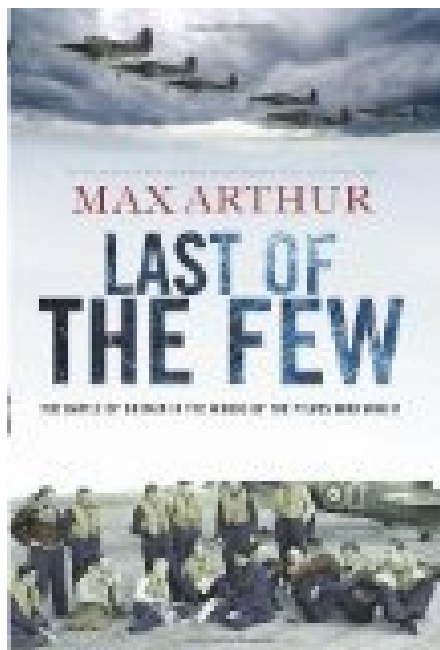




Last of the Few: The Battle of Britain in the Words of the Pilots Who Won It

Max Arthur

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After the fall of France in May 1940, the British Expeditionary Force was miraculously evacuated from Dunkirk. Britain now stood alone to face Hitler's inevitable invasion attempt.

For the German Army to be landed across the Channel, Hitler needed mastery of the skies - the RAF would have to be broken - so every day, throughout the summer, German bombers pounded the RAF air bases in the southern counties. Greatly outnumbered by the Luftwaffe, the pilots of RAF Fighter Command scrambled as many as five times a day, and civilians watched skies criss-crossed with the contrails from the constant dogfights between Spitfires and Me-109s. Britain's very freedom depended on the outcome of that summer's battle.

Britain's air defences were badly battered and nearly broken, but against all odds, 'The Few', as they came to be known, bought Britain's freedom - many with their lives.

These are the personal accounts of the pilots who fought and survived that battle. We will not see their like again.

Last of the Few: The Battle of Britain in the Words of the Pilots Who Won It Details

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D.M. says

To be honest I am not sure what to say about this book. I'm more of a fictional reader so I don't have much to compare and rate with, thus my 3 star rating (which isn't a bad rating from my perspective) but I do occasionally wonder outside my main interests, usually when someone buys me something or recommends it. Last of the Few had been sitting on the coffee table begging to be read so I did.

Last of the Few follows a very basic pattern; it takes "biographical snippets" of real fighter pilots from the Battle of Britain and places them in loose themes, following various pilots exploits from either events or their own personal events. At first I found this very jarring, the snippets can be a short paragraph long to a few pages. But after a while I did find it pleasant to read and very easy to read as well. You had incite into many of the pilots; it was interesting to read from one pilot who goes into technical detail about their dog fights, to others who just brief over it. There are some interesting facts that I never considered. I rather enjoyed it.

Michael says

There was a time, before America entered World War II, when the British fought absolutely alone. France and the rest of Europe was gone, Hitler had crushed all other opposition, the Russians were in a pact with the Nazi's and the British army had been evacuated from Dunkirk leaving almost all of their equipment behind. Hitler was planning to invade Britain to end the war in the west (he would then no doubt have crushed Russia). The only thing stopping Hitler was the Royal Air Force.

The RAF, made up of pilots from all over the British Empire, reinforced by pilots from the conquered countries of Europe, had to be eliminated before Hitler's invasion fleet could sail the short distance from France and England. These pilots were set upon by wave after wave of German fighters and bombers and performed brilliantly, holding the Nazi's at bay and foiling Hitler's plans.

What is really excellent about "Last of the Few" is that it is written by the pilots themselves, both the RAF defenders and the German attackers. It is the very personal story of how these men lived, fought and, in many cases, died. The heroism of these pilots and what they did during the Battle of Britain must always be remembered. Everything we have today is owed to the "Few."

Merlene Neville says

Last of the Few really opened my eyes to the sacrifice the British airmen made during the Battle of Britain. Thank you, Max Arthur, for writing such an important segment of history.

Jonathan says

As time goes on -our veterans get fewer and fewer, it is so important that we get their memories recorded for future generations. This should apply to all campaigns of war. For our island, the Battle of Britain was probably the one that could have gone tragically wrong and had we fallen under the cruel heel of the Nazi regime, we would not be here now. The book is as spoken from the pilots and personnel during the crucial battle, and the constant danger from aerial attack. It's not a story, it's actual fact, these events happened to peoples lives. We should be eternally grateful to them for our peace time.

Dan Ward says

It was an interesting read but very fragmented. This book tells the story of the pilots in the Battle of Britain mostly from the British side. However each section is very short so you keep coming back to the same pilots words at different times. This fragmentation of voices makes it hard to read but does provide many interesting stories of the battle.

Anthony says

Excellent account of this historic stand as told by those who took part. I appreciated that there were accounts from both British and German fighters. One of the few books I would consider reading again.

Alison Sendecki says

This is not a book you sit down and read cover to cover. There is no story line, just 2 - 3 paragraphs per pilot, written about their circumstances or a particular flight. Interesting in a historical, anecdotal way.

MisterLiberry Head says

This is blunt, well-done oral history--simply presented, without pointless elaboration or superfluous historical commentary by the author. Even as their present-day numbers dwindle to nothing, Max Arthur has acquired and preserved survivors' personal accounts of the ferocious, critical air battle over Great Britain that followed the fall of France in May 1940. Nationalities of the narrators include not just Brits, but also refugee Poles & Czechs (a vital source of experienced Luftwaffe-fighting pilots in the earliest days of the air war), Germans, and various Anglos from throughout the under-duress Empire. Thankfully, the interviews are not exclusively with "Fighter Boys," but also encompass the memories of ground crew, armorers, WAAF tracers & plotters, BBC correspondents and others. A few of the Famous are here--such as Squadron Leader Douglas Bader and Fighter Command's sole Victoria Cross winner, Flight Lt. James Brindley Nicolson --but most of the voices belong to the virtually forgotten. (It's sad, too, that the B&W photos from WW II are beginning to seem antique, like Mathew Brady prints.)

Judging from LAST OF THE FEW, the flyers had in common two big fears: letting down their mates and burning. That laconic, matter-of-fact manner of storytelling common to fighter pilots--what became known in the U.S. as the Chuck Yeager school of terse dispassion in crisis--conceals the inherent drama rather than amplifying it. Nevertheless, these are real voices of those who were there. Here is the Battle of Britain, described in its simplest form: "You went up and you fought all day long until the sun went down. Whether

it be three, four, five missions a day--you just fought and fought and fought" (p202). More than a fifth of the pilots died by the end. "I wasn't fighting for the King, I was fighting for me mum" (p274)--last quote, from a pilot officer who died in 2010 at age 89.

Kudos go to Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, whose foresight, persistence and disregard for self-advancement put the RAF into the sky just in time.

Robert Hepple says

Max Arthur's Last of the Few is a selection of recollections mainly by pilots and other personnel who experienced the Battle of Britain. Many of the recollections are not new to the book – the pilots in some instances are no longer with us and the recollections may have appeared previously in other publications. Some of the quotes are a little bit muddled, and no attempt is made in the book to corroborate or otherwise support the accuracy of the statements made. For example, a quote from a BBC broadcast covering an air battle over Weymouth is included, even though other publications have its serious inaccuracies. Criticisms aside, these are the words and thoughts of a lot of very famous RAF pilots and what they have to say is absolutely amazing, and I loved the book.

Remy says

This book is good for even people not into military history due to its readability and easily digestible presentation. I loved this book and was thrilled to read firsthand accounts of RAF pilots (and not just the British ones either!). Some of these men really had remarkable experiences that are shocking and difficult to grasp the hugeness of. If you like this, I recommend "Into the Swarm" as well as "They Gave Me A Hurricane".

William Brown says

If you like military history, this is a very remarkable book. It is not a narrative history. From cover to cover, it consists of long and short 1st person quotes from RAF pilots recounting missions they flew during the 4-5 month long Battle of Britain. It puts you in the cockpit with them, day after day as they take off and fight wave after wave of German fighters and bombers. To say it is riveting is putting it mildly. With typically dry British humor, they describe the chaos and confusion of fast dogfights, victories, defeats, and getting shot down by enemy planes they didn't even see. Through it, you see their fears, not so much of dying, but of being badly wounded or perhaps badly burned or maimed. Pressure? Tension? Nothing less than the survival of Britain and ultimately the war itself was on their shoulders. Yet they kept going, and won the battle by holding off the German onslaught and not losing. Interestingly, Arthur was also able to get quotes from the Luftwaffe aces they were facing, and we get a nice picture of the problems they faced as well. It is a remarkable book.

William F. Brown

Barbara Mader says

I thought this was a bit of a phone-in, as many of the "in their own words" were taken from published books by pilots who had died, some during the war. There were some interviews, but it was never made clear in any way which bits were taken from interviews actually done by Max Arthur and which were from already-published books.

Also rather loosely organized.

Basically, Arthur didn't work too hard on this one.

Because there were no footnotes, no scholarly approach at all, the value of the book was extremely limited as far as I was concerned.

But I'm always interested in first-hand accounts, so it was worth reading.

Hal says

This is a superb book. If you are looking for a history of the RAF, analysis of tactics, statistics, etc., this is not the book for you. I have read many accounts and viewed many films about the RAF and the Battle of Britain.

However, this book, which comprises personal accounts of many participants in the action (with no commentary) told me more than I ever learned from anything else I've read. These snippets by pilots, riggers and fitters and opposition German pilots gave me a fuller picture of the battle than I've ever before experienced.

Churchill hit the nail on the head when he said:

"Never...was so much owed to so many by so few."

Amy Stergar says

This was an awesome collection of first-hand accounts from British, Canadian, and Polish pilots during the Battle of Britain. This book uses personal recollections to show what it was actually like to train for the RAF and its counterparts and then to fight the Luftwaffe during the attacks in France and Britain.

Each narrative is short and sweet and allowed me to learn a lot about what the pilots went through. I was blown away by the lack of training so many of them had and the outstanding bravery they had to fly and attack with very little knowledge of brand new aircrafts. Many of the men were shot down or forced to abandon aircraft and each was a unique story. Very interesting read!

Kathy says

Informative reporting of the lives of pilots who participated in the Battle of Britain. Max Arthur compiled pages of first person reports from these pilots and arranged them in chronological order from the start of the air wars will close to the end. The reports range just a few sentences to several pages. These young men, most in their 20's some even younger, literally saved Britain. It was a truly inspiring read.
