



"Fighter Affiliation: Halifax and Hurricane aircraft co-operating in action"
Walter Thomas Monnington, 1943
Imperial War Museum

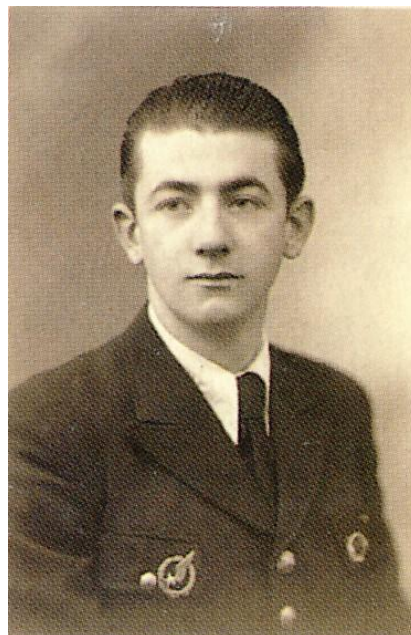
At about 12:40pm on 29 October 1940, a 12-year-old Teston resident, Geoff Cox, witnessed a remarkable and memorable incident: a forced landing by an RAF fighter in a nearby field close to the river. It was also seen by the father, Stanley Martin, of Farleighs resident Jack Martin who was three years old at the time. His grandfather owned Teston Garage, behind which was an orchard owned by a local farmer, a Mr Cooper.

Jack and his father were feeding chickens in that orchard when the plane crashed. Stanley put Jack in a bucket (the usual means of transport!) and together with Cooper carried him at a run down from the orchard and across the railway line to the field, where they found some people surrounding the machine, a Hawker Hurricane. The pilot, who appeared unhurt, was sitting on the wing, smoking a cigarette. He was carted off to the North Pole pub by Cooper and the onlookers for a drink to celebrate his lucky escape.

The pilot was a Frenchman called Henry (Henri) Lafont. His escape from occupied France and his subsequent career make fascinating reading...

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Henry Gaston Lafont was born in Cahors, France, on 10 August 1920. He was determined to fly, and in November 1938 enrolled at the Istres flying school of the Armée de l'Air. He learned to fly on a Morane 191 at Istres, and up to Wings standard at Clermont Ferrand. He was completing a course at the Fighter School at La Sénia near Oran, Algeria when, following the German invasion, France capitulated and the armistice was signed on 22 June 1940.



Lafont in 1938

The Fighter School officers were ordered not to attempt to escape, but Lafont was reportedly mad with rage at the capitulation and chose to ignore this, and together with five of his colleagues found a fuelled-up **Caudron Goéland** twin-engined transport aircraft in which to escape La Sénia. They were lucky to make it, or even to take off – the machine’s engines had been sabotaged so that the propellers were locked in coarse pitch.¹

Nevertheless, having stolen on board, at daybreak on 30 June they made it off the ground and flew at low altitude, barely above stalling speed, to Gibraltar, navigating with the aid of a school atlas. The group joined the Forces Aériennes Francaises Libres (Free French Air Forces) and on 3 July 1940 sailed for England on an armed trawler under the French flag, the “President Houduce”, arriving in Liverpool on 13 July.

Together with eleven other escaped French pilots, he was posted for vetting and selection to RAF St. Athan, Wales, in late July 1940.

Subsequently, he was at the School of Army Co-operation at Old Sarum, Wiltshire, from 29 July to 10 August, and afterwards at RAF Odiham, Hampshire, where he put in hours flying on Tiger Moths and Hectors. He was posted to No. 6 Operational Training Unit, RAF Sutton Bridge, Lincolnshire, on 9 August, converting to Hawker Hurricanes.

He joined No. 245 Squadron at RAF Aldergrove, Northern Ireland, on 11 September. On 18 September, Lafont was posted to 615 Squadron at RAF Prestwick and subsequently RAF Northolt, flying Mk 1 Hawker Hurricanes.



Caudron Goéland

Crew: two pilots
Length: 13.68 m
Wingspan: 17.59 m
Height: 3.40 m
Wing area: 42.0 m²
Empty weight: 2,292 kg
Gross weight: 3,500 kg
Powerplant: 2 x Renault 6Q , 164 kW (220 hp) each
Maximum speed: 186 mph

¹ Variable pitch propeller blades are designed to be set variously from fine to coarse pitch. When a propeller-driven aircraft takes off, the blades are set to fine pitch, taking small bites out of the air and allowing the engine to operate at high revolutions per minute. Once airborne and attaining cruising speed, coarse pitch is selected, meaning that the blades take big bites out of the air, moving forward a large distance with every revolution, and limiting the engine’s rpm’s.

Attempting to take off in an aircraft with the propeller blades set to coarse pitch is roughly analogous to trying to move off in a car in top gear, in which situation progress would be extremely slow, and the engine would labour and likely stall.



Lafont in the cockpit of his Hurricane Mk 1



Hawker Hurricane Mk. I

Function: fighter
Year: 1937
Crew: 1
Powerplant: 1 x 1030 hp R.R. Merlin III
Wing Span: 12.20 m
Length: 9.59 m
Height: 3.96 m
Wing Area: 23.93 m²
Empty Weight: 2118 kg
Speed: 520 km/h
Ceiling: 10900 m
Range: 965 km
Armament: 8 x 7.7 mm machine guns



General De Gaulle visits 615 Squadron. Lafont with other pilots in 1941.



Images of 615 Squadron between sorties – note the Squadron code KW

On 29 October 1940, Lafont took off at 1200hrs flying his Hurricane, identification number V7383. His fellow pilot René Mouchotte (one of the group which stole the Caudron Goéland from La Sénia in June) witnessed the subsequent combat: "Attacked by Messerschmitts, [Bf 109's] higher up than we were; we did not see them, the sun is so dazzling. They dropped out of the sky like three stones and climbed back without giving us time to say 'Ouf!' In the scrap that followed I saw two of ours shot down. One of them was my only French comrade in the squadron. [Lafont]. Luckily he was not [personally] hit and landed in a field. The enemy has a terrible advantage in superiority of altitude."

A GLIMPSE INTO HENRY LAFONT'S MIND

INTERVIEW BY
ASA PRODUCTIONS (UK) LTD –
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In his advanced years, Henry Lafont was interviewed on his experiences as a Free French Air Force pilot attached to the RAF. Here are some of his thoughts:-

Escaping to Britain

We heard on the radio that the Germans had invaded. We thought that France could not lose the war. Unfortunately we were wrong.

We escaped from La Sénia ... and were well received in Gibraltar.

We arrived in Liverpool at 2 o'clock in the morning and were on the train at 4 o'clock so didn't see anything of the town.

Joining the RAF

I joined the RAF at 18 years of age. Sent to a squadron in the north of England, and sent to the south three or four months later. We were sent to an OTU [Operational Training Unit] for three or four weeks, then to 615 Squadron.

Winston Churchill was the patron of 615. I met him three or four times when he visited.

He was always optimistic, cheerful. You had the feeling you'd met the boss.

Battle of Britain

When we scrambled I was usually No 2 to an RAF pilot.

During the scramble we were eager to meet Germans.

We took off squadron by squadron, three by three, nine planes altogether.

Battles in the sky – that's difficult to remember. There was no time to be frightened as we were looking to meet German aircraft. When I first attacked a Me 109 I missed it as I was so excited.

I shot at one aircraft and 2 or 3 days later I was told it was me that shot it down.

Lafont had sustained a damaged engine, resulting in a glycol [coolant] leak. He effected a forced landing between trees near Teston at 1240hrs, and luckily was unhurt. The beers that the farmer, Mr Cooper, and others stood him were no doubt very welcome.

The 615 Squadron Operational Record Book for 29 October 1940 contains the perfunctory entry against Lafont's name: "Time up:1200. Time down:1240. Force landed. Pilot safe."



Subsequent to his crash, Lafont took to the air again and over the next six months flew over 100 patrols. He claimed Bf.109s probably destroyed on 26 February and 15 March 1941. In May 1941, he was posted to 59 Operational Training Unit as an instructor, training more than 60 French pilots.

Later, Lafont joined the Groupe de Chasse No.1 "Alsace", subsequently merged with RAF No. 341 Squadron, formed in the Middle East and taking part in convoy patrols during the Libya campaign. He was wounded on 27 June 1942, and returned to active service in January 1943 with 341 Squadron, flying Spitfires on operations over France and the Low Countries. At the end of the war, at which stage he was flying a Spitfire Mk IX, he had completed 230 operational missions. Throughout, Lafont was always with L'Armée de l'Air, but was detached to the RAF in 245 and 615 Squadrons, and Groupe de Chasse No.1 "Alsace" with 341 Squadron.

Off duty

When not flying we'd often go to the pub. To relax – to enjoy myself – usually in the pub having a pint of beer, but that was so expensive. We weren't paid much and didn't have much money.

English food – we usually ate in the mess. The food was plentiful and was all right. We were 19 years old – we weren't fussy about food.

I met my first wife Hazel with her friend in February 1941, in a club in London. We had very little money so didn't go to many places.

Summing up

After 4 or 5 months I was a section leader leading Brits. It wasn't a question of nationality – the important thing was fighting.

I first flew Hurricanes and later Spitfires. They were doing the same job. My first victory was with a Hurricane. I preferred the Spitfire because it flew faster and higher. But I was happy with the Hurricane.

At the time we didn't know what was going on in France. The important thing was that we were with the squadron and flying.

I enjoyed that period. You cannot enjoy a war but you cannot be sentimental. You're shooting an enemy and you think, if I don't shoot him he'll shoot me.

The scramble – you had three minutes to be up and at the controls, so there was not much time to think.

That sums up that part of my life, when I think of it maybe 80% of comrades were killed. Losing it was very sad. Pilots didn't go to the funeral normally. Once I was with 6 and I was only one to return.



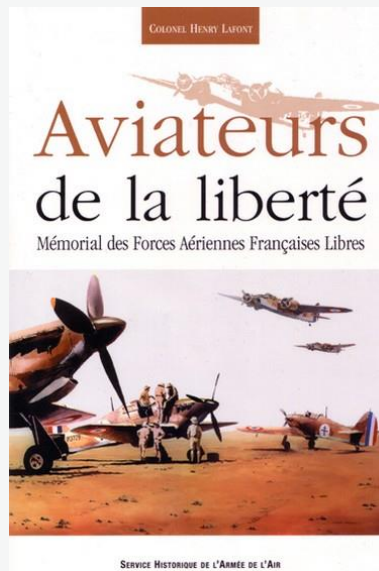
Lafont, C1942

He was decorated with the Croix de Guerre with three palms, and the Croix de la Valeur Militaire, and was made a companion of the Ordre de la Libération.

After the war, Lafont served in the French Air Force, at the 5th Air Region Headquarters in Algeria during the war there and for six years in London. When he lost his fighter pilot medical classification, he flew helicopters. He retired from the French Air Force in 1966 with the rank of colonel.

From 1967 to 1984, Lafont was Director General of the world's oldest and biggest air show, the Paris Air Show at Le Bourget. He was associated with much of Concorde's development.

Further to his wartime awards, he was appointed Commandeur de la Légion d'honneur. In 2002 his book "Aviateurs de la Liberté. Mémorial des Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres" was published.



Henry Lafont died on 2 December 2011, aged 91. At his funeral in Paris, the colours of the French Fighter Pilots' Association were carried in his honour. Senior French Air Force and RAF officers attended. He was married twice, and is survived by two sons and a daughter.



Henry Lafont, C2001



Memorial stamp, Ascension Island, 2010, featuring Henry Lafont's Hawker Hurricane Mk 1