

Ralph Hope

If you want to stiffen the nation's sinews and summon up its blood, pronouncing 'never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few' in growling Churchillian tones probably cannot be bettered. However, leaving aside the veracity of the statement, Leonidas and Co or Horatius notwithstanding, Shakespeare was also keen on the relationship between the paucity of armed strength and subsequent iconic status.

'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers' he slips into the mouth of Henry V shortly before the Battle of Agincourt. And, just as in the long years of the First World War, it was the ultra-green 2nd Lieutenants, some barely of university age, who led their platoons of a few men out of the trenches and over the top into a more than likely shadow of death; so, a quarter of a century later but for an intense period of just four months, it was the young fighter pilots of the Battle of Britain who took up their front line positions in the sky, isolated certainly from the madding crowd's ignoble strife but bearing a burden of heroic proportions.

These young men were indeed a 'happy band' if by that we mean a group of like-minded souls, appreciating the absolute commitment which spawns camaraderie in pursuit of a noble goal. However, the aftermath version of what might have been said by the warriors of 1415 was not emulated by the flying victors of 1940. They were never tempted by the pomp of victorious power; they could never be persuaded to strip their sleeves and show their scars nor remember with advantages what feats in the face of celestial fire they did that day. It was invariably presented as a matter of fact, 'we just got on with the job' approach with brave but natural smiles giving ground to the resignation of a frown only when the passing of a colleague in battle had to be registered or remembered.

Now, eighty-plus years on, we can read their brief histories in a nation's eye but through their own eyes too as they battled to stop others shutting the gates of mercy on mankind. Their annals are short and simple but not born to blush unseen, nor was the sweetness of their compassionate intent wasted on the deserted air of south-east England and the English Channel.

Among the few of growing virtue was Ralph Hope, born on 18 July 1914, free from the worries of chill penury, into an industrial family, their firm producing horticultural machinery and metal windows. His respectable Birmingham parentage comprised Donald and Bertha Hope, the latter of whom was related to the Chamberlain family, that which counted Joseph, Austen, and Neville in its number.

From a glittering Eton career Ralph joined New College in 1932, a time when the name, the place of fame, and the destiny of Oxford undergraduates were by no means obscure. He rowed bow in the Boat Race of 1935, one of only four New College Blues in the 1930s. He was the Amateur Sculling Champion of Great Britain and, at a time when many young men sought to be the successors of Mallory and Irvine, he was a recognised pusher of boundaries as a member of the Oxford University Mountaineering Club.

On graduation he joined the family firm straight away, and from 1937 spent a year working in its American branch in Jamiestown where he also took flying lessons. On return to England in June 1938 he joined 605 Squadron as a volunteer member of the Auxiliary Air Force based in Castle Bromwich. In July 1939, he married Diana Beatrice Pyper, my aunt, and in September of that year he was called up for potential active service. Diana's family firm on her mother's side, Charles Richards Fasteners, made nuts and bolts, so theirs was a typical Birmingham union of metal producers.

For Ralph and his colleagues ambition played no part in their useful toil; it was a natural and unthinking response to a breezy call as they cast not one longing lingering look behind. They were remarkably adept at banishing thoughts of the paths of glory leading to the grave but once airborne, in a heat strongly pregnant with celestial fire, aimed directly at the little tyrant in Germany, while ironically the aircraft, a Hurricane in Ralph's case, moved gracefully for long periods through a sea of solemn stillness.

The Battle of Britain officially lasted from 10 July to 31 October 1940, but Ralph had been on active service since May of that year. He was shot down by Messerschmitts over Kent on 28 September. Despite sustaining injuries, he was flying again almost immediately, only to be brought down again on 14 October. The term 'brought down' is used, some doubt existing as to whether he was shot down or hit a balloon power cable. What is not in doubt is that Ralph could have baled out immediately over outer London and saved himself, but knowing this would endanger the lives of fellow citizens, he stayed in his plane until he was over open ground and by then it was too late to escape safely. He thus very definitely gave his life so that others might live.

Ironically, although not known at the time in the UK, on the day before Ralph died Hitler had decided to postpone a possible invasion of England until the spring of 1941, and German airborne activity was wound down over the next two weeks.

Ralph was buried in Woking Crematorium, but despite being in a narrow cell forever laid, no more to be roused from his lowly bed, he is clearly mentioned on various frail memorials erected high in his old college, in the Leander Club, and in London, all of which may stimulate at least the passing tribute of a sigh.

Diana, widowed at 22, remarried not many years afterwards, a cousin of Ralph's and perhaps inevitably a Chamberlain. She lived healthily and happily for 57 years after Ralph's death.

I write these things for a New College publication not as some pealing anthem to swell the note of praise but because I am very pleased to have donated to New College a pair of Ralph's flying gloves together with the only extant original copy of Ralph's letter to his family when he was shot down for the first time, and which describes the sensation of entrapment, followed by escape with a modestly expressed 'can do' attitude, always prevailing and from which we can be sure that the genial current of his soul was never frozen. I know that Diana and I am sure that Ralph would have been delighted to learn that these significant mementos are forever lodged for safe keeping in a place that meant much to him.



Ralph Hope's sheepskin flying mittens

New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/HopeR

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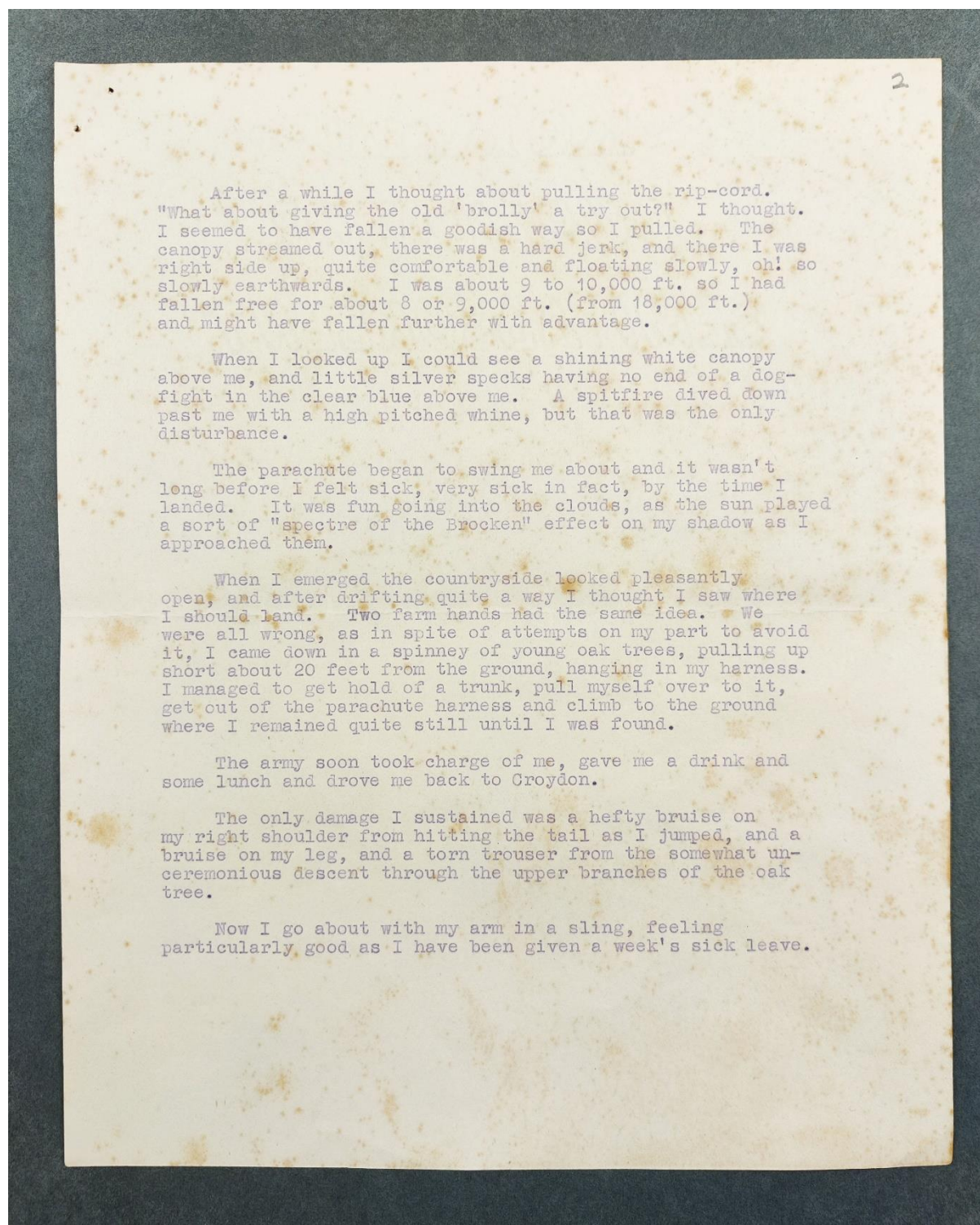
29th September, 1940.

We had a grand day on Friday with three patrols. On the first we had a glorious dog-fight with about 9 Me. 110's which caught a proper pasting: I must admit they were heavily outnumbered. On the second trip we had an uneventful brush with some Me. 109's; it was the last trip which was the most fun. About 12 Junkers 88 bombers came in and after losing 2 from A.A. fire were set on by some Hurricanes. As we climbed up to them we had the pleasure of seeing one dart past us, hotly pursued, large chunks falling off it and the starboard engine on fire. When we were at last in a position to attack there were only 7 left, 4 in front and 3 behind. They looked just like beautiful expensive "crochets" flying along. We had a real field day making attack after attack - a few Me. 109's turned up but did not hinder us. The Ju. 88's went down all over the place. The scrap started at 13,000 feet and the bombers just pushed their throttles wide open and screamed downhill in a vain attempt to get away. We bagged the lot, the last 3 coming down in the sea. My ammunition ran out at about 2,000 ft. so I was unable to administer a "coup-de-grace" but it had been a great day.

Saturday was not quite such a success from my point of view, as on our third patrol I lost my aircraft. We were at about 21,000 feet when we got involved with a squadron of Me. 109's. They got me before I even saw them, which is very annoying. I first felt a kind of funny bump, and as I turned to see what was up my controls suddenly felt funny, a lot of red sparks and black smoke appeared round my feet and a cloud of white smoke, probably glycol, began streaming back from the engine. The aircraft began going downhill fast. I slid back the hood and began to get out, my goggles were whipped off and my helmet began to lift up in the slipstream; I realised I hadn't undone my straps so I pulled out the retaining pin and stood up, standing on anything which came handy (the seat, the instrument panel or the stick; I don't know really). The air seized hold of me, there was a wrench as my oxygen tube snapped off (I had forgotten to undo it) and I shot out into the sky. The aeroplane disappeared.

It was nice and cool falling. I was head down of course, but found the position quite comfortable; there was no sense of speed or feeling of falling. I had a look at the clouds below (they were about 4,000 - 5,000 feet) and then collected the odd bits of my helmet and had a look round. My parachute was still on my seat, both my boots were on, and I did not seem to have lost anything except my goggles, and a handkerchief and map which must have fallen out of the pockets in my knees when I first went upside down.

Transcript typescript of Ralph Hope's letter, 29 September 1940
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/HopeR



After a while I thought about pulling the rip-cord. "What about giving the old 'brolly' a try out?" I thought. I seemed to have fallen a goodish way so I pulled. The canopy streamed out, there was a hard jerk, and there I was right side up, quite comfortable and floating slowly, oh! so slowly earthwards. I was about 9 to 10,000 ft. so I had fallen free for about 8 or 9,000 ft. (from 18,000 ft.) and might have fallen further with advantage.

When I looked up I could see a shining white canopy above me, and little silver specks having no end of a dog-fight in the clear blue above me. A spitfire dived down past me with a high pitched whine, but that was the only disturbance.

The parachute began to swing me about and it wasn't long before I felt sick, very sick in fact, by the time I landed. It was fun going into the clouds, as the sun played a sort of "spectre of the Brocken" effect on my shadow as I approached them.

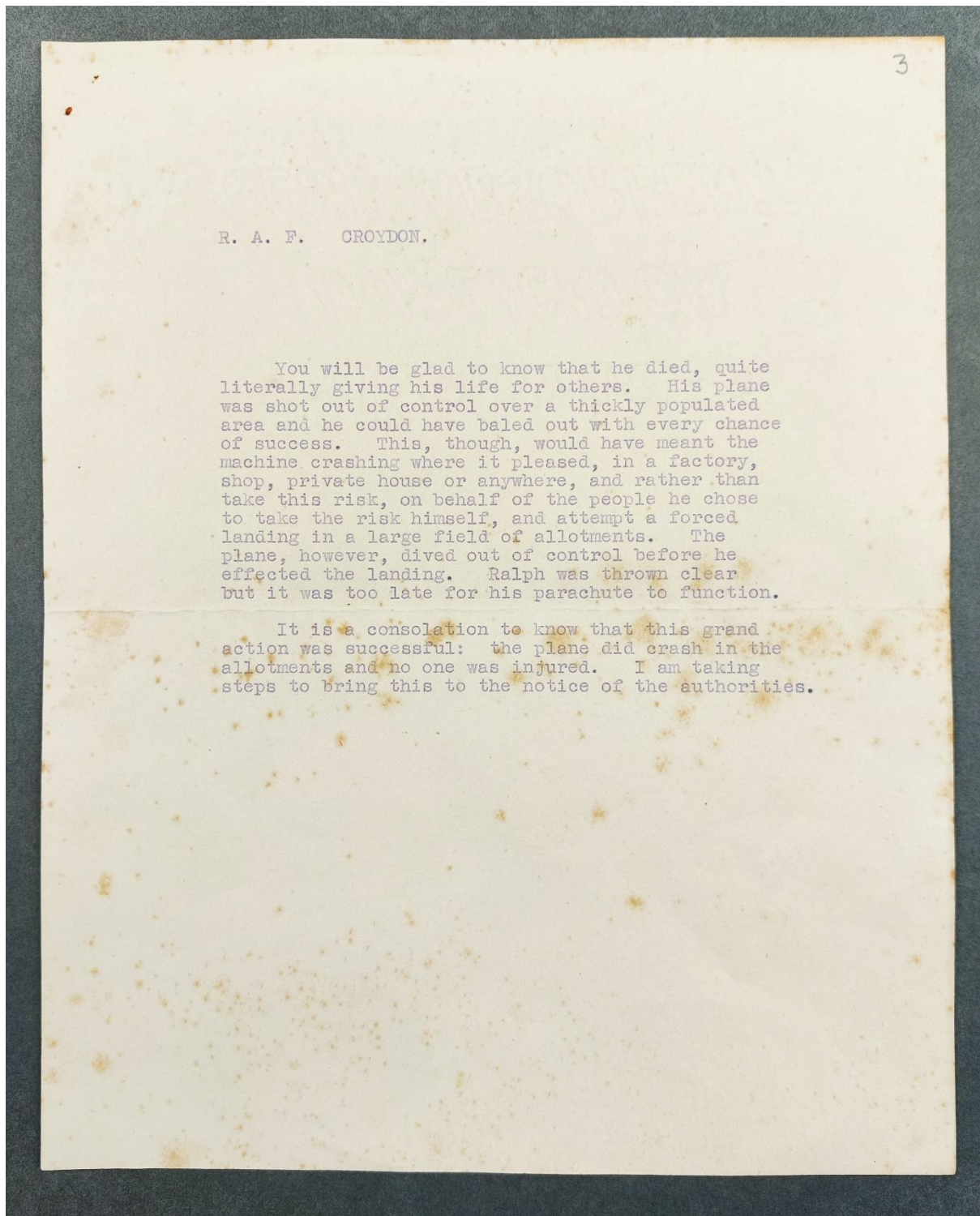
When I emerged the countryside looked pleasantly open, and after drifting quite a way I thought I saw where I should land. Two farm hands had the same idea. We were all wrong, as in spite of attempts on my part to avoid it, I came down in a spinney of young oak trees, pulling up short about 20 feet from the ground, hanging in my harness. I managed to get hold of a trunk, pull myself over to it, get out of the parachute harness and climb to the ground where I remained quite still until I was found.

The army soon took charge of me, gave me a drink and some lunch and drove me back to Croydon.

The only damage I sustained was a hefty bruise on my right shoulder from hitting the tail as I jumped, and a bruise on my leg, and a torn trouser from the somewhat unceremonious descent through the upper branches of the oak tree.

Now I go about with my arm in a sling, feeling particularly good as I have been given a week's sick leave.

Transcript typescript of Ralph Hope's letter, 29 September 1940
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A note about Ralph Hope's death on 14 October 1940, from RAF Croydon
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/HopeR

Mark Pyper