

Australia's First Blood and the Battle of Britain

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An article by Kristen Alexander, author of Australia's Few and the Battle of Britain.



Kristen Alexander is a writer and researcher with a particular interest in Australia's aviation history. She won the Military Historical Society of Australia's Sabretache Writers Award in 2012 and 2013, and was highly commended in the non-fiction section of the 2014 ACT Writing and Publishing Awards. Her second book was included on the RAAF Chief of Air Force's 2010 reading list and her articles and book reviews have appeared in Sabretache, Aviation Heritage, the Journal of the Aviation Historical Society of Australia, Wings, Official Publication of the RAAFA, Britain at War and Flightpath. Australia's Few and the Battle of Britain is her fourth book.

The Luftwaffe had been busy in the early hours of 11 July 1940. It had already sent a number of reconnaissance aircraft over the British coast and attacked an eastwards moving convoy. It looked like there would be more activity on offer that day. Fighter Command's pilots were ready, including 26 year-old Flying Officer Richard Lindsay 'Dick' Glyde DFC, of Perth, Western Australia, who was on duty with 87 Squadron's B Flight at RAF Exeter, and, at Warmwell, 23 year-old acting Flight Lieutenant Stuart Crosby Walch of Hobart, Tasmania, who had already led 238 Squadron's Blue Section on a base patrol and was waiting in dispersal for the next call out.

Between 10.30 and 11.00 a.m., a large formation of 30–40 Messerschmitt Me110 twin-engine fighters, escorting 15 Junkers Ju87 Stuka dive bombers, set off from the Cherbourg Peninsula towards Portland, tasked with carrying out a follow-up raid on the convoy. Shortly after 11.00 a.m., Squadron Leader John Dewar, Dick Glyde, who was flying Hurricane P3387, and Pilot Officer Dudley Trevor Jay of 87 Squadron's Blue Section were ordered up.

The Ju87s dropped their bombs at 11.53 a.m. Blue Section was west of Weymouth, at 5000 feet. Dewar sighted enemy aircraft at 15,000 feet. Fifteen Me110s escorting Ju87s and another group of nine were on their way home and had not seen the Hurricanes. Dewar ordered the section to climb, veering south, so they could get in between the enemy aircraft and the sun. He watched as Stukas harried the convoy below, then saw another squadron's Hurricanes attacking the Me110s, which had started to form a defensive circle.



87 Squadron scrambling at a French aerodrome, 1939. Courtesy of Andrew Rennie.

It was just on noon when Dewar, Dick Glyde, who was Blue Two, and Jay obtained their position of advantage with the sun behind them. Dewar called the attack and dived. Dick, a veteran of the Battle of France, fired two deflection bursts at the nearest Messerschmitt then firmly positioned himself on its tail. As the Me110 turned slightly, he fired again, closing from 200 to 80 yards. 'My bullets appeared to be hitting him', he recalled after the battle, 'and both engines began to stream white vapour thickly'. The Messerschmitt lost power and Dick overshot 'but got in another burst as I closed in'. The West Australian veered away sharply so he could turn back onto the Me110's tail but was attacked from behind. Three bullets ripped through P3387's starboard wing tip and another tore a large hole in the rear panel of the cockpit hood. Dick then 'half rolled to avoid his fire'; it was 'a near escape'. The West Australian scanned the sky. His adversary had disappeared.

Dick had not seen his first Messerschmitt crash but was 'convinced that he was badly damaged and probably disabled'. Within five minutes of his first encounter, he saw a Hurricane engaging a Me110 at 6000 feet. He attacked as well, firing several deflection shots but to no apparent affect. Another Hurricane joined in. The Me110 descended to 3000 feet and fled seawards. Dick caught up and, as he closed from 250 to 100 yards, 'got in a burst which

produced white vapour from his engine'. Most of the rear gunner's answering 'bursts went wide, but one bullet made a long hole in the central panel of the hood and struck the armour plating close to my head'.

The Australian had had another close shave. Not so his target. 'He dived to sea level and I fired again from behind and slightly to one side'. Dick watched the Me110 make a 'controlled landing not far from a lightship, east of Portland Bill, and near to a smaller boat, which moved towards him'. He watched as the 'aircraft sank within 30 seconds... I did not see anyone get out of it'. When the victories for the day were tallied, Dick was credited with one destroyed and 'probably another'. This brought his total score, which included his Battle of France victories, to 3¼ destroyed, 1/3 probably destroyed and one damaged. While Dick twisted, veered and jinked, Stuart Walch entered the fray. At 11.55 a.m., just after the enemy bombers had dropped their load and about the same time his fellow Australian was ordered to intercept, Stuart and 238 Squadron's B Flight, who had been patrolling Warmwell, were directed to Portland. They arrived over the naval base at 10,000 feet. The enemy aircraft were at 12,000 feet and so, Stuart, who was Blue Leader, 'ordered aircraft line astern' and 'climbed towards combat'. When they were about three miles southeast of the base, Stuart, in Hurricane P3124, saw one Me110 diving towards a ship off Portland Bill. He 'ordered Green Section to stay above in case of escort fighters'. Then, just on noon, he and pilot officers John 'Jackie' Urwin-Mann and Brian Considine fired. The twin-engine fighter turned towards Stuart who cut loose 'two/three second bursts' closing from 'about 300–200 yards'. Urwin-Mann made a beam attack. Stuart fired again, this time from 250 yards closing to 50. As the Me110 straightened out, white and black smoke began pouring from its engine which then caught alight. The Messerschmitt plummeted. Stuart followed and 'saw it crash into sea'. Urwin-Mann and Considine confirmed the destruction, and, although the Tasmanian's combat report states that 'Blue One, Two and Three attacked in order', he was the only one credited with 'the squadron's first confirmed scalp'. At least one post-war researcher, however, attributes the Tasmanian with a third share of the downed Me110. It was his first victory.



Trophy from a Heinkel He111 which Dick Glyde 'had the satisfaction of using my guns... and scoring a few hits on". Author's collection.

Both Dick Glyde and Stuart Walch opened their Battle of Britain account on the 11th. But who was the first Australian to claim victory in the world's first great air battle? Their combat reports record encounters at noon but is it likely that both looked at their watches just as they fired, and noticed it was exactly midday? Such was the nature of battle they probably didn't look at their watches at all. Combat times were based on information from operations controllers, eye-witness statements both in the air and on the ground, and post-battle debriefs that took into account take-off and landing times. At best, they were only informed guesses. All that can be said is that Stuart's destruction and Dick's probable (followed by a confirmed victory within five minutes) occurred—officially—simultaneously. They thus share the honour of being the first Australians to draw blood during the Battle of Britain.

Until now, Australian participation in the Battle of Britain has received little attention. In *Australia's Few and the Battle of Britain*, Kristen Alexander provides an intimate perspective of the lives, loves, fears and combat successes of eight Australian pilots, as she follows them from childhood to death, and beyond that to commemoration.



A young Dick Glyde. Courtesy of Robert Glyde.



Stuart Walch in front of one of 151 Squadron's Hurricanes. Courtesy of John Walch