

# The Welsh Squadron

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Part 1 of 2

By the last day of August, 188 Squadron was down to three men: Baker, Birney, and Squadron Leader Nathan Holyrood. On the first day of September, they were back up to full—but Nate had his doubts about whether the number of living pilots had changed.

Normally he'd have put the whole thing down to forty days of flying and no leave. But he'd just come back from seeing Kovalevski in hospital, and had gotten the luxury of a full hour of sleep on the way back. So it couldn't have been just exhaustion.

The airfield was a flurry of activity when he got back, mostly where yesterday's raid had hit hard. There wasn't a foot of ground that hadn't been bombed and filled in again, and half the runway was unusable. The officers' mess had been shot up, but the hangars were for the most part undamaged; probably the Germans had mistaken the mess for vital storehouses again.

Nine bright new Hurricanes stood on the intact section of the airfield, shining like an early Christmas present. His own Sweet Addie stood a little apart, much the worse for wear. As he approached, a figure detached itself from the closest plane and headed for him. It turned out to be a man about Nate's height, dark-haired and sporting a short beard. "Squadron Leader Holyrood? Pilot Idris Gruffydd and company reporting for duty."

"You're here for 188 Squadron? Good." *This one might be trouble*, Nate thought; the man was a born commander and probably wouldn't take orders well. *Still, the more pilots the better, even unshaven ones fresh out of training*. "Gruffydd. You Welsh?"

"All of us are, sir. Just up from Arberth."

"Hm. Good." He gazed out at the new planes. They'd even been fitted with rear-view mirrors, the lack of which had been a design flaw that he and the rest of the squad had corrected with car mirrors from the local garage. "Let me see your papers."

Idris handed him a sheaf of forms. A shock traveled up Nate's arm as he took them, and he jumped—

And the Hurries before him wavered, there one moment and gone the next. Something else stood in their place, like crude child's versions of chariots, reeking of grease and iron. He turned to Idris—

He stumbled back. For a second—no, less—someone else had been in Idris's place, but sheer shock drove the image from his head, leaving only a blank when he tried to remember what he'd seen. *It's like the thunderclap you only hear because of the pain in your ears a second after*, he thought, *or the bullet you only notice after it's hit you*.

"You all right, sir?" Idris eyed him warily.

"Yes—yes, fine. A little off, that's all." He shuffled through the papers, barely taking in what they said: Idris Gruffydd and eight other new pilots, all assigned to 188 Squadron. "Those your Hurries?"

Idris's momentary suspicion changed to pride. "Best out there. This's mine; her name's Carnwennan. Which is yours? That one?" He pointed to a Hurrie down at the end of the field, so covered in dirt you could barely see the bull's-eyes.

Nate forced a laugh. "That's Baker's. Don't try to wash it; his luck's in that dirt. No, Sweet Addie's



Nate woke at dawn on the tenth and listened for the phone's summons to scramble. It didn't come. Neither did MacDonough with more information. Nate lay staring at the ceiling, waiting, until Birney shook him awake. "You must have been as tired as I was," he said, grinning. "Jerry's decided to let us sleep in today. I'll have to thank the next one I shoot down."

"You're sure?" Nate dragged himself out of bed. "The radar towers aren't down?"

"Ask MacDonough yourself."

MacDonough confirmed it. There had been a few flights of Messerschmitts over Brighton, but nothing the bases there couldn't handle. It was the same the next day, and the next. Nate lay awake each morning, expecting the scramble orders any minute. They flew maybe one sortie a day, downing a few stray Ju88s. But beyond that—nothing.

"I don't like it," Kay said on the twelfth, over lunch.

"I do," Baker retorted. "Now the ground crew can get to fixing the Hurries in the hangar rather than putting petrol-can patches on ours. And I can look up at the sky and not expect to see a bloody Dornier."

They needed the rest. Baker and Birney needed it the most, but the entire airfield had suffered in the last months. MacDonough, Clare and the Y Service, the ground crew (who finally got all the craters in the airfield filled in tight)—all greeted the respite with wary joy. The only one who didn't notice was Furness, probably because the bastard was getting plenty of sleep no matter what. But even Baker cheered for Furness when he announced that he could probably risk giving 188 Squadron a day's leave. After 72 Squadron's turn, of course.

Idris spent most of the time reading the Round Table book, grinding his way through the unfamiliar words. Nate taught Kay and Owen poker, and Birney played endless games of checkers with Pig. The waiting became almost as tiring—*almost*, Nate thought, glancing out at the airfield for the fifth time in as many minutes, *but not quite*.

On the thirteenth they were called out against another attack on London. This time they didn't have as much warning; they were barely in the sky when a squad of Messerschmitts caught them from above. Idris rallied and shredded the first attacker's wings, but not before Baker's Black Bess went down, spiraling smoke. Someone shouted over the radio, but Nate paid no attention, flipping Sweet Addie into a vertical roll and firing at the first Me he saw. Shards of blue and black painted steel rained down, and the Me went down to join Baker.

They fought grimly, with barely any exchanges over the radio. Even the call to head back didn't bring its usual cheer. When they got back, MacDonough was out on the airfield before they touched down, waving his arms. He ran up to Sweet Addie as Nate brought her in. "Baker!" he yelled. "I've heard from Baker!"

It turned out that Black Bess hadn't been as damaged as she'd looked from the air. Baker had brought her down in a field and plowed straight into a barn. He was fine, aside from a few minor burns; the plane, though, was a mess, and the flight mechanics had been sent to bring her back. Baker, meanwhile, had spent the rest of the afternoon with the retired major who owned the barn.

The rest of the squadron hurried over one by one as they set down, so the story had to be repeated several times. But the important fact got through: Baker was alive. "By God," Birney said quietly during the third iteration, "I was beginning to think it was back to the old days for us."

"Unlikely," Nate replied, but he'd had the same thought: from here on out they'd only lose more men. "As far as I'm concerned, lads, the evening's ours," he called out. "You go on ahead. I'll wait for Baker to show up, and we'll meet you there." A few protested; Idris wasn't among them.

It was well past nightfall by the time Baker showed up. A few lights were on, barely visible through

