

Top-Scoring Air-Gunner

Alec Brew concludes his look at the career of Fred Barker — the most successful Defiant air gunner, and probably the top-scoring air gunner of World War Two.

DURING JUNE EIGHT replacement Defiants arrived and the Squadron flew a mixture of convoy patrols — and its first night sorties, moving to Fowlmere on July 3. It was here that it was visited by the CO of the second Defiant Squadron, No 141, which had just moved south from Scotland. To the amazement of 264 Squadron aircrew, who passed on details of the successful tactics they had devised for the aircraft, he expressed the view that the Defiant was a death trap; which did not auger well for 141 Squadron's future.

Sure enough, on 141's first and only daylight sortie, on August 19, nine Defiants were sent to cover a Channel convoy, and when bounced by around 30 Bf 109s they did not adopt 264 Squadron's tactics and were decimated. Only two Defiants returned to base, though they did shoot down four of the attacking '109s.

No 264 Squadron was actually in the air at the time, and had been ordered south over London, but was immediately recalled when news of 141 Squadron's debacle became apparent. No 141 was withdrawn back to Scotland, and though 264 was given similar orders, it could not be spared, and was ordered to Kirton-in-Lindsay where it flew a handful of night sorties.

With the Battle of Britain raging in the south, an experienced unit like 264 could not be left out of the action, and it was moved to Hornchurch on August 22, with Manston as its forward base. On the 24th, nine Defiants, including that of Thorne and Barker, moved forward to Manston, and were refuelling on the ground when a German attack was directed at the station just after 1pm.

With bombs falling around them, seven Defiants managed to scramble. Clawing for altitude, they attacked the marauding Ju 88s from below. Luckily the escorting Bf 109s were being engaged by Spitfires on the other side of the formation. Four of the Defiant crews, including Thorne and Barker claimed Ju 88s, but then the Bf 109 pilots of JG.3 and JG.51 noticed them and dived to the attack.

The seven Defiants were soon fighting for their lives in individual battles against the '109s.



No 264 Sqn was by far the most successful of the Defiant units and scored a number of notable successes during day fighter operations in 1940.



Rare shot of radar-equipped Defiant night fighters (note wing-mounted ailerons), March 1942.

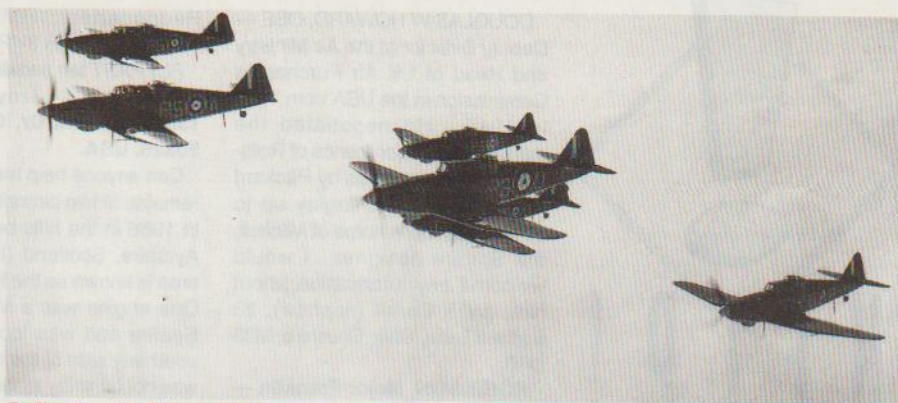
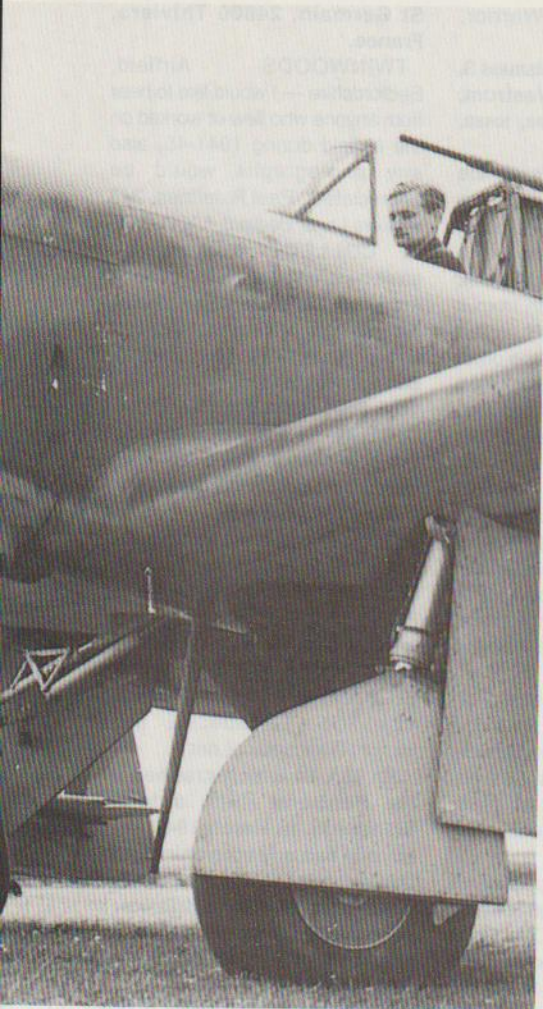
Two were shot down by the Commander of JG.3, Gunther Lutzow, and he may also have accounted for Sqn Ldr Hunter, who was last seen chasing a Ju 88 out to sea.

The battered Squadron returned to Hornchurch to refuel and re-arm, now under the command of George Garvin. At 3.40pm its crews were scrambled again and fought another battle against a mixed force of Ju 88s and He 111s, with escorting Bf 109s. By the end of the day the Squadron had claimed a total of eight bombers and one Bf 109 destroyed, for the loss of four Defiants.

On the 26th they were in action again, being scrambled at 11.30am against a large raid, which included Do 17s and He 111s, escorted by Bf 109s and Bf 110s. As around 70 Hurricanes and Spitfires fought the He 111s with their escorts, 264 Sqn was directed against the Do 17s in the vicinity of Herne Bay. Led by Flt Lt

Banham the Defiants attacked the bombers from below and the Bf 109s dived to the Domiers' assistance. Banham and Plt Off Goodall both claimed Do 17s, and Plt Off Hughes, flying on his first operational sortie, claimed two.

Thorne and Barker claimed two Dorniers shot down in flames, and began firing on a third. At that moment they were hit by one of the attacking Bf 109s — glycol and oil began pouring from the engine. As Thorne threw the Defiant (L7005) into evasive manoeuvres, the Bf 109 pressed home its attack. With the engine failing, Thorne attempted a wheels-up forced landing. Down to 500ft (152m), the Bf 109 attacked once again and as he did so Fred Barker poured his last few rounds into it. The Messerschmitt was severely hit and also force landed a few fields away. The Defiant was brought to a sudden halt hitting a tree, and as it was smouldering, Thorne and Barker scrambled hurriedly out — Ted Thorne



Defiants of A Flight, 264 Sqn on formation practice; the Squadron developed a set of tactics that worked well even when they were attacked by single-seat fighters.

Defiants' last daylight combat, two days later. In another mixed action against He 111s and Bf 109s the Defiants claimed two bombers destroyed, but four Defiants were shot down by the escorting 109s of Adolf Galland's JG.26, and five others were too badly damaged to take-off in the afternoon. Despite the pleas of the three crews with operational aircraft, they were not allowed to take-off when Hornchurch was attacked later in the day.

The badly mauled Squadron had acquitted itself as well as many others in the Battle, claiming 19 German aircraft destroyed for the loss of 11 Defiants, but it was now moved back north to Kirton-in-Lindsay for a rest.

With the Battle of Britain won, and the Luftwaffe turning to night-time bombing, the Defiants were the best night fighters available, faster than the Blenheims, and more effective than single-seaters, if only for the fact of having two pairs of eyes to scan the dark skies for intruders. Finding and destroying German bombers on winter nights, flying above a blacked-out country, was to prove a skill which was only acquired through hard work and experience, but the Defiants had one valuable attribute which they exploited to the full. They could slide in beneath a bomber, which was silhouetted against the stars, and then fire upwards, often from very close range.

Through the long months of the Blitz, the Defiants, by now six squadrons strong, were to prove the most successful night fighters, but victories even for them were to prove intermittent. Plt Off Hughes and Sgt Fred Gash achieved the Squadron's first confirmed night-time victory on October 18, but Thorne and Barker's sole night-time kill did not come until April 9, 1941.

That night they took off from Biggin Hill at 11.50pm and orbited at 15,000ft (4,500m). Kenley Ground Control gave them a vector but they were unable to make contact and returned to orbit over Biggin. They were then given several more vectors and finally sighted an

enemy aircraft 1,000 yards (914m) ahead and flying about 200ft (60m) above them at 18,000ft (5,500m). They closed to about 100 yards (91m) on the starboard side of the aircraft which they identified as a He 111. Fred gave him a two second burst, and the de Wilde ammunition was seen to burst on the fuselage. There was return fire, but only one hit could be subsequently traced, in their starboard aileron.

They then crossed over to the Heinkel's port side and gave it another burst of two seconds, and the port engine began to glow. The Heinkel began to lose height and turn away to starboard. Flying over him, Fred fired another burst at the pilot's cockpit. They then returned to the port side of the bomber, and Fred fired a fourth burst into the fuselage. This time there was return fire from the Heinkel's forward gun.

Sgt Thorne asked Control for their position, and they were told they were over Brooklands. They followed the Heinkel down to 9,000ft (2,700m) where it disappeared in a steep dive into the 10/10ths cloud cover, billowing white smoke which they thought was glycol. The He 111 was subsequently discovered to have crashed in the grounds of Lady Brunton's estate near Godalming in Surrey, with only one survivor. On landing, Fred discovered he had fired a total of 1,079 rounds of ammunition.

Their successful partnership came to an end in October when Thorne was posted to 32 Squadron. He had achieved the peculiar distinction of becoming a fighter ace without actually having fired his guns! Fred Barker went on an instructor's course at Dalcross, and then in 1943 was posted to the Middle East Gunnery School, as an air-gunnery instructor.

Fred was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in April 1944, and was released from the RAF as a Flying Officer in 1946. He currently lives in Essex, a quiet pleasant, man, not anxious to talk of his exploits for fear of immodesty. He even sold his precious logbooks to raise the funds to buy an Austin Allegro!

being obstructed briefly by his oxygen mask which was still attached. He ripped his helmet off, threw it in the cockpit and legged it! They were detained briefly by the Home Guard who had appeared on the scene, but when they revealed their identities they were given some whisky and released. They made their way by train back to Hornchurch, meeting Flt Lt Banham on the way. He had shot down a Do 17 but had then been hit by a Bf 109, a cannon shell exploding in the cockpit setting the aircraft on fire. Banham had ordered his gunner, Sgt R Baker to bale out, and had successfully done so himself. He spent an hour in the sea before he was rescued, but Baker was never found. Thorne and Barker's Defiant was so badly damaged it was written-off. Three Defiants had been shot down in the action, in which 264 Squadron had claimed a total of seven victories.

For their part in this action Thorne and Barker were awarded Bars to their DFMs. Because of their minor injuries they did not take part in the



The He 111 shot down by Sgts Thorne and Barker on the night of April 9, 1941. Right: Fred Barker, complete with Teddy Bear mascot (but not the original one), reunited with a model Defiant at Hornchurch in 1996. (All via author)

