

## Britain's secret German army

Meet the Second World War veterans who felt compelled to fight against their homeland

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**Sir Ken Adam, 88, who fought in the Royal Air Force during Second World War, was born Klaus Adam**

There is that wonderful line in Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* when the American president admonishes the Soviet ambassador and one of his Air Force generals for wrestling over a spy camera: "Gentlemen! You can't fight in here – this is the War Room."

It was Ken Adam who came up with the design for that simple but unforgettable set: a dark, oppressive, cavernous chamber dominated by a huge, circular conference table and giant, glowing wall maps marking the approach of nuclear Armageddon.

Adam is arguably cinema's greatest production designer – a knighthood, two Oscars and a string of Baftas testifying to his talent. The version of the Sixties we see on celluloid is, to a large extent, the product of his imagination. He gave us the Bond villain lair and the shadowy backdrops to the Harry Palmer films, *The Ipcress File* and *Funeral in Berlin*. Indeed, his is one of the best-known names in the film industry, so it is odd to hear him say that he cannot quite remember when he acquired it. Before Ken Adam was Ken Adam, he was Keith Adam; and before that Klaus Adam. The reason for the changes was survival.

Adam, 88, is the only German to have served as a pilot in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. As a Sergeant Pilot in 609 Squadron, flying Typhoon fighter-bombers on low-level strikes across northern France, he would have been put in front of a firing squad if captured and identified. Jewish-born but still the holder of a German passport, he was to the Nazis a traitor.

Some 10,000 men and women from Germany and Austria, Jews and other opponents of the Nazi regime, fought in British uniform. As "friendly enemy aliens" they could not be compelled to join up. All were volunteers, representing almost one in eight of the 78,000 German and Austrian nationals who fled to Britain before September 1939.

The King's uniform did not confer British nationality. Those who wanted to make Britain their permanent home were granted passports only after the war. Hated and persecuted in their homeland and treated with suspicion in their adopted country, they lived out the war in a kind of limbo, uncertain as to what the future held. What drove them was an absolute detestation of Nazism.

"I felt quite pleased about the outbreak of war," recalls Sir Ken. He sits in the small office of his Knightsbridge home, surrounded by awards and books on art, cinema and war. "I hated the Nazis and was absolutely convinced that I was fortunate to be able to do some damage to that regime."

Sir Ken is one of a handful of veterans featured in Churchill's *German Army*, a documentary chronicling this most curious of Allied contingents. It is 75 years since he left Germany but he still speaks with a soft German accent.

Born into considerable wealth – his father owned a well-known sports shop in Berlin – his family arrived in Britain with a few pieces of furniture and a Renoir. His father, who had fought for the Kaiser in the First World War, initially refused to leave his homeland but was persuaded to do so after being detained by the Gestapo. He died a broken man in 1936. When war broke out, Sir Ken was studying architecture and helping to design air-raid shelters. He joined the non-combatant Pioneer Corps in 1940 and the following year transferred from the Army to the RAF.

"I always wanted to be a pilot – I knew I was a natural," he says. "I was honoured to join 609 because it was a top-scoring squadron, very international – Poles, Belgians, everybody. I was renamed Keith but they knew me as Heinie. There was no prejudice, no discrimination. The only thing that happened, which was quite funny, was that, on one or two occasions, I was overheard in a pub or cafe on leave and the police were called. Someone thought they'd caught a spy."

The squadron had a tough war, before and after D-Day – low-level attacks meant high losses.

"I would see a friend go straight down into the ground and the first thought was, 'Tough luck, but I'm glad it wasn't me'."

In September 1944, the *Daily Sketch* ran a story on the RAF's German fighter pilot. "Looking back it was a bloody stupid thing to do. It could have got me shot if I'd had to bail out."

Below Sir Ken, fighting in the fields of Normandy, was another of the men featured in the documentary. Willy Field was born as Willy Hirschfeld in Bonn in 1920.

"I volunteered because I wanted to repay Britain for saving my life," says Mr Field, who lives in north London. A Jew, he fled Germany in May 1939 after spending six months in Dachau concentration camp. During his confinement he had witnessed men dropping dead from exposure after being forced to stand on parade for 60 hours in retaliation for the disappearance of an inmate.

"I knew they would soon come back for me, but if it wasn't for Britain I would have perished in the Holocaust. Some thought I was silly to want to fight but I wanted to do something; I wanted to get back at Hitler and the Nazis."

When the Phoney War of 1939-40 turned to disaster in France, attitudes to enemy aliens hardened. Churchill ordered mass internment and Willy Field found himself in the crowded, festering hold of a liner en route to Australia with 2,600 prisoners of war and refugees. Following a period of internment in Australia, he returned to Britain to join the Pioneer Corps, and in 1943 was transferred to the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars. The driver of a Cromwell tank, he saw action in Normandy and the Low Countries. In 1944, as his unit led the British advance into the Netherlands, his tank was struck by an 88mm shell. He was the only survivor from a crew of five.

"I feel absolutely British. I have been back to Germany – it is a totally different country. But I say you should forgive but not forget."

Mr Field, a dedicated Arsenal supporter, meets regularly with his friend Bill Howard, who lives nearby in north London. Mr Howard, 90, arrived in Britain in 1938, shortly before the pogrom of Kristallnacht. He was Horst Herzberg then; again, he was Jewish. On joining the British Army he chose the name of William Ashley Howard – Howard because he liked the actor Leslie Howard and Ashley because that was Howard's part in *Gone With The Wind*. In 1943, he transferred to the Royal Navy.

"My job was to monitor German radio traffic. The captain called me in and said, 'Now look here, what are your duties?'

"I said: 'Monitoring enemy RT, sir', and he said 'So you're fluent in German then?' I said I was, and he asked me where I went to school. When I told him it was the Hindenburg Oberrealschule, he said: 'Where's that?'

"I replied: 'Germany, sir.'

"He said: 'But you are British?' I said: 'No sir.'

"He looked bemused and said: 'I do hope the Admiralty knows what it's doing.' Dismissed."

Mr Howard is every inch the Englishman now. "We were in the American sector on D-Day and things went pretty smoothly for us, but on the fourth day the Luftwaffe suddenly turned up and started dropping bombs all around us. We were looking at each other and feeling worried when the hatch opened and a Lieutenant-Commander appeared. He was red-faced and I think he was drunk, and he smiled and said: 'I say, chaps, don't worry – I'm here,' and disappeared. "We roared with laughter. It was wonderful – no other nationality would have been like that. We forget it sometimes but, you know, this is a fantastic country."