

The WWII classic film *Reach For The Sky* immortalised the legless hero Douglas Bader. To commemorate the centenary of the RAF, the Mail salutes Britain's bravest (and craziest) Spitfire pilot

By [PAUL BRICKHILL](#)

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Douglas Bader was the living embodiment of the RAF motto, 'Per ardua ad astra' ('Through adversity to the stars').

He lost both his legs in a catastrophic pre-war flying accident and was told he would never walk, or fly, again. Donning artificial legs, he fought to overcome his handicap.

Though reluctantly invalided out of the Air Force, he returned to operational duties when war broke out in 1939, as Britain was in desperate need of fighter pilots.



Fighter pilot Douglas Bader is photographed at North Weald Airfield getting into a spitfire ready to lead a flight over London commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

A domineering, dogmatic swashbuckler of a man, he became one of the RAF's most famous characters — leading his squadrons in the Battle of Britain, devising new tactics that enabled the Luftwaffe to be beaten back, and encouraging the nation with his never-say-die attitude.

This was exemplified when, in August 1941, he was shot down over occupied France. He'd been riding his luck for a while, insisting on leading every sortie, driving himself to the limit.

His superiors ordered him to go on leave and a hotel was booked in Scotland for him and his wife to play golf. But he insisted on one last flight.

Here, to mark the centenary of the RAF this weekend, his biographer **PAUL BRICKHILL** takes up the story in this edited extract from the classic 1954 book *Reach For The Sky*, which was made into a film starring Kenneth More as Bader.

With a high sun and patches of low cloud at 4,000 ft beneath a clear vaulting sky, it looked to Wing Commander Douglas Bader like a good day for a fight. But from the start everything went wrong.

First, there was a messy take-off from RAF Tangmere in Sussex. Then one of his three squadrons went astray somewhere over the Channel and he refused to break radio silence to call them.

The speed indicator on his Spitfire also packed up, which wasn't helpful.



Douglas Bader was the living embodiment of the RAF motto, 'Per ardua ad astra' ('Through adversity to the stars')

He led the squadrons to 30,000 ft and, as they crossed the French coast just south of Le Touquet, he saw a dozen Messerschmitt 109s dead ahead and about 2,000 ft below.

They were flying four abreast and not looking behind. They were sitting ducks.

Bader said tersely into his mask: 'Dogsbody [his call sign — from his initials, DB] attacking. Plenty for all. Take 'em as they come.'

He plunged down at the leading four, picked the second from the left and closed startlingly fast.

Too fast! He'd badly misjudged. He was going to ram. At the last moment he brutally jerked stick and rudder and his Spitfire flashed past into the depths below.

Angry with himself for his error of judgment, he flattened out at 24,000ft and found himself alone, which could be deadly in this dangerous sky. Better climb fast again to join the rest of the pack.

But before he could do so, he was surprised to see six more Messerschmitts ahead, line astern, noses pointing the other way. More sitting ducks.

He knew he should leave them; repeatedly he'd drummed it into his pilots never to try things on their own. But temptation swept discretion aside.

He sneaked up behind and from 100 yards squirted a burst of gunfire at the back-marker.

A thin blade of flame licked out behind it before it flared up like a huge match being struck. The other Germans flew placidly on. They must have been blind.

He aimed at another Messerschmitt, 150 yards in front, and gave him a three-second burst. Bits flew off it and then it gushed volumes of white smoke as its nose dropped.

Instantly, two enemy fighters were turning towards him, and, crazily elated as though he had just pulled off a smash-and-grab raid, he wheeled violently in their direction, intending to pass between them.

As he roared by them, something hit him. He felt the impact. It was as if his Spitfire was being held by the tail, pulled out of his hands and slewed round.

It lurched suddenly and then pointed straight down. He pulled back on the stick, but it fell inertly into his stomach like a broken neck.

The aeroplane was in a steep downward spiral. He looked behind and was shocked and terrified to see that the whole of his plane behind the cockpit was missing.



*On 9th August 1941 Douglas Bader was shot down over Le Touquet. He was captured by German forces and sent to the Colditz prison. He remained there until the end of the war.
(Picture from the 1956 film Reach for the Sky)*

Fuselage, tail and fin were all gone. Sheared off. One of the Messerschmitts must have run into him and sliced it off with its propeller.

He knew it had happened but, even as the altimeter was unwinding fast from 24,000ft, he hoped desperately and foolishly that he was wrong.

Reality kicked in with a sharp gush of panic. Christ! Get out! Get out!

He tore his mask off and yanked the escape lever over his head. The hood ripped away and screaming noise battered at him.

He gripped the rim of the cockpit to pull himself up, wondering if he had the strength to get himself out without any thrust from his helpless legs.

He struggled madly to get his head above the windscreen and suddenly felt he was being sucked out as the tearing wind caught him. Top half out. He was free!

But no. The rigid foot of his right leg was hooked fast on something in the plane and holding him in.

The broken Spitfire, dragging him by the leg, plunged down and spun and battered him, the wind clawing at his flesh and cringing sightless eyeballs as it picked up speed to 400mph, then 500mph.

It went on, hurtling downwards, and all he could do was perch there, trapped in mid-air, timeless, witless, helpless, doomed.

Suddenly he felt the steel and leather of his artificial leg snap. In a flash, the brain cleared and he pulled the rip cord of his parachute, hearing a crack as it opened.

And then he was floating. High above, the sky was still blue, and right at his feet lay a veil of cloud. He sank into it. That was the cloud at 4,000ft. Cutting it fine! Seconds later he saw the earth, green and dappled, below him.

Something flapped in his face — his right trouser leg, split along the seam. Underneath gleamed the white skin of his stump. The right leg had gone. How lucky, he thought, to have detachable ones.

Otherwise he would have died a few seconds ago in the burning wreck of his cockpit.

He heard engine noises and turned in the harness. A Messerschmitt was flying straight at him, but the pilot did not shoot. He turned and roared by, 50 yards away.

Grass and cornfields were lifting gently to meet him, stooks of corn and fences. Two peasants in blue smocks leaned against a gate looking up and he felt absurdly self-conscious.

A woman carrying a pail in each hand stopped in a lane and stared up. He thought, I must look comic with only one leg.

The earth suddenly rose up fiercely and he hit the ground, feeling nothing except some ribs buckle when a knee hit his chest and his consciousness snapped.

He came to with three German soldiers bending over him, taking off his harness and life jacket. No one spoke.

They picked him up and carried him to a car in a lane, where he lay in dazed quiescence as

he was driven away.

They came to a grey stone building in the town of Saint-Omer in northern France. The soldiers carried him up some steps and along a corridor and lay him on a padded casualty table.

A doctor in a white coat stared at the empty trouser leg before realising it was an old injury, not a new one from the crash. He was amazed. He'd never come across a one-legged pilot before.

Then he eased off Bader's trousers and froze for a second time, staring transfixed at the leather and metal that encased the stump of the left leg. He looked once more at Bader, back at the two stumps and again at Bader, and said in a voice of sober discovery: 'We have heard about you.'

His left leg was unbuckled and taken away, a nightshirt was rolled over his head and he was dumped in a bed like a sack of potatoes. He fell asleep and woke in darkness wondering where he was.

Then he knew and sank into misery, black, deep and full of awareness.

He remembered he had a date to go dancing with Thelma, his wife, that night and longed to see her, feeling lonely and helpless without legs among enemies.

Back at base in England, there was stunned disbelief when Dogsbody did not return from the sortie. No one had seen him go down. He had vanished after the first dive and did not answer when they called him.

In the air, the other pilots had been chilled by the absence of his familiar rasping banter. Now, back on the ground, as the realisation sank in, a gloomy hush seemed to fall over the place.



The mascot once owned by legendary World War 11 fighter pilot Douglas Bader sits on the wing tip of an RAF Hurricane at RAF Coltishall.

The news that he'd gone missing was broken to Thelma, with the hopeful prediction that: 'He's indestructible . . . probably a prisoner.'

Meanwhile, over in France, Bader had visitors at his bedside — two young Luftwaffe pilots, curious to see this warrior with no legs.

They told him: 'Of course it would never be allowed in Germany.'

He asked for the wreckage of his plane to be searched in case his lost right leg was still there and, failing that, for a message to go to England for a replacement to be sent. It was agreed.

Later, an officer returned, clicked his heels, saluted Bader and said: 'Herr Wing Commander, we have found your leg.'

It was covered in mud, with a broken piece of leather still hanging from it. Bader unpeeled the sock and saw that the foot was bent away from the ankle and the instep smashed in.

Turning on all his charm, he said: 'D'you think your chaps at the aerodrome could repair this for me?'

They took it away and brought it back the next day, cleaned and polished and with the foot now pointing firmly in the right direction.

The body belt and straps which held it in place were beautifully repaired with good-quality leather. A dent in the shin and another in the knee had been carefully hammered out.

Bader was impressed and rather touched as he strapped both legs on, eased off the bed, feeling unsteady for a moment, and went stumping round the room, a ludicrous figure with the shoe-clad metal legs sticking out from underneath the nightshirt.

Beaming with pleasure, the Germans left. Bader lurched over to the window and looked thoughtfully at the ground three floors and 40 ft below.

To the left of the grass courtyard he could see the gates of the hospital, open and unguarded. His thoughts immediately turned to escape.

By now he'd been put in a ward with a handful of other injured Spitfire pilots who'd fallen into German hands.

The routine, they told him, was that, as soon as any of them could walk, they were taken away and transferred to a POW camp in Germany.

If he stood any chance of getting away, it had to be soon.

Working in the hospital was a French girl named Lucille whose sympathies, he gathered, lay with the British.

In his schoolboy French, he asked for her help and she whispered back that she could put him in touch with 'agents Anglais' living in the area.

When she came back on duty the next day she smiled and slipped a note into his hand. It read: 'We wish to help a friend of France. Someone will be waiting outside the hospital gates every night from midnight until 2am. He will be smoking a cigarette.'

But how the hell to get out of the hospital? No good just walking down the corridors and stairs. The guards would frog-march him back and he'd lose his legs again.

As he pondered this problem, there were two events that demonstrated Bader's fame even here among his enemies.

First, the Germans told him that the British were indeed sending him a spare leg, and Field Marshal Hermann Goering himself, head of the Luftwaffe, had approved it being dropped by plane.

Second, he was invited to a local air base by General Adolf Galland, a renowned Luftwaffe ace and clearly an admirer of his.

Bader was intrigued. It would be churlish to refuse, and in any case it brought a breath of the chivalry lost from modern war.

And it was a chance to spy out the country, to see the other side, life on an enemy fighter station, to weigh it up and compare.

The two duly met — Bader now back in his uniform — and chatted like old friends. They had tea in the mess, with waiters in white coats bringing sandwiches and real English tea.

He reflected to himself that it could have been an RAF mess, except that all the other uniforms were wrong.

Galland even allowed Bader to climb inside the cockpit of a Messerschmitt, which he did, hauling himself on to the wing and swinging in unaided.

As the German leaned in and pointed out the controls, reckless thoughts surged through Bader's mind.

What if he just started up the engine, slammed the throttle and took off? England could be no more than 40 miles away.

Longingly he thought he could get away and be back in his own mess for dinner, if only they would leave him for a moment.

But they didn't and the moment passed.

Only years later did Bader discover that, all the time he sat in the cockpit, a German officer was covering him with a loaded pistol.

Back at the hospital, Bader was given the news he'd been dreading — the next morning he would be on his way to Germany.

The words left him stunned for a moment before he resolved: 'Well, I've got to get out tonight then.'

He lurched over to the window and pushed it open. It seemed a long way down, and on to flagstones. If he fell awkwardly, with his rigid legs, especially the right one, which was amputated close to his groin, he could easily split himself down the middle.

He turned back and scowled round the room, until his eyes lit on the bed linen. Knotted sheets! That was the answer.

With his room mates, he stripped the beds, ripped each sheet in two and began knotting the corners together in a double 'granny' with three hitches, jerking tightly to make them fast and hoping they would stay so when the test came.

Then he waited for nightfall.

It was not quite dark when the door handle rattled and a German soldier stuck his head in and looked round.

Beneath his blankets, Bader could not breathe. The guard muttered 'Gute nacht,' and the door closed behind him.

Three hours passed before a clock somewhere out there in the darkness of Saint-Omer chimed midnight.

Bader eased on to the edge of his bed, vainly trying to stop the creaks, and strapped his legs on. Then his clothes.

Praying that the guard on duty outside was asleep in his chair, he took a step towards the window. His right leg squeaked and thumped with a terrifying noise.

At the window he quietly pushed it open and leaned out. With one end of the sheet rope tied to a bed, he lowered it out, hoping desperately that it was long enough, but could not tell if it reached the ground.

He leaned his chest on the windowsill and tried to winkle his legs out sideways. They seemed fantastically clumsy, more than ever before, huge, disjointed and swollen.

Sweating, he took a hand off the rope to grab his right shin and bend the knee. Then, somehow, he was through, legs dangling, hands clutching the rope on the windowsill.

He started easing himself down, hand under hand, reached a ledge and took a breather, then eased himself off and went on down. Very gently his feet touched the flagstones.

Piece of cake, he thought, cursing the noise from his legs as he headed to the gates.

They were closed, so he forced a gap between them, just a foot or so, and squeezed through. He made it, stepping out on to the cobbles of the road. On the other side, he saw the glowing end of a cigarette.

A dark shadow whispered urgently 'Dooglass?' in a strong French accent. 'Oui,' he replied, and the two of them moved off through the town, the clatter of his steel legs echoing into the darkness.

They walked for 40 minutes, Bader limping, his right stump chafing badly. The leg had rubbed the skin off his groin and every step was searing agony.

Stumbling and exhausted, he hung on to the Frenchman's shoulders until he was virtually being carried piggy-back.

Eventually, they reached a gate in a wall, went up a garden path and into a little, low-ceilinged room with flowered wallpaper, and a tin oil lamp on the table.

An old man and a woman in a black shawl got up from chairs and the woman put her arms round him and kissed him.

She led him upstairs into a room with a huge double bed. He flopped on it, unstrapped his legs with enormous relief and sank into a gloriously soft feather bed, thinking: 'That's foxed the bloody Hun. I'll be seeing Thelma in a couple of days.'

The next morning he woke refreshed, though his stump was raw and bloodstained and terribly sore. No help for it. Just have to bear the pain. Done it before. He strapped his legs on and went wincingly downstairs for a breakfast of bread and jam.

Madame had been out and returned with news that 'les Boches', convinced he could not walk far, were hunting for him around the hospital, but not here. He was nonetheless afraid for them.

If the Germans came and found him, he would be sent to a prison camp, but his hosts were liable to be shot. He should leave them and hide somewhere else, he told them.

They wouldn't think of it. The Germans would never find him here, they insisted. That evening, their son-in-law would come and they would make a plan to get him to the Resistance.

At noon he heard the familiar drone of Spitfires and Hurricanes overhead and went out into the walled back garden to look up at the trails in the sky. Soon he'd be back up there too, he thought.

He sat twiddling his thumbs as the day dragged on and he waited for the son-in-law to arrive.

Suddenly, there came a sudden, terrifying banging on the front door and a chill swept through him. The old man jumped as though he had been shot, whispered 'les Boches!', grabbed Bader's arm and together they stumbled into the garden, moving as fast as the legs would let him.

Against a wall stood a rough shed of galvanised iron nailed on posts. Bader lay down inside and the old man piled straw and baskets on top of him before hurrying back into the house.

Within a minute he heard voices and the tramp of jackboots by the back door. The boots clumped along the path and into the shed. He heard baskets being kicked about.

The straw over him started moving with a loud rustle. Miraculously the footsteps retreated, diminishing down the garden path. Elation filled him.

But now the boots were coming back up the path. Suddenly they clumped again into the shed, then stopped about a yard from his head.

There was a strange metallic clang, a movement in the hay and he saw a bayonet flash down an inch from his nose and stab through the wrist of his battledress jacket to hit the stone floor.

He guessed that the next stroke would go into his neck or back.

Bader jerked up on his hands, heaving out of the hay like a monster rising from the sea, straw cascading off his back. A young German soldier, bayonet poised, leapt back in shock and stared pop-eyed, yelling for help.

Boots pounded and more German soldiers clattered round him in a semicircle. Slowly he raised his hands.

A sergeant ran up and covered him with a pistol as he stood there, feeling like King Lear, with straw in his hair and all over his battledress.

Looking pleased and quite friendly, the sergeant said in perfect English: 'Ah, Wing Commander, we have caught you again.'

He stumped out of the shed and back into the cottage. The old man and woman were standing there and he stiffly walked past them, showing no sign of recognition.

He told the sergeant: 'Those people did not know I was in their garden. I came in last night through that gate in the wall.'

[His attempt to exonerate them did not work. They were arrested, along with Lucille, and sentenced to death. But this was commuted to prison in Germany, from which all three eventually returned home.]

He was driven to headquarters in Saint-Omer, where a German officer questioned him and got no answers. Then into a room where he was surprised and delighted to see the box containing his spare right leg.

They explained, smiling, that it had been parachuted that very afternoon in a long wooden box from a British bomber, and took his photograph standing by it.

Then, to his annoyance, they refused to give it to him. Instead, they sat him on a bed as an officer and a soldier stood over him with a pistol and a bayonet, and made him take down his trousers and unstrap his legs.

They took them away, all three of them!

They were taking no chances with Bader any more. He was taken by train to Germany, his legs placed out of reach in the overhead rack.

Bader spent the rest of the war in prisoner-of-war camps, but never gave up. He made numerous escape attempts and was a constant thorn in the side of his captors.

Eventually, they locked him up with the other hardened trouble-makers and would-be escapers in the virtually impregnable fortress at Colditz, from which he was liberated by the Americans in 1945.



Group Captain Douglas Bader DSO, DFC – he is remembered as one of Britain's bravest and craziest Spitfire pilots