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For Cause and Countries: Initial, Sustaining, and Combat Motivation in the Royal Air Force Eagle Squadrons, 1940-1942

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FOR CAUSE AND COUNTRIES: INITIAL, SUSTAINING, AND COMBAT
MOTIVATION IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE EAGLE SQUADRONS, 1940-1942

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
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ABSTRACT

Before the United States entered the Second World War, 245 American pilots pledged their service to the Royal Air Force (RAF). Organized into 71, 121, and 133 Squadrons, collectively known as the Eagle Squadrons, these foreign volunteers present an intriguing avenue of soldier motivation analysis. Employing the conceptual framework offered by John Lynn and James McPherson, this thesis analyzes three components of the Eagles' motivation—initial, sustaining, and combat.

Viewed in context, the Eagles' decision to join a beleaguered air force reflected a commitment to ideological principles, as the desires to defend England and curb German aggression figured largely into their initial motivation. Once in England, these ideals persisted as motives to remain in RAF service, as their eagerness for combat reflected the ideological basis of their sustaining motivation. While actively engaged in combat, these pilots overcame fear by relying on strong leadership and blindly disregarding danger, but an ideological sense of duty likewise factored into their combat motivation.

Though past historians, such as Vern Haugland and Philip Caine, have argued that motivation in the Eagle Squadrons was largely rooted in adventurous and pragmatic factors, their analysis ended with the pilots' decisions to enlist. By providing a full-scale analysis of the Eagles' motivation, evidenced by interviews, memoirs, diaries, and letters, this thesis conveys the Eagle Squadrons' uniqueness. The primacy of ideological factors in these pilots' initial, sustaining, and combat motivation represents a departure from typical military units and demonstrates the historical significance of the Eagle Squadrons beyond their military contributions.

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The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government

DEDICATION

To Pilot Officer Robert Lewis Pewitt, Royal Air Force 133 Squadron.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Fw 190</i>	Focke-Wulf 190
<i>Me 109</i>	Messerschmitt Bf 109
<i>RAF</i>	Royal Air Force
<i>RCAF</i>	Royal Canadian Air Force
<i>USAAF</i>	United States Army Air Force

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Before the United States declared war on Germany on December 11, 1941, dozens of American fighter pilots were already battling the Luftwaffe in the skies over Europe. As members of the Eagle Squadrons, these American volunteers for Royal Air Force (RAF) service present an intriguing avenue of soldier motivation analysis. As foreign volunteers, the Eagles, to which they were referred, willingly joined the wartime RAF while their own nation remained at peace. As with any other group of soldiers, the Eagles' motivations were complex and require context to fully understand.

On September 1, 1939, Europe descended into war following Germany's invasion of Poland. In a year's time, much of Western Europe had fallen under Nazi rule, while across the Atlantic, the United States remained neutral. Standing firm against the German war machine, though, was Great Britain, whose air force was in the midst of weathering Hitler's campaign for air superiority. Known as the Battle of Britain, the RAF and Luftwaffe waged an aerial war during the summer of 1940. Ultimately, Great Britain prevailed, forcing Germany to abort its plans for invasion by October of that year. The RAF's victory was not without a cost, however, as it lost more than 20 percent of its fighter pilot force—nearly five hundred men killed.¹

From the RAF's severe losses came a desperate need for replacements, a need which two individuals in North America were especially willing to satisfy. The idea for an all-American squadron fighting in Europe originated with soldier of fortune, Colonel Charles Sweeny. Immediately upon the outbreak of the war, Sweeny looked to recreate

¹ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain and the Rise of Air Power 1930-40* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), 468–69.

the famed Lafayette Escadrille, a unit of American volunteers who flew for the French Air Force in World War I. In defiance of the United States' numerous neutrality acts, Sweeny managed to land thirty-two Americans in France by May 1940.² The nation's surrender to Germany in June, however, dashed his plans to supplement the French Air Force's ranks. Discouraged, Sweeny turned over his recruiting operations to his two nephews, Charles and Robert Sweeny. As both younger Sweenys were living in England at the time, they contacted the British Air Ministry and offered their American volunteer pool to the RAF. On July 2, 1940, the Air Council approved the Sweenys' plan and the Eagle Squadrons were born.³

Though Colonel Charles Sweeny can claim ideological ownership of the Eagle Squadrons, the units were primarily populated by the efforts of Clayton Knight, a Canadian World War I pilot and aviation artist. At the behest of Canadian Air Vice Marshall, William "Billy" Bishop, Knight formed a recruiting organization for American pilots to join the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and RAF in May 1940. Known as the Clayton Knight Committee, the organization far outstripped Sweeny's comparatively small-scale operation. Whereas Robert and Charles Sweeny were only able to muster fifty pilots by the time of their proposal to the Air Ministry, the Clayton Knight Committee was beginning to recruit hundreds of prospective pilots. In fact, over the

² Kenneth C. Kan, *First in the Air: The Eagle Squadrons of World War II* (Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2007), 2, <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/28/2001330139/-1/-1/0/AFD-100928-005.pdf>.

³ Kan, *First in the Air*, 3.

course of the committee's two-year existence, it processed nearly fifty thousand applicants and facilitated the enlistment of 6,700 pilots into the RAF.⁴

Faced with a shortage of fighter pilots, the Air Ministry was in no position to curtail Clayton Knight's efforts and accordingly designated his committee as the principal source of American manpower for the RAF in the fall of 1940.⁵ A few weeks later, on September 19, 1940, RAF Fighter Command officially formed the first Eagle Squadron, Number (No.) 71.⁶ By mid-1941, thanks to the continued success of the Clayton Knight Committee's recruitment, there were a sufficient number of American pilots in the RAF training pipeline to form an additional Eagle Squadron, Number 121, on May 14, 1941.⁷ The Eagle Squadrons were then rounded out with the establishment of Number 133 on August 1, 1941.⁸

Until September 29, 1942—when all three squadrons transferred to the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) and became the 334th, 335th, and 336th Fighter Squadrons—these Americans fought under the Union Jack.⁹ Given the unique nature of these pilots' World War II service, numerous historians have sought to understand the Eagles' motivations for joining the beleaguered RAF while their own nation remained at

⁴ Philip D. Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1991), 45.

⁵ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 47.

⁶ Kan, *First in the Air*, 6.

⁷ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 170.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹ Kan, *First in the Air*, 25.

peace. Over the course of three decades, the question of these pilots' motivation became a central feature of their units' historiography, though with varying degrees of analysis.

In 1979, Vern Haugland offered the first historical analysis of the Eagle Squadrons with his book, *The Eagle Squadrons: Yanks in the RAF, 1940-1942*. While valuable in introducing the Eagle Squadrons to a larger audience and providing an accurate timeline of its operations, Haugland's work is mostly a celebration of the squadrons. He paid closer attention to the Eagles' aerial exploits than to their motivation for joining an air force at war. Whereas he devoted two chapters to a pair of specific combat operations, Haugland's direct analysis of the Eagles' motivation is limited to less than two pages. In his analysis, Haugland concluded that the Eagles were driven to join the RAF primarily out of a sense for adventure, with patriotism factoring in secondarily.

Enlisting a quote from Leo Nomis, a member of No. 71, Haugland suggested that the Eagles "with very few exceptions, were simply adventurers and romanticists, and perhaps idealists."¹⁰ To underline the primacy of adventure over patriotism, Haugland made use of another quote from an Eagle, this from Chesley Peterson. "Six of seven of us volunteered together—and out of a sense of adventure primarily," the No. 71 pilot said, "but everyone I knew in the group had a fairly deep innate sense of patriotism."¹¹ Throughout the book, Haugland made passing mention of the Eagles' senses of adventure and patriotism but failed to provide further evidence for such ideological motivation.

¹⁰ Vern Haugland, *The Eagle Squadrons: Yanks in the RAF, 1940-1942* (New York: Ziff-Davis Flying Books, 1979), 16.

¹¹ Haugland, *The Eagle Squadrons*, 16.

Published in 1991, Brigadier General (retired) Philip D. Caine's *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons* offered the most comprehensive analysis of the history of the Eagle Squadrons and remains to this day as the authoritative account on the units. Whereas Haugland focused mostly on combat and day-to-day life in the Eagle Squadrons, Caine explored all facets of the units' existence—including its formation, training, combat, transfer to American forces, and its members' motivation. In terms of the latter, Caine argued that, above all, the Eagles were aviation enthusiasts. They were driven to volunteer for the RAF by a general love of flying and a specific desire to fly the best aircraft of the time—the Spitfire and Hurricane.

Underpinning this aviation-centric motivation were a pair of practical factors that facilitated their decision to volunteer. Firstly, Caine argued that service within their own nation's air force, the USAAF, was impossible due to a variety of factors—such as failed physicals and check rides, or a lack of the requisite two years of college education. Secondly, Caine argued that the existence of Great Britain's widespread recruiting network, specifically the Clayton Knight Committee, further pushed the Eagles towards RAF service. As a result, Caine essentially downplayed the presence of ideological factors within the Eagles' motivation. He argued that the Eagles were not primarily motivated by patriotic beliefs and a determination to face Germany, but rather by the opportunity to fly Spitfires—after the USAAF was eliminated as an option and with the proactive assistance of the Clayton Knight Committee. In his words, “To be sure, they were patriotic defenders of freedom and democracy, but in the final analysis, it was the airplanes that made them sign up.”¹²

¹² Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 5.

In 2007, for the sixtieth anniversary of the United States Air Force's founding, Kenneth C. Kan published *First in the Air: The Eagle Squadrons of World War II*. Though smaller in scale than the preceding books on the subject, Kan's pamphlet is comprehensive in its historical analysis, as it covers the units' formation, combat experiences, leadership, and more. The central assertion of his work was that the Eagle Squadrons provided an outsized military contribution to the RAF as it transitioned from a defensive to offensive war. Though a little overstated, this assertion tended to overshadow discussion of the Eagles' motivation, which he reserved for the very end of the pamphlet. Essentially, *First in the Air* presented a synthesis of the preceding historians' arguments on the subject, as Kan asserted that "the Americans who joined the RAF and formed the Eagle Squadrons did so for a variety of reasons."¹³ Chief among them were the ideological senses of adventure and patriotism which Haugland mentioned, as well as the "lure of flying high-performance aircraft" for which Caine argued.¹⁴

In 2015, David Alan Johnson published his take on the Eagle Squadrons, titled *Yanks in the RAF: The Story of Maverick Pilots and American Volunteers Who Joined Britain's Fight in World War II*. A novel perspective on the subject, Johnson's work was as much a social history as it was a military history. His main task was placing the Eagle Squadrons within the larger context of Anglo-American relations, as Johnson used the units as a representation of the two nations' close, though sometimes discordant, relationship. Along the same vein, Johnson strongly emphasized the individualist,

¹³ Kan, *First in the Air*, 26.

¹⁴ Kan, *First in the Air*, 26.

maverick mindset of the American volunteers as compared to the gentlemanly nature of their English comrades. As a result of Johnson's social and cultural focus, analysis of the Eagles' motivation formed a minor component of his argument. In fact, he mostly avoided answering the question. Though he made passing mention of the Eagles' senses of adventure and idealism factoring into their motivation, Johnson ultimately concluded that "the vast majority of the Americans who volunteered for the RAF did not really know why they did it, or at least have not put their motives into words."¹⁵

While each of these historians provided different explanations for the Eagles' volunteer service, the common feature of their analysis rested in a one-dimensional view of the pilots' motivation. As outlined by John Lynn in *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94*, three components make up a soldier's motivation—initial, sustaining, and combat. According to Lynn, initial motivation "concerns the decision to become a soldier, to enlist or at least to comply with conscription."¹⁶ Traditionally, ideological factors like patriotism are the predominant factor in such motivation, but social pressure likewise plays a role in a soldier's decision to enlist, Lynn argued.

The factors which influence a soldier to remain in military service and choose to fight comprise his or her sustaining motivation. Often overlooked, this second tier of motivation is key in explaining a military unit's success in battle and overall cohesion.

¹⁵ David Alan Johnson, *Yanks in the RAF: The Story of Maverick Pilots and American Volunteers Who Joined Britain's Fight in WWII* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2015), 239.

¹⁶ John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 35.

On the one hand, soldiers with strong sustaining motivation will exhibit a “cheerful and energetic acceptance of duty.”¹⁷ On the other hand, soldiers with no desire to remain in military service will resort to “surrender, desertion, or mutiny.”¹⁸ Lynn contended that primary group cohesion—the close bonds formed by soldiers—and unit morale constitute the most important sources of sustaining motivation.

Lastly, combat motivation concerns a soldier’s decision to physically fight his or her enemy. Depending on the strength of such motivation, soldiers will abjectly surrender, neglect to use their weapons, or display aggressive initiative.¹⁹ As for motivators, primary group cohesion ascends to “paramount” importance in combat, Lynn argued, but simple self-interest likewise plays an important role.²⁰ Ideological factors, like patriotism, are less common, but Lynn noted that they “cannot be entirely read out of the combat picture.”²¹

Despite this three-dimensional framework for analyzing soldiers’ motivation, the historiography of the Eagle Squadrons has solely focused on the factors that drove the Americans to volunteer for the RAF. With two-thirds of the Eagles’ overall motivation unexplored, this thesis fills such a historiographical gap by analyzing the full scope of soldier motivation in the Eagle Squadrons. Supported by extensive interviews and questionnaires from surviving Eagles, as well as their memoirs, diaries, letters, and

¹⁷ Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic*, 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

personnel records, this thesis will not only advance the preexisting assessments of the Eagles' initial motivation, but it will also determine the factors which drove them to remain in RAF service and fight German pilots in combat.

In all, the pilots of the RAF Eagle Squadrons were profoundly motivated by ideological factors, across all three tiers of soldier motivation. Though Philip D. Caine argued to the contrary, the Eagles' decisions to volunteer for the RAF were primarily centered on the ideological desire to defend Great Britain against German aggression. His pragmatic argument weakens when examined in the context of the Luftwaffe's superiority and when subjected to a deeper look into the Eagles' ineligibility for the USAAF and their subsequent pursuit of alternative military service.

The Eagles' professed desire to fight for England's cause was further demonstrated once in RAF service. The volunteers' eagerness for combat, as evidenced by their avoidance of "boring" missions and numerous requests for transfer to more active battle zones, reflected a sustaining motivation rooted in ideological principles, not a mere love of flying. Interestingly, many Eagles incorporated an American sense of identity into their British service, further deepening the extent of their ideological motivation.

Even in combat, the Eagles were driven by ideological factors. Supported by adept leadership—and sometimes a disregard for the danger surrounding them—the Eagles relied more on a sense of duty than on a devotion to their comrades to overcome fear in aerial combat. A marked departure from most soldiers' combat motivation, this ideological basis was made all the more noteworthy when one considers the Eagles' severe lack of training and discipline.

By providing a full-scale analysis of soldier motivation in the Eagle Squadrons, this thesis will fill a historiographical gap and advance the discipline's understanding of what drives men and women to enlist in militaries, remain in its service, and fight in its battles. As a unit of foreign volunteers, primarily motivated by ideological principles, the Eagle Squadrons represent an ideal case study for such analysis. From their example, the significance of ideological principles to soldiers is made unmistakably clear.

CHAPTER II – FLYING WITH A PURPOSE: INITIAL MOTIVATION

The factors which concern one's decision to join a military comprise one's initial motivation. Existing accounts of the Eagle Squadrons, with their unsurprising focus on understanding what drove hundreds of American men to volunteer for another nation's air force, have exclusively dealt with this category of soldier motivation. In the historiography, Philip Caine's *Eagles of the RAF* has emerged as the authoritative text. His interpretation of the Eagles' initial motivation placed a love of flying at the core of their decision to join the Royal Air Force (RAF). Caine argued that, facilitated by the impossibility of joining the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) and proactive recruitment by RAF agencies, the Eagles volunteered with few ideological principles in mind. In his words, "To be sure, they were patriotic defenders of freedom and democracy, but in the final analysis, it was the airplanes that made them sign up."¹

Though a love of flying was indeed an important motivating factor for the Eagles, it merely set in motion their decisions to fly for the RAF; it alone does not fully explain the Eagles' decision to volunteer. This chapter will challenge Caine's assertions by way of analysis through three contextual lenses—the reality of German fighter aircraft superiority, on both a macro and micro level; the differentiation of USAAF ineligibility sources; and the Eagles' ideologically-based pursuit of many avenues of military service—and ultimately argue for the primacy of ideological principles over such pragmatic factors as love of flying and ease of enlistment.

The reality of German fighter aircraft superiority is best understood when viewed within the context of the Eagles' love of flying. This reality could not have gone

¹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 5.

unnoticed by the Eagles because, as Caine argued, they were aviation enthusiasts of the highest order. As evidenced by their early infatuation with flight, the extraordinary number of flying hours they amassed, and continued careers in aviation following their RAF service, the Eagles were ingrained within the world of aviation and, as a result, were certainly aware of its global developments.

For many Eagles, the love of flying began at an early age. For example, John Campbell of No. 121 began flying at age fourteen, paying his way through lessons by doing any chore possible, as he would “gas airplanes, help strap passengers, wash airplanes,” anything to fuel his true passion.² LeRoy Gover of No. 133 likewise began flying in his teens, as he acquired his private pilot’s license at just sixteen years old. Thanks to his time as a crop duster, he possessed nearly eight hundred flying hours at the time of his RAF enlistment in April 1941. When Joseph Durham was gifted a flight lesson on his sixteenth birthday, he fell in love on the spot. “My decision to become a pilot at all costs,” he proclaimed, “was solidly set at that time.”³ Carroll McColpin was a Civilian Pilot Training Program instructor by his mid-twenties—an age at which most Americans were participating in the program as students.⁴ Given this early start on his

² John A. “Red” Campbell, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 1, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library), 7-8.

³ Philip D. Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons: American Pilots Who Flew for the Royal Air Force* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2009), 149.

⁴ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 275.

aviation career, the future No. 133 commander had piloted “twenty to thirty different kinds” of civilian aircraft before flying in the skies over Europe.⁵

Of all the Eagles, Steve Pisanos displayed perhaps the greatest dedication in earning his pilot wings. At age twelve, the Greek native caught a glimpse of a biplane and, in that moment, promised himself that he would become a pilot. Despite speaking “very few words” of English, Pisanos immigrated to the United States, driven by nothing more than a wishful promise from a friend: “You really want to be a pilot? America is the place to go. Why in America they have more aircraft than stars in the sky.”⁶ His friend’s advice was ultimately sound, however, as Pisanos accumulated more than 160 flying hours on the way to receiving his private pilot’s license, before volunteering for the RAF in the summer of 1941.⁷

Given the early start that many Eagles had on their aviation careers, it should be of no surprise that they amassed an impressive number of flight hours. In fact, this quantitative perspective further evidenced their profound love of flying. For example, the requisite flying hours for one to earn a private pilot’s license in the prewar United States, as defined in the Civilian Pilot Training Act of 1939, ranged from thirty-three to fifty-five hours.⁸ Of the 245 Americans who served in an Eagle Squadron, 215 have a record of their prewar flying time. Of these Eagles with recorded flight time, 196 possessed the

⁵ Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, in Novato, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

⁶ Steve Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine on, September 2, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 62, 10.

⁷ Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 12.

⁸ Grove Webster, “The Civilian Pilot Training Program,” *Aerospace Historian* 26, no. 1 (March 1979): 38.

minimum requirement of thirty-three hours. In fact, the average of the Eagles' flight hours, 220, far exceeded even the maximum requirement of fifty-five. Though some Eagles, like LeRoy Gover and Harold Strickland, amassed hundreds and even thousands of flight hours, their immense flight experience did not artificially inflate the average number. For example, only five Eagles entered RAF service with no flight time and those with less than one hundred hours numbered just nineteen.⁹

From top to bottom, the Eagles bore statistical proof of their love of flying. This love was made all the more noteworthy given the time period in which the Eagles learned to fly. In the 1930s, the decade in which most Eagles spent their formative years, civilian aviation—not to mention every other sector of the industry—was still in its infancy. For reference, only 30,000 Americans in 1939 held some sort of pilot's license—student, private, commercial, or transport. This amounted to just 0.023% of the population that possessed at least thirty-five flight hours. 80 percent of the Eagles, however, possessed this minimum requirement. In a time of so few American pilots, the Eagles represented a unique group of aviation enthusiasts.

This love of flying that enamored Eagles in their teens continued in their post-RAF service. Whether in a military or civilian capacity, a great number of Eagles continued to fly after World War II ended. Donald Young of No. 121 exchanged his military flight suit for that of a civilian, as he became a pilot for Delta Airlines and retired

⁹ Statistical data on the Eagles' flying time was obtained by cross-referencing two sources. Firstly, the Eagles' RAF personnel files (Forms 1406 and 543), housed in the Philip D. Caine Collection of the Clark Special Collections Branch at the United States Air Force Academy Library in Colorado Springs, CO. Secondly, Philip Caine's book, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons: American Pilots Who Flew for the Royal Air Force*, a collection of biographical sketches of every Eagle Squadron member.

in 1979 with more than 26,000 flying hours to his name.¹⁰ Luke Allen followed suit, as he also became a corporate pilot, ending his flying career with more than 23,000 hours.¹¹ Karl Kimbro of No. 133 remained closer to the ground, spending fifteen years as a crop duster after his service in the war.¹²

Other Eagles stayed on the military side of aviation. Chesley Peterson and Carroll McColpin, who both retired as major generals, immediately stand out, but numerous other Eagles honorably served their country for years after the close of World War II. Bob Smith stayed in the Air Force until 1970 and flew F-84s and F-86s in the Korean War.¹³ Reade Tilley stuck with the US Air Force, eventually amassing over four thousand flying hours and becoming General Curtis LeMay's top public affairs advisor. He retired as a full colonel.¹⁴ Paul Ellington of No. 121 transitioned to the National Guard after his wartime service, where he flew P-51s.¹⁵

¹⁰ Donald Young, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, May 15, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹¹ Luke Allen, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine on March 12, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹² Karl Kimbro, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 24, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹³ Bob Smith, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 15, 1994, in Alexandria, VA, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 50.

¹⁴ Reade Tilley, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine on November 16, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹⁵ Paul Ellington, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 19, 1994, in Slidell, LA, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

Given the depth of the Eagles' love of flying, it should be of no surprise that they were aware of global developments in aviation. Therefore, on a macro level, the reality of German fighter superiority was an unavoidable fact to these American volunteers—a fact made all the more apparent when contextualized by two major events in the aviation world: Charles Lindbergh's mid-1930 tours of Luftwaffe facilities and the Battle of Britain. The first event served to demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, the superiority of the German Air Force, as Charles Lindbergh's assessment of the force created ripples through the aviation world. The second event served to demonstrate the converse, as the Battle of Britain's depiction as England's "darkest hour," coupled with the near defeat of the RAF, indicated the inferiority of the British air force versus its German counterpart. Furthermore, many Eagles were of German heritage and virtually all volunteered before US opinion turned sharply against Germany. Thus, when viewed in this context, it becomes difficult to argue that the Eagles volunteered for RAF service due to a motivation to fly the best aircraft of their time because such aircraft belonged to Germany.

Instigated by the American military attaché to Germany, Truman Smith, as a means of gathering intelligence on Luftwaffe capabilities, Charles Lindbergh was invited on several tours of German aircraft facilities. Between 1936 and 1938, Lindbergh made five "inspection trips," in which he was granted unprecedented access to Luftwaffe operations, as he "toured German aviation factories; inspected the latest aircraft; visited the most recently deployed tactical units of the new German air force; and discussed the evolution of tactical and strategic concepts with Luftwaffe officers." Most notably,

during his October 1938 tour, Lindbergh personally flew the Luftwaffe's frontline fighter, the Messerschmitt Bf 109.¹⁶

From this experience, Lindbergh declared the German Air Force to be the best in the world. He touted both the Luftwaffe's quantitative and qualitative superiority. Germany, he said, was "now able to produce military aircraft faster than any other European country; possibly even faster than we could in the States."¹⁷ And the aircraft they produced were of superlative quality. A report created for the Intelligence Division of the US General Staff, based off Lindbergh's firsthand knowledge, stated that "Germany is on the whole superior to Great Britain in the quality of her planes, but is still inferior to Great Britain in motors, but rapidly closing the gap."¹⁸

Given Lindbergh's stature in the 1930s, it is incredibly unlikely that his appraisal of the Luftwaffe went unnoticed by Americans. After all, following his historic solo, trans-Atlantic flight in 1927, Lindbergh became an overnight celebrity and national hero. Upon his return to the United States, a whopping thirty-five million Americans—nearly a third of the population—listened to his address in Washington D.C. via radio. An additional half a million attended in person.¹⁹ Lindbergh was even awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor—the United States' highest honor for bravery in battle—

¹⁶ "Manuscript Collections - Truman Smith Papers," Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://hoover.archives.gov/research/collections/manuscriptfindingaids/smith>.

¹⁷ "America First and WWII," Charles Lindbergh House and Museum, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.mnhs.org/lindbergh/learn/controversies>.

¹⁸ Robert Hessen, ed., *Berlin Alert: The Memoirs and Reports of Truman Smith* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), 118.

¹⁹ Associated Press, "35,000,000 Radio Audience Welcomes Col. Lindbergh," *Douglas Daily Dispatch*, June 12, 1927, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020064/1927-06-12/ed-1/seq-1/>.

for his civilian accomplishment.²⁰ Due to Lindbergh's unprecedented fame, his words on the Luftwaffe would certainly not have been lost on the young Eagles, many of whom specifically highlighted Lindbergh as an inspiration to them.

Jackson Mahon of No. 121 said that seeing Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis* as a young boy inspired him to learn to fly.²¹ Robert Priser concurred, as he remembered seeing the *Spirit of St. Louis* on a tour in his native Tucson, Arizona and resolving to become a pilot that day.²² When Stephen Crowe heard the news of Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight, he told his mother, "I'm going to be a pilot."²³ LeRoy Gover likewise attested to Lindbergh's allure to aspiring pilots, as he noted that "everybody listened to the radio almost day and night [to] see how he was on that flight."²⁴

While Lindbergh's words demonstrated the superiority of the Luftwaffe, the paradoxical outcome of the Battle of Britain, as well as the discourse surrounding it, demonstrated the inferiority of the RAF. Intended as a prelude to full-scale German invasion of the British Isles during the summer of 1940, the Battle of Britain certainly holds a glorified position in the annals of military history. Though England emerged victorious, the battle's outcome—many historians argue—came not from the superiority

²⁰ Stanley Shapiro, "The Celebrity of Charles Lindbergh," *Air Power History* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 31.

²¹ Jackson "Barry" Mahon, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 25.

²² Robert Priser, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

²³ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 123.

²⁴ LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on June 30, 1993, in Palo Alto, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 46.

of its air force, but from misguided German strategy. Throughout the battle, the German high command regularly erred on intelligence estimates and too hastily abandoned its targets, but its specific decision to alleviate pressure upon the RAF Fighter Command in early September 1940, in favor of bombardment of London, ultimately doomed the Luftwaffe's prospects for success. Despite the RAF having "gravely impaired strength and efficiency" by the end of August, German leaders bizarrely opted to bombard London rather than eliminate its English foe once and for all.²⁵

In *The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain and the Rise of Air Power, 1930-1940*, Derek Wood and Derek Dempster divided the battle into five distinct phases: first, German attacks on Channel convoys and ports; second, the offensive against RAF coastal airfields and radar stations; third, Luftwaffe assaults on major inland airfields and sector stations; fourth, the attack on London; and fifth, fighter-bomber attacks with the primary objective of drawing RAF fighters into battle. This third phase, which took place from August 24 to September 6, 1940, comprised "the most critical phase" of the battle in which the position of the RAF was "grim to the extreme."²⁶ During the month of August, persistent German bombardment had pushed the RAF to its limits by way of unsustainable losses dealt to its airfields, aircraft, and pilots. With "gravely impaired strength and efficiency," the RAF was braced for the worst as August turned into September, but—through no deliberate action of its own—avoided potential destruction when Luftwaffe bombers overflew English airfields en route to London.

²⁵ Wood and Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 333.

²⁶ Wood and Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 300, 330.

The most visible destruction wreaked by the Luftwaffe during this time period was inflicted upon the RAF's airfields and accompanying operation rooms and radio stations. Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park—whose role as commander of 11 Group tasked him with the defense of England's most vulnerable airfields, as well as London—declared in September that if the past month's losses to such airfield infrastructure were to continue, "the fighter defences of London would have been in a powerless state during the last critical phase, and unopposed heavy attacks would have been directed against the capital."²⁷ Five of his forward aerodromes had suffered "extensive damage," with two of them "quite unfit for fighters," and another "so severely damaged that only one squadron could operate from the airfield."²⁸

Grievous harm was likewise done to the RAF's aircraft supply. Though English frontline fighters were in no danger of immediate destruction, Luftwaffe attacks on the production and supply of reserve fighters put the RAF inventory on a dangerously negative trajectory. Denis Richards, co-author of the official history of RAF operations during World War II, noted that "between 24 August and 6 September" the RAF lost 295 Hurricanes and Spitfires, with an additional 171 classified as "badly damaged," During this time, production and repairs could only total 269, putting the RAF at a net loss of 197 aircraft in just two weeks.²⁹ So appalling was this trend that Hugh Dowding, the

²⁷ Ibid, 333.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Richard Hough and Denis Richards, *The Battle of Britain: The Greatest Air Battle of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 249.

RAF's commander-in-chief, estimated his overall force would be exhausted in three weeks, assuming the Luftwaffe maintained its current pace of operations.³⁰

As concerning as the RAF's airfield and aircraft situation was, the true crisis lay in its shortage of pilots. In the same 24 August to 6 September time frame, 103 RAF fighter pilots were killed and 128 wounded. This two-week casualty figure "nearly equalled an entire month's output of new fighter pilots from" training units, Richards noted.³¹ By September, the average number of pilots in an RAF squadron had decreased by nearly 30 percent. Unlike destroyed aircraft, deceased pilots were not as readily replaceable. With the loss of each skilled pilot, a fresh and unexperienced pilot was forced to take his place—whether from a quiet sector of operations or from training. When replacements began to form significant portions of squadrons, the cost of inexperience truly revealed itself. For example, the battle-hardened 501 Squadron lost just nine aircraft and four pilots in a two-week span in August while stationed in 11 Group. In comparison, the fresh 253 Squadron lost thirteen aircraft and nine pilots during the same time span and operating from the same base, but in half the time.³² This, Richards argued, "was Dowding's nightmare."³³

With these factors put together, RAF Fighter Command "had approached the breaking point on September 6," as Michael Korda noted in *With Wings like Eagles: The*

³⁰ Michael Korda, *With Wings Like Eagles: The Untold Story of the Battle of Britain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 251.

³¹ Hough and Richards, *The Battle of Britain*, 249.

³² *Ibid.*, 250.

³³ *Ibid.*, 249.

Untold Story of the Battle of Britain.³⁴ The next day, rather than continuing to exert this deadly pressure upon the RAF, the Luftwaffe's commander, Hermann Göring "threw victory away" by bombing London instead.³⁵ Motivated by a combination of an underestimate of RAF Fighter Command strength, the desire to avenge two bombing raids on Berlin in late August, and the continuation of the planned procedures for invasion, the German high command initiated the famed "Blitz."³⁶ Historian James Stokesbury contended that, ironically, "the Blitz was the best thing that could have happened to the Royal Air Force, for respite meant survival."³⁷ With the reduced pressure on its airfields, aircraft supply, and pilot population, the RAF was able to recoup from its losses. Due to the unsustainable losses to his own air force; the coming of fall, which would bring dangerous Channel conditions for an invading force; and the desire to focus on increasing Lebensraum to the East, Adolf Hitler called off his plans for invasion of Great Britain. The RAF had survived, but a large measure of its success clearly rested in self-inflicted errors by its foe, not in its own superiority.

Beyond this military analysis of the Battle of Britain, however, it is further apparent that the RAF was the inferior force at the time when one considers the discourse that surrounded the battle—both at the time and thereafter. Recounts of the battle were replete with expressions such as "our darkest hour" and "the few against the many." Churchill's famous "We shall fight on the beaches" speech, for example, was simply not

³⁴ Korda, *With Wings Like Eagles*, 255.

³⁵ James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of Air Power* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 178.

³⁶ John Andreas Olsen, ed., *A History of Air Warfare* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2010), 31–32.

³⁷ Stokesbury, *A Short History of Air Power*, 179.

an address by a head of state possessing the superior military force. For Americans contemplating service in the RAF, such rhetoric surely did not go unnoticed, to which James Griffin of No. 121 attested. “It is doubtful that any American who was thinking of volunteering for service with the RAF or RCAF at that time wasn't acutely aware of what he was getting into,” he explained, “the Battle of Britain had just been fought, and radio and newspapers reported every detail.”³⁸

As future Eagles like Griffin heard such rhetoric, they could not have truly believed the RAF to be the superior force, fitted with the best aircraft of the time. Morris Fessler of No. 71 certainly recognized the balance of power in the early stages of the war, as he crudely put it, “oh, I was in sympathy for a country the size of England getting the shit beat out of it at that time.”³⁹ If the Eagles did not notice this large-scale Luftwaffe superiority when they enlisted, they surely observed it while in England. It is significant that a number of Eagles did not shy away from admitting such a reality. James Goodson conceded that “you have to admire these Luftwaffe guys, because, between you and I, they were better than we were.”⁴⁰ Paul Ellington was less secretive in his appraisal of the Luftwaffe. “I like to think of our Air Force as the cream of the crop, the Luftwaffe definitely was the cream of the crop.”⁴¹

³⁸ Griffin, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine.

³⁹ Morris Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

⁴⁰ James Goodson, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 23, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 27.

⁴¹ Ellington, interview by Philip D. Caine, 36.

Alongside the Luftwaffe's military advantages, there were other reasons that flying for Germany would have been an appealing choice for prospective American pilots. For one, like many Americans, several Eagles were of German ancestry. Of the seventy Eagles who returned a questionnaire to Philip Caine, fourteen indicated some degree of German ancestry in their family. For context, that number would be sufficient to man an entire RAF squadron, which were typically composed of twelve to twenty-four pilots.⁴² One of these Eagles, Gus Daymond, even had a close relative in the Luftwaffe, Alfred Kesilring, who he said was "a very high level man."⁴³ Despite this connection, Daymond chose to volunteer for the RAF, citing a desire to "leave this planet doing what I thought was right."⁴⁴

In addition to the German heritage of many members of the Eagle Squadrons, it is important to note the significant presence of positive German sentiment within the United States' borders, before the latter's declaration of war on December 11, 1941. In the aftermath of four years of war, as well as the revelation of Nazi atrocities, it is easy to forget that "the German Bund was very strong," as John Campbell of No. 121 remembered, referencing the German American Bund. This organization, comprised of German-Americans, aimed to promote a favorable view of Nazi Germany and was very active in pre-war America. Its most notable demonstration of widespread support came on February 20, 1939, when the group held a rally at Madison Square Garden that drew

⁴² Ken Delve, *Fighter Command 1936-1968: An Operational and Historical Record* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2007), 33.

⁴³ Gregory Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine on July 2, 1994, in Newport Beach, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

⁴⁴ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 35.

more than twenty thousand people.⁴⁵ Gus Daymond specifically remembered that event, with Americans “marching around having big...swastikas all over the place.”⁴⁶

While joining the Luftwaffe would seem unthinkable in post-Pearl Harbor America, it is necessary to point out that virtually every Eagle volunteered for the RAF before December 7, 1941. The lone exception, No. 133’s John Mitchellweis, only joined after American opinion turned sharply against Germany because he had been in USAAF pilot training since late 1941. When he failed a check ride on April 5, 1942, he immediately signed up for RAF service.⁴⁷ The presence of positive German sentiment in America was even recognized by the Eagle Squadrons’ RAF leaders. Hugh Kennard, commander of No. 121, noted that the disdain some of his American pilots had for their adversaries was “surprising in a way, because if you go up into parts of the States how many [are] actually full of Germans.”⁴⁸

When these large-scale factors are considered together—Charles Lindbergh’s appraisal of the Luftwaffe’s capabilities, the discourse and outcome of the Battle of Britain, and the Eagles’ connections to Germany—it is difficult to conclude that the Eagles’ initial motivation came from the desire to fly the best aircraft of their time. The world’s most renowned pilot—and idol to many Eagles—famously declared that such aircraft belonged not to the RAF, but to the Luftwaffe. Then, once Germany brought the

⁴⁵ Sarah Kate Kramer, “When Nazis Took Manhattan,” National Public Radio, February 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/20/695941323/when-nazis-took-manhattan>.

⁴⁶ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 8.

⁴⁷ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 302.

⁴⁸ Hugh Kennard, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 24, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 23.

war to Great Britain in summer 1940, the superiority of the Luftwaffe was further demonstrated in the Battle of Britain, even in its strategic defeat. Given that the root cause of Great Britain's victory lay in strategic errors from German high command, and not in the inherent superiority of RAF fighters, it is clear which force possessed the best aircraft of the time. Lastly, many Eagles had familial connections that would have made Luftwaffe service more than logical—not to mention the significant positive sentiment towards Germany in the U.S. at large. On a small-scale level too, the superiority of German fighter aircraft was apparent, as indicated in a direct comparison between specific German variants and specific British variants.

While it is apparent that the Luftwaffe was superior to the RAF in a general sense, it is likewise apparent that the individual components that made up the Luftwaffe—its specific fighter aircraft—were superior as well. The backbone of the German fighter force was comprised of the Messerschmidt Bf 109 (Me 109) and Focke-Wulf 190 (Fw 190), two aircraft which even the Eagles themselves widely regarded as the superior fighter aircraft of World War II. This micro-level acceptance of German fighter superiority further disproves the idea that the Eagles were motivated to volunteer by a desire to fly the best aircraft of the time. This reality of Luftwaffe superiority was demonstrated by the game of engineering cat-and-mouse between German aircraft (the Me 109 and Fw 190) and British aircraft (the Spitfire and Hurricane), in which the former always remained a step ahead of the latter.

When comparing their Spitfires and Hurricanes against the German competition, many Eagles employed a metaphor of a cat-and-mouse game, referring to the regular upgrades that each aircraft received. With each successive model, denoted with an

alphanumeric suffix attached to the aircraft name, the balance of power shifted slightly. For context, the Eagle Squadrons flew three variants of the Spitfire, the Mk IIa, Vb, and IX, and two variants of the Hurricane, the Mk I and IIb. The Hurricanes were primarily used in each squadron's buildup to initial operational status—from November 1940 to August 1941 for No. 71, from May to July 1941 for No. 121, and from August to October 1941 for No. 133—and only No. 71 flew the Mk I.⁴⁹ As a result, most Eagles' experience with the Hurricane rested in the Mk IIb variant—and only for the first few months of their operational service. Likewise, a single model of the Spitfire, the Vb, comprised the majority of the Eagles' experience with that aircraft. The Spitfire Mk IIa was flown solely by No. 71 for a mere ten days in August 1941, whereas the Mk IX was flown by just No. 133 for only a few weeks before all three squadrons transferred to the USAAF in September 1942.⁵⁰ As a result, the Spitfire Vb was the model with which most Eagles were most familiar.

As for the Eagles' specific competition, they most frequently encountered the Me 109F and G, as well as the Fw 190. The Me 109F was introduced at the end of 1940 and, thus, was the first Me 109 model to face the Eagle Squadrons, though its E-model predecessor certainly remained in Luftwaffe squadrons.⁵¹ For the duration of the war, however, the mid-1942 successor to the F-model, the Me 109G, was the most common variant in the Luftwaffe.⁵² Rounding out the Eagles' aerial adversaries was the

⁴⁹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 160, 172, 188, 194.

⁵⁰ Caine, 161, 122.

⁵¹ Jochen Prien and Peter Rodeike, *Messerschmitt Bf 109 F, G, & K Series: An Illustrated Study*, trans. David Johnston (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1992), 8.

⁵² Prien and Rodeike, 56.

formidable Fw 190. First appearing in the skies over Europe in early 1941, the Fw 190 underwent fewer upgrades during the Eagles' existence—just three minor upgrades to its A-variant—but that did not take away from its lethality.⁵³ Though produced in lesser numbers, many Allied pilots considered the Fw 190 to be superior to the workhorse Me 109, thanks to its superlative climbing and diving capabilities.

Whether it was a small increase in an engine's horsepower or a new armament system, both England and Germany continually altered their fighter aircraft to gain an advantage over their adversary. As William Dunn of No. 71 explained this game of cat-and-mouse, "the Spit II and 109E were pretty much the same. They came out with the F and we came out with the V. Then they came out with the G and we came out with the IX."⁵⁴ His squadron mate in No. 71, Gus Daymond, said that it was not until the Spitfire IV and V models, which first appeared in late 1941, that RAF pilots were able to hold their own against their German adversaries.⁵⁵ Up to that point, Daymond admitted, the Fw 190 "was clearly a superior plane."⁵⁶

Charles Cook of No. 133 did not hold such an optimistic perception of the Spitfire. He admitted that Luftwaffe fighters were superior to the Spitfire until an even later, mid-1942 iteration became operational—the Spitfire IX. Until that time, its German

⁵³ Edward Shacklady, *Butcher Bird: The Focke-Wulf Fw190* (Bristol, UK: Cerberus Publishing, 2003), 57.

⁵⁴ William Dunn, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 26, 1990, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 6.

⁵⁵ "Spitfire," The Spitfire Society, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.spitfiresociety.org/content-Spitfire>.

⁵⁶ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 30.

counterpart could “turn and climb” better.⁵⁷ This view of the oscillating disparity between Spitfires and Me 109s was not just an Eagle Squadron observation, the Germans likewise recognized the back-and-forth nature of the evolution in fighter aircraft superiority.

General Johannes Steinhoff, a highly-decorated Luftwaffe fighter pilot with 176 victories to his name, explained the shifting balance of power between Me 109s and Spitfires in terms of a simple capped wingtip.⁵⁸ “As we entered the Battle of Britain we had the Messerschmitt 109E. They then added a rounded wingtip, like the Spitfire. We entered the Battle of Britain with the E without the wingtip. Then the wingtip was capped and suddenly we could climb better and turn better and it was more equal to the Spitfires.”⁵⁹ Though he considered Me 109s and Spitfires to be roughly equal, he argued that Fw 190s surpassed them both. “The Focke-Wulf was a better aircraft. It had far more capability ...”⁶⁰

Despite this game of cat-and-mouse, most Eagle Squadron pilots—including some of the most combat-experienced among them—believed the Luftwaffe’s fighters to be generally superior to their Spitfires in the long term. As James Goodson of No. 133 described this deadly game of back and forth, “the 109 was always faster than the Spit straight and level. When we got the Spit IX’s, they came along with the 109G, the

⁵⁷ Charles Cook, interview by Philip D. Caine on August 31, 1987, in West Covina, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3.

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Saxon, “Gen. Johannes Steinhoff, 80, Dies; Helped Rebuild German Air Force,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/23/obituaries/gen-johannes-steynhoff-80-dies-helped-rebuild-german-air-force.html>.

⁵⁹ Johannes Steinhoff, interview by Philip D. Caine on July 29, 1988, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3-4.

⁶⁰ Steinhoff, interview by Philip D. Caine, 7.

Gustav's they called them, which was a game better, were always one jump ahead.”⁶¹

Goodson's belief in the overall superiority of German fighters over British fighters is especially noteworthy when one considers his British upbringing and service in the RAF since 1939—predating the Eagle Squadrons. Therefore, Goodson had both emotional and practical reasons to prefer the Spitfire, yet he admitted to its inferiority.

As the first American to win the British Distinguished Flying Cross—awarded to pilots who achieved the venerated five aerial victories figure—No. 71's Gus Daymond was an expert on the combat capabilities of both his aircraft and those he battled. So, for him to proclaim that “a Spitfire V against a Focke-Wulf was not a good situation,” speaks volumes to the gap that existed between German and British fighter aircraft.⁶²

Daymond's perception of the Fw 190 was not a personal opinion, however, as his squadron mate in No. 71, Morris Fessler, noted that even the Luftwaffe's second-rate fighter, Me 109, was widely recognized in the Eagle Squadrons as superior to the Spitfire and Hurricane. “It was an assessment of the pilots,” Fessler declared, “that the 109 was an excellent aircraft and it had its attributes, it could climb higher, it could dive faster than a Spitfire or a Hurricane.”⁶³

Though edges in climbing in diving might seem trivial to the layman, these characteristics granted German fighter pilots important advantages in combat, chiefly in offering them more opportunities for offensive and defensive maneuvers. Fessler went on to explain,

⁶¹ Goodson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 21.

⁶² Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 30.

⁶³ Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine, 10.

The Germans had the ability of getting higher and choosing the attack and then diving away and escaping. We couldn't catch them. So that was really I think the upper most hand in choosing when to have combat and when not too. When they attacked us the only thing that we could do was to go into a real tight turn and out turn them and get out of their sights.”⁶⁴

This game of cat-and-mouse was especially pertinent to the Eagles’ initial motivation because, in addition to the Spitfire’s avowed inferiority to German aircraft in the long term, most Eagles recognized the superiority of their competition in the early stages of the war—or, in other words, during the time frame in which Eagles were volunteering. As noted earlier, all but one Eagle volunteered before December 7, 1941, and—for a general understanding of their date of entry as relative to the ongoing game of aerial cat-and-mouse—the Eagles’ average volunteer date was January 13, 1941.⁶⁵ It was in this early-1941 period that many Eagles attested to the superiority of Germany’s fighter aircraft. For example, Chesley Peterson—another Distinguished Flying Cross recipient—said that, in early 1941,

When the 190 first came out, I think we looked on it with a little bit of awe. We knew damn well that it was a better airplane than we had. Of course, at that time we only had the Spit V. I remember, this sort of permeated throughout the RAF, enough so that Leigh-Mallory himself came down and visited each Squadron and assured us that we were going to get Spit IX in the next couple of months.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵ Statistical data on the Eagles’ average volunteer date was obtained by cross-referencing two sources. Firstly, the Eagles’ RAF personnel files (Forms 1406 and 543), housed in the Philip D. Caine Collection of the Clark Special Collections Branch at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO. Secondly, Philip Caine’s book *The RAF Eagle Squadrons: American Pilots Who Flew for the Royal Air Force*.

⁶⁶ Chesley Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 14, 1987, in Ogden, UT (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 72.

It is especially noteworthy that an officer of Air Chief Marshall Trafford Leigh-Mallory's stature felt it necessary to personally assure "each Squadron" in the RAF that an improved Spitfire was on the way. As the commander of 11 Group, tasked with aerial defense of London, and soon to be head of RAF Fighter Command and the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, Leigh-Mallory's recognition of the Fw 190's unquestioned superiority in early 1941 spoke volumes to the initial gap between Spitfires and German fighter aircraft.⁶⁷ Edwin Taylor of No. 133, yet another Distinguished Flying Cross recipient—and therefore, another credible authority on combat performance of aircraft—declared that Germany's fighters "were superior in the beginning."⁶⁸ Even Philip Caine admitted that it was not until late August 1941, with No. 71's issuance of the Spitfire Vb, that "for the first time," the Eagles held "a real edge over the Me 109."⁶⁹

In summation, the reality of German fighter aircraft superiority was evident on both a macro and micro level during the time frame in which Eagles volunteered for the RAF. The Luftwaffe's general superiority was demonstrated in the words of Charles Lindbergh and the depiction and outcome of the Battle of Britain, while its specific superiority was apparent in the words of the Eagles themselves. Therefore, it is clear that the Eagles' choice of the RAF could not have been driven by the desire to fly the best aircraft of their time. The real difference between the RAF and Luftwaffe was the ideological principles for which each nation fought—freedom and independence for the

⁶⁷ "Subordinate RAF Commanders," Royal Air Force Museum, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/history-of-the-battle-of-britain/subordinate-raf-commanders/>.

⁶⁸ Edwin Taylor, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 1, 1987, in San Clemente, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 10.

⁶⁹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 161.

RAF, tyranny and aggression for the Luftwaffe. To fully underscore the primacy of the Eagles' ideological motivation over a simple desire to fly the best fighters of their time, one needs only to note the time Reade Tilley made a joke to Bert Stewart about joining the Luftwaffe. As Stewart remembered the encounter,

We sit one night and, of course it was in jest and light, ... we'd seen the ME-109Es a couple of times and the damned airplane was faster and it could climb higher and everything else. And I think it was Reade brought it up...he said, 'Do you think we could get over to Germany and fly the ME-109s?' If we'd have been heard we would have been shot as damned traitors. But of course it was all in jest.⁷⁰

Tilley's joke encapsulated the mindsets of most Eagles. The Spitfire, though beloved and more than capable in combat, was not the unquestioned ruler of the skies over Europe. Its appeal, therefore, lay not in its combat capabilities, but in the ideological principles for which its air force fought. The depth of the Eagles's ideological initial motivation is further evident in their relationship to their native air force, the United States Army Air Force.

In *Eagles of the RAF*, Philip Caine presented the Eagles as zealous pilots who, for factors outside their control, were unable to join their own nation's air force, and accordingly jumped at the opportunity to join the RAF, thanks to its possession of the world's so-called best fighter aircraft and its large recruiting network. Caine's assertion that "almost all of them were either ineligible for entry into the US military pilot training program or had entered it and been eliminated," belied the true nature of the Eagles' ineligibility for the USAAF.⁷¹ While many Eagles could not join the USAAF for reasons

⁷⁰ Bert Stewart, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

⁷¹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 330.

outside their control—such as disqualifying medical conditions—most chose to not join the USAAF because they did not want to wait to complete the requisite two years of college. Motivated by various ideological factors, these Eagles felt that they could not remain in the United States and continue flying in noncombat capacities while a war raged in Europe. As LeRoy Gover put it, “I could see the war was just around the corner, so I said, ‘Hell, I can’t go to college for four years, it’ll be all over.’ They wouldn’t take anybody who went to college then. And it didn’t have a damn thing to do with flying combat, having a college education.”⁷²

It is undeniable that the peacetime USAAF held notoriously stringent requirements for entry to pilot training. For example, applicants had to have near perfect vision, possess no physical abnormalities, and even be unmarried to enter USAAF pilot training. In 1939, 73.2 percent of applicants were denied for physical reasons.⁷³ It is also true that many Eagles were precluded from USAAF service due to these stringent requirements. George Carpenter had already begun USAAF pilot training, but after passing out from a routine tetanus shot, he was discharged.⁷⁴ Likewise, the USAAF denied Wilson Edwards the opportunity to serve his nation on the basis of his two missing teeth.⁷⁵

⁷² LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, in Palo Alto, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

⁷³ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Men and Planes*, vol. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 435.

⁷⁴ George Carpenter, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 3, 1994, in Paris, TN (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 1.

⁷⁵ Wilson Edwards, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 16, 1987, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 7.

In the realm of motivation analysis, however, it is vital to differentiate between two categories of factors that deemed one ineligible for USAAF service: factors outside one's control and factors within one's control. Treating these factors monolithically, though both contain similarly stringent requirements, occludes proper analysis. For example, most Eagles precluded from USAAF service simply lacked the two-year college requirement. Of the 245 men who flew in an Eagle Squadron, 139 expressed some indication of the unavailability of USAAF service. Of these 139, just thirty-one were medical turndowns or training washouts. This leaves 108 Eagles—78 percent of known USAAF turndowns—who merely lacked the requirement of two years.⁷⁶

Ineligibility on this basis is very different from that of Carpenter or Edwards. An individual like Leo Nomis, who “would have loved to go into the Air Corps at the time, but they had the age limit, they had the two year college limit,” could have reasonably attended college for two years, and then become eligible for USAAF pilot training, but instead chose not to, in favor of service with the RAF.⁷⁷ Such a choice was nonexistent for Eagles whose ineligibility was due to factors outside their control.

Eagles like Nomis, who lacked the requisite college education, but chose to volunteer for the RAF instead, reveal important implications for their initial motivation. Since their path to the USAAF was not entirely blocked and their opportunity to continue flying—albeit, in a nonmilitary capacity—was still available at home, their decisions to volunteer for a beleaguered air force at war with a superior force, therefore, indicated a

⁷⁶ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, bk.

⁷⁷ Leo Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine on August 31, 1987, in Sherman Oaks, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3.

sense of ideological motivation. Rather than wait the mere two years to obtain the requisite college education, these Eagles were driven by a sense of duty to combat the enemy in the skies over Europe.

Additionally, many of the Eagles who fell into this insufficient education category were already college students at their time of volunteering. In other words, an Eagle like Douglas Booth, who had completed one year of college, simply had to wait one additional year to be able to fly for his own country.⁷⁸ Instead, Booth offered his services to the RAF. Likewise, John Brown had just completed his freshman year at Cole College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and obtained an excellent summer job as an inspector in a steel mill. Despite the benefits of his situation in November 1940, he volunteered for the RAF without even first pursuing the USAAF. He attributed his decision to sympathy for the British cause. He “didn’t like what was going on” in Europe and took matters into his own hands, rather than wait for the war to reach the United States.⁷⁹

Moreover, other Eagles even completed the two years of education—waiting, therefore, was not even required—but opted to join the RAF instead of the peacetime USAAF. Robert Priser, for example, had completed two years at the University of Arizona, but could not sit idly by with the USAAF as Europe descended into war.⁸⁰ He

⁷⁸ Douglas Booth, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 17, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

⁷⁹ John Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 2, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 19-20.

⁸⁰ Robert Priser, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 22, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

credited his decision to stopping the Luftwaffe. “It was about the Germans,” he declared.⁸¹ Ben Mays of No. 71 had even graduated from Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX, but decided to volunteer for the RAF instead of the USAAF because “he thought it would take too long to get accepted” by the latter.⁸²

A few Eagles were even in the USAAF and quit to pursue the opportunity for immediate combat with the RAF. Ervin Miller was stationed in Sacramento as a USAAF instructor pilot when he heard of the opportunity to join the RAF in October 1940. With the news of the Battle of Britain fresh in his mind, he opted to fly in combat, rather than peace time, even if that meant joining a foreign nation’s air force.⁸³ When Wendell Pendleton heard by “word-of-mouth grapevine” that the RAF was seeking combat pilots, “I talked to the right people and decided I would step out of the American uniform and join the British.”⁸⁴ In total, sixty-seven Eagles possessed at least some college education, yet did not apply for the USAAF.⁸⁵ This strongly indicates their ideological motivation, as they nearly, or in some cases actually, met USAAF entry requirements, but instead opted to fly for an air force at war.

These college-less and college-dropout Eagles could have omitted the story of the USAAF turning them down, perhaps stemming from a sense of embarrassment, but one

⁸¹ Priser, interview by Philip D. Caine, 3.

⁸² Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 272.

⁸³ Ervin Miller, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 30, 2000, in Santa Monica, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 4.

⁸⁴ Wendell Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” February 1941, SMS 729, Wendell Pendleton Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 16.

⁸⁵ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, bk.

must consider the fact that, upon American entry into the war, every Eagle who wanted to transfer into the USAAF, did so—regardless of prewar failed physicals or check rides. Therefore, every Eagle who wanted to serve their nation was eventually permitted to do so. With this fact in mind, there would be little reason for “embarrassed” Eagles to omit a prewar denial of USAAF service. Additionally, quotes from the Eagles themselves support the fact that their initial lack of USAAF service was primarily rooted in their unwillingness to wait two years and receive a college education. For example, Carroll McColpin remembered biased treatment from USAAF leaders shortly after the transfer, because he and his fellow Eagles had not passed through the same USAAF training pipeline. McColpin remarked that “in most cases,” this failure to receive the same USAAF training was due the fact that the Eagles “didn't have a college education.”⁸⁶

Within this context of German aircraft superiority, both on a macro and micro scale, as well as the ability for most USAAF turndowns to eventually become eligible, it is evident that the Eagles were primarily motivated to volunteer for the RAF by ideological reasons. While an Eagle with no college education and an Eagle with deficient vision were both denied by the USAAF, only the latter Eagle was truly prevented from serving in his nation's air force. For the former, a mere two-year stint in college would grant them eligibility in the USAAF, yet such Eagles chose to volunteer for the RAF instead. Only by differentiating these two sources of USAAF ineligibility can the Eagles' ideological initial motivation be revealed. A final factor of Caine's argument in *Eagles of the RAF* remains, however, that further obscured the ideological

⁸⁶ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 2.

motivation that drove the Eagles' decision to volunteer for the RAF: the presence of the proactive, large-scale recruiting organization known as the Clayton Knight Committee.

Conceived of by Canadian World War I fighter ace, Billy Bishop, but operated by his friend and aviation artist, Clayton Knight, the Clayton Knight Committee was an organization that aimed to tap into the American manpower pool to replenish the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and RAF's pilot supply in the wake of the Battle of Britain.⁸⁷ The Clayton Knight Committee represented a key component of Caine's argument, for he asserted that most Eagles volunteered for the RAF, not because of ideological principles, but because the committee proactively offered the American volunteers the quickest means of flying fighter aircraft by way of active recruitment.

In other words, the ideological implications of volunteering for the beleaguered RAF were irrelevant in the minds of most Eagles. Instead, Caine argued, service in the RAF was a mere coincidental outcome of the Clayton Knight Committee's active recruitment of prospective pilots. Its ability to quickly put volunteers in the cockpits of high-powered aircraft was the Clayton Knight Committee's primary appeal, not its ideological connection to the RAF, and since the majority of Eagles were recruited by the organization, it would reason that most Eagles lacked a significant degree of ideological initial motivation.

The statistics certainly seem to support Caine's argument, as he stated that 80 percent of Eagles entered RAF service via the supposedly ideologically-devoid Clayton Knight Committee.⁸⁸ But with regard to analysis of initial motivation, it is important to

⁸⁷ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 38.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

differentiate the ways by which so many Eagles became involved with the Clayton Knight Committee. In reality, many Eagles independently sought out service with the RAF, as they desired to assist England in its battle for survival, but were in turn directed to the Clayton Knight Committee, which finalized their volunteering process. As a result, their initial motivation rested within an ideological commitment to Great Britain, not within simply organizational recruitment, even though the committee ultimately facilitated their RAF enlistment.

Vivian Watkins of No. 121 was one such Eagle who initially sought out RAF service without Clayton Knight involvement but was ultimately directed to the recruiting organization. Having already made up his mind to join the RAF, Watkins wrote in his diary, “I inquired at the R.C.A.F. in Ottawa by mail, they in turn handed my name over to the Clayton Knight committee in Oakland, Calif., they in turn sending me an interview form to be filled out by myself.”⁸⁹ Though Watkins, on paper, was a Clayton Knight Committee recruit, it is evident that he was motivated by the ideological desire to fight in England’s war, rather than by the committee’s proactive recruitment process.

Many other Eagles fell into this category, further diminishing the significance of Caine’s 80 percent statistic. Wendell Pendleton and Joseph Durham of No. 71 and No. 121, respectively, wanted to specifically serve in the RAF, so they made direct contact with the Air Ministry in Canada. Before hearing back, however, a friend “gave us the low-down on how to get into the Royal Air Force. We were to contact the Clayton Knight

⁸⁹ Vivian Watkins, diary of Vivian Watkins, n.d., SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 1.

company in the Baker hotel, Dallas, Texas.”⁹⁰ As a result, these two Eagles fell into the 80 percent figure, despite the fact that they were not drawn to RAF service by the Clayton Knight Committee. In fact, the reality was just the opposite, as they were drawn to the Clayton Knight Committee by a desire for RAF service.

When this caveat is applied to Caine’s statistical analysis, along with updates to his original calculations, the percent of Eagles who directly volunteered via the Clayton Knight Committee wanes to 63 percent.⁹¹ Therefore, more than a third of Eagle Squadron volunteers joined the RAF on their own volition—without external assistance from a well-connected recruiting organization—which further demonstrated their ideological initial motivation. The primary non-Clayton Knight avenue to RAF service was volunteering through the RCAF. For Eagles such as Gilmore Daniel, Chesley Robertson, and Leon Blanding, this meant travelling to Canada to pledge their services to a foreign air force at war. Since such a journey was unprompted by a proactive recruiting agency, their decision underlined the tremendous magnitude of their ideological initial motivation. Moreover, another RCAF-direct Eagle, James Griffin, noted that so many Eagles joined the RCAF from Texas that it was often referred to as “the Royal Canadian Air Force of Texas.”⁹² It is especially notable that such a large number of Eagles would

⁹⁰ Wendell Pendleton, “I Flew with the Eagle Squadron,” n.d., SMS 729, Wendell Pendleton Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 1-2.

⁹¹ Following the 1991 publication of his *Eagles of the RAF*, Caine conducted additional research on the Eagle Squadrons for a compilation of biographical sketches of the pilots. The resulting work, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons* was therefore built upon additional evidence—such as new interviews and RAF records. From this additional research came a new figure for the number of Eagles who volunteered via the Clayton Knight Committee. Though not explicitly stated in the book, analysis of the biographies—which included the volunteer route of every pilot—yields the 63 percent figure, an apparent update of the original 80 percent figure of *Eagles of the RAF*.

⁹² Griffin, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine.

voluntarily travel to Canada from Texas—one of the US states farthest in distance from its northern border—without any assistance or guidance from a recruiting agency.

Additionally, many Eagles considered joining non-British foreign air forces, such as those of France, China, Spain, and even Finland. Since the common factor among all these non-British air forces was their state of war against a belligerent invader, the Eagles' desire to volunteer for them further demonstrated their ideological initial motivation. They could have joined any air force in the world, yet no Eagle considered joining one of a hostile nation. For example, Fonzo "Snuffy" Smith of No. 121 first tried to join the famous Flying Tigers, a group of American volunteers flying for the Chinese Air Force against the Japanese. He only reached out to the Clayton Knight Committee afterwards when he was placed on a "back log" for his first choice.⁹³ Reade Tilley said he first tried to join the Spanish Air Force in their civil war, hoping to side with the Loyalists against their Nazi-supported Republican foe, but "that didn't work out." He instead made his way to Canada and volunteered for the RCAF.⁹⁴ Carroll McColpin tried both Smith and Tilley's route, as he attempted to join the Flying Tigers and the Spanish Air Force, but ultimately decided against it in favor of RAF service.⁹⁵

Chesley Peterson—one of the rare Eagles who soldier of fortune, Colonel Charles Sweeny, recruited in mid-to-late 1940—volunteered under the assumption he would be

⁹³ Fonzo Smith, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 13, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 7.

⁹⁴ Reade Tilley, interview by unknown party on unknown date, in Maxwell Air Force Base, AL (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 1.

⁹⁵ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 1.

joining the French Air Force in a reincarnation of the famed Lafayette Escadrille of World War I. Peterson said that Sweeny “was trying to reconstitute the Lafayette Escadrille in France so hell we just all volunteered and said let's go.” His service for France did not materialize due to the nation’s surrender a few days before he crossed the Atlantic. As a result, the RAF became his next, and last, option.⁹⁶ For other Eagles, such as Eugene Tobin and Andrew Mamedoff, the RAF was actually their third choice. These two initially tried to join the Finnish Air Force, as it combatted Russian invasion, but their service was precluded with Finland’s surrender on March 12, 1940. Tobin and Mamedoff, with the assistance of Charles Sweeny, then tried to join France’s air force. Like with Chesley Peterson though, their hopes were dashed with yet another surrender in the face of foreign invasion. From there, the two future Eagles turned to the next European nation to face foreign invasion—Great Britain.⁹⁷

In conclusion, Caine’s utilization of the Clayton Knight Committee misrepresented the ideological initial motivation of the Eagles. Though the organization recruited the majority of Eagles, the percentage is greatly reduced when one accounts for the nuances of initial motivation—namely, that many Eagles were directed to the Clayton Knight Committee by alternate, and less proactive, recruiting sources. Additionally, more than a third of all Eagles—not an insignificant number—joined the RAF without depending upon a recruiting network. Instead, they proactively sought out RAF service, rather than letting RAF service seek them out. Furthermore, other Eagles were not initially drawn to RAF service, specifically, but rather to service in the air forces of other

⁹⁶ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 45.

⁹⁷ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 437-438.

beleaguered nations. Since the common factor of these non-British air forces was their active opposition to a hostile outside force, such a decision further supports the idea that the Eagles were ideologically motivated in their decision to volunteer in World War II.

Given the recognized superiority of German fighter aircraft; the ability, for most Eagles, to wait for USAAF service; and the pursuit of other avenues to combat flying, aside from the easily accessible Clayton Knight Committee; it becomes clear—albeit indirectly—that ideological motivation trumped a simple love of flying and desire to fly RAF fighters. Many Eagles, however, were more direct in their profession of ideological motivation. The desires to defend Great Britain, halt German aggression, and eventually serve the United States were often-cited sources of initial motivation.

For many Eagles, the straightforward defense of Great Britain was their rallying cry. Morris Fessler said he was very sympathetic to the British cause, especially after the miraculous evacuation at Dunkirk. At the time, he was training to become an airline pilot, but immediately volunteered for the RAF due to the “historical conditions occurring at the time France fell.”⁹⁸ Steve Pisanos of No. 71 felt that, on the whole, his training class was motivated by the idea of defending Great Britain. “I could see that we wanted to help the British because after all the British are our friends, they discovered this country and we need to help.”⁹⁹ George Sperry found his sympathy to the British cause deepened by RAF’s performance in the Battle of Britain. “I was very sympathetic to the British.

⁹⁸ Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine, 2.

⁹⁹ Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 33.

During the Battle of Britain it really got exciting. The Royal Air Force was outnumbered ten to one, whipping the hell out of the Luftwaffe.”¹⁰⁰

Harold Strickland noted in his memoirs that “England, fighting alone, was frequently on my mind and on the minds of many Americans....”¹⁰¹ These thoughts, greatly enhanced by the Battles of Dunkirk and Britain, along with Churchill’s famous “We shall never surrender” speech of June 4, 1940, inspired Strickland to volunteer his services to the RAF. In fact, Strickland believed that such ideological motivation was the common denominator among all Eagles, as he claimed that “however divergent our reasons for wearing the RAF uniform, every man in the three squadrons was ready and willing to fight the Luftwaffe.”¹⁰² Simply put, “the desire to aid Britain was strong” within the Eagle Squadrons.¹⁰³

On the other side of the same coin, many Eagles were motivated to serve by stopping a potential German takeover of Europe. Ross Scarborough thought that “what was happening in Europe was terrible.” In his opinion, “Hitler seemed like a mad man” who must be stopped.¹⁰⁴ Arthur Roscoe said that the desire to curtail German aggression transcended national lines within the RAF. “Everyone was there on a common cause, whether we're Americans or Poles or Czechs or Canadians or whatever, none of them

¹⁰⁰ George Sperry, interview by Philip D. Caine, September 11, 1987, in Pleasanton, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 11.

¹⁰¹ Harold Strickland, untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 670, Harold H. Strickland Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 14.

¹⁰² Strickland, untitled memoirs, 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Alida Adams, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 11, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 4.

wanted to see the spread of Fascism, Naziism.”¹⁰⁵ Chesley Peterson agreed that such a spread would poison Europe, as he declared that “ideologically I just knew that things were just wrong in Europe and would be certainly under a Nazi regime.”¹⁰⁶ Gus Daymond explained his initial motivation very simply, “I just wanted to fly and make a contribution to something that was going to beat up on that Nazi thing.”¹⁰⁷

Interestingly, some Eagles viewed their British service in terms of American service. That is to say some, like James Goodson, viewed their RAF service as a steppingstone to future USAAF service. For example, Goodson stated that he was motivated by the “conviction that the U.S. would eventually enter the war and RAF experience would give me an advantage.”¹⁰⁸ Walter Wicker felt that the war would soon involve the U.S., but since it remained “asleep,” he instead volunteered for the RAF. In England, he saw his combat experience as an advantage to eventually offer the U.S., once they “awakened.”¹⁰⁹ Fred Almos expressed similar sentiments toward his native country, as he said, “I felt at that particular time...that I knew that the United States should be

¹⁰⁵ Arthur Roscoe, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 27.

¹⁰⁶ Chesley Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, June 10, 1987 (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 16.

¹⁰⁷ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 11.

¹⁰⁸ James Goodson, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, August 18, 1987, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Wicker, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, October 3, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

doing something more than what they were doing.¹¹⁰ This belief that the United States would—and should—soon enter the war was widely-held in the Eagle Squadrons.

William Geiger spoke for himself and his fellow Eagles when he declared, “a lot of us felt pretty certain that the United States was going to come into the war and all of us felt equally certain that when it did all of us were going to end up in the Army Air Corps.”¹¹¹

The Eagles expressed this sense of American identity in other ways once established in Great Britain, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

As direct as many Eagles were in declaring their ideological initial motivation, there is evidence that a greater degree of such motivation bubbled beneath the surface. Chesley Peterson of No. 71 thought that his fellow Eagles were even more ideologically motivated than they professed to be. He believed that “deep down in these guys knew they were on the right side,” but did not readily profess such sentiments because they were either too timid or unable to articulate their thoughts. “Most of them weren’t very deep thinkers,” Peterson remarked, but even though “you still can’t get them to admit that they had any of these feeling on the war...I would still like to point out that none volunteered for the Luftwaffe.”¹¹²

As an Eagle Squadron commander, Peterson’s comments carry extra weight. One of Peterson’s central tasks, as a leader, was to have a pulse on his men’s morale and

¹¹⁰ Fred Almos, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 7.

¹¹¹ Bill Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 3, 1987, in Pasadena, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

¹¹² Peterson, interview by Philip Caine, 46–47; Chesley Peterson, monologue prepared for Philip D. Caine on unknown date, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

motivation; their hopes of survival in combat rested upon both remaining high and Peterson's leadership accomplishments certainly support the claim that he was proficient in such a task. Peterson was the first American to command an Eagle Squadron, his own No. 71.¹¹³ His fellow Eagles raved about his natural leadership, even at his young age. In fact, Peterson's promotion to No. 71 commander made him the youngest squadron commander in the entire RAF. Moreover, once he transferred to his native air force, he continued to rise through the ranks, eventually becoming the youngest full colonel in the USAAF.¹¹⁴ Given the widespread approval of his leadership abilities, it would be safe to assume that his comments on the Eagles' ideological motivation were sound.

Additionally, Peterson's comments aligned with historian Peter Kindsvatter's assertion on ideological motivation of American soldiers, as laid out in his book, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam*. In his analysis of American soldier motivation across four twentieth-century wars, Kindsvatter concluded that a sense of "latent ideology" was a powerful motivator. That is to say, American soldiers were strongly motivated by belief in cause and country, even if they did not readily profess such sentiments.

Kindsvatter supported his claim by using a quote from Ernie Pyle, the famous war correspondent. Though Pyle is noted for proclaiming the supposed lack of ideological motivation within American GIs in World War II—as he once said, "I believe our soldiers over here would have voted—if the question had been put—to go home

¹¹³ Johnson, *Yanks in the RAF*, 125.

¹¹⁴ "Major General Chesley G. Peterson," U.S. Air Force, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/105911/major-general-chesley-g-peterson/>.

immediately, even if it meant peace on terms of something less than unconditional surrender by the enemy.”—Kindsvatter showed how Pyle soon realized their latent ideology. “Sure,” Pyle added later, “they all still want to go home... . But there is something deeper than that... . I can’t quite put it into words—it isn’t any theatrical proclamation that the enemy must be destroyed in the name of freedom; it’s just a vague but growing individual acceptance of the bitter fact that we must win the war or else.”¹¹⁵

An example in which one can witness the latent ideology of Eagle Squadron pilots occurred within the questionnaires Philip Caine provided to surviving Eagles. One question asked, “what was envisioned service in the RAF would involve?” Few Eagles replied with “stopping Hitler,” or “saving the King,” but the majority included some reference to flying in combat. Though not a clear proclamation of ideological motivation, their clear desires to engage the enemy in combat operations is an unmistakable indication of their belief in Great Britain’s cause. Chesley Peterson, for example, said, “I certainly hoped that it would entail flying the best aircraft that they had as a front line pilot, a professional pilot and fighting the war.”¹¹⁶

Karl Kimbro said he hoped his RAF service would include “flying Spitfires on combat missions.”¹¹⁷ Bert Stewart did not mince his words, as he answered “Flying Spits. Fighting Germans.”¹¹⁸ Donald Young’s indirectly displayed his ideological motivation

¹¹⁵ Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 139.

¹¹⁶ Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, 16.

¹¹⁷ Kimbro, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine.

¹¹⁸ Bert Stewart, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, May 27, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

when he replied, “I knew the RAF wanted me strictly for combat duty against the Germans and I was well aware of the high risk involved.”¹¹⁹ When compared to the minority of Eagles—like Alfred Hopson, who answered, “first, I thought it was a ferry job...just before we went overseas I found out I was to be a fighter pilot”—it is clear that the combat-oriented responses from most Eagles reflect their sense of ideological initial motivation.¹²⁰

In conclusion, it is evident that the pilots of the RAF Eagle Squadrons were initially motivated by ideological principles, such as defense of Great Britain, rather than pragmatic factors, such as the desire to fly the best aircraft of the time. When contextualized by the widespread recognition of German fighter superiority, on a large and small scale, by the differentiation of sources of USAAF ineligibility, and by the pursuit of many avenues of foreign military service, pragmatic and nonideological explanations of the Eagles’ initial motivation—as offered, most notably, by Philip Caine—appear unsound. Instead, such contextualization reveals the strength of the Eagles’ ideological motivation behind their decision to volunteer for the RAF.

On the macro level of German fighter superiority, Charles Lindbergh’s words and the discourse surrounding the Battle of Britain made it clear that Great Britain did not possess the greatest air force of the time. Given the Eagles’ widespread love of flying, as evidenced by their immense flying experience, they certainly were not oblivious to these

¹¹⁹ Donald Young, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, August 10, 1987, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹²⁰ Alfred Hopson, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, August 17, 1987, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

events. Lindbergh credibly testified to the qualitative and quantitative advantages that the Luftwaffe held over the RAF, yet no Eagles considered joining the German air force that their aviation hero so strongly endorsed. The depiction of the Battle of Britain as England's "darkest hour" gave no impression of outsized RAF superiority, but rather the opposite, as Britain's air force, in truth, was nearly defeated in the battle. Despite these very visible disadvantages that would be brought about by volunteering for the RAF, these American volunteers enlisted in the RAF all the same, driven by an ideological desire to save one of Europe's last unconquered democracies.

On the micro level of German fighter superiority, the direct comparison of Luftwaffe and RAF fighter aircraft—the main driver behind the Eagles' decision to serve in the RAF, Caine argued—revealed that the Me 109 and Fw 190 routinely surpassed the Hurricane and Spitfire in combat capability and performance. Even in the eyes of the Eagles themselves, the engineering game of cat-and-mouse favored German fighter aircraft over those of Great Britain—both in the long-term and in its initial stages. This latter point is especially relevant in the discussion of initial motivation, as the early competition between Luftwaffe and RAF fighters was what informed the Eagles' decisions to volunteer. Since many recognized the superiority of German fighters in this early time period, it is clear that a desire to fly the best aircraft of their time was not what pushed the Eagles to RAF service. Instead, an ideological desire to join Great Britain in its battle against Nazi aggression motivated the Eagles to volunteer for the RAF.

By differentiating the sources of the Eagles' USAAF ineligibility, it becomes clear that they could not wait to participate in this ideological battle. Though Caine argued that "almost all of them were either ineligible for entry into the US military pilot

training program or had entered it and been eliminated,” such an assertion belied the nuances of their ideological initial motivation.¹²¹ For one, most Eagles declared “ineligible for entry” into the USAAF simply lacked the two-year college requirement. Rather than obtain the necessary education, these Eagles enlisted in the RAF, thereby demonstrating their impatient desire to combat the superior Luftwaffe. Secondly, the vast majority of USAAF-ineligible Eagles were those without the requisite college education, rather than those who failed a physical or check ride—two circumstances that truly eliminated one from USAAF service. Some Eagles even had a year of college in their possession—or met the two-year requirement—and still chose to fly for the RAF, rather than the peacetime USAAF. Such a decision further supported the ideological basis of the Eagles’ initial motivation.

The Eagles’ pursuit of many avenues of military service also weakens pragmatic arguments for their initial motivation. A significant number of Eagles were not drawn to RAF service by the proactively recruiting Clayton Knight Committee, but rather to the Clayton Knight Committee by RAF service. The fact that many Eagles—far more than Caine calculated—first pursued RAF service without external assistance, such as volunteering through the RCAF, it becomes clear that the RAF’s ideological contest with the Luftwaffe was the motivating factor for the Eagles to volunteer, not a simple ease of access to fighter aircraft. Moreover, other Eagles even pursued service in the air forces of other nations, such as France, Spain, China, and Finland. What these countries had in common was their battle against hostile invaders, which further indicated the Eagle’s ideological initial motivation.

¹²¹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 330.

Lastly, many Eagles readily professed their ideological initial motivation. Driven by a desire to defend England, battle Germany, and even (eventually) serve the United States, many Eagles volunteered for the RAF. As significant as this is, there is further evidence that greater ideological motivation was hidden beneath the surface. The unquestioned leader of the Eagle Squadrons, Chesley Peterson, believed that a sense of latent ideological motivation drove the Eagles to join the RAF—an idea supported by historian Peter Kindsvatter. The Eagles’ overwhelming desire to engage the enemy in combat operations—an indirect proclamation of ideological principles—certainly suggested that such latent ideological motivation existed in the Eagle Squadrons. In fact, once in England, this zealous yearning for combat fully materialized as the Eagles found themselves in the thick of the war. This ideological desire comprised the core of the next section of their motivation—sustaining motivation.

CHAPTER III – “LET US TO THE BATTLE”: SUSTAINING MOTIVATION

As the volunteers for the Eagle Squadrons crossed the Atlantic and joined the Royal Air Force (RAF), they not only entered a new world, but also a new realm of motivation. Whereas their initial motivation concerned the factors that persuaded them to enlist, their sustaining motivation was defined by the factors that drove them to remain in RAF service and choose to fight its battles. In this second tier of soldier motivation, the Eagle Squadrons displayed a similar belief in ideological principles—perhaps to an even greater degree than in their decision to volunteer for the RAF.

In fact, the overall strength of the Eagles’ sustaining motivation was particularly strong when one considers their status as foreign volunteers. To avoid stripping the Eagles of their US citizenship, RAF officials did not make the American pilots pledge allegiance to the king. As a result, there was a widespread acknowledgement that RAF service was not binding, as many Eagles noted the ability to quit. The fact that very few took advantage of such an opportunity, however, evidenced the profound strength of the Eagles’ sustaining motivation.

The basis of this strength lay in the Eagles’ continued pursuit of ideological principles, as demonstrated in their pronounced desire for combat. As the most direct, actionable means by which they could achieve the ideological principles that initially motivated them—namely, defending Great Britain from German aggression—combat flying became the core of the Eagles’ sustaining motivation. They expressed their eagerness for such flying in a variety of ways, like with direct pleas for combat, avoidance of and displeasure with noncombat missions, requests for transfers to more

active combat zones, perception of their friends' deaths as hindrances to the mission, and, in qualitative terms, their total combat hours and missions.

Their adherence to ideological principles while in England was further demonstrated by the quick adoption of such ideals from the few Eagles who did not cite them in their decisions to volunteer. Lastly, many Eagles expressed their ideological sustaining motivation, not in terms of RAF service, but of future United States Army Air Force (USAAF) service. By choosing to be in an Eagle Squadron, as opposed to an ordinary RAF squadron, and expressing an eagerness for a transfer to the USAAF, many Eagles displayed their American patriotism while in British service. Regardless of national identity, however, the common factor of the Eagles' sustaining motivation was its ideological basis of protecting Great Britain and defeating Germany.

Given the foreign-national composition of the Eagle Squadrons, the RAF was keen to avoid jeopardizing the Americans' citizenship. Gus Daymond of No. 71 remembered that "the British were very careful about that because the United States Embassy had warned us that if you sign allegiance to the King you would lose your citizenship. The RAF said that all you had to do was obey your superior officers. Don't sign anything just obey them."¹ This resulting workaround removed an important piece of sustaining motivation—obedience to the head of state.

As Daymond recounted, when soldiers enlist in a military, they take a pledge of allegiance to defend their state—whether it be to the Constitution, a king, or a dictator. This pledge forms the basis of the entire military system of discipline and order, as the

¹ Gregory Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine on July 2, 1994, in Newport Beach, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 36.

nation's leader rests upon the top of their soldiers' chain of command. Therefore, obedience to the head of state comprises an essential source of sustaining motivation—albeit in an extrinsic, even coercive, form. In fact, this motive can easily turn downright sinister; but, as historian Omer Bartov argued, it is no less effective in such a case.

In his work, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, Bartov argued that the German Army in World War II displayed a powerful degree of sustaining motivation due to an unquestioned and total obedience to Hitler and his mandates. Reinforced with constant propaganda and years of Nazi indoctrination, the Wehrmacht remained a combat-capable force for the duration of hostilities. For six long years, German soldiers suffered from “tremendous losses in the fighting, the lack of replacements, and the rapid manpower turnover among combat units,” yet they continued to fight with “extraordinary resilience.”² Underpinned by draconian discipline, their belief in Hitler's ideology and German cause motivated Wehrmacht soldiers to remain in service even after “most infantry formations had lost half of their personnel” by November 1941.³

While the Wehrmacht relied on obedience to the head of state to keep its soldiers in service, such a motive was absent in the Eagle Squadrons. Despite this, the Eagles displayed a tremendous degree of sustaining motivation. Evidencing this powerful motivation was their ability to quit, yet most did not. Numerous Eagles mentioned that a handful of their comrades quit while on active service with the RAF. William Dunn noted

² Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5, vii.

³ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 36.

that “there were several who returned home as they marked their papers. They didn't like the idea of a war after they got in it.”⁴ Carroll McColpin said some Eagles “just said to hell with it. This isn't what I thought it was going to be and sent them home.”⁵

Most Eagles said the quitters were unable to stomach the reality of combat. Chesley Peterson, describing the average quitter, said, “a guy would get shot up pretty badly and then he would say, ‘This is the end. Let’s try and find something else.’”⁶ Morris Fessler was gentler in his description of discharged Eagles: “They just hadn’t thought things out.”⁷ Though there was a clear ability to quit RAF service, the Eagles were sure to point out that few did so, thus indicating the strength of their sustaining motivation. Peterson said that “not very many of them” quit; “I can only remember one or two.”⁸ Wilson Edwards mentioned that there were only “a few” that quit.⁹ Carroll McColpin said that he could only remember “four or five” comrades.¹⁰ Don Nee

⁴ William Dunn, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 26, 1990, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

⁵ Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, in Novato, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 22.

⁶ Chesley Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 14, 1987, in Ogden, UT (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 58.

⁷ Morris Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 9.

⁸ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 58.

⁹ Wilson Edwards, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 16, 1987, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

¹⁰ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 22.

remembered just one, Bill Hunt, who had not shirked his duty, but instead decided to fly for the US Navy.¹¹

Given the strength of the Eagles' sustaining motivation, it is no surprise that the same principles that comprised their initial motivation—ideological factors like the defense of Great Britain against German aggression—were carried over in their sustained RAF service. While in Great Britain, such principles became even more apparent because, as trained fighter pilots, the Eagles had an actionable means by which they could attain such ideological principles—flying in combat operations. After all, only by engaging the enemy in battle could the Eagles truly “defend Great Britain.” If the Eagles were only motivated by a love of flying and cared little for such ideological principles, as past historians like Philip Caine have argued, it would reason that they would seek out relatively safe assignments. For example, by flying as an instructor or on convoy patrol, Eagle Squadron pilots would still be flying Spitfires and Hurricanes, but with minimal risk of bodily harm or death.

Analysis of the Eagles' motivation while in England, however, suggests the exact opposite. In fact, most Eagles eagerly sought combat, while deliberately eschewing “safe” and “boring” missions—like instructor or convoy duty. Furthermore, many Eagles even requested transfers to the most active combat zones, such as Great Britain's 11 Group and Malta. Additionally, other Eagles went as far as to view the death of their comrades, not as an unfortunate tragedy, but as a hindrance to the mission. Of the handful of Eagles who expressed little ideological initial motivation, many of them came to adopt

¹¹ Donald Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 15, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 5.

such principles into their sustaining motivation. Lastly, the Eagles' zeal for combat was quantified in the extraordinary number of combat missions and hours they amassed during World War II, which far exceeded the average for American fighter pilots. In all, such eagerness for combat reflected the depth of the Eagles' ideological sustaining motivation.

Once in England, the Eagles quickly expressed their desire for combat. No. 133 even chose "Let us to the battle" as its official motto the very day RAF Fighter Command established the squadron on August 1, 1941.¹² Unfortunately for its initial cadre, No. 133 did not immediately experience combat, a fact that dissuaded some from joining the squadron. For example, LeRoy Gover declined an assignment to the Eagle Squadrons because "the Eagles weren't doing a hell of a lot, truthfully, at that time. They were just piddling around, training and so forth. So I went to a British squadron, 66 Squadron."¹³ There, Gover remained for several months because "I liked this outfit I was in. God, we were getting a lot of combat. I was eager as hell and wanted to get in all these missions and things, going out and shooting up boats and stuff. I enjoyed all that."¹⁴

Gene Fetrow seconded Gover's desire for combat. He was even content with his minimal flight training because "I was anxious to get into the scraps."¹⁵ Marion Jackson had a similar outlook on prioritizing flying in combat over training. "We did think that

¹² Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 188.

¹³ LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, in Palo Alto, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 18.

¹⁴ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 19.

¹⁵ Gene Fetrow, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

we were ready,” Jackson said, “Get us in combat, we’re ready. Give us the Spitfire.”¹⁶

Robert Pewitt excitedly wrote his mother as he finished training and neared combat-ready

status. “I will probably start actual operations in about two or three weeks,” he stated,

“and I am really looking forward to it. I really want to get a crack at those Heinies.”¹⁷

Roy Evans of No. 121 could barely contain his excitement before his first combat sortie.

“I was just tickled pink,” Evans said, “when I knew I was going on my first mission and every mission after that. I was just elated over it because I had finally arrived at the point which I was seeking. That was the job I went over to do and now I was there to do the best that I could with it.”¹⁸

Evans was so eager for combat that he would frequently volunteer for one of the more dangerous sorties of the time—low-level strafing missions—often times by himself. These solo combat missions became so frequent that Evans said his commanders eventually ordered him to fly in a group. “You have to take somebody with you,” Evans was told, “if you go down maybe this fellow can tell what happened so we have it in our record, otherwise you just disappear and nobody knows anything about you.”¹⁹ Such zeal for low-level strafing missions apparently transcended Eagle Squadron boundaries, as

¹⁶ Marion Jackson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, in Aptos, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 20.

¹⁷ Robert Pewitt, letter to “Junior,” August 7, 1941, Private collections of Pam Chatagnier, Goldsboro, NC.

¹⁸ Roy Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 13, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

¹⁹ Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine, 20.

No. 133's George Sperry noted that his squadron was banned from such missions, as they too frequently "engaged in unauthorized attacks on ground targets."²⁰

Aside from No. 133's squadron-wide ban on strafing missions, there is further evidence that such a fervor for combat did not just occur on an individual basis but permeated through each of the three Eagle Squadrons. James Goodson asserted that Gordon Brettell, a British officer, was given command of No. 133 on the basis that his own desire for combat would mesh well with that of his pilots. "Well here's the Englishman that would fit in with the Americans," Goodson explained, "They want action, he wants action"²¹ Don Nee claimed that the desire for combat was nearly universal. "At the time in the RAF," Nee said, "I think we were all eager. I think everybody wanted to go. It didn't make any difference what kind of a mission it was you just wanted to go."²²

Hugh Kennard, the British commander of No. 121, said that the Americans in his squadron were so eager for combat that they would try to fly on scheduled off days. "I mean it used to infuriate me," Kennard complained, "because I'd like a day off you know, but no you can't have a day off. They wanted to go and do something. So we used to go to, when we'd get permission, go to off the coast of Holland...and shoot up, I think they were armed trollers"²³ The Eagles' pleas for combat were sufficiently widespread that

²⁰ George Sperry, monologue prepared for Vern Haugland on August 21, 1980 (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 44.

²¹ James Goodson, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 23, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 33.

²² Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine, 36.

²³ Hugh Kennard, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 24, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 10.

even the chief of RAF Fighter Command, Air Marshal Sir William Sholto Douglas, was aware of them. Marion Jackson remembered Douglas visiting his squadron and informing everyone “since you are complaining [of] the little combat, we’ll see that you get combat.”²⁴ Douglas was true to his word, as Jackson confirmed that “they shipped us out of there right away. We went to Kirton-in-Lindsey up in the Midlands and within two weeks we had Spitfires, Mark I Spitfires.”²⁵

When sorties failed to produce opportunities for combat, the Eagles loudly voiced their displeasure. Michael Miluck was a member of No. 71 but requested a transfer during the winter of 1941-1942 that greatly precluded combat operations.²⁶ The RAF, in turn, sent him to Egypt to combat General Erwin Rommel’s fearsome Afrika Korps. When the tide of the campaign shifted to the Allies favor, Miluck was disappointed by the lack of combat that resulted from Germany’s retreat and poor weather. “The bastards have done it again. They just won’t fight,” he complained, “Can’t even strafe the galloping Hun because of the weather and probably won’t catch up with him again for a long time.”²⁷

Harold Strickland was similarly frustrated with a lack of combat opportunities. A frequent complaint in his memoirs was his poor luck in finding enemy aircraft on combat

²⁴ Jackson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 297.

²⁷ Michael Miluck, diary of Michael Miluck, October 1, 1942, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 30.

missions, relative to his comrades in No. 71. “It seemed that when I was on any kind of operational mission,” he wrote, “enemy aircraft could not be engaged or did not appear. When I wasn’t on a mission, engagements or dogfights occurred, or all Hell broke loose.”²⁸ He continued, “after 16 missions and only one dogfight I began to wonder where the hell were the 109’s.”²⁹ Strickland was so frustrated with the lack of combat that he blindly volunteered for an unknown assignment, solely on the promise of increased aerial action. No. 71’s commander, Chesley Peterson, withheld details of the mysterious assignment, only asking Strickland if he “wished to volunteer for an overseas assignment with the squadron where there would be some action.” Upon hearing this promise for combat, Strickland “volunteered immediately,” and he added that “most of the other 71 pilots” followed suit, thus demonstrating the widespread desire for combat within the squadron.³⁰

To the Eagles, the only mission more frustrating than an unfulfilled combat sortie was one that had little promise for combat at all. These missions, such as convoy patrol and instructor duty, were widely resented and considered “boring” by the Eagles. As Ernest Beatie of No. 121 explained, “We’d fly out these convoys going up and down the English Channel. And it was boring, my God was it boring.”³¹ Michael Miluck described convoy patrols as “detestable” in his diary and upon hearing a rumor that his squadron

²⁸ Harold Strickland, untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 670, Harold H. Strickland Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 21.

²⁹ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 21.

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ Ernest Beatie, monologue prepared for Philip D. Caine on unknown date, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

was to “spend the next ten days” flying such missions, hoped it was “merely talk.”³²

Nicholas Sintetos of No. 133, while stationed in Scotland, even questioned his decision to initially volunteer due to the scarcity of combat at his remote base. He wrote in his memoirs, “I wondered what I had gotten into. This was not Eleven Group...where I would have plenty of action...but here, with boring convoy patrols!”³³

Sintetos’ No. 133 comrade, George Sperry, offered a similar appraisal of their convoy-ridden Scotland assignment. “We flew Hurricanes on long cold uneventful patrols over the North Atlantic, and grew resentful of this type of duty. In between patrols we flew our beat up old Spitfires and dreamed of future action.”³⁴ The Eagles were so keen on combat flying that boring assignments, like convoy duty, were often used as a form of punishment. For example, No. 133’s Don Blakeslee, one of the Eagle Squadrons’ more maverick personalities, was caught entertaining two Women’s Auxiliary Air Force personnel one night, so his RAF superiors sent him to Wick, Scotland. Far removed from mainland Europe, and thus the most active combat areas, Blakeslee was ordered to fly target drones “back and forth for a couple of weeks as punishment.”³⁵

Another mission the Eagles considered to be boring was that of instructor duty. Entirely removed from combat—and, therefore, the opportunity to pursue the Eagles’

³² Miluck, diary of Michael Miluck, 22.

³³ Nicholas Sintetos, “Getting to the Eagle Squadron the Long Way,” n.d., SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 2.

³⁴ George Sperry, typed untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 24.

³⁵ LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 25, 1993, in San Carlos, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 26.

ideological principles—instructor duty was actively avoided by most Eagles. Marion Jackson turned down an opportunity for an instructor assignment because “I signed up for the RAF and that’s what I wanted.”³⁶ After making the trek from Washington D.C. to Canada to volunteer for the RAF, George Maxwell declined the official’s offer after they informed him that he would be an instructor. He only returned to pledge his services when he learned he would train to be a combat pilot.³⁷

Dominic Gentile was so frustrated after being initially assigned as an instructor pilot that he made a deliberate low pass over his base’s control tower, knowing that such a prohibited act would result in a court martial. Since he had a stellar flying record, he reasoned that his punishment would be a transfer to a different unit, rather than a return to the United States. Fortunately for him, his logic proved sound, as the RAF transferred him to No. 133 which brought with it the increased likelihood of combat.³⁸ Arthur Roscoe noted that he was glad he did not volunteer through the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), because he had heard that those who did were often assigned to instructor duty, or as Roscoe delicately put it, were “stuck” in Canada.³⁹

Bert Stewart of No. 71 was one such pilot who was nearly “stuck” with instructor duty in Canada. Instead, the combat-motivated volunteer did everything in his power to avoid the assignment, even going so far as to stowing himself away on the next ship

³⁶ Jackson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 8.

³⁷ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 270.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁹ Arthur Roscoe, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 6.

bound to England.⁴⁰ Despite being declared away without leave—a severely punishable offense—Stewart exclaimed, “I didn’t want to be an instructor that wasn’t why I went up there in the first place. I wanted to get in the Spits or Hurricanes, or some damn thing that would fly.”⁴¹ Fortunately for him, the RCAF declined to punish the American volunteer.

Carroll McColpin told his superiors that if he was not assigned to an operational fighter squadron, he would have preferred to “be sent home pronto.”⁴² LeRoy Gover declined instructor duty, even when it was accompanied by a promotion to captain. The assignment “sounded O.K.,” he wrote to his parents, “until I realized I would be off of operations and no more fighting.”⁴³ The ability to directly pursue ideological goals by way of combat operations was more important to Gover than an increase in pay and responsibility. “I’d rather be a captain of a fighter squadron than a general in a soft job,” he declared.⁴⁴

The Eagles’ avoidance of and displeasure with noncombat missions especially undermines the notion that their initial motivation was primarily based on flying Spitfires and Hurricanes. If that were the case, it would reason that the Eagles would widely desire “boring” missions, such as convoy and instructor duty, because they would provide the

⁴⁰ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 417.

⁴¹ Bert Stewart, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3.

⁴² Carroll McColpin, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 20, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

⁴³ LeRoy Gover, letter to Roy Gover, December 4, 1942, RAF Eagle Squadrons Collections, SMS 803, LeRoy Gover Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

⁴⁴ Gover, letter to Roy Gover.

same opportunity to fly Spitfires and Hurricanes, but without the inherent dangers of flying in combat. In fact, convoy and instructor duty would have granted the Eagles even more time in Spitfires and Hurricanes. Combat flying, in comparison, is characterized by high speeds, fast turns, and evasive maneuvers—all of which burn fuel at a higher rate than straight-and-level flying. As a result, combat sorties were typically shorter than convoy sorties, which consisted of flying at moderate speeds, and therefore, permitted longer, more fuel-efficient flights. Furthermore, many combat sorties were classified as scrambles, or last-minute attempts to intercept invading German aircraft. Often times, the Eagles were unable to make the intercept in time, resulting in a short flight.

The logbook of No. 121's Douglas Booth evidenced the disparity in flight hours between convoy and combat sorties. Beginning with his posting to No. 121 on August 25, 1941, continuing through his service in Malta, and then ending with his transfer to the USAAF, Booth flew a combined seventy-four convoy patrol and combat sorties. The average duration of his convoy patrols was 1 hour and 34 minutes, whereas the average duration of his combat sorties was just 1 hour and 6 minutes.⁴⁵ Given that convoy patrol offered Eagle Squadron pilots 50 percent more flying time, with significantly less risk to their lives, one would reason that they would prefer such missions—especially if one believes they were primarily motivated by a love of flying. In reality, however, the Eagles despised such missions, instead opting to risk their lives in the pursuit of ideological principles by engaging the enemy in combat. Their commitment to such

⁴⁵ Douglas Booth, pilot logbook, July 17, 1941, MS 34, Douglas E. Booth Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

principles was evident not only in their avoidance of noncombat flying, but also in their requests for transfers to more active combat zones when their units hit lulls in operations.

Arthur Donahue was one such Eagle who requested a transfer when combat became scarce. An early member of No. 71, joining the squadron in September 1940, Donahue's early admittance came as a result of his pre-existing RAF service. He was so eager to "fight Nazis over Europe" that he volunteered for the RAF before the Eagle Squadrons even existed—making sure to tell the RAF that "enlisted on the condition he would be a fighter pilot."⁴⁶ As a result, Donahue had weeks of combat experience before becoming an Eagle. Given that the No. 71 was in its nascent stage when he joined, the squadron was not quite ready for combat operations. This was unacceptable to the ideologically-motivated Donahue, however, so he almost immediately put in for a transfer to "a more active unit."⁴⁷ He was sent to Singapore, where he served honorably, before returning to England and tragically losing his life in 1942.⁴⁸

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, many Eagle Squadron pilots requested a transfer to the Pacific, hoping to combat the Japanese. This patriotic fervor was evidently widespread in No. 121, as Gene Fetrow noted that "all the guys" in his squadron wanted to be transferred to "Japan or to the East."⁴⁹ But, in a reaction that perhaps suggests the primacy of combat flying over patriotism—in the realm of sustaining motivation—the

⁴⁶ Arthur Donahue, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, December 19, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

⁴⁷ Donahue, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine.

⁴⁸ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 73.

⁴⁹ Fetrow, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, 3.

concerns of Fetrow and his comrades were only eased when they were promised “to get plenty of action here.”⁵⁰

While No. 121, having been declared operational just seven months ago, needed promises of combat in December 1941, the older No. 71 had been regularly flying combat sorties in 11 Group—the sector tasked with the defense of southeast Britain. As this area was the nearest to mainland Europe—and, not to mention, contained London—11 Group was the most active combat zone in the RAF. In accordance with RAF policy that intended to mitigate aircrew combat fatigue, Fighter Command ordered No. 71 to transfer to the quieter 12 Group in late 1941. Despite having already exceeded the maximum six-month period in combat, the pilots of No. 71 refused. Acting upon the wishes of his men, Chesley Peterson—now commanding the squadron—personally appealed to 11 Group’s commander, Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, to continue fighting in Great Britain’s most vital sector. Unfortunately for the Eagles, Leigh-Mallory “was absolutely adamant and he wouldn’t do it.”⁵¹

Further underscoring the depth of their ideological sustaining motivation, Peterson did not take no for an answer. In a flagrant breach of basic military customs and courtesies, Peterson skipped the chain of command and “went over to Fighter Command and asked to see Sholto,” referring to Air Marshal William Sholto Douglas, commander of all RAF Fighter Command.⁵² There, Peterson pleaded to one of the RAF’s highest-

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14–15.

⁵² Ibid., 15.

ranking officers that “these were American pilots that had come over here to fight and they wanted to stay in the fighting area.”⁵³ Surprisingly, Douglas permitted No. 71 to remain in 11 Group, where the ideological Eagles were able to continue their desired combat operations.

For some Eagles, not even the defense of Great Britain offered them the combat operations they desired. After all, in the period between the Battle of Britain and Operation Overlord, Germany was on the defensive in Western Europe. Having given up hope of invading Great Britain, Hitler’s forces directed the bulk of their attention eastward, toward the Russian threat. But while Me 109s dueled Spitfires over the English Channel and while German infantrymen fought through the streets of Stalingrad, an equally fierce war was being waged on a small island in the Mediterranean—Malta.

With its centrally-located position in the Mediterranean, the island of Malta was one of the most important strategic points in Europe. Its aircraft were in range of “every theatre of war in the Mediterranean,” thus granting the British a base from which vital supply, interdiction, and reconnaissance missions could be operated.⁵⁴ From an interdiction standpoint, Malta-based aircraft wreaked havoc on Axis shipping, which was direly needed for their North African campaigns. From May to November 1941, RAF Swordfish torpedo bombers flown from Malta destroyed 110,000 tons of enemy shipping, on top of a further 130,000 tons damaged.⁵⁵ Royal Navy submarines joined in the damage

⁵³ Chesley Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine on June 10, 1987, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 6.

⁵⁴ Air Ministry, *The Air Battle of Malta: The Official Account of the R.A.F. in Malta, June 1940 to November 1942* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1944), 7.

⁵⁵ Air Ministry, *The Air Battle of Malta*, 39.

inflicted to the Axis supply campaign. Due to their operations, Axis “supplies to Libya wilted and for a time virtually ceased.”⁵⁶ The Italian Navy was even forced to utilize “almost their entire battle fleet to escort one important convoy across” the Mediterranean.⁵⁷

Within the realm of reconnaissance as well, Malta offered Great Britain an immense strategic advantage. Malta-based aircraft were capable of reconnoitering enemy forces in “Italy, Sicily, North Africa and the Greek Archipelago,” which was especially valuable when the focus of the Allied war was in those exact areas, as was the case before Operation Overlord.⁵⁸ In fact, tactical reconnaissance for the Allied campaign in North Africa was solely supplied by Malta-based aircraft. Since the island was the only Allied base from which such reconnaissance and interdiction raids could be flown, Malta’s strategic impact upon World War II was immense. In fact, the RAF’s official account on the Battle of Malta, *The Air Battle of Malta*, argued that had it not been for the British colony, “Rommel in 1942 might well have pressed on to Alexandria.”⁵⁹

Given the strategic value of Malta to the Allies, the Axis powers devoted considerable time and energy towards neutralizing the Mediterranean island. Beginning on January 16, 1941, Italian and German forces battered Malta almost continuously until Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was ejected from El Alamein in November 1942.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

According to the RAF, over 14,000 tons of bombs were dropped in that time frame.⁶⁰ In fact, Malta was bombarded so heavily that King George VI awarded the entire island the George Cross—the civilian equivalent to the Victoria Cross, the nation’s highest military award for gallantry in battle.⁶¹ In April 1942 alone, the peak of German bombardment, the Luftwaffe flew as many as four hundred sorties a day en route to dropping 6,278 tons of bombs in total.⁶²

Further evidencing the Eagles’ desire for combat, it was at this peak of April 1942 when many of the Malta transfers arrived on the island. The Eagles immediately noticed the rapid pace of operations. After taking off from the deck of the USS *Wasp* and landing on the besieged island, Reade Tilley and Douglas Booth were greeted by 306 Luftwaffe bombers, which quickly rendered their Spitfires unserviceable.⁶³ A British pilot, attempting to describe the “tempo of life” in Malta, encapsulated the reason so many Eagles transferred to the strategic stronghold of the Mediterranean. “One lives here only to destroy the Hun and hold him at bay,” the pilot remarked, “everything else, living conditions, sleep, food, and all the ordinary standards of life have gone by the board. It all makes the Battle of Britain and fighter sweeps seem like child’s play in comparison but it is certainly history in the making, and nowhere is there aerial warfare to compare with this.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁶¹ Ibid., 61.

⁶² Ibid., 40.

⁶³ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 67.

This pilot's description of Malta captured the essence of the Eagles' sustaining motivation. They were driven to remain in RAF service by the opportunity to combat Great Britain's enemies in the air—the greater the significance to the war effort, the greater their motivation. Within this context, the fourteen Eagles who requested transfers to Malta did not do so accidentally. In fact, the Eagle Squadrons had a widespread understanding of Malta's strategic significance and concomitant high operations tempo. Leo Nomis declared that “if you wanted some action, you'd just go to Malta. You didn't have to do anything except go there.”⁶⁵ Jackson Mahon of No. 121 likened operations in Malta to those of the Battle of Britain. He credited such constant combat as the reason that “quite a number of our squadron signed up to go down there.”⁶⁶ Arthur Roscoe understood how Malta's strategic implications led to intense combat. Since “everything in between, on both sides, was all Axis controlled,” Roscoe explained, any Allied force “that came into the Mediterranean was automatically under attack.”⁶⁷ Such constant pressure exerted upon the RAF made for high casualties. Roscoe heard that “three months was the average life span of a fighter pilot” in Malta, but he requested the assignment all the same.⁶⁸

For the Eagles who volunteered to serve in Malta, their decisions were centered on the desire for combat. “I was anxious to get more action,” Reade Tilley of No. 121

⁶⁵ Leo Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine on August 31, 1987, in Sherman Oaks, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 27.

⁶⁶ Jackson “Barry” Mahon, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 5.

⁶⁷ Roscoe, interview by Philip D. Caine, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

said, “and Malta was where it was. I volunteered and so did my buddy, Tiger Booth.”⁶⁹ In England, Tilley was frustrated with the combat formation employed by the RAF, called the line astern. Consisting of four aircraft aligned single-file along their longitudinal axes, the line astern was a “strictly defensive formation,” Tilley argued.⁷⁰ “You were so busy trying not to run into the guy ahead of you,” he explained, “that you didn’t have much time to look around for the enemy.”⁷¹ The resulting lack of combat, combined with the stories of hundreds of German aircraft taking to the skies over Malta, was enough to convince Tilley to transfer.

Leo Nomis requested a transfer during a lull in No. 71’s combat operations. His squadron was stood down in preparation for a transfer to Russia—the mysterious assignment for which his squadron-mate, Harold Strickland, volunteered—but when a German U-boat sunk the ship carrying their Spitfires, the RAF cancelled the assignment and No. 71 was left without any aircraft.⁷² Despite this lull occurring in summer 1942—just before the USAAF arrived in Europe, which almost assuredly promised continued combat in the near future—Nomis requested a transfer so that he could resume combat operations. Harold Strickland said his friend, Arthur Roscoe, volunteered for Malta because he was “keenly disappointed by the absence of 109’s” and was unmistakably aware that such enemy aircraft were plentiful in Malta.⁷³ George Sperry offered similar

⁶⁹ Reade Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine on unknown date, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 37.

⁷⁰ Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 20.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine, 25.

⁷³ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 22.

insight into the motivation of his Malta-bound friends, as he noted that “Fred Scuddy and Putnam requested transfers to Malta—where the action was centered, and received their posting within a few days.”⁷⁴

Once in Malta, these Eagles personally attested to the frenetic pace of operations on the island. Arthur Roscoe said that, in response to the German bombers that came in “40 and 50 plus raids a day, seven or eight times a day,” he and his fellow RAF pilots flew “four or five times” a day.⁷⁵ Nicholas Sintetos’ decision to transfer to Malta proved worthwhile, as he declared that he saw much more combat on the island than in Great Britain.⁷⁶ In his diary, Reade Tilley described operations as “gloriously hectic” on the island.⁷⁷ “Malta is undoubtedly the hot spot for air war,” he continued, “the greatest air battles in the history of the world have been going on over the Island”⁷⁸

Tilley even said that combat in Malta was so manic, the RAF was forced to change its tactics on attacking bombers. The existing plan was to attack in the previously-mentioned line astern formation, but since this single-file shape limited offensive fire to just the lead aircraft, the RAF needed an alternate plan. It simply took too long for a single Spitfire to shoot down a Junker 88—“four or five seconds, or six maybe,” Tilley

⁷⁴ George Sperry, letter to Vern Haugland, March 10, 1975, SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 6.

⁷⁵ Roscoe, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14, 15.

⁷⁶ Nicholas Sintetos, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 17, 1993, in San Bernardino, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 25.

⁷⁷ Reade Tilley, diary of Reade Tilley, April 20, 1942, MS 58, Reade F. Tilley Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 7.

⁷⁸ Tilley, diary of Reade Tilley, 7.

claimed—when surrounded by German fighters that outnumbered it “five or ten, occasionally twenty to one.”⁷⁹ Opting instead for a line abreast formation, with four Spitfires aligned wingtip-to-wingtip, the RAF fighters were better able to concentrate their fire “and this worked very effectively,” Tilley confirmed.⁸⁰

Given that Malta was the most active combat zone within the RAF’s area of operations—not to mention one of the most strategically important areas in Europe at the time—these Eagles’ voluntary decisions to fly there represented an especially profound desire to engage their enemy. Furthermore, as the most direct means available to defending Great Britain and defeating Germany, such a desire indicated the depth of these Eagles’ ideological sustaining motivation. Arthur Roscoe demonstrated this mindset when he explained the challenge of confirming aerial kills in Malta.

With hundreds of aircraft engaged in chaotic maneuvering, and seldomly in concerted squadron action, aerial combat in Malta was not conducive to diligently tracking kill counts. “If an enemy plane was seen to go in, who knew whose it was, you could only report the time and place,” Roscoe explained in his memoirs.⁸¹ As a result, it was difficult for pilots to amass kill counts, but he cared little for such superficial rewards. “Our job was to defend the island,” Roscoe wrote, “not to worry about big scores.”⁸² In all, thirty-four Eagles requested transfer to more active combat zones.

⁷⁹ Reade Tilley, interview by unknown party on unknown date, in Maxwell Air Force Base, AL (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

⁸⁰ Tilley, interview by unknown party, 12.

⁸¹ Arthur Roscoe, “Reflections on Malta,” summer 1942, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 10.

⁸² Roscoe, “Reflections on Malta,” 10.

Frustrated by their first winter in Great Britain, which precluded combat operations, more than an entire squadron's worth of Eagles volunteered to relocate to areas of increased action.

A profound, if not alarming, demonstration of the Eagles' dedication to combat was the way some viewed the death of their comrades. Rather than expressing sadness when their friends were killed, some Eagles viewed the tragedy as a hindrance to the mission. "You have got to really forget about" the death of a friend, Steve Pisanos said. He continued, "It is going to affect your aggressiveness, your attitude against the enemy; by getting involved with some folks like that you could really not act properly up there."⁸³

Along the same vein, many Eagles even considered attendance at funerals to be an unnecessary distraction from the mission. LeRoy Gover of No. 133 despised the RAF's mandatory funeral attendance for causing him to dwell on the losses of his friends. "You all had to go to a goddamn funeral and all this solemn marching and all this stuff," Gover complained.⁸⁴ "That'd get you thinking," he continued, which he considered to be a distraction from his job as a fighter pilot. He contrasted the RAF's approach to funerals with that of the USAAF, which he said "did it right."⁸⁵ When a pilot was killed in American service, "that was the end of it. There was no funeral, there was nothing," Gover explained, "they had them but you didn't go. They didn't tell you where or when or

⁸³ Steve Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 2, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 65.

⁸⁴ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 25, 1993, 15.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

nothing else.”⁸⁶ Edwin Taylor shared in Gover’s outlook on funerals. “I didn’t want to do that anymore,” Taylor said. “I just didn’t think it was necessary to do it.”⁸⁷

Aside from their professed desires for combat—even to the extent of requesting transfers to Europe’s most active combat zone—many Eagles directly cited ideological principles as sources of their sustaining motivation. Wilson Edwards refused an opportunity to return to the United States. because “I was over there to do a mission and whatever I could.”⁸⁸ When questioned by his mother on his feelings toward an eventual transfer to the USAAF, Robert Pewitt of No. 133 cited ideological principles as the reason for his indifference toward the subject. “No one knows how or when it will be done,” Pewitt replied, “in the meantime, I will stay in the R.A.F. because, after all, we are after a common enemy.”⁸⁹ “The sacrifice may be great,” Pewitt continued, “but then we can enjoy pleasures even more if we have a few hardships to make us appreciate freedom.”⁹⁰ Pewitt eventually made the ultimate sacrifice, as the ideologically-motivated pilot was killed in action just two months after writing that letter.

Additionally, many Eagles who did not initially display ideological motivation came to adopt such principles as reasons to remain in RAF service. Chesley Peterson, for example, said that he “absolutely” came to see England’s war as his war.⁹¹ “I will tell you

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Edwin Taylor, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 20, 1993, in San Clemente, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 44.

⁸⁸ Edwards, interview by Philip D. Caine, 32.

⁸⁹ Robert Pewitt, letter to Ruth Pewitt, March 27, 1942, Private collections of Pam Chatagnier, Goldsboro, NC.

⁹⁰ Pewitt, letter to Ruth Pewitt, March 27, 1942.

⁹¹ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 56.

what had happened,” Peterson explained, “When Churchill got on the 6:00 news and made his little speeches I decided I was an Englishman right behind him.”⁹² Fonzo Smith of No. 121 said that the British people were the catalyst for him adopting ideological sustaining motivation. “When I got over there and got acquainted with those people. I found out the war was real and they were real,” he said.⁹³ Robert Pewitt wrote his mother that “I think I did the right thing in coming over because we are fighting for a wonderful cause and the more I see over here the better I realize it.”⁹⁴

LeRoy Gover said he “wasn’t gung ho against” the Germans when he initially volunteered for the RAF, but that changed “at the end of 1940, right after the Battle of Britain.”⁹⁵ The perilous situation in Europe, Gover said, led to him adopting ideological principles into his sustaining motivation. “The Germans had run everybody out of France, Belgium, Holland and everyplace else,” he explained, “it was just a matter of time, if we didn’t help them, Hitler would have the whole damn world.”⁹⁶ Don Nee likewise expressed a change in sources of motivation once in England. In terms of what drove him to enlist in the RAF, Nee said that he “wasn’t gung ho, wanted to be a war hero or

⁹² Ibid., 57.

⁹³ Fonzo Smith, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 13, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 17.

⁹⁴ Robert Pewitt, letter to Ruth Pewitt, July 4, 1941, Private collections of Pam Chatagnier, Goldsboro, NC.

⁹⁵ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 26.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

anything like that,” but then noted that, while in England, flying in combat “was really what we had been waiting for.”⁹⁷

Wendell Pendleton was initially prompted to volunteer by the promise of adventure and excitement, but then said his motivation—and that of his fellow pilots in No. 71—transformed once in England. “As the weeks passed and as planes failed to return, a change came over all of us,” he declared, “we were fighting not so much for excitement now—but for a cause, for the dignity of man, for the freedom of peoples wherever they might live.”⁹⁸ While the glamour of becoming an ace was an initial motive for Pendleton, once in England he realized that “confirmed victories or downed planes wasn’t important. The really important thing was to live, to drive Jerry back home, and to protect the helpless down there in London and the other English towns that Jerry hit.”⁹⁹

A squadron-mate of Pendleton in No. 71, Gilmore Daniel, expressed a similar ideological shift in motivation. He noted that, in the beginning, “I just wanted to fly.” Only later, in England, did he get “involved in the patriotic side of it.”¹⁰⁰ Hugh Kennard, the British commander of No. 121, agreed that “the love of flying was the first thing” to motivate his American pilots, but “to be able to fly in combat was just another bit added to it,” once in sustained service with the RAF. Additionally, Kennard was sure to point

⁹⁷ Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14, 2.

⁹⁸ Wendell Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” February 1941, SMS 729, Wendell Pendleton Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 35.

⁹⁹ Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” 39.

¹⁰⁰ Gilmore Daniel, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, July 28, 1987, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

out that it was not just a generic love of flying that provided the Eagles with sustaining motivation, but rather the pursuit of ideological principles inherent to flying in combat. In his words, the Eagles were not content “just flying around in a little airplane in the States,” but rather flying and “doing something worthwhile, I suppose, when they do it.”¹⁰¹

Even in quantitative terms, the Eagles’ ideological sustaining motivation was apparent. By so fervently pursuing combat sorties as their most direct means to defending Great Britain and curbing German aggression, many Eagles amassed an extraordinary number of combat missions and hours. In fact, many Eagles far surpassed what the USAAF considered the “end of limit effort” for fighter pilots. To mitigate combat fatigue among its air crews, USAAF headquarters issued a rotating leave policy. The schedule stipulated that air crew should receive one-half day of leave every three or four days of combat, a forty-eight hour pass every two weeks, and a seven-day pass at the “end of limit of effort.” For fighter pilots, this limit was considered reached between ninety to one hundred hours.¹⁰² Not only did many Eagles reach this “end of limit effort,” several greatly exceeded it.

For example, Dixie Alexander flew 168 combat missions over the course of World War II, which amounted to 450 hours.¹⁰³ Fonzo Smith of No. 121 accumulated

¹⁰¹ Kennard, interview by Philip D. Caine, 23.

¹⁰² USAF Historical Division, Historical Studies Branch, “Combat Crew Rotation: World War II and Korean War” (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University, Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1968), 3.

¹⁰³ Richard Alexander, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 21, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

more than 250 combat hours and 113 combat missions during his service.¹⁰⁴ Don Gentile, who General Dwight D. Eisenhower described as a “one-man Air Force,” flew more than 300 combat hours on his way to becoming the first American to eclipse Eddie Rickenbacker’s twenty-six aerial victories. The new “Ace of Aces” finished the war with thirty kills to his name.¹⁰⁵

Though Gentile finished as the Eagle Squadrons’ top ace, his No. 133 squadron-mate Don Blakeslee was not far behind him with seventeen. And what Blakeslee lacked in aerial victories, he more than made up for in combat experience, as he finished the war with more than five hundred missions and one thousand hours. Barrett Tillman, a former executive secretary of the American Fighter Aces Association, believed Blakeslee’s figures to exceed those of “any other American fighter pilot of World War II.”¹⁰⁶ Though no Blakeslee, John Brown flew an impressive 142 combat sorties during the war, just below his No. 121 comrade Leon Blanding’s 188.¹⁰⁷

In sum, the Eagles were dedicated fighter pilots who went above and beyond the call of duty in the pursuit of ideological principles. By demonstrating such a committed

¹⁰⁴ Fonzo Smith, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 11, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹⁰⁵ “Gentile, Salvatore Dominic,” The National Aviation Hall of Fame, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.nationalaviation.org/our-enshrinees/gentile-salvatore-dominic/>.

¹⁰⁶ Dennis Hevesi, “Col. Donald Blakeslee, Decorated World War II Flying Ace, Dies at 90,” The New York Times, October 3, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/03/us/03blakeslee.html>.

¹⁰⁷ John Brown, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, October 12, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO; Leon Blanding, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, December 19, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

devotion to flying in combat, the Eagles revealed that defending Great Britain from German aggression was what motivated them to remain in RAF service—even when it was clear that they were not bound by British regulations. As Donald Young said, “it was just strictly an oral obligation,” yet the vast majority of the Eagles continued their RAF service to the very end—when they transferred to the USAAF.¹⁰⁸ In fact, the transfer to American service provides an interesting avenue of analysis for the Eagles’ sustaining motivation, as many of the ideological principles that motivated them to remain in service with the RAF were just as connected to the United States as they were to Great Britain.

For some Eagles, flying in combat with the RAF was seen as an ideological means to a different ideological end—flying in combat for the USAAF. As detailed in the previous chapter, many Eagles were initially precluded from USAAF service. Though most USAAF rejects were able to wait two years to receive a college education, they were spurred to join the RAF by the desire to fly in combat in furtherance of ideological principles. Despite their status as RAF pilots, many of these men retained a sense of American identity and the pursuit of related ideological principles—such as US patriotism—factored largely into their sustaining motivation. As Harold Strickland wrote in his memoirs, “Eagle Squadron members...were, in fact, fighting for the United States whether we realized it or not, but that did not become fully apparent until December, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked.”¹⁰⁹ This US-focused sense of ideological

¹⁰⁸ Donald Young, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 14, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 4.

¹⁰⁹ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 3.

sustaining motivation was evident in their desire to specifically serve in an Eagle Squadron and their eagerness to transfer to the USAAF.

It is important to note that Americans recruited to join the RAF, even by the Clayton Knight Committee, were not universally assigned to one of the three Eagle Squadrons. Many, like LeRoy Gover, James Goodson, and Arthur Donahue, were members of ordinary RAF squadrons before they joined an Eagle Squadron. Moreover, some Eagles did not even know that the Eagle Squadrons existed when they initially volunteered. Roy Evans, for example, was rather surprised when he was assigned to a British squadron full of Americans because “I never knew. I didn't know anything about the Eagle Squadrons. I had no choice in it. I was assigned there.”¹¹⁰

Regardless of specific individuals’ awareness of the Eagle Squadrons, it is undeniable that RAF Squadrons No. 71, 121, and 133—comprised entirely of Americans—represented the United States while in England. The squadrons’ communal patch, an eagle derived from the front of a US passport, was a clear symbol of its members’ American identity. Service in any RAF squadron afforded these men the opportunity to defend Great Britain against German aggression, but only service in an Eagle Squadron provided them with a sense of American identity. For many of these pilots about to enter an operational squadron, sharing in this sense of American identity was an important motivator.

No. 133’s Michael Sobanski, a first-generation Polish-American, clearly recognized the direct connection of American identity with the Eagle Squadrons, even through broken English. In his diary, he wrote, “I would like to join Eagle Squadron in

¹¹⁰ Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine, 5.

future. Is nothing better than like being American. I can see how Americans have good organization and they take care about their citizens wherever they are.”¹¹¹ In fact, the sense of American identity that Sobanski derived from Eagle Squadron service was so profound that he declined an opportunity to fly for his native Polish Air Force. “I feel American. I feel like one and I'm happy to live in the States. The US are very great country and I am proud to belong to it. I am Polish patriot too but my mind was always attracted to America to style of American life.”¹¹²

Walter Wicker’s sister said that the No. 133 pilot “wanted to become a member of the American Eagle Squadrons, that was his only goal.”¹¹³ Chesley Robertson was another Eagle who was “very proud” of serving in an all-American RAF squadron.¹¹⁴ Chesley Peterson noted that, while serving as No. 71’s commander, non-Eagle Americans “fought like hell to get into the Eagle Squadrons.”¹¹⁵ In an act that demonstrated his understanding of the significance of serving in an Eagle Squadron, Peterson told prospective Eagles that he “would make damn sure that you get here. I will give you priority over” a pilot awaiting his initial assignment.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Mike Sobanski, diary of Mike Sobanski, November 21, 1941, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 2.

¹¹² Sobanski, diary of Mike Sobanski, 7.

¹¹³ Walter Wicker, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, October 3, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹¹⁴ Chesley Robertson, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, May 13, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹¹⁵ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Of the seventy Eagles to respond to questionnaires written by Philip Caine, thirty-one said they specifically requested assignment to an Eagle Squadron—nearly half. Aside from their national make-up, RAF Squadrons No. 71, 121, and 133 were no different from the rest of those in the RAF. They flew the same aircraft—Hurricanes and Spitfires—and fought the same enemy, but assignment to an Eagle Squadron had important ideological implications for many Eagles. James Goodson, for example, said that the greatest contribution he made with his RAF service was “gaining experience, which enabled me to become commanding officer of 336 Sq. of the 4th Fighter Gp. Which became the leading Allied Fighter Group (over 1000 enemy a/c destroyed) and formed the nucleus and led the long-range (and decisive) operations of the 8th U.S.A.A.F Fighter Command.”¹¹⁷ By viewing his RAF service as a benefit for his own country, Goodson demonstrated his US-focused sense of ideological sustaining motivation.

William Geiger was similarly motivated by a sense of American patriotism. He viewed his Eagle Squadron service as a means to providing the USAAF with a combat-experienced pilot. “When the United States got into the war,” Geiger said, “I would already have combat experience. Now I would be a plus instead of struggling up. I would be what they got.”¹¹⁸ Laddie Lucas was a British ground crew member in No. 249—the squadron that Reade Tilley transferred to in Malta—and was thus far removed from Eagle Squadron operations, but even he recognized that “they had a very strong

¹¹⁷ James Goodson, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, August 18, 1987, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹¹⁸ Bill Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 3, 1987, in Pasadena, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 14.

patriotism.”¹¹⁹ Lucas said this sense of patriotism was evident in their desire to specifically serve in an Eagle Squadron.¹²⁰ Additionally, William Slade noted that “I liked that I was going to be with other Americans. You might say that I was pretty happy about that.”¹²¹

Once in an Eagle Squadron, many Eagles further demonstrated their American patriotism by expressing an eagerness for transfer to the USAAF. Donald Young said that it was only right that he and his fellow Eagles, “since we were at war,” fought “under the U.S. flag.”¹²² Gene Fetrow was thankful for the “opportunities and flying experience I had in the Eagle Squadron but when the U.S. got into it I wanted to fly for my country.”¹²³ Once in USAAF service, George Carpenter was happy to be surrounded by his fellow countrymen again. “You were back with your own people, so to speak. Back to your ground crews who were American boys and all of the pilots were American boys.”¹²⁴

Steve Pisanos’ sense of American identity—even as a non-US citizen—captured the overall strength of patriotism within the Eagle Squadrons. Like Sobanski with the

¹¹⁹ Laddie Lucas, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 24, 1988, in London, England (phone interview), (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 4.

¹²⁰ Lucas, interview by Philip D. Caine, 4.

¹²¹ William Slade, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 5, 1995, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 36.

¹²² Young, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 14, 1988, 29.

¹²³ Gene Fetrow, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 24, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹²⁴ George Carpenter, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 3, 1994, in Paris, TN (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 35.

Polish Air Force, Pisanos declined an opportunity to fly for his native Greek Air Force. “I had made up my mind that I was going to be an American,” Pisanos proclaimed, “because that is what I elected to do when I left the country.”¹²⁵ When Pisanos ultimately transferred to the USAAF, he made history by becoming the first American citizen to be naturalized outside the continental United States.¹²⁶ Jackson Mahon shared Pisanos’ American patriotism, as he said that “we were stumbling all over ourselves to get into” the USAAF. “Mainly for the pay,” he added, “but I just wanted to come home as an American officer.”¹²⁷

On the topic of pay, this factor was too significant to ignore when analyzing the Eagles’ decision to transfer to the USAAF. Most Eagles cited the increased USAAF pay as a major incentive for the transfer. Donald Ross of No. 121 explained it in terms of standard of living. With USAAF second lieutenant pay, he and his fellow Eagles “progressed from buses and tubes to taxis, from beer to scotch. Living got considerably better.”¹²⁸ LeRoy Gover was sure to point out that “it wasn’t that we were mercenaries or anything. We thought, ‘Geez, we can date more dollies and buy more beer with that kind of bucks.’”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 21.

¹²⁶ “Col Steve N. Pisanos, USAF (Ret.),” Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://airandspace.si.edu/support/wall-of-honor/col-steve-n-pisanos-usaf-ret>.

¹²⁷ Mahon, interview by Philip D. Caine, 32.

¹²⁸ Donald Ross, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 15, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹²⁹ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 20.

Gover's comment, though a little crude, illustrated an important point. Though pay was a vital factor in the Eagles' decision to transfer to the USAAF, it would be difficult to use it as a means of diminishing their sense of patriotism. This is simply due to the fact the Eagles did not receive a minor pay increase—their salaries nearly tripled. As junior officers in the RAF—either pilot or flying officers—the Eagles made a little more than \$80 a month. Despite this figure already being fairly meager—for reference, \$80 in 1942 is the equivalent to \$1,333 in 2021—the Eagles' take-home income was even less.¹³⁰ As Carroll McColpin explained, “they took away \$18.00 income tax, \$15.00 mess bill, and \$4.00 for your batman and you paid for your library and all those things.”¹³¹ He added that due to such deductions, most prewar RAF officers needed outside income to survive.¹³² Robert Pewitt agreed that such deductions essentially negated their RAF paychecks, as he sarcastically told his mother, “I could make more at home digging ditches.”¹³³

When compared to USAAF pay, one can see how transferring to American service was an easy decision. USAAF second lieutenants made a minimum of \$240 a month—the equivalent of \$4,000 in 2021—which did not even include flight pay.¹³⁴ This massive gap in pay between RAF pilots and USAAF pilots could easily obscure the

¹³⁰ “Inflation Calculator,” US Inflation Calculator, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

¹³¹ Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, in Novato, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 21.

¹³² McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, 21.

¹³³ Robert Pewitt, letter to Ruth Pewitt, February 2, 1942, Private collections of Pam Chatagnier, Goldsboro, NC.

¹³⁴ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 284.

patriotic incentives for transferring to American forces, so it is important to note the sheer magnitude of the difference when considering the factors that influenced the Eagles' decisions. Royce Wilkinson, the British commander of No. 71, probably said it best when he broke down the factors that influenced the Eagles' widespread decisions to join the USAAF—"I think it was fifty percent [pay] and fifty percent patriotism."¹³⁵

The Eagles' eagerness for the USAAF transfer, not surprisingly, reached its apex in the immediate wake of Pearl Harbor. Royce Wilkinson said, "when America did come into the war, they all cheered. I remember exactly as if it was one second ago, as fresh as yesterday. They were all as pleased as punch."¹³⁶ Harold Strickland of No. 71 said that the "date which will live in infamy" transformed the Eagles' perception of their RAF service. "Now there was no question in any of our minds," he wrote, "that we had been fighting for the United States as well as Britain."¹³⁷ His mindset was clearly shared in his squadron because No. 71 was so enthusiastic to join the USAAF that they convinced their commander, Chesley Peterson, to request an immediate transfer to the USAAF—or at the very least, to Singapore, where they could combat the Japanese. "So I went down to see Sholto Douglas," Peterson dutifully noted, and "I explained that I had some guys that all want to go fight in their own country, in their own service, but if not they certainly want to be fighting what we consider our enemy. What about sending us to Singapore?"¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Royce Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 22, 1988, in Minster, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 19.

¹³⁶ Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 10.

¹³⁷ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 2.

¹³⁸ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 19.

Peterson said his request was denied on the grounds that Singapore was not “going to last six months,” which turned out to be the case, as the British colony surrendered on February 15, 1942.¹³⁹

Such patriotism in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor was not just limited to Peterson’s squadron. No. 121’s Reade Tilley noted that “the uppermost thought in everybody’s mind” after Pearl Harbor “was it is our job to fight for our own country.”¹⁴⁰ Such a sentiment was clearly widespread in No. 121 because Vernon Parker, acting as a “representative of 121 Sqdn.,” met with “Ambassador John Winant in London immediately following Pearl Harbor, to offer our service and effect transfer.”¹⁴¹ Robert Priser was still stateside on December 7, 1941—a rare occurrence among the Eagles—as the future No. 71 pilot was at Polaris Flight Academy in California for refresher flight training. Upon hearing the news, he and his other classmates immediately “tried to fly, enlist, or get in the Marines.”¹⁴² Priser only remained in the RAF training pipeline when he was told that he would have to complete boot camp, thus delaying his entry into the war.

In conclusion, the strength of the Eagle Squadron pilots’ sustaining motivation was undeniable, if not surprising. As a unit of foreign volunteers, the Eagles were exempt

¹³⁹ Stephen Wynn, *The Surrender of Singapore: Three Years of Hell 1942-45* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2017), 30.

¹⁴⁰ Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 36.

¹⁴¹ Vernon Parker, response to questionnaire written by Philip D. Caine, March 9, 1991, SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

¹⁴² Robert Priser, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 6.

from pledging allegiance to Great Britain's head of state. Such an oath normally constitutes a powerful source of sustaining motivation, as demonstrated in Omer Bartov's analysis of the Wehrmacht in World War II, but it was noticeably absent in the Eagle Squadrons. Despite this, the Eagles' strength of sustaining motivation was evidenced by the known ability to quit, yet virtually none did.

The source of the Eagles' powerful sustaining motivation was unmistakably rooted in ideological principles. Their adherence to these principles, like defending Great Britain and curbing German aggression, was revealed by their zealous desire for combat. Specifically, they expressed this desire in the five ways: direct quotes to that effect, displeasure with noncombat missions, requests for transfer to areas with greater combat, a mission-focused perception of the death of their friends, and amassed combat hours and missions.

Many Eagles could barely contain their excitement for combat. Despite minimal training, they felt they were ready to confront the world's foremost air force. They were so eager for combat that their commanders had to ban them from embarking upon dangerous, low-level strafing missions—a punishment meted out in more than one Eagle Squadron. When sorties failed to produce the combat for which they yearned, the Eagles were keenly disappointed.

Along the same vein, the Eagles expressed widespread resentment toward missions that had little promise for combat. The dreaded convoy patrol was one such mission and despite being dangerous in its own right—flying miles over water in the notoriously difficult to ditch Spitfire was indeed hazardous—the Eagles considered such

flying to be boring and avoided at all costs. Likewise, instructor duty—which totally precluded opportunities for combat—was also avoided by the Eagles.

The only type of flying Eagles despised more than combat-less missions was the total lack thereof. Thanks to traditionally poor English weather, the Eagle Squadrons would often go weeks at a time without flying—especially in the winter. Starved of combat, many Eagles went so far as to request transfer overseas. Malta was the prized destination, and not because it was a balmy Mediterranean getaway. In fact, it was just the opposite, as the island's strategic significance brought to it prodigious amounts of German bombardment. With such high enemy activity in the area, dozens of Eagles requested transfer to the besieged island, hoping to contribute to the RAF's most intense combat sector of the time.

The Eagles even perceived the death of their friends in terms of combat. Rather than mourn the loss of their comrades in arms, many Eagles viewed the tragedy as a hindrance to their mission. They deliberately avoided dwelling on casualties in their units, lest their sadness impair their combat capability. The Eagles even considered attending the funerals of their fallen comrades to be an unnecessary distraction from their duty.

Lastly, the Eagles' fervor for combat could be quantitatively expressed in their total combat hours and missions. Many Eagles went far beyond what the USAAF considered to be maximum effort for fighter pilots. They routinely eclipsed the one hundred mission mark and, especially in the cases of Don Blakeslee and Don Gentile, became some of the United States' most experienced and deadliest fighter pilots in the entire war.

Additionally, the Eagles often expressed their ideological motivation in American terms, as demonstrated in their desire to specifically serve in an Eagle Squadron and eagerness for the transfer to the USAAF. Though the RAF made a deliberate effort to place American volunteers in the Eagle Squadrons, the individual pilots generally had a say in their initial squadron assignment. With so many Eagles specifically requesting assignment to RAF squadrons No. 71, 121, or 133, it is clear that a sense of American patriotism pervaded the units. Though other squadrons offered the same opportunity to fly in combat with the same aircraft, only the Eagle Squadrons offered its pilots a sense of US identity. While easily glossed over by the stark difference in pay, the Eagles' eagerness for the transfer to USAAF service was significant. Especially in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the Eagles were enthusiastic about the opportunity to fly for their home nation's air force. Ultimately, all but seven Eagles opted to transfer to the USAAF—an authoritative demonstration of their sense of American identity.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that their desire for combat was inextricably linked to ideological principles. Only through combat flying could such principles—like defending Great Britain and curbing German aggression—be attained and the Eagles displayed a particular passion for such flying. As such, attributing a love of flying to the Eagles' sustaining motivation is unfounded. Though some conceived of their combat service in American terms—whether through their desire to specifically serve in an Eagle Squadron or through their eagerness for a transfer to the USAAF—virtually all Eagles' sustaining motivation was rooted in ideological principles that transcended nationality. Through combat, the Eagles expressed their sustaining motivation, but the question remains, what motivated them while in combat? That is the question to be addressed in

the next chapter, which centers around the final component of soldier motivation: combat motivation.

CHAPTER IV – LEADERSHIP, FEAR, AND DUTY: COMBAT MOTIVATION

Of the three types of soldier motivation, combat motivation is perhaps the most compelling. Understanding what causes a human to ignore his or her most basic survival instinct of self-preservation is an intriguing, but difficult endeavor when one considers the nature of combat. Chaotic, loud, and dangerous, combat is a frenzied moment for most soldiers. As a result, it is often difficult for them to express in words what motivated them through the pandemonium. Some historians, such as Christopher Hamner, believe that combat motivation is derived from nothing more than self-preservation.¹ The Eagle Squadron pilots were no different, as George Sperry of No. 133 noted that “my greatest concern” in combat “was to keep alive.”²

Despite this fear that Sperry and other Eagles felt in combat, they continually and willingly engaged their enemy in the skies over Europe, thus demonstrating the strength of their combat motivation. This strength was primarily evidenced by the dearth of instances in which Eagles shirked combat, despite having a feasible excuse for doing so. As pilots, the Eagles relied upon imperfect technology—their aircraft—to perform their combat duties. Given the unreliability of aircraft technology of the time, it was not an uncommon occurrence for World War II pilots to feign mechanical problems in order to avoid combat. In the Eagle Squadrons, however, such a display of low combat motivation was exceedingly rare.

¹ Christopher H. Hamner, *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 5.

² George Sperry, “It Started with Visitors,” n.d., SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 5.

The basis of the Eagles' powerful combat motivation rested upon a surprising collection of factors. Traditional sources of combat motivation—chiefly, primary group cohesion, hatred of one's enemy, training, and discipline—were conspicuously absent in the Eagle Squadrons. To avoid sadness in the event of a comrade's death, many Eagles resorted to simply refraining from building friendships, or primary groups, in the first place. German pilots were not hated in the Eagle Squadrons, but respected—perhaps a continuation of aviation's traditional sense of sportsmanship. The Eagles' time in training—both flight and military—was far too short to play a role in their combat motivation. Stemming from such minimal training was minimal discipline, as the Eagles gained a reputation for rowdiness and recklessness—both on the ground in and in the air.

In the place of these traditional sources of combat motivation stood a combination of superb leadership, disregard for the possibility of death, and ideological factors. Both American and English, leadership in the Eagle Squadrons was undeniably important in motivating the pilots in combat. The Eagles expressed quality leadership in terms of combat skills, thus indicating its role in their combat motivation, and it was no coincidence that their best leaders were also their best combat pilots. The Eagles were also motivated to survive combat by simply not considering the possibility of being killed. While in combat, they convinced themselves they were indestructible, and that death only happened "to the other guy." Lastly, continuing with the principal sources of their initial and sustaining motivation, the Eagles were motivated in combat by ideological principles. By focusing on the mission and perceiving the act of shooting down an enemy aircraft, not as killing a man, but as an essential task of a fighter pilot, the Eagles demonstrated their ideological sense of duty in combat.

While it is difficult to distinguish the specific sources of a soldier's combat motivation, it is clearer to observe its relative strength and the Eagle Squadrons certainly possessed a significant degree of it. This was most evident in the scarcity of incidences in which Eagles avoided combat sorties. Don Nee of No. 133 asserted that he did not "remember any in our particular outfit that would try to get out of missions. I don't know anybody."³ Eric Doorly said he remembered a few comrades who tried avoiding combat, but such cases were "way below the average" in the Eagle Squadrons.⁴ Though Doorly was not privy to this overall statistic, for reference, 4 percent of US Eighth Air Force airmen were "removed from combat for emotional reasons."⁵ Extrapolated to the Eagle Squadrons, this figure indicates that less than ten Eagles cited emotional reasons for avoiding combat.

Roy Evans agreed that very few Eagles avoided combat sorties, thus demonstrating the strength of their combat motivation. Before the sole mission in which all three Eagle Squadrons participated, the Dieppe Raid of August 19, 1942, Evans said that only a "very, very small percent" opted out of the sortie.⁶ This is especially notable because, as a preparatory operation for the eventual invasion of mainland Europe, the Dieppe Raid promised intense combat with the enemy. As a result, combat-induced fear

³ Donald Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 15, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 38.

⁴ Eric Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 21.

⁵ Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 161.

⁶ Roy Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 13, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 14.

would likely have been higher than normal before participating in such a mission. Royce Wilkinson, a British flight commander in both No. 71 and 121, said that it was “not my impression” that Eagles attempted to avoid combat.⁷ “They were all genuine fighter pilots, as far as I was concerned,” he continued, “both 71 and 121.”⁸

To underscore the significance of so few Eagles opting out of combat, it is important to point out that, as pilots, they had a feasible means of dodging combat that infantrymen did not have. Aircraft technology, even in the 1940s, was not fully reliable. For the Eagles, any number of malfunctions could arise before or during a combat sortie. Engines could quit at any moment, wing spars could crumble under g-forces, and fuel could unexpectedly leak. Roger Atkinson of No. 71 would have been able to attest to the unreliability of aviation technology of his time, but he was killed on October 15, 1941 after a wing on his Spitfire collapsed while in level flight.⁹ As his squadron-mate, Wendell Pendleton, noted, “flying in those early days of World War II was like pioneering.”¹⁰ Given the reasonable possibility of such an occurrence, a World War II pilot could easily feign any one of these malfunctions before a combat encounter and return home safely without much suspicion from his comrades—lest, of course, one

⁷ Royce Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 22, 1988, in Minster, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 14.

⁸ Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14.

⁹ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, 58.

¹⁰ Wendell Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” February 1941, SMS 729, Wendell Pendleton Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 2.

would make this a habit. Infantrymen, however, could not as easily blame technology for shirking combat and hope to avoid charges of cowardice.

In fact, Carroll McColpin noted that fabricated mechanical issues were not an uncommon occurrence within World War II fighter squadrons. “Oh, it always happened,” McColpin declared, “not just in the Eagle Squadrons but in any squadron.”¹¹ In the Eagle Squadrons, however, McColpin added that instances of such feigned malfunctions were exceedingly rare. “I don’t think there was more than two or three or four of them at the most,” McColpin explained, “I don’t recall people that did it frequently.”¹² As just one of the two Eagles who served in all three Eagle Squadrons, McColpin’s assessment of the Eagles’ overall combat motivation is certainly credible.

One of McColpin’s comrades in No. 71, William Geiger, demonstrated the Eagles’ profound combat motivation in the face of an easy escape route, as he once contemplated declaring such a false emergency before a potential combat encounter. Geiger was flying on a routine sortie when enemy aircraft unexpectedly came into sight. “My mind was saying, ‘I am not ready yet. For God's sake I am not ready yet,’” Geiger admitted.¹³ Then, “it ran across my mind that maybe I could pull the mixture control and flood the engine and stall it, and I would get it started again or somebody else would go

¹¹ Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, in Novato, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 1.

¹² McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, 2.

¹³ Bill Geiger, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine on unknown date, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection).

when I stalled it. Or I might even pretend that I didn't even see him although I was looking eyeball to eyeball” with the enemy pilot.¹⁴

Though many Eagles found themselves in Geiger’s situation over the course of their RAF service, very few of them took advantage of such an opportunity. Geiger himself evidenced this, as he ultimately “didn’t do either one of these things”—feign engine trouble or ignore the sight of the enemy.¹⁵ The Eagles’ overwhelming refusal to opt out of combat sorties, especially when viewed in the context of imperfect aviation technology, greatly evidenced the strength of their combat motivation. Given this overall strength of combat motivation in the Eagle Squadrons, it would be reasonable to assume that the traditionally most powerful source of combat motivation, primary group cohesion, lay at the heart of the matter.

Primary group cohesion refers to the close attachment that soldiers possess within a small, primary group. In his work, *Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-1794*, John Lynn limited the size of primary groups to “the small number of comrades who constantly deal with one another on a face-to-face basis.”¹⁶ For all intents and purposes, a primary group consisted of the men who trained, ate, slept, fought, and lived together during the course of a war. As a result of such close bonds, cohesive primary groups reveal themselves through the use of “band of brothers” imagery and other family-like descriptors.

¹⁴ Geiger, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, 30.

In the realm of combat motivation, many historians and social scientists have credited primary group cohesion as the single most important factor. *The American Soldier*, a social science report from Samuel Stouffer et al., found that US soldiers in World War II were primarily motivated in battle by relying on their comrades. In fact, the study found that primary group cohesion was the second-most cited “combat incentive,” only after “wanting to end the war.”¹⁷ One soldier in the study declared that the members of his unit would “rather be killed than” do “anything to let the rest of them down.”¹⁸

Historian Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall agreed that primary group cohesion comprised the principal source of combat motivation. In his influential work, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, Marshall declared, “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade.”¹⁹ Citing “seventy tactical episodes” of US paratroopers during Operation Neptune as an example, Marshall argued that military units fought more effectively with men they knew and trusted than with strangers and replacements.²⁰

Despite Marshall’s convictions, the Eagle Squadrons had a conspicuous absence of primary group cohesion, which was reflected in three ways. Firstly, and most significantly, many Eagles noted that they actively avoided creating primary groups in

¹⁷ Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, vol. II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 108.

¹⁸ Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, 136.

¹⁹ Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 42.

²⁰ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 152.

the first place. Secondly, sadness in the event of a comrade's death or transfer—an indication of cohesive primary groups—was typically absent in the Eagle Squadrons. Thirdly, casualty rates were so high in the Eagle Squadrons that any primary groups that did form were quickly fractured.

The most significant indication of the Eagles' lack of primary group cohesion was their conscious effort to avoid making primary groups in the first place. James Griffin made such an intentional effort as a coping mechanism against the sadness caused by friends' deaths. "After the first few months you didn't make friends in the squadron too. You know what I mean? You shied away from that because it would hurt too much if they were lost."²¹ Malta Stepp echoed such an intention, as he declared after the death of a friend, "nobody else is going to get close to me."²² John Brown agreed with the actions of Griffin and Stepp, as he noted, "there was never a real closeness" in the Eagle Squadrons, "you didn't want to be hurt and therefore you wanted everybody at an arm's length."²³ Carroll McColpin was less self-protective, but no less guarded, when he said, "I wasn't that close to most of them. Almost all of them in fact."²⁴ George Sperry remarked that "we saw so many of our friends die that we soon developed a defense

²¹ James Griffin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 14, 1993, in Kingman, AZ (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 4.

²² John Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 2, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 29.

²³ Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine, 29.

²⁴ Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, in Novato, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 73.

against any betrayal of emotion and refused to sentimentalize friendship and parting and death. To many therefore, we were without loyalty or deep feeling.”²⁵

Another indication that the Eagles possessed little primary group cohesion was the minimal sadness they displayed in the wake of a friend’s transfer or even death. In the interest of balancing strength among units, militaries often transfer individuals across companies and squadrons. Though such a policy was effective in maintaining overall squadron readiness, it came at the cost of breaking up primary groups. This drawback did not seem to affect the Eagle Squadrons, however, as LeRoy Gover noted that when his refresher training classmate, Jay Reed, was transferred to another squadron he was not crestfallen by the action. “After a while it just seems that nothing of any nature seems to both you,” Gover explained, “you have a job to do and the quicker it can be finished, the sooner we can all be together again.”²⁶

While transfers still promised future reunions among close friends, as Gover remarked, deaths in primary groups were an irreversible finality. Such a fate would certainly evoke more emotional responses within cohesive primary groups. On the one hand, strong primary groups are capable of weathering the permanent loss of a friend but exhibiting at least some degree of sadness after a friend’s death is a sign of a healthy relationship among a cohesive group. On the other hand, the Eagles seemed generally undisturbed after a comrade did not return from a combat mission. Fred Almos

²⁵ George Sperry, letter to Vern Haugland, February 22, 1975, SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 4.

²⁶ LeRoy Gover, letter to Betty Gover, March 22, 1942, RAF Eagle Squadrons Collections, SMS 803, LeRoy Gover Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO.

deadpanned that losing friends in combat “doesn’t affect me that I can tell, as far as the job is concerned.”²⁷ Philip Fox of No. 121 said that his reaction to the death of a comrade was simple: “back to life.”²⁸

Hugh Kennard, the British commander of No. 121, noted that emotional effects of deaths in his squadron were very fleeting. “I mean when anyone gets killed there is a sort of cloud, but depression didn’t last.”²⁹ His countryman and flight commander of No. 71, Royce Wilkinson, concurred. “You would just pass it off. It didn’t seem to affect too many people,” he said.³⁰ As commanders, Kennard and Wilkinson would certainly have a strong feel for the overall morale in their squadrons, so their comments on the Eagles’ indifference towards their friends’ deaths were likely sound.

Gene Fetrow’s reaction to losing a comrade was “Gosh, that was just too bad that he got shot down,” before adding, “and that was about it.”³¹ Tilley, speaking for all Eagles, said “I don’t think that” losing comrades “was a problem for most of us.”³² Jackson Mahon even went one step further, as he accused his fallen comrades of

²⁷ Fred Almos, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 9.

²⁸ Philip Fox, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 20, 1999, in Phoenix, AZ (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 19.

²⁹ Hugh Kennard, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 24, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 25.

³⁰ Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14.

³¹ Gene Fetrow, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 16, 1993, in Ontario, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

³² Reade Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine on unknown date, in Colorado Springs, CO, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 46.

carelessness. “Well, then you figured that the guy is stupid. You have to take that attitude or you'd go crazy. He's just unlucky or he's stupid”³³

The apathy which so many Eagles expressed toward the death of their comrades was best displayed in the aftermath of the Morlaix Raid. This mission, flown by the entirety of No. 133 on September 26, 1942, took place just before the USAAF officially absorbed the Eagle Squadrons. Due to this impending transfer, No. 133's commander, Carroll McColpin, was in London—along with a few other squadron members who just entered No. 133—to complete paperwork. In his place, a British officer, Gordon Brettell, commanded the mission.³⁴ Due to Brettell's inexperience and an erroneous weather report—which failed to account for a strong southerly wind and overcast cloud deck—No. 133 unknowingly found itself far too displaced over enemy territory. Short on fuel, disoriented, without competent leadership, and surrounded by enemy fighters, only one of the twelve Spitfires returned to Great Britain. The rest, nearly the entirety of No. 133, were killed or captured.³⁵

Despite this horrendous loss, many Eagles could not have cared less. When asked of the emotional impact of losing an entire Eagle Squadron, Leon Blanding replied, “not a bit on me.”³⁶ Gus Daymond seconded the minimal impact of the Morlaix Raid, as he

³³ Jackson “Barry” Mahon, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 13.

³⁴ Haugland, *The Eagle Squadrons*, 163.

³⁵ Haugland, *The Eagle Squadrons*, 165.

³⁶ Leon Blanding, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 27, 1994, in Sumter, SC (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 49.

said it “didn’t do a whole lot” to the Eagles’ morale.³⁷ Don Nee said that “the big thing” of the mission was not the loss of twelve comrades, but the loss of thirteen Spitfire IXs—the top-of-the-line model.³⁸ “We hated to lose all of those guys,” Nee somewhat sincerely noted, before adding, “but we hated to lose the 9s too, because we never got them back.”³⁹

An especially shocking reaction to the unmitigated disaster that was the Morlaix Raid belonged to William Slade. A member of No. 133 himself, Slade was with McColpin in London instead of flying on the mission, but when he heard the news of his entire squadron’s loss, he seemed unperturbed. “I can’t say that it hit me any harder than some of the other single losses,” he said.⁴⁰ Donald Young of No. 121 had an equally callous response to the Morlaix Raid. Despite the fact that two of his training classmates, George Middleton and Leonard Ryerson, were shot down on the mission, Young didn’t think it “had any profound impact on us.”⁴¹ He continued, “I don’t think it was anything, it was just a loss you know.”⁴²

Even if any Eagles formed cohesive primary groups, it would have been doubtful that they persisted through the high casualties that the Eagle Squadrons suffered. Philip

³⁷ Gregory Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine on July 2, 1994, in Newport Beach, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 28.

³⁸ Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine, 32.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ William Slade, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 5, 1995, in Colorado Springs, CO (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 44.

⁴¹ Donald Young, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 18, 1994, in Metairie, LA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 66.

⁴² Young, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 18, 1994, 66.

Caine stated that “of the 260 members of the Eagle Squadrons, 109—more than 40 percent—were killed during the war.”⁴³ This is an alarmingly high casualty rate for three squadrons that did not participate in any major engagements of World War II. For reference, during the Battle of Britain about one in every six RAF fighter pilots were killed in action—a casualty rate of 17 percent.⁴⁴ So, in other words, the Eagle Squadrons’ casualty rate was nearly double that of the rest of the RAF Fighter Command in its most intense period of combat.

The best example of the Eagles’ exorbitant casualty rate could be seen in the experience of No. 133. Described as a “hard luck” squadron by many of the pilots, No. 133 suffered through numerous calamities that all but precluded the formation of strong primary groups. At No. 133’s first operational base, two of its pilots, Walter Soares and Charles Barrell, collided into one another in midair and both died.⁴⁵ The squadron’s luck only worsened thereafter. En route to a new base in Eglinton, Northern Ireland, almost the entirety of “B” Flight crashed into a mountain after descending through a cloud. In one fell swoop, nearly a third of the squadron lost their lives. Then, once arrived in Northern Ireland, two more pilots—George Bruce and Gene Coxetter—were killed. In less than three months, No. 133 had lost eight pilots and the squadron had not even experienced combat yet.⁴⁶

⁴³ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 162.

⁴⁴ “Listen to the RAF Pilots Tell the Story of the Battle of Britain,” Imperial War Museum, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/listen-to-raf-pilots-tell-the-story-of-the-battle-of-britain>.

⁴⁵ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 189.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 191–92.

George Sperry, a member of No. 133, remembered that ten new pilots were transferred to the squadron just to cover its “losses of July ’42.”⁴⁷ The transfer of ten new pilots into a squadron—which were only comprised of about twenty—was simply an insurmountable level of turnover for the formation of adequate primary group cohesion. Rounding out No. 133’s run of terrible luck and high casualties was the aforementioned Morlaix Raid, from which only one pilot from the entire squadron returned. In Sperry’s words, there was “no doubt fate dealt 133 Sqdn one whale of a lousy hand.”⁴⁸ Carroll McColpin, the first American commander of No. 133, further underlined both the excessive casualties his squadron faced, as well as the overall weakness of primary group cohesion in the Eagle Squadrons, when he said, “I found out real early that you didn’t get close to people. They weren’t around most of the time for very long.”⁴⁹

George Sperry encapsulated the extent to which primary group cohesion factored into the Eagles’ combat motivation with a simple statement, “of course the Eagles are pretty individual, they don’t use the word ‘we’ they use the word ‘I.’”⁵⁰ As displayed through their conscious desire to avoid making close friendships, minimal sadness after the transfer or death of a comrade, and high casualty rate, primary group cohesion was an insignificant factor in the combat motivation of the Eagle Squadrons. Without this traditionally vital piece of combat motivation, what drove the Eagles to overcome their

⁴⁷ George Sperry, monologue prepared for Vern Haugland on August 21, 1980 (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 38.

⁴⁸ George Sperry, “Last Mission,” n.d., SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 1.

⁴⁹ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 73.

⁵⁰ Sperry, monologue prepared for Vern Haugland, 54.

natural fear in battle? Another traditional combat motivator exists, hatred of the enemy, but that too was notably absent within the Eagle Squadrons.

The demonization and dehumanization of one's adversary in war is a combat motivation tool as old as time. In doing so, soldiers are able to transform the human in front of them into a creature worthy of death—thus enabling them to perform their mission. In his work, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, John Dower illustrated just how powerful a combat motivator hatred can be—especially when combined with racial animosity. Fueled by racist imagery and code words, not to mention years of dehumanizing propaganda, American and Japanese soldiers in World War II prosecuted a war without mercy, defined in terms of “kill or be killed,” “no quarter, no surrender,” and “take no prisoners.”⁵¹ Such hatred drove soldiers on both sides to endure unfathomably intense fighting—often to the last man—in horrendous conditions for three years. Marked by the mutilation of dead soldiers, booby traps, and prisoner-of-war torture, the Pacific Theater of World War II provided a grotesque example of hatred's ability to motivate soldiers in combat.

Such a pernicious source of motivation, however, failed to materialize in the Eagle Squadrons. Donald Lambert of No. 133 encapsulated most Eagles' views toward their enemy by describing the distinction they drew between the German cause and German pilots. “We hated the Germans per se, but not the pilots,” Lambert explained, “I hated the Gestapo and those people,” but “I loved the German pilots, they were damned

⁵¹ John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 10.

nice guys.”⁵² From this distinction, Lambert argued, arose no direct desire to kill the pilots with whom the Eagles fought. “It was more like a football game, a sport,” Lambert explained, “seeing how good you are with that German.”⁵³

James Goodson expressed similar sentiments, as he described his mindset in combat as, “you just think like in a shooting gallery, you’re trying to hit the target.”⁵⁴ George Carpenter put it more directly, “you were trying to get the airplane. I don’t think you were trying to kill anybody. I think you were trying to get the airplane.”⁵⁵ Harold Strickland believed this mindset transcended national lines, as he recounted an aerial battle in his memoirs, “looking back on my inconclusive dogfight, it is obvious that the Luftwaffe pilot and I were trying to kill one another, but at the time all he was trying to do was shoot down a Spitfire—an inanimate object—and likewise I was trying to shoot down a FW 190.”⁵⁶

The lack of hatred for Germans in the Eagle Squadrons went beyond simply avoiding shooting the pilots; many Eagles readily declared that hatred was not a combat motivator for them in the slightest. “I didn’t have that” as a motivation in combat, Roy Evans remarked. “That didn’t cross my mind,” he continued, “all during the war hate was

⁵² Donald Lambert, interview by Philip D. Caine on May 1, 1993, in Redding, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 46.

⁵³ Lambert, interview by Philip D. Caine, 46.

⁵⁴ James Goodson, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 23, 1988, in London, England (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 29.

⁵⁵ George Carpenter, interview by Philip D. Caine on March 3, 1994, in Paris, TN (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 21.

⁵⁶ Harold Strickland, untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 670, Harold H. Strickland Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 20.

the farthest thing from my mind.”⁵⁷ Morris Fessler agreed, as he noted, “there was no hate involved. I never hated the Germans.”⁵⁸ In his diary, Reade Tilley declared that “I do not and will never feel a hatred for the enemy and a ruthless desire to kill him”⁵⁹ Fred Almos claimed this mindset was widespread across the Eagle Squadrons, as he truly believed that most of his comrades who survived the war never developed a hatred for the Germans.⁶⁰

Even as prisoners of war, a circumstance in which hatred of the enemy would certainly be heightened, the Eagles harbored no ill will towards their captors. Jackson Mahon’s experience as a prisoner resulted in a complete lack of hatred for his enemy. In fact, after German pilots “one after another tried to buy me drinks, trade wings,” and even “slip me glasses of champagne” while in transport to a prisoner camp, Mahon noted that “I was beginning to wonder why we fought the Germans at all.”⁶¹ Additionally, Paul Ellington lauded his captors as “very professional soldiers.”⁶² As a whole, virtually every prisoner-of-war Eagle attested to the good treatment they received by men they did not perceive as evil or worthy of hatred.

⁵⁷ Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14.

⁵⁸ Morris Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 22.

⁵⁹ Reade Tilley, diary of Reade Tilley, April 20, 1942, MS 58, Reade F. Tilley Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 7.

⁶⁰ Almos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 8.

⁶¹ Jackson Mahon, untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 784, Philip D. Caine Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 6.

⁶² Paul Ellington, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 19, 1994, in Slidell, LA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 36.

It is evident that two major combat motivators—primary group cohesion and hatred of the enemy—were largely absent in the Eagle Squadrons. Perhaps their absence can be attributed to the nature of the Eagles themselves. After all, both motivators are naturally-occurring phenomena, and the Eagles could have simply found themselves outside of such conditions that were conducive the formation of primary groups and hatred of the enemy. There are three additional common combat motivators, however, that are more man-made in nature. Ultimately though, these factors of training, discipline, and leadership, found an uneven presence in the Eagles’ overall combat motivation.

In *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, James McPherson’s study of soldier motivation in the American Civil War, he asserted that “the traditional means of motivating soldiers to fight are training, discipline, and leadership.”⁶³ Training provides soldiers with the skills and mindset necessary to perform their duty. Properly trained soldiers, therefore, are more likely to overcome fear on the battlefield, as they can rely upon their combat and military training. Similarly, disciplined soldiers are more likely to steel themselves through combat, as their obedience to orders facilitates the accomplishment of the mission. Tying everything together, adept leadership reinforces training and instills discipline. Strong leadership on the battlefield has provided soldiers with an invaluable source of combat motivation since time immemorial. Given the absence of both primary group cohesion and a hatred of the enemy, it would reason that perhaps these three factors formed the core of the Eagles’ combat motivation.

⁶³ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.

The results are mixed, however, as both training and discipline were nonfactors in the Eagles' combat motivation, but leadership played a very significant role.

To learn the skills required to successfully perform the combat duties of a fighter pilot, the Eagles underwent a two-part training process. In the first, they received “refresher” training in smaller aircraft, such as AT-6s and PT-17s. This training, facilitated by the Clayton Knight Committee, ranged anywhere from thirty to 150 hours and took place in various aeronautical academies in the United States. The Eagles who volunteered via the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) completed an analogous form of training in Canada, but a few such Eagles were fortunate enough to benefit from additional RCAF-supplied training there.

From this refresher training, the Eagles arrived in Great Britain, where they began fighter-pilot-focused training in Hurricanes and Spitfires—what the RAF called operational training. Organized into Operational Training Units (OTUs), this training not only introduced prospective RAF pilots to flying high-powered, military aircraft, but also taught them how to operate such aircraft as a weapon of war. For fighter pilots, this training was the most critical, as it introduced them to the Hurricanes and Spitfire they were to fly in combat, as well as tactics and weapons they would employ.

Across both phases of training, the Eagles widely attested to its overall inadequacy. For example, since most Eagles possessed an above-average amount of flying time, their refresher training was exactly as described—a refresher. As a result, they were quickly rushed through this phase of training. Richard Moore of No. 71 said that his AT-6 instructor pilot flew the entirety of his refresher training check ride for him before, inexplicably, giving Moore a passing grade. “We went back and landed and he

put the undercarriage down, he put the flaps down, he put everything down. I didn't touch a goddamned thing in there. It's just one of these things where I didn't want to interrupt their training program. So anyhow he said, 'Oh, you did very well. I'll give you a passing grade.'”⁶⁴

Where the Eagles were truly deprived of training's value to combat motivation was in their OTUs. Though the Eagles were experienced civilian pilots, their operational training revealed the massive chasm that exists between casual civilian flying and higher-stakes military flying. As George Sperry of No. 133 learned, flying high-powered military aircraft with a focused mission was vastly different than “weekend flying jaunts back in California.”⁶⁵ He noted that “flying fighters called for a cold, reasoned observation and assessment of maneuvers, so as not to exceed the design limitations of the aircraft, and a much more accurate piloting of the aircraft” than his previous civilian flying demanded.⁶⁶ “Prior to arrival in England my six years of flying experience had given me a well founded confidence in my ability to do anything that could be done in an airplane,” he noted, but once in an OTU in England, “I very quickly discovered that my knowledge of flying added up to next to nothing. I knew how to fly, but I had a lot to learn about flying fighters, and the ‘why of flying.’”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Richard Moore, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 23, 1996, in San Francisco, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

⁶⁵ George Sperry, untitled memoirs, n.d., SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 8.

⁶⁶ Sperry, untitled memoirs, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

This “why of flying” to which Sperry referred often eluded the Eagles, as their operational training was rushed and insufficient—a byproduct of the RAF’s desperate need for pilots following the Battle of Britain. Gene Fetrow of No. 121, for example, remembered his training being so rushed that he did not even receive the most basic instruction for operating a Spitfire—one of the world’s highest-powered aircraft at the time. Before flying the plane solo for the first time, he was only told “Now, don’t heat up the engine. And that was it. That’s it.”⁶⁸

Other Eagles received a more gradual exposure to high-powered fighter aircraft, normally through instruction in the gentler Miles Master, but just marginally so. Marion Jackson said that his first flights in the Miles Master and Hurricane occurred “all in the same hour.”⁶⁹ LeRoy Gover said he flew the Miles Master for just thirty-five minutes before strapping into a Spitfire.⁷⁰ George Sperry remembered feeling “pretty proud of myself” after soloing the Miles Master for an hour and “figuring that within another twenty hours...I might be ready for the Hurricane.”⁷¹ One can imagine his surprise, then, after his instructor told him to immediately climb into a Hurricane. Despite his pleas for more time, Sperry’s instructor reminded him that “there is a war on” and “petrol was in

⁶⁸ Fetrow, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 16, 1993, 34.

⁶⁹ Marion Jackson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, in Aptos, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 17.

⁷⁰ LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, in Palo Alto, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 17.

⁷¹ Sperry, untitled memoirs, 8.

short supply,” so “with a sinking heart I climbed aboard the hairy looking Hurricane Mark I”⁷²

And even if Eagles received adequate time in the Miles Master, the transition to a Hurricane or Spitfire was still jarring. As Wendell Pendleton of No. 71 explained, “none of us had been in a Hurricane before or anything that approached a Hurricane in power. But we had to learn Hurricanes and learn them in a hurry. The most we had flown up to this time was a Miles Master with 750 horsepower Kestrel engine. The Hurricane had nearly twice that power.”⁷³

The minimal training in OTU, especially, was deleterious for the Eagles because the training that was typically cut out—in favor of simply learning to handle the high-powered Spitfires—was combat-specific skills, such as gunnery, basic fighter maneuvers (also called “dogfighting”), and intercepts. Without such training, many Eagles were unprepared for combat against experienced Luftwaffe fighter pilots. As Eric Doorly explained, “there were kids that got killed because they didn't have that kind of instruction and then we lost a lot of opportunities to shoot down a hell of a lot more Germans because we didn't have the instruction.”⁷⁴ Many Eagles cited the lack of combat training as the most glaring inadequacy of their training.

The Eagles said the RAF made up for this shortfall in training with “learning by doing,” once operational. Rather than employing a training syllabus, which Eagles like Robert Priser said did not exist, RAF instructors simply threw the Eagles into operational

⁷² Ibid., 8–9.

⁷³ Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” 19.

⁷⁴ Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, 37.

situations. As Donald Young explained, “go out and fly. That is how you got your training. Go out and fly in the clouds. That is how you got your instrument training.”⁷⁵ Though this was unfortunate, and undoubtedly led to many deaths in the Eagle Squadrons, most Eagles realized the exigent circumstances in which Great Britain found itself. “What are you going to do,” Oscar Coen of No. 71 questioned, “shut the war down for six months while they train people? They can't do that.”⁷⁶

Eric Doorly of No. 133 summed up most Eagles’ mindsets upon leaving OTU, when he said, “what I didn't know was what I didn't know. And what I didn't know was vast.”⁷⁷ With such inadequate training, it is doubtful that the Eagles were able to rely on their learned combat skills to overcome fear in battle. As a result, the American volunteers were deprived of an important source of combat motivation. To make matters worse, on top of the Eagle’s minimal flight training was a near total absence of military training.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of Eagles commissioned as officers in the RAF—only a handful entered the Eagle Squadrons as sergeant pilots—virtually none received any sort of military training. Given that even the most basic fundamentals of military training—such as saluting, marching, and recognizing rank—were foreign concepts to the Eagles, it would be unfathomable to assume military training played a role in their capability to overcome fear in aerial combat. William Geiger noted that “a

⁷⁵ Donald Young, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 14, 1988, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 41.

⁷⁶ Oscar Coen, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 19, 1994, in Baker, OR (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 7.

⁷⁷ Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, 12.

lot” of his fellow Eagles “had no idea how to stand at attention, no idea how to salute. They were just in absolute shambles.”⁷⁸ His fellow member of No. 71 concurred, as he remembered that RAF officers “had to show us” how to salute.⁷⁹ In fact, Nomis said the Eagles’ understanding of military customs and courtesies was so poor, their British superiors gave up and simply expected the Americans to “just pick it up as you went.”⁸⁰

LeRoy Gover admitted that he “didn’t know the difference between a second lieutenant and a sergeant or a corporal in those days.”⁸¹ The No. 133 pilot clearly did not understand the guidelines for addressing a superior either, as he embarrassingly neglected to salute the Duke of Kent, King George VI’s brother, when the two ran into each other in London:

When we got through talking and he says something about, ‘Good to see you’ or something and he stood, waiting for me to salute him and I didn’t have the sense enough to do it, I just stood there and looked at him. He stood there, I’ll bet for fifteen or twenty seconds waiting for me to salute him. So finally he turned around and walked off. Then it dawned on me that I was supposed to salute this general or whatever the hell, air commodore, whatever he was.⁸²

Harkening back to Chesley Peterson’s blatant skipping of the chain of command to remain in 11 Group, the No. 71 Squadron Commander apparently felt no shame over his neglect of the basic military custom, as he admitted to repeating the violation “in a

⁷⁸ Bill Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 3, 1987, in Pasadena, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 27.

⁷⁹ Leo Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine on August 31, 1987, in Sherman Oaks, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 12.

⁸⁰ Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine, 12.

⁸¹ LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on June 30, 1993, in Palo Alto, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 24.

⁸² LeRoy Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 25, 1993, in San Carlos, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 35.

couple of incidences.”⁸³ “I knew I could get away with it,” Peterson boasted, “I knew that they weren’t about to relieve me or anything like this.”⁸⁴ Though Peterson had prior military experience himself—he was an enlisted National Guardsman in Utah before becoming an Eagle—perhaps he was simply attempting to reflect the overall level of military training in his squadron, for he conceded that “none of my people really had any military training background as such.”⁸⁵

This fact further undermined the notion that military training had any bearing on the Eagles’ combat motivation, because on top of receiving little to no such training in Great Britain, scarcely any Eagles came from military backgrounds. William Geiger said that “with the possible exception of” Chesley Peterson and himself, “I don’t think anybody else had any kind of military training at all.”⁸⁶ Geiger was very nearly correct. Though a handful of Eagles attended private military academies—Paul Ellington graduated from the Ohio Military Academy, while Philip Fox attended the Peekskill Military Academy—relatively few possessed formal military experience. Ervin Miller and Jackson Mahon both served in the United States Navy, while Donald Lambert was a Marine, but these Eagles were outliers among their comrades. The average Eagle’s level

⁸³ Chesley Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, June 10, 1987 (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 5.

⁸⁴ Chesley Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 14, 1987, in Ogden, UT (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 16.

⁸⁵ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 4; Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, 5.

⁸⁶ Bill Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 21, 1993, in Pasadena, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 61.

of military training was represented in a story from Edwin Taylor, who remember that some of his comrades “saluted doormen, all kinds of funny things.”⁸⁷

From military training comes discipline and, given the lack of the former within the Eagle Squadrons, it should be no surprise that the latter was sorely deficient as well. The Eagles were frequently labelled as “undisciplined,” even by those among their ranks. Chesley Peterson admitted that he and his fellow Eagles “did have a reputation of sort of being renegades I guess to a certain extent and undisciplined”⁸⁸ Fred Almos of No. 121 advanced that thought, as he estimated “that 80 percent of the Eagle Squadrons were a group of renegades anyway.”⁸⁹ George Sperry boasted that “most of the pilots assumed the attitude that ‘every nite is Saturday nite and Saturday nite is New Years eve’”⁹⁰ Robert Priser remarked that the Americans in the OTU class prior to his had been “so undisciplined and unmilitary” that they made his class receive full-scale officer training. “For half a day, for a month,” Priser explained, “we marched with the Royal Air Force Bureau, which was the same as the British Army Bureau. And the other half of the day we studied King's regulations and lectures and classes.”⁹¹

Many Eagles noted that their charges of lacking discipline came mostly in the beginning of the No. 71's existence, but before the Clayton Knight Committee began

⁸⁷ Edwin Taylor, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 20, 1993, in San Clemente, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 29.

⁸⁸ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 28.

⁸⁹ Almos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 6.

⁹⁰ George Sperry, “Squadron Life,” n.d., SMS 1210, George O. Sperry Collection, Clark Special Collections Branch, United States Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, CO, 1.

⁹¹ Robert Priser, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in Las Vegas, NV (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 13.

regularly producing pilot candidates for the RAF. This time period constituted, roughly, the last quarter of 1940. Given that the Clayton Knight Committee did not exist in full force, most No. 71 pilots were recruited by Charles Sweeny, the soldier of fortune who did not institute the Clayton Knight Committee's screening process. As a result, many Eagle Squadron pilots of the time were more adventure-focused than duty-focused.

William Geiger was one such early Eagle and he remembered discipline issues becoming so severe that the RAF considered disbanding the all-American volunteer squadron. No. 71 "got a bad reputation at that time," Geiger admitted, "guys were raising hell and getting drunk and not really doing anything for the war effort to be perfectly blunt about it. Some of them wanted to, some of them didn't. I think the British got to a point where they were either going to use us or they were going to kick us out and send us all home."⁹² Gus Daymond, one of Geiger's No. 71 comrades during the same early period, remembered that "the Brits were somewhat appalled at our lack of discipline" at that time. "We were supposed to be more like Englishman," he continued, "we weren't supposed to stay up half the night playing ping pong and snooker and poker or whatever."⁹³

One indication of the Eagles' lack of discipline could be seen in their excessive drinking. While Fonzo Smith believed it to be rooted in the stress of wartime—"they were young and I guess they thought, 'I am here today and I might not be tomorrow'"—other Eagles considered their alcoholic consumption to be a reflection of their

⁹² Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 3, 1987, 22.

⁹³ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 15.

undisciplined natures. For example, it is a well-known rule in aviation that pilots do not consume alcohol twelve hours prior to flying—the so-called twelve hours “bottle to throttle”—but Eric Doorly remembered operating a Spitfire after having “five or six beers” the night before.⁹⁴ Carroll McColpin estimated that “a third” of all members of the Eagle Squadrons “ran around a lot and drank quite a bit.”⁹⁵ Given that McColpin was one of just two Eagles to serve in all three Eagle Squadrons, it would stand that his estimate was fairly accurate. After (unsuccessfully) completing a challenge to “drink 21 double Scotch drinks without passing out,” Wendell Pendleton flew a dawn patrol the following day. “By the time the trip was half-over I was all right,” he remembered, but “I’m still a total blank as to what happened during the first half of that patrol.”⁹⁶

In addition to their lack of discipline on the ground, many Eagles similarly displayed unruly behavior in the air. For example, Eric Doorly noted that William Daley of No. 121, on a £5 bet, snap rolled a Spitfire—a maneuver that, if done incorrectly, could damage an aircraft’s structure.⁹⁷ Chesley Peterson remembered one Eagle who “absolutely insisted that he could land a Spitfire out of a loop. He tried and he tried and he tried. He never did quite make it but he lived through it.”⁹⁸ Such a maneuver would be unheard of even at an airshow. Undisciplined as they were, both on the ground and in the

⁹⁴ Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 15, 1988, 23.

⁹⁵ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, 24.

⁹⁶ Pendleton, “Arrival in England,” 24–25.

⁹⁷ Eric Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 12, 1993, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 28.

⁹⁸ Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 43.

air, the Eagles still had their minds set on a goal bigger than themselves. As Carroll McColpin explained, “the attitude was ‘we are not here to march around and so forth; we are here to fight a war. We are pilots and we are going to do it that way.’”⁹⁹ What likely erased the negative aspects of the Eagles’ lack of training and discipline was the existence of excellent leadership—a benefit which many Eagles readily cited.

Virtually every Eagle attested to the superb quality of leadership within the Eagle Squadrons—both English and American. Leadership was especially relevant within the Eagle Squadrons because, to offset the American volunteers’ minimal training, the RAF manned No. 71, 121, and 133 with some of its most experienced officers—an advantage, Carroll McColpin noted, “that some of the English Squadrons didn’t get.” The RAF, he continued, “picked their best people, with the choices they had, to lead us and try to form us into a squadron so we would be effective. They gave us some good squadron commanders and good flight commanders.”¹⁰⁰ Reade Tilley agreed with McColpin’s assessment, as he noted that in No. 121 “we had a squadron commander, two flight commanders, between them they had about 20 victories and about four or five RAF decorations and they had flown the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain.”¹⁰¹ No. 71’s British officer corps was just as experienced. For example, Royce Wilkinson—a flight commander in No. 71 and, later, No. 121—was a Battle of Britain veteran with nine kills

⁹⁹ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰¹ Reade Tilley, interview by unknown party on unknown date, in Maxwell Air Force Base, AL (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3.

to his name before joining the Eagle Squadrons.¹⁰² McColpin, no novice pilot himself, said Wilkinson “was the most experienced and one of the best pilot leaders to have.”¹⁰³

Chesley Peterson evidenced the quality of RAF leadership in the Eagle Squadrons by noting the career resumes of his British commanders. “We have very good tutorage in all of the Squadrons,” Peterson explained, “for the simple reason that for the first three of four months, at least until they were well operational the Squadrons were commanded by senior British officers as Squadron Leaders who later rose in the RAF hierarchy.”¹⁰⁴

Royce Wilkinson went on to command at both the squadron and wing levels, retiring as a wing commander and Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE).¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Hugh Kennard commanded another RAF squadron after holding that post for No. 121, earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, and retired as a wing commander.¹⁰⁶ Harold Strickland concurred, as he wrote in his memoirs that the Eagle Squadron’s RAF leaders “were not only outstanding fighter pilots, they were, or soon became, outstanding air commanders with that extra dimension that is characteristic of the very best. I consider that serving in 71 and 133 Eagle Squadrons with these men was the highest honor ever conferred on me.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² “The Airmen’s Stories - F/Lt. R C Wilkinson,” The Battle of Britain London Monument, accessed September 7, 2021, <http://www.bbm.org.uk/airmen/WilkinsonRC.htm>.

¹⁰³ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, 14.

¹⁰⁵ “The Airmen’s Stories - F/Lt. R C Wilkinson.”

¹⁰⁶ “Hugh Charles Kennard,” American Air Museum in Britain, accessed September 7, 2021, <http://www.americanairmuseum.com/person/240516>.

¹⁰⁷ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 30.

American leadership in the Eagle Squadrons was similarly lauded by the Eagles. Three individuals in particular stood out among their peers as the greatest leaders in the squadrons—Chesley Peterson, Carroll McColpin, and Don Blakeslee. Though just twenty-two years old when he was given command of No. 71, Chesley Peterson exuded a maturity beyond his years. Countless Eagles touted his natural leadership abilities, even before he was named their commander. “He was our de facto leader,” said Gus Daymond, a later commander of No. 71.¹⁰⁸ “He was the one who stood up and made a lot of things happen,” he continued.¹⁰⁹ William Geiger said that Peterson “had that leadership quality that some people never acquire. I think Pete was probably born with it...people did things for him because they wanted to.”¹¹⁰ Leo Nomis agreed, as he described Peterson as a “born leader.”¹¹¹

As great as a leader Peterson was, some Eagles preferred Carroll McColpin. Don Nee said that the No. 133 commander “was the best leader in my opinion.”¹¹² McColpin’s mission-first mindset and immense flying experience endeared him to his subordinates. “Mac proved himself,” said Eric Doorly, “he was an excellent pilot and leader.”¹¹³ McColpin’s leadership qualities were so profound that William Slade believed if he had not been in London completing his transfer to the USAAF while the rest of No. 133 flew

¹⁰⁸ Daymond, interview by Philip D. Caine, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 31–32.

¹¹⁰ Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 21, 1993, 60.

¹¹¹ Nomis, interview by Philip D. Caine, 29.

¹¹² Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine, 54.

¹¹³ Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 12, 1993, 56.

the doomed Morlaix Raid, the disaster would have been averted. “I don't think it would have happened if Mac had been there,” explained Slade, “because he would have thought about what was happening and where they were going. He was a good leader.”¹¹⁴

Don Blakeslee rounded out the trio of exemplary Eagle Squadron leaders. Widely regarded as one of the greatest pilots of World War II—even by those with no affiliation with the Eagle Squadrons—Blakeslee “was absolutely the greatest” leader, according to Steve Pisanos.¹¹⁵ Though the No. 133 commander retired at the respectable rank of colonel, many Eagles were assured he would have joined Peterson and McColpin as a general, if he had been better behaved. “He was kind of wild,” George Sperry explained, “when he got drunk he thought he could fight”¹¹⁶ According to Gilbert Wright, Blakeslee “was a good leader, very good leader. He was an excellent leader. But he had a temper.”¹¹⁷ Steve Pisanos asserted that Blakeslee “would have had four stars...but he didn’t play his cards right.”¹¹⁸

While it is clear that the Eagles enjoyed superlative leadership in the RAF, the role of such leadership needs further examination to determine its effect on their combat motivation. The direct impact of leadership upon the Eagles’ ability to overcome fear in battle was revealed by their perception of what makes a good leader. For the vast

¹¹⁴ Slade, interview by Philip D. Caine, 46.

¹¹⁵ Steve Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 2, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 78.

¹¹⁶ George Sperry, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 11, 1987, in Pleasanton, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 21.

¹¹⁷ Gilbert Wright, interview by Philip D. Caine on February 21, 1994, in Niceville, FL (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 8.

¹¹⁸ Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 78.

majority of these American volunteers, superior combat-related traits—such as tactical proficiency, combat experience, and the ability to keep one’s subordinates alive—separated the good leaders from the bad. Non-combat traits, such as pure flying ability and a leader’s personality and disposition, mattered less to the Eagles, thus demonstrating leadership’s specific effect upon combat motivation.

Arthur Roscoe perfectly explained the primacy of combat leadership traits over non-combat leadership traits:

Well, I think without a doubt, leadership qualities were more important. Piloting the airplane—that came naturally. It's just like a hockey player playing a game, they're not thinking about how to ice skate. They're thinking of the tactics of the game. Flying the airplane was secondary. The leadership qualities and decision making as to, when to attack, is it right to attack now, do I maneuver for a better position or if I have any of these choices. It's decision making where it's important, more important than actual piloting ability. Many good leaders that I've seen in the RAF, good squadron leaders and wing leaders and things like that were horrible pilots. They used to make terrible landings and run into things on the ground. So, the two really aren't all that related, as far as I can see.¹¹⁹

This decision-making that Roscoe referred to was directly tied to an individual leader’s tactical proficiency. As Jackson Mahon explained, “instead of everybody going fifty different directions, all shooting each other down and crashing together” in combat, a good leader “organized it quickly” and oriented his men into positions that would lead to “a tremendous victory.”¹²⁰ Doorly echoed an appreciation of such mastery of chaos in combat. He admired leaders who had the “ability to keep track of what is going on without getting flaked up.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Arthur Roscoe, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 4, 1987, in Hollywood, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

¹²⁰ Mahon, interview by Philip D. Caine, 11.

¹²¹ Doorly, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 12, 1993, 56.

Additionally, tactically proficient leaders had to be aggressive. James Gray admired that the RAF promoted their officers on such a basis. “They emphasized aggressiveness,” he explained, “and you’ll see that throughout. The guys who got a lot of airplanes destroyed and ribbons got the advance to the, normally, to the higher posts.”¹²² LeRoy Gover expected similar aggression from his leaders. “If had had the guts when we saw an enemy” and “he’d go after it,” such a leader earned his trust and admiration.¹²³

Another indication of the Eagles’ preference for tactically skilled leaders could be seen in their frequent listing of an individual’s combat decorations. When describing their leaders, the Eagles were quick to highlight his medals and awards, such as the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and Distinguished Service Order (DSO). In fact, some Eagles broached the information, even when unprompted. For example, when Paul Ellington of No. 121 was asked about his first impression of the Spitfire, he replied “it was beautiful,” before immediately adding, “our instructors there were all combat veterans. Most of them had DFCs and a few DSOs around.”¹²⁴ Such decorations—awarded for skill and valor in combat—clearly mattered to the Eagles’ perception of their leaders.

Similar to a leader’s skills in combat was their experience in combat, and this trait mattered immensely to the Eagles. Edwin Taylor of No. 133 said his RAF officers “were good leaders and you trusted them because you know they’ve already had the

¹²² James Gray, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 11, 1987, in Dublin, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 34.

¹²³ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 28.

¹²⁴ Ellington, interview by Philip D. Caine, 4.

experience.”¹²⁵ John Brown asserted that British officers, despite being “aloof” and “reserved,” were trusted leaders because “you knew they had experience. When you'd fly with them, you could depend on them. They knew what they were doing in combat situations.”¹²⁶ John Campbell was pleased with the leadership in No. 121 because “all of them were people who had earned their spurs and had something to give. I had no complaints about leadership in the Eagles at all.”¹²⁷

Evidently, No. 71 was not so lucky, at least when it was first established. Oscar Coen noted that No. 71 did not become an effective fighter squadron until their initial commander and former U.S. Navy pilot, William E.G. “Joe” Taylor, was replaced. Though his military background provided the Eagles with a solid training foundation—“I don’t think we could have had a better training person than Joe Taylor was,” Coen admitted—his lack of combat experience stunted No. 71’s growth.¹²⁸ “He wasn’t a combat leader. Nor did he have any experience as a combat leader,” Coen explained, “you have a situation where you have a squadron commander that never fired a shot in anger. At that particular time he just wasn't it.”¹²⁹ Further emphasizing the importance of combat-experienced leaders, Harold Strickland noted that when No. 71 eventually

¹²⁵ Edwin Taylor, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 1, 1987, in San Clemente, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 14.

¹²⁶ Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine, 36.

¹²⁷ John A. “Red” Campbell, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 1, 1987, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 68.

¹²⁸ Coen, interview by Philip D. Caine, 7.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

possessed “air combat veterans,” their deaths were even more tragic than those from the rank and file because “their experience was lost forever.”¹³⁰

The third essential component of a combat-focused leader was his ability to keep his men safe. A leader who minimized casualties by avoiding unnecessary risks was quickly admired by the Eagles. John Brown appreciated leaders who grasped “the big picture” by emphasizing that “it's dumb to be up there with about 19 people after you and stay in there and fight.”¹³¹ He said that leaders with a “he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day” mindset kept their men alive, thus earning their men’s respect. William Slade said that a good leader “tried to watch out not only for himself but for everybody else. He tried to do things right so you would get the job done without taking a lot of foolish chances.”¹³² Likewise, George Sperry appreciated leaders who were able to strike such a balance between aggression and safety. A good leader, he said, had “to be aggressive but careful. He doesn't want to lose all his people.”¹³³

Underlining the role of leadership in the Eagles’ combat motivation, when asked why Peterson, McColpin, and Blakeslee emerged as the finest leaders in the Eagle Squadrons, most the Eagles’ answers were centered around the trio’s combat leadership traits. Peterson, for example, was beloved by his men for his ability to keep them safe in combat. LeRoy Gover said Peterson “was the best” because of such consideration for his

¹³⁰ Strickland, untitled memoirs, 30.

¹³¹ Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine, 35–36.

¹³² Slade, interview by Philip D. Caine, 41.

¹³³ Sperry, interview by Philip D. Caine, 21.

fellow pilots.¹³⁴ “He didn’t lose too many men or anything,” he continued, “you know, he thought about people.”¹³⁵ Gover likewise appreciated Peterson’s tactical contributions to the Eagle Squadrons, namely in his decision to change attack formations. Peterson, he was a good leader,” Gover explained, because “he started changing things and having us spread out.”¹³⁶ Such an increase in the group’s combat effectiveness was an important combat motivator for Gover. Richard Braley based Peterson’s combat proficiency upon his experience and ability “to analyze an entire situation.”¹³⁷

Carroll McColpin also demonstrated an adeptness in combat that endeared him to other Eagles. Don Nee said that McColpin’s single-minded focus on the mission was what made him a great leader. “McColpin was a pretty straight-laced individual,” Nee elaborated, “I really can’t remember him drinking very much. He was all business.”¹³⁸ LeRoy Gover liked his proactiveness and team-first attitude in combat. “He would figure out maneuvers and get the squadron in position, things that some of the others never thought about, just go in and worry about getting out. But Mac always planned his escape before he went in, more or less.”¹³⁹ It would seem that McColpin’s mission-focused leadership philosophy—which he described as, “I always put to a guy what his job was,

¹³⁴ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 25, 1993, 55.

¹³⁵ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 30.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁷ Richard Braley, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 23, 1993, in Newport Beach, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 63.

¹³⁸ Nee, interview by Philip D. Caine, 55.

¹³⁹ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 29.

told him what it was, showed him what it was, and he better damn well do it or I got rid of him.”—provided his men with an important source of combat motivation.¹⁴⁰

In the realm of combat proficiency, however, even pilots as experienced as Chesley Peterson and Carroll McColpin paled in comparison to Don Blakeslee. Reade Tilley described him as the “greatest fighter leader of the war.”¹⁴¹ Philip Fox said he was a “genius” in combat, with his ability to “spot a German fighter clean out of sight.” He continued, “that’s why he was probably the best fighter pilot that ever lived.”¹⁴² “Don was an absolute wizard” in combat, asserted Richard Braley.¹⁴³ Even Chesley Peterson admitted that “Blakeslee was probably the greatest fighter pilot, fighter leader of World War II”¹⁴⁴ Donald Lambert said that Blakeslee was “much better” than Peterson or McColpin due to his skill in combat; he was “more aggressive and he was sharp,” Lambert explained.¹⁴⁵ Tilley expressed a similar assessment of Blakeslee’s attitude in combat, saying that he was “reckless, aggressive and relatively fearless. He never missed the opportunity for a fight. He was respected by everybody that ever flew with him.”¹⁴⁶

Braley attributed Blakeslee’s combat proficiency to his unparalleled level of experience. He claimed that Blakeslee “absolutely” flew more combat sorties than any

¹⁴⁰ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 28, 1993, 53.

¹⁴¹ Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 47.

¹⁴² Fox, interview by Philip D. Caine, 12.

¹⁴³ Braley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 64.

¹⁴⁴ Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Lambert, interview by Philip D. Caine, 19–20.

¹⁴⁶ Reade Tilley, interview by unknown party on unknown date, in Maxwell Air Force Base, AL (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 3.

other American fighter pilot—Eagle Squadron or otherwise. “No question,” he continued, “and he didn’t fly selected missions. He flew them all.”¹⁴⁷ Steve Pisanos, however, attributed Blakeslee’s skill in combat to his ability to orchestrate massive battles and still achieve high kill-to-loss ratios. He claimed that “Blakeslee was the greatest” because he was able to lead “70, 60, 50 or 80 fighter aircraft” against “300 or 400 German fighters” in the heat of combat and somehow guide his force to “down about 20” enemy aircraft, while only losing “one or two and not because of German action but because of mechanical problems.”¹⁴⁸

In all, it is evident that leadership played an important role in the Eagles’ combat motivation. This was revealed by their specific mention of combat-related leadership traits as those that characterized above-average leaders. Such general appreciation of combat leadership was supplemented by the Eagles’ specific admiration for Chesley Peterson, Carroll McColpin, and Don Blakeslee. Though all three were excellent pilots and men of integrity—save the latter for Blakeslee, perhaps—their true value to the Eagles as leaders was in their combat proficiency, experience, and ability to protect their well-being in battle. These combat-related traits defined their overall leadership philosophies and, as such, cemented leadership’s role in the Eagles’ combat motivation.

If leadership failed to motivate the Eagles in combat, they often turned to a simple sense of denial. Many Eagles, whether in their youthful ignorance or as a deliberate coping mechanism, believed that bodily harm or death would simply not happen to them while flying in combat. Gene Fetrow said that he motivated himself through combat by

¹⁴⁷ Braley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Pisanos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 40.

thinking “it was the other guy” who would be killed.¹⁴⁹ “I kept thinking,” he continued “bah, they're not going to pick me out. They're not going to hit me, there's too many other airplanes in the sky.”¹⁵⁰ William Geiger expressed a similar mindset, as he convinced himself on one mission, “no, I am not going to get shot down in the damn water. They just wouldn't do that to me.”¹⁵¹

Likewise, Bert Stewart thought death was a fate that only befell others. “I never thought I'd get killed,” Stewart remarked, “I mean it's always going to happen to somebody else, not me.”¹⁵² Reade Tilley agreed with Stewart's conviction, as he declared, “flying in combat is dangerous and people being killed. You always think it won't be you.”¹⁵³ George Sperry recognized the value of combat experience in increasing a fighter pilot's life span, so he mindfully convinced himself that he would not be killed in action in order to attain such experience. As he explained in his memoirs, he “always figured that if I negotiated that stage of overconfidence in being immune from getting my ass knocked out of the air, I would at some time be able to gain a reasonable assurance in my competence as a fighter pilot.”¹⁵⁴ John Brown believed that such a mindset was widespread in the Eagle Squadrons, as he noted, “you're indestructible until they start to shoot at you and then there's a question in your mind. Fortunately, I think everyone

¹⁴⁹ Fetrow, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 16, 1993, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵¹ Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 21, 1993, 43.

¹⁵² Bert Stewart, interview by Philip D. Caine on October 2, 1993, in San Diego, CA (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 10.

¹⁵³ Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Sperry, “It Started with Visitors,” 5.

normally has the attitude, ‘It’s going to happen to him, not me.’”¹⁵⁵ Philip Fox echoed the “indestructible” mindset that many Eagles adopted. He believed it was inherent to their duty title. “Fighter pilots in their own mind are indestructible,” he claimed.¹⁵⁶

Unfortunately for many Eagles, they were not indestructible, but such a mindset seemed to motivate them in combat all the same. When combined with effective combat leadership, this naively confident outlook created a significant source of combat motivation. Both extrinsically and intrinsically, the Eagles believed they could survive combat, so long as they relied on their battle-tested leaders and believed in their own good luck. An additional source of combat motivation, however, drove these pilots beyond mere survival. The belief in the same ideological principles that motivated the Eagles to both volunteer and remain in the RAF proved just as applicable in combat, as dedication to their cause motivated them to not only survive in combat, but to achieve their mission.

Where the abstract pursuit of ideas became concrete action was in the cockpits of their Spitfires and Hurricanes, engaged in aerial battle with the enemy. Combat was the realm through which the Eagles expressed their pursuit of ideological principles, so it should be of no surprise that the ideological principles that motivated them to enlist and remain in RAF service continued to motivate them while in combat. The Eagles indicated their ideological combat motivation by the sense of duty that their actions exuded. This was most evident in their direct attribution of duty to their combat motivation, their

¹⁵⁵ Brown, interview by Philip D. Caine, 27.

¹⁵⁶ Fox, interview by Philip D. Caine, 19.

perception of killing enemy pilots, and their focus on the mission at the expense of self-preservation.

Many Eagles directly cited mission accomplishment as a motive in combat. Such an ideological source of combat motivation is normally unusual among soldiers, but it aligns with the Eagles' initial and sustaining motivations. Philip Fox, when asked about his thoughts as he fired his weapon in combat for the first time, replied "it's what I was here for."¹⁵⁷ He understood that only by engaging the enemy in combat could the RAF achieve its mission. Morris Fessler exhibited a similar mission-focused source of combat motivation. The No. 71 pilot declared that combat never frightened him, so long as he remained focused on the mission. "I was never afraid in that regard," he explained, "I was pumped up. You are pumped up when you knew you were going to do the mission ..."¹⁵⁸

William Slade likewise overcame his fear by focusing on the task at hand. He remembered that he was "scared the first time that" enemy aircraft surrounded him, "but frankly, I went ahead and did my job."¹⁵⁹ William Geiger took his ideological combat motivation one step further. He said that, while in the heat of battle, he was more afraid of erring in his duty than of losing his life. In his words, "I wasn't afraid of what was going to happen. I said, 'This is what you are here for. I hope I do it right. I hope I can handle it right.'"¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵⁸ Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Slade, interview by Philip D. Caine, 39.

¹⁶⁰ Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 3, 1987, 23.

To keep his skills sharp, Carroll McColpin said that he only focused on the mission—combat flying—and avoided all other distractions:

I didn't go to the taverns and get drunk at night and I didn't fight with people and I didn't go out with girls, not that I am adverse to that, but I figured we were there to fight a war. It's a damn serious thing and you try to train and find out as much as you can, figure out as much as you can on how to do it best. I flew all the time. I flew morning, noon and night. I flew more than anyone else in the outfit and always did.¹⁶¹

Reade Tilley remembered that he was completely devoid of fear in his first combat experience because he was finally executing the mission. He felt “great exultation” in that encounter because combat was “why we were there, we were there because we wanted to be and we worked hard to get to that point and gee, we just couldn't wait to get there and we finally made it!”¹⁶²

Beyond the Eagles’ direct profession of a sense of duty as their combat motivation, others revealed such an ideological motive through their perception of killing enemy pilots. Though a necessary, if not essential, task for fighter pilots, killing another man was a difficult demand made of the Eagles. Their perception of such a task, however, not only further indicated their lack of hatred for their enemy, but also demonstrated the depth of the ideological combat motivation. This is due to the fact that the Eagles were driven to fight their German counterparts, not out of hatred, but out of a sense of duty.

¹⁶¹ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 24–25.

¹⁶² Tilley, interview by Philip D. Caine, 16.

Fred Almos said that shooting down German pilots “was a job. That’s all I can say. In other words, it was either destroy or be destroyed.”¹⁶³ Roy Evans seconded that thought, as he noted, “when I shot down a plane sure, I hated killing a man, but I didn’t get no pleasure or satisfaction out of it. It was just something that I had to do. He was on one side and I was on the other and you get into those situations and you have to defend yourself.”¹⁶⁴ LeRoy Gover encapsulated the thoughts of many Eagles when he said, “no, I never particularly felt too much about the Germans, except that they were the enemy.”¹⁶⁵ By viewing the essential task of their profession, with all of its inherent difficulties, as a means of completing their mission, the Eagles demonstrated their ideological combat motivation.

The core of combat motivation’s significance is its role in overcoming a human’s natural sense of self-preservation. So innate is this sense that some historians argue self-preservation ultimately becomes most soldiers’ combat motivation. In other words, soldiers motivate themselves to survive combat by doing whatever is necessary to remain alive. In *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945*, Christopher Hamner adopted such an argument in his study of combat motivation of American soldiers across the breadth of US military history. Hamner argued that since combat is not a universal experience, “a single explanation for soldiers’ behavior in *all* battle” is untenable, but combat motivation was largely rooted in doing what was necessary to

¹⁶³ Almos, interview by Philip D. Caine, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 10, 1987, 26.

survive.¹⁶⁶ In the Eagle Squadrons, however, there is evidence that ideological motivation eclipsed self-preservation as the dominating source of combat motivation. This can be seen in the Eagles' admiration for Don Blakeslee.

As it has already been discussed, Blakeslee was widely regarded as the finest combat leader in the Eagle Squadrons, but this near-universal assessment is all the more significant when one considers Blakeslee's frequent inability to keep his men safe. Many Eagles cited such an ability as an important leadership trait—Chesley Peterson was perhaps best known for keeping his men alive in combat—but Blakeslee, far and away the greatest combat leader of the Eagles, often failed in this pursuit. LeRoy Gover said that “Blakeslee didn't give a goddamn how many people he lost”¹⁶⁷ He remembered the time that “time he took 48 planes up and 32 of them were shot down.”¹⁶⁸ Carroll McColpin echoed Gover's criticism, as he said Blakeslee “was a hell of a pilot and a leader but he lost a lot of people.”¹⁶⁹

Given that Blakeslee's aggression in combat sometimes led to otherwise avoidable deaths of his men, it would reason that self-preservation-motivated pilots would despise him as a leader, but the Eagles exalted Blakeslee. Such a discrepancy revealed the depth of the Eagles' ideological combat motivation. Blakeslee's wholehearted focus on combat, the most direct means of accomplishing their mission in Europe, was more important to many Eagles than the increased likelihood of death that

¹⁶⁶ Hamner, *Enduring Battle*, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Gover, interview by Philip D. Caine on April 25, 1993, 56.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶⁹ McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 8, 1987, 24.

was sometimes accompanied by flying under his command. This subordination of self-preservation to mission accomplishment speaks volumes to the presence of ideological factors in the Eagles' combat motivation.

In conclusion, the strength of combat motivation in the Eagle Squadrons was readily apparent, as revealed by its members' overwhelming willingness to fly in combat—even though, as pilots, they had a feasible excuse to avoid aerial battle. Surprisingly, the most common sources of combat motivation, such as primary group cohesion, hatred of the enemy, training, and discipline, were noticeably absent in the Eagle Squadrons. The Eagles widely viewed close friendships as nothing more than a hindrance to the mission, as their comrades' deaths served only to distract them from their duties as fighter pilots. A sense of hatred toward their German foes was absent within the Eagle Squadrons—even among those held captive by the Luftwaffe. In fact, the Eagles held a considerable degree of respect for their adversary pilots. The negative effects stemming from the Eagles' lack of training was felt in two ways. Firstly, their inadequate flight training deprived them of the technical skills they needed to survive in aerial combat. Secondly, their nonexistent military training robbed them of understanding the military system of order and discipline. This latter effect was most noticeably reflected in the Eagles' rowdy behavior and chaotic flying habits.

What motivated the Eagles to fight lay in a combination of adept leadership, blind ignorance in the face of danger, and ideological factors. By defining good leadership in terms of combat-related qualities—such as tactical proficiency, combat experience, and the ability to keep one's subordinates safe in battle—the Eagles demonstrated the presence of leadership within their combat motivation. An easier means to overcoming

fear in battle, perhaps, was to simply ignore it. Many Eagles motivated themselves in combat by ignorantly believing that death would not befall them. Lastly, ideological factors, like focusing on the mission, were a source of combat motivation in the Eagle Squadrons. So profound were these ideological factors that many Eagles often subordinated their sense of self-preservation to their duty as fighter pilots—as evidenced by their admiration for the aggressive Don Blakeslee. Even if it risked their lives, combat was a means to an important ideological end for the Eagles: defense of Great Britain against German aggression. With lofty ideals like this in mind, the Eagles found their motivation in combat.

CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Royal Air Force (RAF) Eagle Squadrons provide a unique historical example through which soldier motivation can be studied. Due to its members' foreign military service, the traditional source of ideological motivation—defense of one's own country—was absent in the Eagle Squadrons. Despite this, the Eagles demonstrated a remarkable degree of ideological motivation, characterized by a desire to defend Great Britain against German aggression. Across all three tiers of soldier motivation—initial, sustaining, and combat—the Eagles were driven by such a motive.

As analyzed in Chapter 2, the Eagles' decisions to join the RAF were rooted in their belief in ideological principles. Though the world's premier historian on the Eagle Squadrons, Philip D. Caine, argued to the contrary, a desire to fly Spitfires and ease of recruitment access do not fully explain the Eagles' initial motivation. The first point can be disproven by recognizing the superiority of the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe. Apparent on both a macro and micro level, the Luftwaffe's relative excellence negated any argument that the Eagles joined the RAF on the basis of desiring to fly the world's supposedly best aircraft.

On a macro level, as evidenced by the credible assessment of Charles Lindbergh and the outcome of the Battle of Britain, the RAF was not Europe's superior air force. Supported by firsthand knowledge obtained from several tours of Luftwaffe facilities in the late 1930s, Lindbergh declared Germany's air force to be the best in the world. Given his worldwide fame at the time, Lindbergh's words certainly did not go unnoticed by the Eagles. In fact, many of them specifically mentioned Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic solo flight as the inspiration for them to become pilots.

Though England emerged victorious, the outcome of the Battle of Britain further demonstrated the relative inferiority of the RAF as compared to the Luftwaffe. Despite exerting deadly pressure on the Great Britain's pilot and aircraft supply, the Luftwaffe thwarted its own prospects for success by abandoning attacks on RAF Fighter Command infrastructure in favor of terror bombing London. Even the leader of Fighter Command, Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, admitted that the RAF was just weeks away from total collapse, but ironically avoided potential disaster with the beginning of the Blitz in September 1940.¹ Clearly, the RAF cannot be credited as the superior force in the battle when its survival was partly enabled by German strategic errors.

On a micro level, the RAF's specific fighter aircraft—the Spitfire and Hurricane—were outclassed by its Luftwaffe competition at the time of the Eagles' enlistment. Given that the American volunteers, and even Caine himself, admitted to such a reality, it becomes difficult to argue that the Eagles chose to join the RAF on the basis of its fighter aircraft inventory.² What the RAF had that the Luftwaffe did not, however, was a cause in which the Eagles believed. Such an ideological motive was far more powerful than a desire to fly specific aircraft.

Additionally, the Eagles were not overwhelmingly driven to RAF service by exclusion from their own nation's air force, the United States Army Air Force (USAAF). Though Caine argued that “almost all of them were either ineligible for entry into the US military pilot training program or had entered it and been eliminated,” such a statement overlooked the fact that the vast majority of such Eagles simply lacked the requisite two

¹ Korda, *With Wings Like Eagles*, 251.

² Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 161.

years of college. Rather than being declared medically ineligible—a circumstance outside of one’s control—these preponderant Eagles only had to wait two years to fulfill the education requirement. In all, 78 percent of the Eagles who were known to have been “turned down” by the USAAF fell into the college-less category of ineligibility.³ Despite having the possibility of USAAF service in the near future, such Eagles instead opted to enlist in the wartime RAF, a clear demonstration of their desire to aid in Britain’s war effort.

The depth of the Eagles’ ideological initial motivation was perhaps lost on historians due to its latent nature. In line with historian Peter Kindsvatter’s assessment of motivation within American soldiers, the Eagles seldom explicitly professed ideological motivation. As the commander of No. 71, Chesley Peterson, asserted, “deep down in these guys knew they were on the right side.”⁴ Even though “you still can’t get them to admit that they had any of these feelings on the war,” Peterson pointed out that “none volunteered for the Luftwaffe.”⁵

The primacy of ideological factors in the Eagles’ initial motivation was better displayed through their actions than by their words. This proved especially true in terms of their sustaining motivation—the focus on Chapter 3. While some Eagles readily professed a belief in ideological principles—for example, No. 133’s Robert Pewitt wrote to his mother, “I think I did the right thing in coming over because we are fighting for a

³ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, bk.

⁴ Chesley Peterson, interview by Philip D. Caine on September 14, 1987, in Ogden, UT (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 46.

⁵ Chesley Peterson, narrative tape prepared for Philip D. Caine on June 10, 1987, (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy Oral History Collection), 2.

wonderful cause and the more I see over here the better I realize it.”—they best demonstrated it through their fervent desire for combat.⁶

As the most direct means by which the Eagles could achieve such ideological aims as defending Britain, combat flying made up the core of the Eagles’ sustaining motivation. The strength of this motive was evidenced by their disdain for noncombat missions, such as convoy and instructor duty, and requests for transfers when combat became scarce. In all, thirty-four Eagles transferred to more active combat zones—nearly two squadrons’ worth of pilots.⁷ The fact that the majority of such transfers were to Malta—the strategic significance of which made it the most heavily bombarded location at the time—further underlined the Eagles’ eagerness for combat.

In addition to this combat-driven source of sustaining motivation, the Eagles were likewise driven to remain in RAF service by retaining a sense of American identity. As demonstrated in their specific desires to serve in an all-American Eagle Squadron and eagerness for the USAAF transfer, many Eagles viewed their British service in terms of American service. The experience they gained in the RAF became an important motive to the Eagles, as it would in turn benefit their own nation’s air force following their transfer in late September 1942. It would appear there was validity to such a belief, as the USAAF fighter group into which the Eagle Squadrons were absorbed finished the war as the United States’ top-scoring unit, with 1,016 victories.⁸

⁶ Pewitt, “Letter to Ruth Pewitt,” July 4, 1941.

⁷ Caine, *The RAF Eagle Squadrons*, bk.

⁸ Grover C. Hall Jr., *1,000 Destroyed: The Life and Times of the 4th Fighter Group* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing, 1946), 279.

Once in combat, the Eagles continued to demonstrate their ideological motivation. Traditionally, such motives in combat are subordinated to more immediate and instinctual factors—like primary group cohesion, hatred of one’s enemy, training, and discipline—but such was not the case in the Eagle Squadrons. In fact, these traditional sources of combat motivation were conspicuously absent. Few Eagles relied on primary group cohesion—which refers to the close bonds among comrades—to overcome fear in combat. Their deliberate avoidance of creating close friendships primarily evidenced this assertion, but any bonds that did form were likely shattered by the Eagles’ exorbitant 40 percent casualty rate.⁹

Additionally, the Eagles displayed minimal hatred for their German foe. A further indication of the Luftwaffe’s excellence, the Eagles readily lauded their German counterparts’ skill and professionalism. Even as prisoners of war, the Eagles did not express feelings of resentment toward their captors. Training and discipline likewise failed to play a role in the Eagles’ combat motivation. Across the board, the Eagles testified to the inadequacy of both their flight and military training. Without the technical skills to optimally perform in combat, nor the discipline and mindset to appropriately react to fear, the Eagles could not have relied on training to motivate them in battle. Stemming from such minimal training was minimal discipline. Especially in their early stages, the Eagles earned a reputation as “renegades,” who drank excessively and acted recklessly—both on the ground and in the air. As a result, such a source of combat motivation was largely absent in the Eagle Squadrons.

⁹ Caine, *Eagles of the RAF*, 162.

What drove the Eagles to overcome fear in combat lay in a combination of adept leadership, disregard for the possibility of death, and ideological principles. The Eagles' perception of good leadership in terms of combat traits—such as tactical proficiency, experience in battle, and the ability to keep one's wingmen alive—demonstrated the presence of leadership within their combat motivation. It was no coincidence that the specific commanders the Eagles overwhelmingly recognized as the greatest—Chesley Peterson, Carroll McColpin, and Don Blakeslee—were the individuals who best exemplified such traits. Additionally, many Eagles simply believed that bodily harm or death would not befall them in combat. This “it won't happen to me” mindset was widespread within the Eagle Squadrons and the young pilots convinced themselves they were indestructible to avoid succumbing to fear in battle.

Underpinning this all was the Eagles' belief in ideological principles in combat. By focusing on a sense of duty, the Eagles overcame combat-induced fear. This motive was evidenced by their perception of killing enemy pilots. Stemming from their lack of hatred towards their enemy, the Eagles perceived the process of aerial battle, not as the act of killing a man, but as the fulfillment of their military duty. This pursuit of mission accomplishment was profoundly underscored by the Eagles' admiration for Don Blakeslee. Though widely recognized as one of the greatest fighter pilots of World War II, Blakeslee tended to engage in unnecessary risks that could endanger his wingmen's lives. Despite this flaw, the Eagles exalted Blakeslee and loved flying under his command, thus indicating a subordination of self-preservation to duty fulfillment.

Only through a full-scale analysis of soldier motivation in the Eagle Squadrons does the unit's historical significance reveal itself. Using the foreign volunteer squadrons

as a case study, this thesis has demonstrated the importance of ideological motivation—especially with regard to sustaining and combat motivation. In *The Bayonets of the Republic*, John Lynn asserted that “for most soldiers, and certainly for U.S. soldiers,” ideological principles are “far from their minds” on the battlefield.¹⁰ The example of the Eagle Squadrons, however, represents a departure from the norm. As argued by John Lynn, S.L.A. Marshall, Samuel Stouffer, and others, primary group cohesion traditionally constitutes the major source of both combat and sustaining motivation, but the Eagles were driven to fight their enemy and remain in RAF service by the pursuit of ideological principles.

Moreover, the Eagles’ example demonstrated the potency of ideological motivation even when not in its traditional form. Logically, defense of one’s nation comprises the most common source of ideological motivation within soldiers. James McPherson, in his study of American Civil War soldiers’ motivation, declared that such appeals to patriotism “almost leap from many pages” of the men’s letters.¹¹ For the Eagles, however, defense of their own nation was an inapplicable motive. For one, the United States was not at war for a sizeable portion of their service. More importantly, however, was the fact that the Eagles fought under the Union Jack, not the Stars and Stripes.

Despite this negation of a critically important piece of ideological motivation, the Eagles were driven to serve and fight by related ideals all the same. Even if not initially motivated to fight for England’s cause, many Eagles noted the quick adoption of such an

¹⁰ Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, 36.

¹¹ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 91.

ideological motive once in RAF service. Such a transformation indicated the ability of ideological principles in war to transcend nationality. Interestingly, many Eagles retained a sense of American patriotism, which further added to the complexity of soldiers' ideological motivation.

The RAF Eagle Squadrons were a unique chapter in military history, unlikely to be repeated again. Their motivations were varied and complex, but their predominant display of ideological motivation across all three levels provides a valuable historical lesson. No matter the cause and no matter the country, soldiers will be driven to enlist, serve, and fight by the ideals which they believe to be right.

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