

A city in the frontline of the Battle of Britain

By Jez Gale



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SOUTHAMPTON, with its vital docks as the enemy's target, was, well and truly in the Battle of Britain arena 75 years ago.

In 1940, with the nation's future hanging in the balance, men and women toiled 17 and 18 hours a day to produce desperately needed **Spitfire** fighter. Many of them died in two bombing raids in September that year against the Supermarine Aviation Works, as the Luftwaffe sought to extinguish one of RAF Fighter Command's main suppliers. The first of the daylight raids, on the 24th, saw 17 aircraft approach from the south and drop 29 high explosive bombs and one incendiary. The Supermarine works was lucky — of the 17 bombs which fell on the site, most landed in the, mud of the river, and there was little damage to the buildings. But some of the workers had ran into a' shelter beneath the railway embankment. This took a direct hit and most of those killed.

Many nearby houses were also destroyed with loss of life. The Luftwaffe tried again two days later with a much heavier force. At teatime an estimated 60-100 fighters and bombers flew high up over the west side of Southampton Water, then dived to 5,000 or 6,000 feet to deliver their deadly cargo. In spite of anti-aircraft fire, 60 high-explosive bombs were dropped west of the river and 80 on the east side, some of which virtually destroyed the main Supermarine factory and its Itchen-Annex up-stream.

One bombed scored a direct hit on a shelter, but it was unoccupied — with the experience of two days before vividly in their minds, many of the employees had run up the slope behind. Over 100 people were killed in the two raids.

The Air Ministry, in their subsequent account of the battle, described these attacks as “well executed and pressed home.”

Photographs taken by Daily Echo photographers at the time revive memories of scenes that were then part of everyday life. The Pirelli General factory chimney, now no longer a land-mark in a city of soaring buildings, stood out starkly against a sky in which duelling aircraft traced vapour trails over the docks. On Hampshire airfields, pilots took a well-earned breather as ground crews worked at high speed to refuel and rearm the RAF's Hurricanes and Spitfires as they were made ready to resume battle against the next vast wave of Messerschmitts and Heinkels.

The pilots, many of them youngsters in their early twenties and some still just teenagers were good marksmen. Hampshire had its share of wrecked German machines — a heartening sight to those who heard more than they could see of battles three to five miles up.

As “The Few” fought out the vital battle over Britain's towns and countryside. The people of Southampton in the streets eagerly and anxiously bought evening newspapers to read the latest scores not of the football and cricket, but of the enemy and home plane losses.