



## Remembering local RAF pilot Ray Holmes and how his daring attack on a German bomber during a WWII air raid near Buckingham Palace became one of the most celebrated events of the Battle of Britain.

Born 20 August 1914 in Wallasey, Cheshire, Raymond Towers Holmes was the son of a journalist. Attending Calday Grange Grammar School, West Kirby, he excelled at cricket and rugby.

He first worked as a crime reporter, joining the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) as an airman pilot in 1937 and training at Prestwick and Barton in Lancashire.

The Battle of Britain was an air campaign waged by the Germans during the Second World War. Ray Holmes was by that time a highly trained and experienced pilot holding the rank of a sergeant. On September 15, 1940, he was flying with the 504 Squadron. They flew from RAF Hendon in North London intending to intercept the German's midday raid on the city.

The German bomber that Ray Holmes took down was a Dornier 17 that had taken off from France heading for central London in formation at 15,000 feet. Managing to avoid RAF fighters crossing Dungeness, one of its engines started to malfunction and it dropped away from the main force. Just as it was nearing its target, the German warplane encountered fighters near Battersea and an attack ensued. Two of the German plane's crew baled out after it was set aflame by the Hurricanes of 310 (Czech) Squadron.

Sergeant Ray Holmes joined the fight at this time to assist the attack and he flew into the German bomber, crashing into its tail. This onslaught caused the enemy aircraft to break up and the pilot was forced to bale out. Victoria Station's forecourt was the landing place for a large piece of the Dornier. This scene was depicted – with, of course, a great deal of artistic licence – in the classic war film, *Battle of Britain*. The scars from this air battle could be seen on the stone facade of the station for more than 40 years.

When Holmes was asked about the event, he said: "There was no time to weigh up the situation. His airplane looked so flimsy, I didn't think of it as solid and substantial. I just went on and hit it for six. I thought my aircraft would cut right through it, not allowing for the fact that his plane was as strong as mine!"

### The Aftermath

The destruction of this enemy plane became one of the most notable and renowned events in the Battle of Britain, not least because in the eyes of many, it was a heroic act from a RAF pilot, but also because the fall of the plane happened in a very public place, very close to Buckingham Palace and without any English casualties. Moreover, the incident was also captured on film.

Furthermore, the plane piloted by Holmes also went down that day – he had to bale out over Chelsea, landing on Hugh Street. This naturally caused a sensation. Witnesses were able to tell him that his enemy had crash-landed at Victoria and he was led to the Orange Brewery a few hundred yards down Pimlico Road where he drank brandy before being sent to Chelsea Barracks. After being



seen by an Army doctor, he went to the mess for more drinks before a taxi transported him back to RAF Hendon where he had taken off earlier that day.

Holmes continued flying through the remainder of the Second World War and then went on to become a flight instructor, teaching Russian aircrew how to fly the Hurricane. Using a specially prepared Spitfire, he also undertook high altitude photo-reconnaissance from 30,000 feet above Germany.

Holmes was presented with the Air Efficiency Award, leaving the RAF in November 1945, having been mentioned in dispatches. Returning to civilian life, he resumed his career in journalism in Liverpool, where he established his own agency that dealt with court reporting.

In 1989 he shared his exciting and very interesting aviation experiences in his autobiography, *Sky Spy*.

The wreckage of his Hurricane was discovered in 2004 and successfully excavated from the streets of London. The discovery was later featured in the National Geographic Channel documentary, *The Search for the Lost Fighter Plane*.

Ray Holmes passed away at Hoylake Cottage Hospital in 2005. On the day he died, his obituary in *The Telegraph* records that "Wirral Borough Council bestowed the Freedom of the Borough on Holmes; the chief executive stating that he could 'think of no one upon whom this honour could have been more fittingly bestowed'." The obituary describes the day of his death, saying that "flags flew at half mast in his honour in the Wirral, and his widow received a message from Buckingham Palace expressing the Queen's sadness on hearing of his death."

At his funeral Caldys Air Cadets lined the streets outside the church in Lower Heswall as the coffin was carried in by members of the current 504 Squadron.