

The Few

*The American "Knights of the Air"
Who Risked Everything to Save Britain in the Summer of 1940*

Alex Kershaw

For Discussion

1. What various motivations drove “the few,” whose story Kershaw tells, to risk their citizenship and their lives to join Britain’s Royal Air Force in 1939 and 1940?
2. How might we explain the commitment and enthusiasm of pilots and other German service men such as Luftwaffe Captain Werner Mölders, despite their religious devotion and open opposition to Nazi repression of their churches and religious faith? Why might Mölders and others have dedicated themselves so resolutely to improving their skills in the service of such a repressive regime?
3. Recording the June 25, 1940, arrival in Plymouth, England, of Tobin, Mamedoff, and Keough, aboard the Baron Nairn, Kershaw writes, “They had arrived in a country bonded as never before in its determination to avoid becoming yet another slave state in the Great Third Reich.” (p. 52) How might we explain this determination in the immediate aftermath of France’s surrender and the German occupation of so many other European nations? Kershaw goes on to note that despite the devastation of the Blitz, “Londoners were trying . . . to carry on as if as normal, bonded as never before by rage and dread.” (p. 169) How do you think Londoners managed to keep going in the face of devastating air attacks?
4. To what extent do you sympathize with Tobin, Mamedoff, Keogh and other American volunteers who had to pledge “their allegiance to Britain’s sovereign, King George VI”? (p. 54), however friendly toward the U.S. Britain was?
5. Kershaw quotes Brian Kingcome of 92 Squadron: “It helped to fly crudely, as I did, and not be bound by the rules. The good pilots . . . were often killed quickly because they flew too well.” (p.69) What examples of surviving by flying crudely and not being bound by the rules do you find in *The Few*?
6. What qualities characterized the special friendships and camaraderie that developed between the American pilots and their fellow pilots from England, Wales, Scotland, and other nations? What shared experiences and events determined the nature of their relationships?

7. In what ways were the RAF pilots and the Luftwaffe pilots similar, and in what ways different? In what ways did their personalities, qualities of character, and loyalties inform their attitudes toward flying and their behavior as fighter pilots?
8. Of the August 11, 1940, battle, 85 Squadron's Peter Townsend recalled that "within, fatigue was deadening feeling, numbing the spirit. Both life and death had lost their importance. Desire sharpened to a single, savage purpose—to grab the enemy and claw him down from the sky." (p. 105) To what extent did the Battle of Britain deaden the feelings and numb the spirit of the RAF pilots? What were the consequences of life and death losing their importance, and of the savagery that the dogfights with the Luftwaffe entailed?
9. What were the symptoms and the consequences of the stress of combat and the constant tension and fear experienced by the RAF fighter pilots? What means did they adopt to cope with unremitting stress and fear?
10. What qualities of personality and patriotism enabled the RAF pilots to persist against, and overcome, the seemingly insurmountable odds presented by the Luftwaffe? What enabled the men of the RAF—despite all their losses, frustrations, and suffering—to continue their courageous defense of Britain? How might we account for the victory of the RAF over the seemingly much more powerful Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain?
11. Kershaw quotes Flight Lieutenant Richard Hillary (from *The Last Enemy*) to the effect that there was an "essential rightness" to one fighter pilot killing another and that the fighter pilot "is privileged to kill well." (p. 137) How would you describe the "essential rightness" that Hillary cites? To what extent does Kershaw's narrative illustrate that rightness? In what ways were the fighter pilots "privileged to kill well"?
12. Why might the Battle of Britain be considered "the greatest air battle in history"? (p. 156) What decisions, actions, and strategies on both sides contributed to the battle's critical importance?
13. Kershaw makes numerous references to the "luck" experienced by both air forces, but especially by the RAF (see p. 183, for example). How would you describe and explain this "luck." To what degree was it a question of either side—particularly the RAF—taking advantage of circumstances and unforeseen events?
14. Kershaw quotes Peter Townsend, 85 Squadron: "And we became infected instead with a morbid terror of dying, filled with the same of killing, saddened with the endless departure of friends to their lone home, repulsed by the futile, boasting claims of the wiping-out, the annihilation of the enemy." (p.191) At what state do you think this "morbid terror of flying" and of killing came into effect? When—and why—did the claims of killing the enemy become repulsive?
15. What was the importance of establishing, in late 1940, a distinctively "all-American squadron"—the Eagle Squadron—within the RAF, "whose shoulder patch would resemble the

insignia of the eagle on [the] American passport”? (p. 194) In what ways might that squadron “powerfully and symbolically [have undermined] the notion of American neutrality”? (p. 194)

16. What activities of the various RAF squadrons do you think were most important in providing especially the American pilots with satisfaction and high morale? What feats gave them their greatest sense of accomplishment?

About the Author

Alex Kershaw is the author of the widely acclaimed and best-selling books *The Bedford Boys* and *The Longest Winter*, and two biographies: **Jack London** and *Blood and Champagne: The Life and Times of Robert Capa*. He has been a journalist and screenwriter in Britain and now lives in Bennington, Vermont.