

Where Should I Put Them?

I have just taken delivery of two die cast models – a Supermarine Spitfire Mark I and a Messerschmitt 109, representing the aircraft which fought in the Battle of Britain – though, in fact, there were more Hurricanes than Spitfires in the skies in 1940.

I have a personal soft spot for the Spitfire because my first flight ever was in a two seater Spitfire – second prize in a raffle at RAF Manston, for which I didn't even have any tickets, but that's another story. It was quite something to fly out over the channel in a Spitfire and return to Manston over the White Cliffs of Dover.

While I was officiating chaplain at Manston, I was also chaplain to the Ramsgate and Broadstairs branch of the Royal Airforce Association. The duties included preaching on Battle of Britain Sunday – the Sunday on or following Battle of Britain Day which is 15th September. We would follow the service with a parade through the town led by a marching band and civic and RAF dignitaries to our club house where we enjoyed a few drinks and a reception. It would be my job to cycle on ahead and form a one man welcoming committee – not so much *after the Lord Mayor's Show* as in front of it.

Having to preach on this occasion annually made me very sensible of what the Battle of Britain means for us. When Hitler marched into Poland in 1939, the allies had no alternative but at last to declare war. A British Expeditionary Force was despatched to France and at first so little happened that it was referred to as the phoney war. In May 1940, however, the Germans invaded the Low Countries and France, the French Army surrendered and the British Army was evacuated from Dunkirk. The next logical step was Hitler's proposed invasion of Britain – Operation Sealion. In order for this to be successful he needed control of the English Channel, which the Royal Navy and the RAF had to prevent at all costs. There followed the Battle of Britain in which the Luftwaffe attempted to bomb our ports and airfields and also our munitions factories and civilian population in the Blitz. Fighter Command had to stop them and, over the long Summer of 1940, eventually succeeded in repelling the waves of German bombers so that Operation Sealion had to be cancelled and Hitler made the disastrous mistake of invading Russia.

It is almost certain that if the Battle of Britain had not been won, Germany would have had victory in the Second World War and the whole of Europe (like Poland in 1939) would have been divided up between the evil regimes of Nazism and Stalinism. So it is right to be thankful for that victory. It is also right to honour the extraordinary courage of the fighter pilots who took off on mission after mission, knowing that casualty rates were high and that living with horrific injuries was as much a possibility as sudden death. It is also right to remember other service personnel and civilians who all played their parts and the general population who endured the Blitz with a fortitude which no one had anticipated. It had been thought that civilian populations would capitulate under sustained bombing, but this has not proved to be the case. Human beings are more resilient than we appear.

But what to do with these fine models in my all already cluttered Rectory? The first place I tried was on top of a cupboard in front of a picture of Jesus and the apostles at the Last Supper. I had to move them. It seemed so wrong to display implements of war in front of that scene. Probably there are occasions when war is unavoidable and, as well as bringing out the worst in us, the challenge of armed conflict can bring out the best in human beings – courage, fortitude, endurance, loyalty, self-sacrifice –but war is never a good thing. It is not how things are meant to be. There is a more excellent way – the way of love – a way which we should never cease to seek in this world of sin and grief. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and it is for His Kingdom that we long. My fighter aircraft models are now on the other side of the room. The picture and the models both have their honoured place but my ultimate allegiance can only be to the One Who gave His life for the sins of the world. Roger Knight, Rector of Cuxton & Halling.

Christmas Services at St John the Baptist Halling:

22nd December : 3.00 pm Crib Service, Nativity Play & Christingles.
25th December: 8.00 am Holy Communion.

Christmas Services at Michael & All Angels Cuxton:

22nd December: 6.30 pm Nine Lessons and Carols.
24th December: 5.00 pm Crib Service, Nativity Play & Christingles.
11.00 pm Midnight Mass.
25th December: 9.30 am Family Communion.