

Fighter Pilots Over Dover

Vronni Ward - Dover Museum

Tom Cruise in his role as flying ace Maverick in *Top Gun* could have been easily talking about the fighter pilots of WWII. His famous quote has a special resonance, "Up there with the best of the best." The flying aces of WWII were brave, daring and incredibly young. The average was 20 years of age; the youngest being Thomas Dobney who joined the RAF as a schoolboy dare and went on to fly heavy bombers over Germany at only 15 years of age!

Thousands of planes and pilots kept the Germans at bay and stopped them inflicting even further death and damage. Two flying aces in particular who stand out for me are Pilot Officer Keith Gillman (1920 to 1940) who came from River, Dover and Commandant René Mouchotte DFC (1914 to 1943) the first Frenchman to become an RAF Squadron Leader of the 341 RAF Squadron with personnel of the Free French Air Forces. Both pilots flew over the skies of Dover in their Hurricanes and both pilots flew out of Hawkinge and Biggin Hill. What beautiful, brave souls they were.

Pilot Officer Keith Gillman

Keith Gillman joined the RAF in 1939 straight from Dover County School. At first, he didn't take to flying and during training was seen as poor to average. He then undertook an armament course, achieving a 'fail' and showing 'little interest'. However, once he joined 32 Squadron at Biggin Hill this all changed as he fell in love with his beloved Hurricanes. This squadron was involved in the Battle of France and was at 'the front line' of the Battle of Britain. For months the 32 sqn took the full brunt of the German attacks over Kent and London. As John Rawlings put it, "Day after day its aircraft took off, fought, landed, refuelled

and took off again, by the same pilots and ground crews." They fought from dawn to dusk, and the crews were totally exhausted. Keith's first combat victory came in July 1940 when he shot down a one of twelve Messerschmitt Bf 109s. He was then in continuous action for the whole of July and into August.

On the 24th August, the 32 sqn were involved in two huge battles 20,000ft above Dover involving twelve Messerschmitts, one of which Gillman shot down. On the 25th August they were up again in the evening to 'patrol Dover' and intercepted twelve Dornier Do 215 light bombers (an aerial reconnaissance aircraft and later a night fighter, named 'the flying pencil') and 36 Messerschmitt Bf 109s. Gillman and his fellow pilot Rose were shot down, Rose was rescued from the sea as 32 Squadron's pilots had been issued with packs of fluorescein, a greenish-yellow dye, to sew on their life jackets. In the sea this would create a stain around the pilot to attract the attention of searching aircraft. According to Rose's



Pilot Officer Keith Gillman

recollection, he sewed his pack on and was saved from the sea later that day. Others, including Gillman, did not. Gillman was report 'missing in action' three miles south of Dover at the age of 19.

Whilst taking a break from flying at Hawkinge in July 1940, Gillman was photographed by Fox Photos. Keith's image was widely used in magazines and recruiting posters during the war; several had been published before the time of his death, so he would have been aware he was becoming 'famous'. No one would have realised then, but Keith's image would become a symbol of the Battle of Britain with his photograph and images depicting the youthfulness of 'The Few'. The resulting image became the iconic photograph of a Battle of Britain pilot.

Commandant René Mouchotte

Rene Mouchotte was born to a wealthy family who resided on the outskirts of Eastern Paris. He began his military career in 1935 with the French Air Force. He rose to Sergeant and gained his wings in 1937. He became a training instructor but made several requests to become a fighter pilot. He was posted to Algeria where, upon occupation by German forces, he and five colleagues escaped, flying just above the wave tops in a stolen, partially disabled plane to Gibraltar. From there he made his way to England and RAF Fighter Command.

Once in England he flew Tiger Moths and Hectors, and like Gillman, he operated out of Biggin Hill and Hawkinge and flew Hurricanes over the Straits of Dover. In 1941, he was made a Flight Commander, in 1943 a Captain and awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), on 1st September 1942, for his flying during the Blitz. The medal is awarded to RAF officers for acts of bravery whilst flying in active service against the enemy. On 18th January 1943 Mouchotte commanded 341 Squadron. In May the

squadron was at Biggin Hill and on the 15th excitement was running high as to who would claim the sector's 1,000th victory. Mouchotte destroyed a Focke-Wulf 190, apparently coinciding exactly with the destruction of another by Squadron Leader Charles. It being impossible to decide who had been the first to fall, the two pilots shared the honour and the cash sweepstake, getting £90 each. The party at the mess went on late into the night!

Unfortunately, on 27th August, 1943 Mouchotte failed to return from a bomber escort to the V2 rocket launch construction site near St. Omer and was reported 'Missing'. His body was washed up on the beach in Belgium on 3rd September and he was buried in nearby Middelkerke, Belgium. Mouchotte was awarded the Croix de la Liberation on 14th July 1944 and the Croix de la Légion d'honneur (Chevalier) gazetted on 20th October 1943.

His body was exhumed in 1949 and returned to France. In a ceremony at Pere-Lachaise Cemetery, Paris on 3rd November 1949, Mouchotte was buried in the family vault.



Commandant René Mouchotte

René's wingman, Pierre Closterman, wrote in his book on aerial combat, entitled, 'The Big Show': "For us he (René) had been the pattern of a leader: just, tolerant, bold and calm in battle, the finest type of Frenchman, inspiring respect whatever the circumstances."

If you would like to learn more about René Mouchotte, the St Margaret's History Society in their 2025 programme have guest speaker Jan Leeming talking about him on 18th March in St Margaret's Hall, Reach Road, St Margaret's at 7.30pm. You can book ten talks for £14 or £4 per talk at stmargarethistorysociety@gmail.com

Here at Dover Museum our temporary 'Animals Everywhere' exhibition continues until May, 2025. There is an Animal Safari trail for children to complete and we have tokens for children to put in our vintage

RSPCA donation dog. Our 2025 - 2026 temporary exhibition will display fascinating models of local buildings through the ages. We open: Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 5.00pm. Open Sundays in the summer (April to September) 10.00am to 3.00pm. Admission is FREE. Tel: 01304 201066 Visit www.dover.gov.uk/museum

Sources

Dover History by Banksy

<https://doverhistorybybanksy.co.uk/keith-gillman-portrait-of-a-pilot/>

The Battle of Britain London Monument

<https://www.bbm.org.uk/airmen/Gillman.htm>

Key Military

<https://www.keymilitary.com/article/front-cover-pilots-portrait>

The Invicta Military-Vehicle Preservation Society

<https://www.imps.org.uk/commandant-mouchotte/>

Curiosity of Dover

17 Cannon Street, Dover CT16 1BZ Tel 01304 202621

A Long Lasting Business

Of 30 Years

We have a wonderful collection of

Bears for the established collector

A wide range of gifts and some beautiful art

From some very talented

Artists which include amazing photography

Come and have a browse I am sure there will be

Something for you