



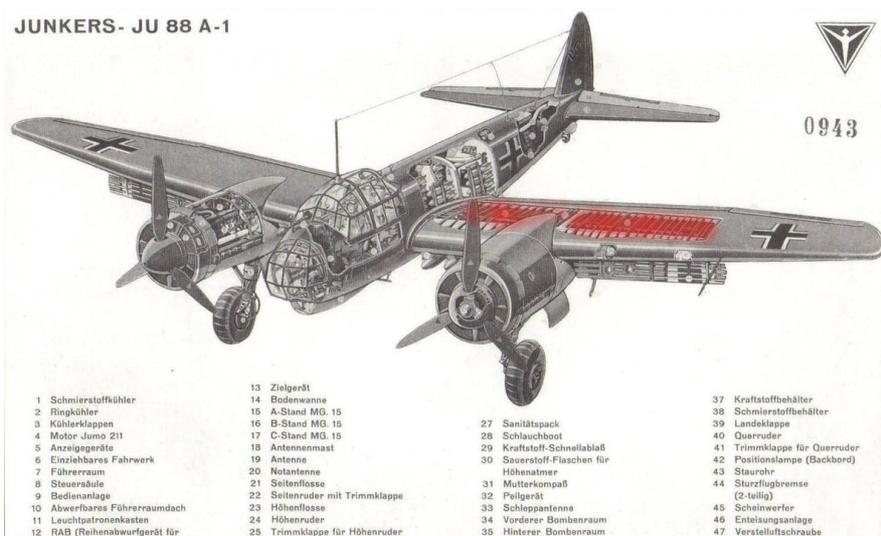
This is the imperishable story of the most exclusive private social club in the world.



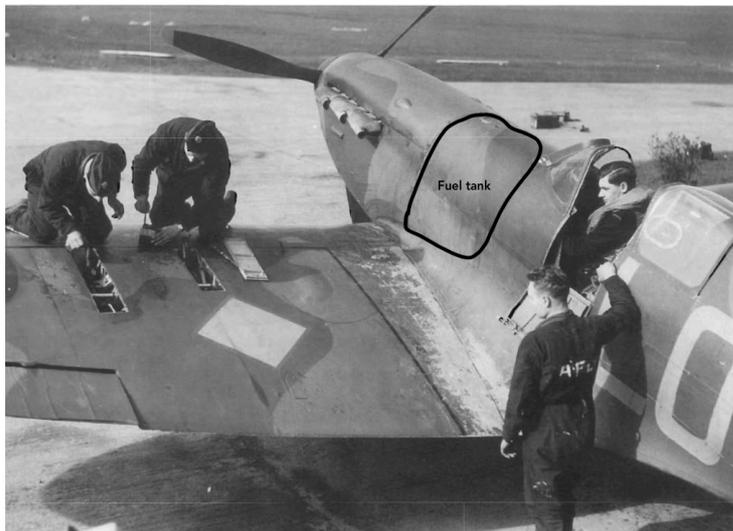
So prohibitive was its membership fee, so severely inflexible and exacting the terms of membership, that through the span of its existence, it had just 649 members.

The story, curiously, has its beginnings in the locus of the fuel tank in the Spitfire and the Hurricane, the single-seat fighter airplanes used by Britain in the second world war.

Fuel tanks in fighter aircraft in the 1930s were customarily placed in the wings.



That changed with the Spitfire. Those glorious elliptical wings with the mounted guns were considered ill-suited for carrying fuel, so they placed the fuel tanks directly in front of the cockpit, behind the Rolls Royce Merlin engine.



In the French skies, for the defence of France in 1940, those spanking new squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes got proper action for the first time.



That meant vertiginous high-speed dogfights with the German Messerschmitts. And incendiary ammunition coming at them at all sorts of angles.

The RAF fighters soon realised the grave folly of placing large fuel reserves right in front of the cockpit. It was an unwittingly easy target for the powerful 20mm Motorkanone guns on the German fighters.

The French skies were soon bespeckled with German and British fighters crashing and burning. By the summer of 1940, the Germans had complete control of mainland Europe and England was next on the list.

The Battle of Britain, aka the Air Battle for England that followed, was fought in the air by very young, hastily recruited airmen.



The average RAF fighter pilot was a little over twenty years old and unmarried. He hadn't quite finished his formal education and had been recruited by the RAF less than ten months back. He had had roughly twenty hours of experience flying the Hurricane / Spitfire.



These unbelievably raw striplings were commemorated by the British nation as 'The Few'. The phrase came from a wartime speech about the RAF made by Winston Churchill in August 1940. "Never in the history of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."



Anyway, we should come back to the fuel tank in the Spitfire. When the tank was hit, the ignited fuel almost instantly found its way into the cockpit.

At 20,000 feet in the air with a throbbing, screeching, mortally wounded engine and a plane that was diving upside down uncontrollably, brain numbed by acute panic, for the first few seconds, the pilot would lack any animate awareness of being on fire.

The inferno would be perceived only when the flesh on the hands could be seen hanging off like shreds of tissue paper.

With the will to survive stuck somewhere between the tongue and the gullet, the pilot's primary instinct would be to take off the oxygen mask, pull off the goggles and slide the glass hatch back to bail out. That's when the spout of flame would suddenly find more oxygen.



And the flames would gust upon the face and neck. It was like being in front of the nozzle of a flamethrower.

The first thing survivors would remember would be the unrelieved smell of grilled pork stuck in their nostrils.

Surviving pilots from almost all the Spitfires and Hurricanes that crashed in the Battle of Britain had burns of the exact same description. The injuries were of such unvarying characteristics that they were admitted to the nomenclature of descriptors as 'Airman's Burns'.

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