

# TRUE STORIES OF THE BLITZ

HENRY BROOK



In association with the  
IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



TRUE STORIES  
OF THE  
**BLITZ**

苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章



**First published in 2006 by Usborne Publishing Ltd,  
Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill,  
London EC1N 8RT, England.  
[www.usborne.com](http://www.usborne.com)**

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U.E. First published in America in 2006.**

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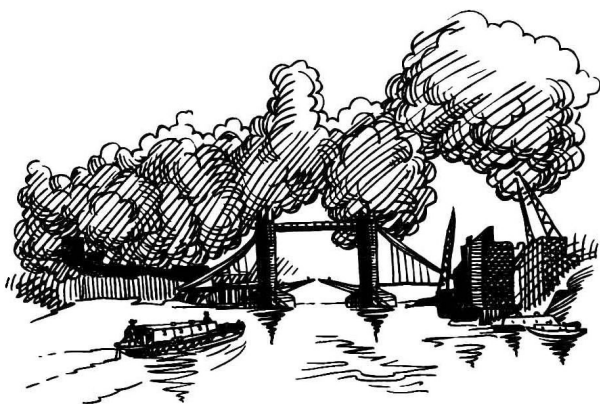
**A catalogue record for this title is available  
from the British Library.**

**Printed in Great Britain**

**Designed by Brian Voakes  
Edited by Jane Chisholm  
Series designer: Mary Cartwright  
Cover design by Neil Francis  
Cover photograph: Mirrorpix**

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# STORM WARNINGS



*A Stuka dive bomber  
dropping bombs*

On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland. Without any warning, they smashed their way across the frontier, using dazzling new tactics that relied on speed, daring and explosive force. This became known as *Blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, a phrase coined by an American journalist describing the German attack.

Blitzkrieg was a response to the static, close-quarter trench fighting of the First World War (1914-18). In that conflict, attacks involving tens of thousands of foot soldiers, known as infantry, sometimes failed to breach the enemy lines. Barbed wire barricades and machine guns could stop the infantry in their tracks. Instead of sending ranks of soldiers across a wide battlefield, Blitzkrieg called for an attacking force to use surprise and concentrated firepower to overwhelm their opponents. Supported by dive-bomber attack planes, paratroopers and heavy artillery shelling, elite



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German soldiers punched a narrow hole in the Polish frontier. Before the Poles could react, a motorized column of panzer tanks and infantry burst through – outflanking, encircling, and then crushing any resistance.

The Polish army was made up of three million men, but only about half of these were mobilized and ready for action. Their tactics and equipment were pitifully outdated and some of their best soldiers were in cavalry regiments, with a fighting tradition that stretched back to the 1400s. They carried powerful rifles and even machine guns on their horses, but were no match for the Germans' steel-plated panzers. The fighting was over in 28 days. Governments across the world looked on in astonishment at the power of Blitzkrieg.

Britain, France and Poland were bound together by a military and political alliance and news of the invasion brought a quick response from the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. He threatened the German leader, Adolf Hitler, with force, unless he withdrew his army at once. But Hitler ignored the warning and Chamberlain was left with no choice but to fight. Just two days later, at 11:15 on September 3, he made an announcement on the radio, confirming that the two countries were at war. Moments later, air raid sirens howled across London.

But it was a false alarm – a French civilian plane had flown off course over the capital. There was no sudden attack against Britain. Instead, Europe was locked in

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an agonizing, seven-month waiting game, while each side traded insults and propaganda, trying to win over a neutral America to their cause. The only major battles were fought at sea, as great warships swapped salvos and German *U-boat* submarines stalked Britain's merchant ships in the Atlantic Ocean. British newspapers called it the 'phoney war' or 'bore war' and joked about a '*Sitzkrieg*' instead of a lightning war.

But, on April 9, 1940, the waiting ended with the roar of a thousand guns. Hitler unleashed Blitzkrieg against Denmark and Norway. By May 28, his troops had overrun Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland. Only a month later, the Germans had occupied much of France, forcing the British army and its allies into a desperate retreat. In a dramatic rescue operation, over 300,000 French and British soldiers were ferried across the English Channel from the beaches around Dunkirk.

Short of equipment, bruised and tattered, the forces opposing Hitler gathered in their besieged island fortress. The British were relying on their Royal Air Force and, in particular, on its *Spitfire* and *Hurricane* fighter pilots, to save the day. Royal Navy warships were there to guard the English Channel against invasion. But warships are vulnerable to attack from the air, so whoever won control of the skies would win the battle for Britain.

German strategists had developed Blitzkrieg by combining their ideas for a fast-moving, heavily armed and independent infantry with recent advances in

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weapons and motorized transportation. They studied the work of British military experts, including Captain Liddell Hart, who compared motorized warfare to a lightning strike. Hart's ideas were largely ignored by his own commanders, but the Germans understood their potential. They were particularly interested in the role of the bomber plane, and how it might be used to bring a country to its knees. Events in the First World War had persuaded them of the bomber's awesome destructive power.

At the opening of the First World War, air warfare had been limited to slow-flying monoplanes making spying patrols over enemy trenches. But the demands of war often produce astonishing technological breakthroughs. By 1915, the Germans were dropping bombs into the heart of London from gas-filled airships known as *Zeppelins*. These droning, mammoth raiders only carried a small bomb load – the same weight of explosive as a single First World War bomber. But they had a catastrophic effect on people's morale. The British had always considered their island to be a safe haven, protected by the moat of the English Channel, so they were shaken by their sudden exposure to attack from the air.

By 1917, the Zeppelins had been driven off by British fighter planes and *ack-ack* – anti-aircraft gunfire – but they were soon replaced by huge *Gotha* planes dropping high explosive bombs. There was something alien and terrifying about these deadly metal canisters screaming down through the night sky.

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Thousands of people panicked and forced their way into London's Underground railway stations to seek shelter. Some even refused to come out after the raids. The local authorities worried that life in the city would become impossible unless they forced everyone to stay above ground.

Over 1,400 people died in the air attacks during the First World War, and British military chiefs speculated that, if huge squadrons of bombers could be built this time, they might demolish a capital city in weeks, if not days.

Throughout the 1930s, the Germans set about designing new planes for their air force, known as the *Luftwaffe*. In a move they would regret in the later stages of the war, Luftwaffe commanders decided against manufacturing a long range, heavy bomber. Instead, designers concentrated on building smaller, faster planes suitable for making sudden, precise attacks in support of their infantry. These planes could appear in the sky without any warning and spread terror on the ground with their machine guns and high explosive bombs.

The *Junkers 87 Stuka* dive bomber had first been tested in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). With sirens fixed to its landing legs, the Stuka made a blood-chilling howl as it plunged in a near-vertical attack, earning it a nightmarish reputation across Europe. When the Germans invaded Poland, the Luftwaffe was in control of the skies within two days. It was this air

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power that brought the Germans within sight of England, at the end of a staggering run of victories across Europe.

But, if Hitler expected the British to shudder and beg for peace he was mistaken. There was a new Prime Minister in charge – Winston Churchill – and he was ready to fight. Churchill warned his people he had nothing to offer them in the struggle ahead but blood, toil, tears and sweat. Their lives were already blighted by the war. Rationing of food, fuel and other goods was creeping in, as the U-boats tightened their grip on British trade with the outside world. Every citizen, including babies, had been issued with gas-masks in case of poison gas attack. Local councils removed road signs, to confuse the enemy if they invaded, and they extinguished street lights as part of their blackout precautions against German spy planes. But these hardships were nothing to the horrors the country would soon be facing.

The bombers were coming, rushing towards their targets. Their mission was to crush the Royal Air Force – its airfields and equipment – and seize control of the skies over southern England to open the way for invasion. If that failed, they would pound British towns and cities until Churchill was forced to surrender.

German bombs and shells had demolished about one fifth of Poland's grand capital, Warsaw, in a matter of weeks. Now London, the world's largest metropolis, was standing directly in the path of a Blitzkrieg storm.

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The British were expecting sustained and ferocious raids, by the mightiest air force in the world. People braced themselves for the bloodiest ordeal in their country's history - and they named it the Blitz.



# A HURRICANE SNAPS A PENCIL



*The badge given to  
members of the  
'Caterpillar Club'*

*Sergeant Ray T. Holmes was relaxing in a steaming hot bath when the siren sounded. It was the signal for every man on the airfield to get ready for action. The next instant he was pulling on the first clothes to hand as he rushed to the door. Holmes was a British fighter pilot, stationed at Hendon aerodrome. He knew that if his squadron had to 'scramble' – pilot slang for getting their planes off the ground – every moment wasted would be regretted later, up in the skies.*

*After months of aerial combat with the Luftwaffe, the pilots of the Royal Air Force (RAF) had learned a lot about survival. They knew how important it was to get into position and gain height on the raiders, and this all took precious minutes of flying time. Holmes was still dripping from his bath as he hauled himself into the back of a truck, joining a clutch of other pilots on the high-speed race across the airstrip towards their Hurricane*



## A HURRICANE SNAPS A PENCIL

*fighter planes. The other men chuckled at his appearance. He was wearing a casual sports shirt instead of his RAF tunic or flight overalls. But Holmes smiled and shrugged his shoulders. It was no big deal. The pilots were flying so many combat missions they had little time for rules and regulations. Some pilots wore thick layers of clothes to fend off the cold at high altitude. And who was going to complain about their dress, as they criss-crossed the skies at 10,000 feet, fighting to save their country from invasion?*

*By the time the pilots reached the dispersal area where planes were parked, the airfield loudspeakers were calling SCRAMBLE. Sprinting over to a hut, Holmes yanked his locker open, pulled on some flying boots and his 'Mae West' lifejacket, then ran out into the sunshine. A team of technicians and mechanics surrounded his plane, making their final checks and preparations for take-off. Holmes climbed up to the cockpit and strapped himself in, fixed his helmet, oxygen supply and radio cable in place, then opened the throttle. His Hurricane's Rolls-Royce Merlin engine roared into life. Moments later, the plane was streaking into the air.*

*Holmes had four minutes to prepare himself for battle as he climbed with 11 other fighters to intercept the German raiders. A coastal radar station had detected the formation of 36 Dornier bombers - known as 'flying pencils' because of their long, thin fuselage. They were loaded with high explosives and heading straight for central London.*