



First Light

Geoffrey Wellum

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"In First Light, Geoffrey Wellum tells the inspiring, often terrifying true story of his coming of age amid the roaring, tumbling dogfights of the fiercest air war the world had ever seen.

It is the story of an idealistic schoolboy who couldn't believe his luck when the RAF agreed to take him on as a "pupil pilot" at the minimum age of seventeen and a half in 1939. In his fervor to fly, he gave little thought to the coming war."

"Writing with wit, compassion, and a great deal of technical expertise, Wellum relives his grueling months of flight training, during which two of his classmates crashed and died. He describes a hilarious scene during his first day in the prestigious 92nd Squadron when his commander discovered that Wellum had not only never flown a Spitfire, he'd never even seen one."

A battle-hardened ace by the winter of 1941, though still not out of his teens, 'Boy' Wellum flew scores of missions as fighter escort on bombing missions over France. Yet the constant life-or-death stress of murderous combat and anguish over the loss of his closest friends sapped endurance. Tortured by fierce headaches, even in the midst of battle, he could not bear the thought of "not pulling your weight," of letting the other pilots risk their lives in his place. Wellum's frank account of his long, losing bout with battle fatigue is both moving and enlightening.

First Light Details

Date : Published May 1st 2003 by Penguin Books Ltd. (first published 2001)

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Author : Geoffrey Wellum

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Tim says

As was the case with Jack Curry's Lancaster Target this is a must read if the subject interests you. First Light is a fabulous account of the day to day life of a spitfire pilot during The Battle of Britain. He selects a handful of his most memorable experiences and devotes a chapter to each. Wellum puts you up there in the cockpit with his masterful command of language and fantastic descriptive prowess. Absolutely riveting and deeply moving from start to finish.

Jeff says

A fine memoir from the youngest RAF pilot to fly in the Battle of Britain. I enjoyed this very much. We get plenty of air combat descriptions, we get the whole story of his training, and we get quite a lot of self-analysis and reflection. He is honest about his faults, and describes his removal from combat twice without glossing over or ending the book prior to those events. I wish he would have spent a bit more time on his events after leaving 92 Squadron. He went on to be a Flight Commander with 65 Squadron, then ferried a Spitfire to Malta and spent time there on combat patrols defending the island and attacking Sicily. But the time with 65 Squadron and at Malta takes only 2 chapters at the end of the book. Perhaps he didn't make any detailed notes during those times. Overall an excellent book describing the Battle of Britain.

Tony says

Geoffrey Wellum left school at 17 to join the RAF, before being launched into the Battle of Britain as a Spitfire pilot at the age of 19. This is his beautifully and candidly written account of what it felt like to be part of a fighter squadron and to fly a Spitfire, the camaraderie, fear, confusion and excitement of flying and fighting, which eventually led to combat fatigue.

Andrew says

If you want an overview of the strategy and tactics of the Battle of Britain read Michael Korda's "With Wings Like Eagles". However, if you want a first-person account of a fighter pilot this is your book. Wellum doesn't give a good sense of how his squadron's work figures in the big picture but DOES give a good sense of what it is to be flying and fighting.

Pages 147-155 describe a dogfight in detail.

Pages 230-240 describe him in low overcast trying to find his way home -- with a failed radio. It means flying down on the deck and navigating the coast at 200'.

Finally in Malta, he succumbs to combat fatigue that's deep enough that a chronic sinusitis makes him unfit for flying.

Wayne Cochrane says

My second time through this book, having read it first several years ago. As good as it gets, and I've read many examples of this genre. The Battle of Britain, the deadly dangerous sweeps over France in 1941, and flying a Spitfire from a carrier with a short deck across hundreds of miles of Mediterranean to take part in the defence of Malta are all well described, as perhaps you might expect. What is special are the evocative personal details. Often when non-pilots write about combat flying they are focused on totalling the number of air to air victories, or other such indicators. When pilots write, and write well, as many have, they recreate for us their experiences on the ground and in the air relating to flight, not just fighting. For example, Wellum's descriptions of learning to fly are lengthy, detailed, and utterly absorbing. He captures the atmosphere of flight schools, and the feeling of students - the uncertainty, fear, exhilaration, and the reality of trainees sometimes dying. Equally well done are his descriptions of how utterly focussing, and sometimes frightening (not just for a few seconds, but for many minutes), it can be to fly in poor visibility, when neither the horizon nor the ground can be seen. Marvelous writing.

Mark says

The author comes across as somewhat of a twit (although a heroic one), but this seems to enhance the book's verisimilitude. He's not much of a writer, but his descriptions of the mechanics of flight in a Spitfire are very good. Does not discuss anything about Battle of Britain tactics, strategy etc. so is a refreshing (perhaps) first person account of being a fighter pilot there and then, only.

KOMET says

This is a very compelling book. As the son of a Second World War veteran of the European phase of the war, in reading Mr. Wellum's account, I want to thank him for helping to make real in my mind, the stresses that war places on you. In particular, while reading the chapter in which Mr. Wellum describes his chase of a Junkers 88 bomber in foul weather and his subsequent efforts to return to his airbase, I felt as if I were the cockpit with him, hoping that I'd get down safely and in one piece!

Having read other books by and about the famous RAF aces (Bader, Tuck, and Paul Richey), I recommend this book very highly. It's very well-written and will give you a deeper appreciation for the sacrifices made by the Second World War generation. Thank you, Mr. Wellum, for your service and for this book. There are many more people than you may realize who are grateful for what you have written. Thank you again.

Pete daPixie says

Here in 2010, being the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, Geoffrey Wellum was featured on a t.v. programme just the other night. I then remembered that I read his book some years back. I can review it now because of the deep impression it made back then.

The story begins as the dark clouds gather over Europe in the late thirties. Wellum joins the R.A.F. and is selected for fighter pilot training. The whole account is awesome stuff. From gypsy moth novice to that very first night flight and into the seat of a Spit.

As needs must the conveyor belt thrust G.W. into the front line of the summer of 1940 over the skies of southern England.

The account of Wellum's Battle of Britain is an incredible read, as all these true stories are, told by one of the few, who is owed so much by so many.

Skylar says

This is the best work in the genre of memoir/biography/autobiography I have read by or about pilots of the Battle of Britain. It is beautifully written, humorous and touching. It made me laugh out loud in places and also brought tears to my eyes in others. The most memorable aspects of this memoir (for me) were the sense of serene freedom enjoyed by the author whilst in the air during the pre-operational part of his training, the quiet but deep bonds of friendship between the author and his fellow pilots and the moments of humour expressed in snappy prose and quoted speech. However, and it is probably due to the author's modesty, I didn't get a good sense of his impending breakdown towards the end of the memoir, nor of his subsequent recovery. This would probably be more adequately expressed in the third person by a biographer. The various interviews with the author (available online) add an extra poignancy to this memoir in light of his personal struggle in later life. In the interviews, Wellum talked about the difficulties he encountered later on in reconciling this part of his life with his later years and I was eagerly awaiting his second memoir 'Twilight of the Few' but there seems to be some delay or problem in publishing it.

Kathy says

mumble mumble...this website has made it more challenging to select correction edition of book one is reading as well as the start and finish dates and I will soon throw in the towel with frustration...or not. I will stop logging books as being read and just hold off until complete. [Lightbulb!] (sorry to anyone reading this mumble)

This hardback book, checked out from my wonderful library, is the edition I did read. It is quite unlike any other World War II book I have read. This gentleman wrote of his own experiences at the age of 17 as RAF pilot in war action with a genuine and moving personal account from signing up to action. Although he wrote it years later without referring to a personal journal (since he had not kept one) the experiences are like a fresh recounting of some recent event. As he and his friend Peter ride the train: "We talk quietly, both wondering what on earth has hit us in the last twenty-four hours. This time yesterday we were with our course at Warmwell. I've very nearly got the same feeling as I had when they put me in charge of night flying that dreadful night at Kidlington. My goodness when was that? Two months? Three months? Time means nothing. It only seems a few weeks or so ago that I walked out of the school gates for the last time, but it can't have been a matter of weeks because I'm dressed up in a blue suit with a pair of wings on it. It's got a very thin stripe on the sleeve as well, just to finish things off....This then is yet another milestone in my life. I realize that, like leaving school, training days in the peaceful Cotswolds are over and I'm aware that Peter and I are going to be faced with total war in the air because presumably Churchill will fight on, and this Teutonic monster will hurl the might of his Luftwaffe on to this island with a view to invading. That's where Peter and I will come in, trying to stop him. I shall never forget May and June 1940. If I survive, that is."

Steve Switzer says

Excellent first hand account of 'boys' battle of Britain experiences as a very young fighter pilot

Malissa Mcdermott says

This book is fantastic!! It touches the heart, it is a true and honest account of a Veteran Pilot who served his country throughout the 2nd world war as a heroic pilot. It tells us his story of first becoming a pilot and being chosen among others to become one of the finest pilots who flew the spitfire. It is amazing I felt as if I were flyng the spitfire wow!! You must read this book....

Marc Stevens says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It was the first, first-person account I'd ever read of the Battle of Britain, and my heart ached for the author (the youngest pilot to take part in the Battle).

It was especially poignant to feel the author's loss of hope for his own survival as his tours wore on, and he lost increasing numbers of friends. You truly felt, along with the author, his utter devastation.

At the end of the book, after closing the cover, I burst into tears.

What a great work! Thanks ever so much for your service, Mr. Wellum, and for your retelling of same.

Marc Stevens

Grateful son of a Hampden pilot

Author of 'Escape, Evasion and Revenge: The True Story of a German-Jewish RAF Pilot Who Bombed Berlin and Became a POW'

Edoardo Albert says

This won't be so much a review as an injunction: read this book. That's right, stop reading this review right now and go and get hold of First Light however you can: buy it, borrow it, steal it if necessary (any writer in his deepest heart wants readers more than anything else, so if you can't afford to buy his work, he'll forgive someone who steals to read).

Right, got it? What, you mean you haven't bought it yet? Well, let me tell you why you should. Firstly, this book has moved, in a single reading, into my top five favourite books of all time. The achievement is all the greater in that the other occupiers of that list were books I read when I was much younger, unmarked, and could receive deeper and more lasting impressions from the books I read. But First Light has broken through the dull accretions, and the dullening, of age. So, if you would be young again, read First Light.

How has it managed to do this? Because it combines two things in a quite extraordinary manner. Firstly, it is the memoir of a boy growing into manhood while flying Spitfires during the Battle of Britain. As such, it is thrilling, humbling and intense in a way that very little else could be. (As an aside, the great Australian cricketer, Keith Miller, also flew fighter planes during the Second World War. When interviewed many years later by Michael Parkinson, Parkinson asked him about how the pressure of playing top-level cricket, to which Miller gave the immortal, and precise, answer: 'Pressure is a Messerschmitt up your arse, playing cricket is not.')

As a straight memoir, *First Light* would be a good book for the almost impressionist way it brings to life the stress and tension of being a front line fighter pilot during the Second World War. But there are many other memoirs of the air war. Where *First Light* becomes something quite exceptional is that, unlike most of the other memoirs, it was written many years after the events it describes, when Wellum, so young during the Battle of Britain that he was nicknamed 'Boy' by the other members of his squadron, had become an old man. What's more, he was an old man whose marriage had broken down and who had withdrawn from his old life.

First Light is the record of an old man looking back on his life and asking the question of whether that life was worthwhile. It is the record of humanity staring into the great unknown that awaits and asking, 'Did I live in vain?' There is thus, behind the tale of the young man growing up, the almost unbearable poignancy of an old man assessing his years and weighing them in the scales. This is what makes *First Light* so exceptional: youth recalled in age, and the great question of whether, when Geoffrey Wellum meets his maker, he will have anything to place in the scales to weigh his life as having been well lived.

Although there is an aching sense that Wellum himself is unsure of the answer, to the reader there is no doubt: that we live to read what you have written is testament to your life and its worth.

Thank you, Mr Wellum, for your life and for your book.

'Aussie Rick' says

First Light is one of those books that is destined to be remembered as a "classic" and rightly so. This is a wonderful book of a young man who joined the Royal Air Force before the start of World War Two and who later fought during the Battle of Britain and survived. Most of the book is taken up with his training as a pilot and the fighting during the Battle of Britain. However the book continues on to cover his role in Operation Pedestal and the fighting over Malta until his return to England as a tired and worn out pilot.

I truly enjoyed Geoffrey Wellum's story of his training and chuckled a good many times whilst reading about one thing or another. Mr Wellum has a wonderful way of telling a story and you can easily picture the details as you read his narrative. I found myself amazed as I read the book of how much this young man and his friends suffered in defending their country and their mates in the air.

This is an account that anyone who has an interest in WW2 aviation will be delighted in. It's well told, full of humor, sadness, and death defying flying and combat action. These men, as young as 18, flew one of the fastest and deadliest aircraft at the time and many didn't make it through the campaign or even their first mission. You read with sadness the loss of many good pilots and friends but still the men continue flying day after day facing terrible odds.

I really enjoyed the author's style of writing, he was witty, descriptive and came across with a sense of telling

a story with understated facts. He downplayed his own role during the Battle of Britain and I was really hooked on the narrative as it moved along at a cracking pace. I found it hard to put the book down late at night, which brought forth a moan from my wife about turning the lamp off or else!

This is a great story and in finishing I would like to add the following comment from a great historian about this book: *"A work of exceptional quality.....his prose has a passion and immediacy which make it compelling reading"* - Max Hastings.

He's not wrong either!
