

# A Battle of Britain story

Battle over London - Sgt. Ray Holmes rams a Dornier 17Z, 15 Sept. 1940

© Geoff Nutkins. All rights reserved

<http://www.aviartnutkins.com>



**Sixty-eight years ago this month, one of history's greatest dramas was reaching its climax over southeast England. Providing a fitting coda to the Battle of Britain is this story by Max Pudney.**

At 11am on September 15, 1940, still wet from the bath he had been taking when the scramble order came, Flt Sgt RT Holmes took off in a Hurricane from Hendon airfield with the rest of 504 Squadron. Directed to intercept a raid of Dornier bombers approaching London, they engaged and were quickly dispersed in the fighting. Flying alone over London after carrying out attacks on two bombers, Holmes sighted a lone Dornier slipping out of clouds ahead, at about 12,000ft, and flying towards Buckingham Palace. He promptly began a head-on attack only to find that his ammunition was exhausted. Without thinking about it, Holmes continued his firing pass to deliberately ram the bomber.

The result at first didn't appear all that dramatic. "There was a bit of a bump but nothing much. I thought I had got away with it."

In fact he had sliced the entire tail unit off the Dornier — a slender machine popularly known as the "Flying Pencil". The Dornier did a forward somersault, both wings broke off outboard of the motors, and it cartwheeled earthward. Three of its bombs fell out, one landing on Buckingham Palace and two in the grounds. None exploded because they hadn't been armed for dropping. The rest of the aircraft crashed in Victoria station, from which it was later removed by crane. Two of its four crew baled out successfully.

Holmes' Hurricane meanwhile had plummeted, and despite all his efforts wouldn't answer the controls. As the speed built up, he forced himself partway out of the cockpit against the



29 May, 2004: preparations for the search for Ray Holmes' Hurricane get underway.

slipstream, then tugged his parachute ripcord. The canopy snapped open, plucking him clear at a desperate 350 feet. Swinging wildly, he crashed onto the roof of a three-storey block of flats, slid helplessly down the tiles and off the side of the building. He plunged again, and with his parachute collapsed expected imminent death.

However the canopy caught on a drainpipe and he was yanked up short of the ground to finish suspended three inches from terra firma with his feet and legs inside a dustbin in the back garden.

Even in this extremity he retained the fighter pilot's style. "I undid the parachute and stepped out. There were two girls in the next garden, so I vaulted over the fence and kissed them both."

By this time his Hurricane had plunged into Buckingham Palace Road at such velocity it buried itself far below the surface. And there it remained, undisturbed, until May 2004. However it wasn't forgotten, for the story of Holmes' defence of Buckingham Palace became an essential part of the Battle of Britain legend.

Finally Steve Vizard, a highly experienced aviation archaeologist who has participated in many excavations of aircraft remains from Battle of Britain crash sites, decided to investigate the possibility of retrieving the Hurricane.

After much research and investigation, Vizard and his colleague Chris Bennett decided it might be possible to raise the aircraft from its 63-year resting place. However first they had to find it. Initially all they had to go on were two wartime photos of the crash site. But they interviewed people who might have witnessed the crash, and also performed geological surveys and magnetometer searches of the area until Vizard felt able to make an all-or-nothing chalk cross on the pavement and say, "Here it is." They had to be absolutely correct, for there were no second chances — you can't dig up busy streets in Central London when and where you feel like it! They had to liaise with 27 different agencies including the police and administrative and service bodies, many of whose representatives were present that Saturday night of 29 May 2004 when the dig commenced. Also present was a man more essential than any local body representative: the pilot, Ray Holmes. At the age of 90 years and not in the best of health, he had travelled from Liverpool to watch the action.

The dig site seemed strangely quiet, despite the presence of mechanical diggers, 400 spectators and TV cameras. The site had been isolated from the modern city by the diversion of traffic and use of screens, and all present felt the presence of history, while knowing the odds were not high of actually



An elderly Hurricane pilot sees his aircraft for the first time in 63 years.

finding anything tangible. But in the event the drama of the dig echoed that of 1940, for four metres below the road surface and just half a metre from Vizard's 'X', the diggers found the shattered Merlin engine of Ray Holmes' Hurricane and the control stick he had been holding when he rammed the enemy plane.

"That sort of thing never happened before," said Vizard. "We have done several hundred digs over the years and collected bits from four or five hundred different aircraft, but this was the culmination of my hobby; we will never achieve that level of excitement and interest again."

The engine, control column and various pieces from Ray Holmes' Hurricane have been given to the Imperial War Museum in London.

*Thank you to renowned aviation artist Geoff Nutkins for the use of the image of his painting. All funds raised by his work go towards an RAF Memorials Project run by the Shoreham Aircraft Museum in Kent to commemorate Battle of Britain pilots killed in the area.*  
[www.shoreham-aircraft-museum.co.uk](http://www.shoreham-aircraft-museum.co.uk)