with the RAF he had 13 claims and later had a illustrious career with the United States Army Air Forces. Pilot Officer Dominic “Don” Gentile was credited with one Fw 190 destroyed during the Dieppe raid and had two aerial victories overall while with the 133 Squadron. He went on to become a leading ace after transferring to the Army Air Forces.



Col. Donald Blakeslee in US Army Air Forces. (*Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.*)

American air units were becoming increasingly involved in the war in Europe at this time. On August 17, 1942, 12 B-17s of the 97th Bomb Group took part in the first heavy bomber attack from the United Kingdom when the aircraft attacked the Rouen-Sotteville, France, marshalling yards. The B-17s were escorted by RAF Spitfires included ones flown by 133 Squadron pilots. During the Dieppe Raid, the American 309th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group, provided air cover over the ground operations and 22 B-17s dropped 34 tons of bombs on the Abbeville/Drucat, France airfield in an attempt to draw German fighters away from the landing force.

By this time, the Eagle Squadrons had made noteworthy contributions to England's war efforts, which were duly noted by a variety of American news out-



Dominic "Don" Gentile in front of his Spitfire Mark VB. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.)

lets. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine published many stories, especially when squadron members received British decorations for gallantry in combat. Another venue occurred through the medium of motion pictures. In July 1942, the American-made movie, *Eagle Squadron*, received its premiere showing in London. Members of 71 Squadron were not involved in the actual production of the film but believed it would be a documentary style film. This belief was reinforced by the fact that movie crews had filmed scenes of the unit at North Weald. As the case turned out, the film which featured Robert Stack, Diana Barrymore, John Hall, Eddie Albert and Nigel Bruce, turned out after a brief introduction by the respected journalist Quentin Reynolds to be a typical Hollywood fictionalized war story. Most of the Eagles who attended the premier

came away vastly disappointed, indeed many did not stay in the theater to see the entire film. The critical response was not much better and the film enjoyed only a short run in United States' theaters.

In the midst of on-going flying operations, United States and British officials began talks on the transfer of the Eagle Squadron pilots into American Army Air Forces units. Although the United States had entered into the war in December 1941, time was needed to activate operational units and work out specific transfer details. The Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron of Eighth Air Force, who would become the major organizational unit for European operations, were activated on January 28, 1942, in Savannah Georgia followed by the activation on February 1, 1942, of the VIII Bomber Command at Langley Field, Virginia and VIII Interceptor Command at Selfridge Field, Michigan. The latter two units later relocated to Savannah and Charleston, South Carolina, respectively. Initially, Eighth Air Force's mission was to support operations in Northwest Africa. However, these operations were abandoned once it became apparent that United States forces could not support such undertakings at that time given on-going needs in the Pacific theater. Eighth Air Force was therefore left without a specific operation. On March 31, 1942, Maj. Gen. Carl Spaatz, commander of the Air Force Combat Command and upcoming commander of the Army Air Force in Great Britain (AAFIB), recommended that Eighth Air Force be assigned to the AAFIB. Army Air Forces officials accepted his recommendation by basing the unit in England. Eighth Air Force now had the responsibility of performing strategic bombing missions over Germany. Many details had to be worked out to carry out the proposed American air offensive: planes and material had to be delivered to England and joint plans worked out with British counterparts.

An ambitious ferry operation was devised by which planes were flown along an air route that began in Maine, moved forward to Labrador, then to Iceland, and finally England. Other aircraft arrived crated aboard ships. Strategy sessions were held where American leaders expounded their firm insistence on carrying out daylight bombing as opposed to the British preference for night bombing. The first American planes arrived on July 2, 1942, after completing the long North Atlantic air crossing. In terms of fighter aircraft, by August, there were four American fighter groups stationed in England: the 1st and 14th flew P-38s and the 31st and 52nd which were equipped with Spitfires. As more personnel and equipment arrived in England, Maj. Gen. Spaatz conducted further discussions with his British counterparts on how United States forces would be utilized in the overall allied air offensive.

Several issues had to be resolved regarding transfer of the Eagle Squadrons. Maj. Gen. Spaatz and Air Chief Marshal Wilfred Freeman, Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, discussed the matter during a meeting held on August 8, 1942. As talks continued between British and American officials, one matter of importance was what rank the Americans would have once they became members of the Army Air Forces. The Eagle Squadron pilots who held officer ranks in the RAF wanted to have equivalent United States grades. Accordingly, prior to transfer, all transferees were interviewed and then assigned a rank based on their experience and



General Carl A. Spaatz.

qualifications. Senior leaders like Chesley Peterson came in the Army Air Forces as a lieutenant colonel. Eagle Squadron unit personnel also did not want to be split up and assigned to different units so British and American officials reached the understanding that the units would transfer intact.

Shortly before the Eagle Squadrons transferred, the 133 Squadron flew a tragic last mission. On September 26, 1942, 133 Squadron, now flying the more powerful Spitfire Mark IX, a plane that could meet the Fw 190 on equal terms, was assigned to escort duty, alongside two other Spitfire Mark IX squadrons, for



Brig. Gen. Frank O'D. "Monk" Hunter.

24 B-17s bombing enemy targets at Morlaix, France. During the preflight briefing, the Eagle Squadron pilots were told to expect 35 mile-per-hour winds. Once aloft, the squadron did not find the B-17s they were suppose to escort and encountered 100 mile-per-hour winds and poor visibility. The squadrons continued to search for the bombers not knowing they had arrived at the rendezvous point early and traveled toward the target. The RAF fighter squadrons then lost radio contact with their ground control and decided to continue southward to try and connect with the bombers. They did encounter another group of bombers and

began escorting back to England but the fighter's fuel supply became a critical issue. The squadron leader, Flight Lieutenant Edward Brettell, who was serving in Carroll McColpin's stead while he was in London preparing to transfer to the AAF, decided to descend out of the overcast sky to try and get his bearing, the rest of the squadron followed. Instead of being over England, the strong winds had blown the squadron over Brest, France. The Eagle Squadron pilots attempted to land at an airfield and ran into enemy anti-aircraft fire and Fw 190s. The 133 Squadron lost all 12 planes that left on this mission. Six pilots were shot down and became prisoners of war with one later killed for plotting to escape. Four others died after being shot down or running out of fuel. Another pilot bailed out over France and later made his way back to England. Only one pilot returned to England from this mission but he was seriously injured after running out of fuel and crash landing. The other two RAF squadrons lost two and one aircraft, respectively.

On September 29, 1942, at a ceremony held at Debden, the three Eagle Squadrons transferred from the RAF to the Army Air Forces. The 71 Squadron became the 334th Fighter Squadron; 121 became the 335th and 133 became the 336th. The three squadrons were assigned to the 4th Fighter Group and all were collocated at Debden. Pending the arrival of additional American-made fighters into the European theater, the squadrons flew Spitfires (the older Mark Vs not the Mark IXs) but with United States markings.

Numerous dignitaries attended the ceremony. ACM Douglas, Air Marshall Harold Edwards, air officer commanding-in-chief (AOC-in-C), RCAF Overseas; and Maj. Gen. Spaatz and Brig. Gen. Frank O'D. "Monk" Hunter, head of VIII Fighter Command represented their respective air forces during this occasion. During his address to the assembled unit personnel and other dignitaries, ACM Douglas' remarks included the following comments:

We of Fighter Command deeply regret this parting for in the course of the past 18 months, we have seen the stuff of which you are made and we could not ask for better companions with whom to see this fight through to a finish.

It is with deep personal regret that I today say 'Goodbye' to you whom it has been my privilege to command. You joined us readily and of your own free will when our need was greatest.

There are those of your number who are not here today—those sons of the United States who were first to give their lives for their country. We of the RAF no less than yourselves will always remember them with pride.

The Eagle Squadron pilots took their place in the United States Army Air Forces. The Fourth Fighter Group would go on to amass one of the most impressive records among all United States fighter units in World War II: the unit claimed it destroyed 1,016 enemy aircraft. Individuals such as Chesley Peterson and Donald Blakeslee, who had learned much in the way in fighter combat and leadership qualities as Eagle Squadron pilots, had distinguished careers, Peterson



Group picture of former Eagle Squadron pilots in the USAAF. (*Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force.*)

as one of the youngest colonels in the USAAF and Blakeslee as commander of the Fourth Fighter Group.

The Americans who joined the RAF and formed the Eagle Squadrons did so for a variety of reasons. Some were adventurers and were attracted by the exploits of British pilots who flew during the Battle of Britain in their Hurricanes and Spitfires. For these individuals, the lure of flying high-performance aircraft outweighed patriotism and the wish to help England which drew other recruits. Others believed the United States would eventually be drawn into the war and wanted to enter into military service on their own terms rather than being drafted. Whatever their motivations, these Americans were willing to join a foreign air force and go into combat.

The Eagle Squadrons made a significant contribution to the RAF's wartime effort. The units came into service during England's transition from a defensive to offensive effort that brought the war directly against German forces on the European continent. By flying convoy and bomber escort missions and fighter sweeps, the Eagle Squadrons played a significant role in stemming the German offensive while Britain built up its forces. Moreover, the Eagle squadrons helped solidify the growing Anglo-American alliance that, coupled with the wartime efforts of the Soviet Union and other Allied nations, spelled the ultimate defeat of the Axis powers.

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