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First Light (WWII Collection)



Synopsis

Two months before the outbreak of the Second World War, seventeen-year-old Geoffrey Wellum becomes a fighter pilot with the RAF . . . Desperate to get in the air, he makes it through basic training to become the youngest Spitfire pilot in the prestigious 92 Squadron. Thrust into combat almost immediately, Wellum finds himself flying several sorties a day, caught up in terrifying dogfights with German Me 109s. Over the coming months he and his fellow pilots play a crucial role in the Battle of Britain. But of the friends that take to the air alongside Wellum many never return.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An extraordinarily deeply moving and astonishingly evocative story. Reading it, you feel you are in the Spitfire with him, at 20,000ft, chased by a German Heinkel, with your ammunition gone * Independent * A brilliantly fresh, achingly written memoir. Thrilling and frightening on virtually page . . . Wellum takes you into battle with him. A book for all ages and generations, a treasure * Daily Express * Vivid, wholly convincing, compelling. One of the best memoirs for years about the experience of flying in war -- Max Hastings * Sunday Telegraph * Amazing fresh and immediate . . . absolutely honest, it is an extraordinarily gripping and powerful story * Evening Standard *

"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." –Winston Churchill, 1940 Geoffrey Wellum was one of Churchill’s "few," the gallant pilots of the RAF who streaked through the skies to repel the massive, brutal Nazi bombing assaults that killed thousands and leveled entire cities throughout the endless months of the Battle of Britain. To a man,

they were courageous, determined, and oh, so young. Geoffrey, known as Boy to his comrades, was a good deal younger than most. In *First Light*, Geoffrey Wellum tells the inspiring, often terrifying true story of his coming of age amid the roaring, tumbling dogfights of the fiercest air war the world had ever seen. It is the story of an idealistic schoolboy who couldn't believe his luck when the RAF agreed to take him on as a "pupil pilot" at the minimum age of seventeen and a half in 1939. In his fervor to fly, he gave little thought to the coming war. Writing with wit, compassion, and a great deal of technical expertise, Wellum relives his grueling months of flight training, during which two of his classmates crashed and died. He describes a hilarious scene during his first day in the prestigious 92nd Squadron when his commander discovered that Wellum had not only never flown a Spitfire, he'd never even seen one. Boy soon learned the golden rule of the dogfight: "Never fly straight and level for more than twenty seconds. If you do, you'll die."

Wellum's vivid accounts of ferocious aerial combat contrast the mortal terror of an innocent teenager with the grim determination of a highly trained warrior intent on doing his job—blasting the enemy one moment, desperately trying to shake off a pursuer the next. Few writers have succeeded more completely in evoking the chaos and horror of war. A battle-hardened ace by the winter of 1941, though still not out of his teens, Boy flew scores of missions as fighter escort on bombing missions over France. Yet the constant life-or-death stress of murderous combat and anguish over the loss of his closest friends sapped endurance. Tortured by fierce headaches, even in the midst of battle, he could not bear the thought of "not pulling your weight," of letting other pilots risk their lives in his place. Wellum's frank account of his long, losing bout with battle fatigue is both moving and enlightening. Filled with affectionate portraits of Boy's fellow fliers—many of whom did not survive the war—*First Light* tells an unforgettable true story of patriotism and fear, pride and humility, self-sacrifice and triumph. Already a bestseller in England, this powerful and compelling memoir is destined to become a classic, not only of military history, but also of literature. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Once I started reading this book, I couldn't take my eyes off the pages. It's an absolutely fascinating and gripping account of a young English pilot during the opening phases of World War II and the Battle of Britain. Wellum tells his story in a simple first-person narrative and it's almost as though he was sitting next to you and sharing a pint and telling you stories about flying in the war. His story starts out when he was a teenager in the summery days of his last year of public school with his chums and cricket and then his enlistment as an 18-year old civilian pilot-trainee in the R.A.F. He takes you into the cockpit with him and you see what it was like to fly a Gypsy Moth biplane; you

learn what it was like to fly a Harvard trainer; and you meet the older, sharp-as-a-razor flight instructors who taught and trained him. Before he finished the last phases of his training he was yanked out of flight school and sent to a Spitfire squadron because of the extreme need for pilots in the opening Battle of Britain . There is a hilarious moment when he first meets the commanding officer of the squadron and is asked if he's EVER flown a Spitfire and he replies that no, his instructors wouldn't even let him look at one. He tells you about the patrols and dogfights and comrades lost; the escort missions with bombers over France. After the Battle of Britain wound down he was posted to besieged Malta where he ferried in a Spitfire squadron and continued air combat as Flight Commander. At this point he was 20 years old, one of the most seasoned fighter pilots with hundreds of dogfights and patrols, had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross by King George, and was on the verge of burning out. He was posted back to England where he was an R.A.F. test pilot. Wellum's story is simply told and almost belies his heroic stature. He had done more in a few short years in his youth than most people do in a lifetime. The story is awe-inspiring. Added note: In 2010, to commemorate the Battle of Britain the BBC broadcast a television drama called 'First Light' based on the book. The DVD is available at :First Light DVD

For the sheer thrill of learning to fly look no further than this book. Geoffrey Wellum takes you into the cockpit with him and you share the joy, pain, and anxieties of mastering the intricacies of Tiger Moths, Harvards and Spitfires. Within ten months of leaving school he found himself embroiled in the Battle of Britain. He was seconded to 92 Fighter Squadron of the Royal Air Force stationed at Biggin Hill. This renowned outfit played a significant role in World War 11 and its illustrious pilots included Roger Bushell (Roger Bartlett in the movie "The great escape") and "Sailor" Malan (RAF ace). The Squadron was later posted to Egypt thence to Malta, Sicily and finally to Italy. It claimed the highest number of fighter- aircraft victories of the war. Wellum survived two tours of operations including a hundred bomber escorts and numerous "dog" fights over occupied France. He is now well into his 90ties but like others of his generation he bemoans the fact that at 19 years of age he had reached the pinnacle of his life and by the time 92 Squadron was transferred to Malta he felt that he had been destroyed by the war and he grieved the loss of numerous pilot friends. How did he survive? Luck? I don't think so, for although very modest, he displayed extraordinary skill in the air and was acutely aware of his surroundings during enemy contacts. This story, written in the first person, is a page-turner and you are the pilot author. It is a delight to read.

This is strictly about the memoirs and impression of a British fighter pilot from the moment he applies to RAF training, until being taken out of operations, for the second and last time, in 1942. There's almost nothing about his life before or after these moments. Also, don't expect dates about events related in the book. There are none. The maximum you will get is "January 1941", "August 1942", "Spring 1941". But this is not relevant, since the writer is clearly trying to pass his feelings, emotions and impressions to the reader. And what impressions! I could never have imagined how hard it was to graduate to fighter pilots. Wellum was almost gone before completing the training, his superior had to shake him a lot. A slow learner, how he described himself. At the height of the Battle of Britain, he was posted to 92 Squadron, at only 18 years of age. In 1941 he went on offensive operations on the French coast (the sweeps), for almost the whole year. Then, he took an obligatory rest from operations before returning to the fray again in 65 Squadron, this time as Flight Commander. He probably would get a Squadron, but was simply too young for the job. In August 1942 he flew from Furious aircraft carrier to Malta, where he joined 1435 Squadron, before serious sinusitis and general extreme fatigue took him out of ops for good. (he does not mention George Beurling of 249 Squadron at all). There are well-known characters around, like Brian Kingcome, Johnnie Kent, Jamie Rankin, Walter Churchill. Wellum was not a big scorer, and apparently considered himself not the best pilot and a little bit lucky for having survived.

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